

## **Hearing the Silences: Adult Nigerian Women's Accounts of 'Early Marriages'**

### **Abstract**

'Early marriage' is a relatively common, but under-researched global phenomenon, associated with poor health, mental health, educational and occupational outcomes, particularly for young girls. In this article, we draw on qualitative interviews with 6 Nigerian women from Sokoto State, who were married between the ages of 8 and 15. The interviews explored young women's experiences of the transition to marriage, being married, pregnancy and their understanding of the marital and parental role. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, we explore women's constrained articulations of their experiences of early marriage, as they are constituted within a social context where the identity of 'woman' is bound up in values and practices around marriage and motherhood. We explore the complexity of 'hearing' women's experiences when their identities are bound up in culturally overdetermined ideas of femininity that function explicitly to silence and constrain the spaces in which women can speak.

### **Keywords**

Early marriage; Africa, sub-Saharan; Nigeria; qualitative research; IPA

## **Introduction**

This article explores young Northern Nigerian women's experiences of 'early marriage'<sup>1</sup>. In international development literature, 'early marriage' is typically regarded as a problematic practice. In this context, early marriage is defined as the marriage of individuals under the age of 18, while 'very early marriage' involves individuals under 16 years (Boyden, Pankhurst, & Tafere, 2012). UNICEF (2013) estimate 14.2 million girls marry 'too young' each year, with the highest prevalence in the 'global south' (Bruce & Clark, 2004). Early marriage is under-researched, with the limited available literature largely produced by (or with) global development agencies and international charities (Camfield & Tafere, 2011). The 'voice' of women (particularly African women) who experience early marriage is largely absent from this literature. This exploratory study aims to address this absence in the literature, through an analysis of interviews with a small group of North-Nigerian women about their experiences of very early marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> Various terms are used in the literature and in popular references to describe the practice of marriage between individuals (generally but not exclusively girls) under the age of 16. These include 'child marriage', 'child brides' and 'early marriage'. We have opted to use the term 'early marriage', because we felt that the term 'child marriage' was emotionally loaded, and dependent on culturally normative notions of what it means to be a 'child'. However, we do recognise that the term 'early marriage' is also problematic, as it includes and reproduces embedded assumptions about what 'early' or 'too early' might be, that is also culturally constituted.

Public and academic discourses of early marriage, framed by large international development organisations, generally represent early marriage as a human rights violation, with numerous negative health and social consequences for girls and women (Chandra-Mouli, Camacho, & Michaud, 2013; Le Strat, Dubertret, & Le Foll, 2011; Mathur, Greene, & Malhotra, 2003; UNICEF, 2005). Research highlights its association with higher risk of early pregnancy, maternal morbidity and maternal death (Svanemyr, Chandra-Mouli, Christiansen, & Mbizvo, 2012); significant risk of vesicovaginal and rectovaginal fistula (tearing of the wall separating the bladder or rectum from the vagina) (Meyer et al., 2007); elevated risk of HIV infection (Bruce & Clark, 2004; Clark, 2004); and negative implications for mental health (Gage, 2013). Early marriage increases risk of poverty (Otoo-Oyortey & Pobi, 2003), reduces girls' education prospects, and reinforces gender inequality (UNICEF, 2006).

In Nigeria, early marriage is more common in the Northern states, and amongst Nigerian Muslims (British Council Nigeria, 2012). This regional and religious variation is more marked for very early marriage (Adebowale, Fagbamigbe, Okareh, & Lawal, 2012). Nonetheless, it is a widespread, normative practice (Akpan, 2003), with 77% of women marrying under 18 (UNICEF 2006), despite the Nigerian Children's Right Act stipulation

(2004) of a minimum marriage age of 18 (Chika, 2012). Nigeria's population is roughly 50% Christian, and 50% Muslim, with the latter located primarily in the less economically developed North and Southwest of the country, where early marriage is more common (National Population Commission, 2014). The regionalised pattern of very early marriage overlays a range of other socioeconomic disparities, and should not be understood in purely religious or ethnic terms. Nigeria's regional socioeconomic disparities are explained by a history of colonisation (the Southern coastal regions being more accessible for trade) (Jacob & George, 2014), an oil driven economy, political corruption, and a long history of military rule, militarism and ethnonationalism (Metumara, 2010). The underdevelopment of the North has contributed to deteriorating internal security, and strengthening of militarist Islamist organisations like 'Boko Haram' (Onuoha, 2010). The issue of early marriage in Nigeria is often represented as a religious one, but is also shaped by this broader range of politico-socio-economic factors.

Early marriage practices in Nigeria reflect more general issues with gender parity (British Council Nigeria, 2012), a gendered division of labour, differential access to wealth and education, and gender differences in power and influence in family and public life (Smith, 2010). The government's focus on the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

emphasises legal and policy based recognition of gender inequality, and expansion of educational access for girls (Unterhalter, 2007). The MDG emphasis on increasing educational access and support to challenge early marriage practices is based on research findings that women educated beyond primary school are less likely to marry young (Adebowale et al. 2012; Erulkar, 2013; Field & Ambrus 2008). However, the MDGs underestimate the complexity of gender equity, in highly gender-determined contexts like Northern Nigeria. Cultural change requires a more penetrating engagement with the gendered socioeconomic arrangements that characterise men's and women's lives than can be achieved through mere attention to principles like 'fair access to education' (Parpart, 2009). The MDGs have been criticised for imposing neoliberal constructs of 'human rights' and 'gender equality' that neglect a sufficient engagement with the complexity and specificity of particular countries and regions, resulting in the tendency of development organisations to "teach' gender to communities ... rather than to attempt to understand local gender movements" (Palmary & Nunez, 2009, p. 76).

Archambault (2011) suggests the rights based discourses that characterise early marriage prevention programmes obscure the complex structural and socioeconomic factors that perpetuate early marriage practices. This decontextualises women's lives, constructing an

unhelpful dichotomy of ‘victim’ versus ‘violateur’, with girls positioned as helpless victims, and parents / society as violators of their rights. In an agrarian culture, with high levels of poverty (Walker, 2012), many parents see early marriage as a way of placing daughters in trusted families, constructing reciprocal networks and extending access to resources.

Oversimplified notions of girls ‘victimised’ by oppressive parents are unhelpful – many parents feel they are doing their best for their children by securing a good marriage, while early marriage is seen as a way to improve the economic status of the family and is not regarded as a problem, if successful (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2009). Such constructions also obscure girls’ own capacity for agency in their responses to early marriage, by positioning them as passive victims.

Early marriage is often seen as culturally normal by young girls themselves. For instance, James (2010) found some young people were very supportive of the idea of early marriage, and emphasised the importance of family, and women’s role within the family:

‘Marriage is the pride of a woman and every Muslim and Christian girl is commanded to marry. So you mean if Allah brings a husband to a girl at age 12 years, she should reject the offer? To me, she should go ahead and marry, and if

Allah gives her children immediately, alhamdulillah (glory be to God), since it is Allah that brings children.’ (Focus group participant, James, 2010, p. 271)

Neoliberal, rights based early marriage prevention programmes that emphasise a discourse of gender parity are inadequate in engaging the intersections of gender, culture and economic arrangements that underpin early marriage, and other elements of family life. The imposition of readings of marriage and of the liberation of women and girls based on gender parity functions to assert a neoliberal form of ‘development’ work that insufficiently attends to the specificities of the Nigerian context itself.

The representation of ‘young brides’ as passive victims positions them as needing rescue from parochial and oppressive cultural practices (Archambault, 2011; Camfield & Tafere, 2011). Early marriage is seen as violating ideals of ‘normal childhood’ (Burman, 2007), and the role of the development agency and the government is framed as restoring (a contemporary individualist ideal of) normal childhood and liberated womanhood.

Locating early marriage as a problem that violates universal rights strips away the context that renders early marriage a comprehensible familial and cultural practice, within a particular set of social circumstances. This enables the reproduction of a more general representation of the Muslim girl (and particularly the African Muslim girl) as racialised,

classed and gendered Other, the abjected feminine - an essential victim, silent, passive, always-already requiring rescue (Ahmed, Reavey, & Majumdar, 2009; Majumdar, 2007). This underestimates women's ability to resist cultural practices without the rescuing activity of external agencies, and undermines the potential effectiveness of local community organizing around women's issues.

The marked absence of girls' and women's voices in the literature around early marriage, further entrenches the construction of the 'young bride' as victim, in need of 'rescuing'. However, when such 'rescue attempts' are couched in development organisations' imposed neoliberal values, without taking sufficient account of their perspective and needs, their own views about possible solutions to the issue at hand, or possible local gender activism (Palmary & Nunez, 2009), they can function to further colonise and constrain young women's experiences. Our interest in this article is to interrupt this discourse of silent and helpless 'child brides', by exploring how Nigerian women who have married early understand and experience early marriage as a cultural and socially located practice. To do this, we talk to Nigerian women about their experiences of early marriage, the transition to marriage, and their identities as married women.

To bring about meaningful social change must involve an engagement of those most affected by the issue of early marriage (Cornwall, 2003). Recognising that women's voices are systematically silenced and devalued (Harding, 1987) feminist and critical researchers have sought to provide a platform from which women's voices can be heard. However, romanticising 'voice' runs the risk of homogenising or totalising participants' accounts, while obscuring the productive role of the researcher (Fine, 1992). Further, as Unterhalter (2011) has argued, research that focuses on hearing participants' voices must pay attention to the limits of what it is possible to say within a particular social context. An intersectional and critical feminist engagement with the co-construction of self and culture should consider how the self is constrained in social arrangements that (re)produce asymmetrical power relations (Qin, 2004). The stories people tell about their lives, their voiced experiences are constituted within a shared system of meanings (Gergen & Gergen, 1984), within cultural, political and historical contexts (Boonzaier, 2008). Recognising this makes any simple attempt to 'capture', 'represent' or 'celebrate' feminine experience an untenable project.

This article engages with the complexities of hearing women's voices, in a context where the everyday spaces for them to articulate their experiences are extremely limited, through

attending to the intersections of gender, ethnicity and culture, and social context (Gorelick, 1991). We explore the experiences of a small group of women from Northern Nigeria, who were married under the age of 16. We argue that attending to women's voices in this context requires attention to the constrained articulation of experience, constituted within and through the positionings available within a particular cultural context. We focus on how women make sense of their experience of early marriage, how they are able to secure some sense of agency in their experiences, and consequently how resistance to complex cultural practices is enabled and constrained in their accounts. Scarry (1985, p. 12) suggests "the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be *verbally represented* also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be *politically represented*". Attending both to the overtly articulated, and the more constrained elements of women's accounts enables us to start to understand both women's experiences, and the cultural context within which they are constituted.

## **Method**

Because our interest was in enabling women to tell their own stories of early marriage in as much detail as possible, this exploratory study took a qualitative approach, using individual interviews and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to explore women's lived individual experiences of early marriage.

Phenomenological approaches are suited to an in-depth exploration of lived experience in a small homogeneous sample, while IPA is also sensitive to the intersection of the personal and the social in the construction of experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Through the "double hermeneutic" (Giddens, 1984) the researcher considers the experience the participant narrates, how they make sense of the experience, as well as how the researcher is implicated in the production of meaning in the research interaction (Smith et al., 2009).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Interviews were conducted with 6 young women from Sokoto state, North West Nigeria. The women were all adults (aged 25 to 35) and had been married before they were 16 (see Table 1). Participants were recruited and interviewed in Hausa (the language most widely spoken in the region) at a regional hospital where they were being treated for fistula. All women interviewed had very little formal education and low (or no) literacy. Most had

been educated in Islamic schools (which focus on moral and religious instruction).

Participants all came from rural backgrounds and families affected by poverty.

First contact with participants was through the hospital matron, who spoke privately to women in the fistula ward to ask if they wished to take part in the research. Potential participants had an initial meeting with YG to discuss the research aims, clarify ethical issues, and to ensure that they felt no duress to participate. It was particularly important to us that the women were clear on the kinds of questions we would ask, and that they felt able to refuse to answer questions they found uncomfortable. Consent forms were available in Hausa, but participants were unable to read, so verbal consent for participation was secured.

The hospital context, and the fact that our participants were all undergoing treatment for fistula had implications for the interview interactions, transferability of the findings, and women's participation in the study. While fistula and stillbirth are very common experiences amongst rural Nigerian women who marry very young, they are also potentially stigmatising, resulting in estrangement from their marital family (Meyer et al., 2007). The women we interviewed were all at least temporarily separated from their

husbands while being treated, and were being cared for by parents, close relatives or were dependent on the hospital. This sense of dependency on the hospital could potentially produce some pressure to participate. Many participants did express gratitude to the hospital, suggesting at least some dependency between participants and hospital staff. But in other contexts, their limited public presence and the constraining influence of their husband and other family would likely have made it impossible to interview married women at all. Even under these circumstances, 4 of the 10 women who expressed an interest in participating ultimately declined, stating that their husbands forbade them to speak in public.

The interview schedule was constructed to facilitate a biographical and roughly chronological account of their experiences, and also included questions to facilitate participants' reflections on early marriage as a social issue. The schedule was intended to enable participants to flexibly tell the story of their experience of marriage and its impact on their lives. We particularly wanted to create space for an articulation of a story that was not just about the negatives of early marriage, but that enabled women to express the textures and complexities of their experiences. While participants did become emotional at some points in the interviews, none felt too distressed to proceed, and at the end of the

interviews some spontaneously reported that they found the discussion useful, as they rarely had an opportunity to talk about their marriage and its implications.

Participants were interviewed by YG in Hausa. Interviews were transcribed and anonymised (pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying information was removed). The transcripts were translated by YG, and translations were checked by a second individual, fluent in Hausa and English. As a Christian from Southern Nigeria, YG was concerned about how she should present herself to participants. She decided to wear Islamic dress for interviews, to help the women feel comfortable, to underscore her respect for their views and cultural practices, and to avoid potential offence from appearing in western dress. To avoid deception, she ensured participants knew she was not from Sokoto and was not Muslim. Despite these measures, it is impossible to smooth over the complexities of interviewing across cultural and religious boundaries in a context where both ethnicity and religion are crucial and often over-determined elements of social interaction. The interview context both facilitated and limited what participants could and could not say. On the one hand, being located in the hospital moved women out of the family context in which their capacity to be critical of dominant social arrangements and the position of women in society might be constrained by their role as wife and mother. In

that sense, it created a space within which women were able to speak at all, outside the family home. On the other hand, the hospital's ideological position on ending the cultural practice of early marriage implicitly problematised participants' experiences of family life, potentially constraining women's capacity to voice their experience. While steps taken to make participants more comfortable may have ameliorated this to some degree, it is important to consider the role of this context and YG's positioning as outsider in the production of these interviews.

The interviews were analysed using IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to explore participants' understanding and experiences of early marriage. We coded transcripts independently, working line by line to identify units of meaning in each interview. Codes became increasingly refined as we moved through recursive analytic cycles. Patterns of meaning were identified from this line by line coding, within and across the interviews. From this analytic process, emergent themes were identified. To take into account the way personal experience is constituted and narrated within a social context, we applied Smith, Flowers and Larkin's (2009) reflective stance that combines the hermeneutics of *empathy* and of *questioning*. An empathic stance attended to understanding participants' experiences from their point of view, while a more interpretative and critical stance enabled some

consideration of their articulated experience as located in a particular context. This was particularly important given what we have described in our analysis as the ‘constrained articulation’ of women’s accounts of early marriage.

Working with the interview material we were concerned that the transcripts were sparse and repetitive, and felt some anxiety that they lacked phenomenological density. YG reflected, though, that she had found some of the interviews distressing – that she had been moved by participants’ accounts, and that this made coding the interviews challenging for her. This seemed at odds with our reading of the interviews as ‘sparse’ – while the descriptions did seem quite underdeveloped, they nonetheless had emotional power, a rawness we all felt as we worked on the analysis. As the analysis progressed, we noticed the repetitive phrases themselves had a certain expressive power, and that hesitations and quietness in some elements of their stories brought into sharper relief the things the women *did say* about their lives and experiences. The sparseness, repetition and silence seemed articulate. Women narrated their experience in the form and style of their talk, not just in the content of it. Exploring this sense of constrained articulation required an active interpretive stance, focusing on how women’s voices were articulated in their particular social context. This required attending to rhetorical silences through which women

expressed their resistance to dominant social practices (Glenn, 1997). While their account was highly socially constrained, this *was* their lived experience, and they could express the experience and some resistance to that experience. Our analysis progressed by exploring both what *is* and what *is not said* in the transcripts - finding 'voice' in the unarticulated (Rober, 2002), and exploring silence and hesitation as a foil for the power of speech.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In our analysis of women's constrained articulations of their experiences of early marriage, five master themes were identified. In *I wash, I cook, I clean*, we describe how participants understood marriage itself, and what they had been told about marriage, considering its implications for their transition to the marital state; *Running away and growing up* explores their reframing of the transition to marriage as part of a developmental process; *Being married – duties and limitations* highlights their description of marriage as a constrained space; *Becoming a mother* explores the social importance attached to motherhood, and the experience of 'failing' to be mothers; and *let them grow* explores participants hopes for other young women in similar positions. Our *questioning hermeneutic* stance (Smith et al., 2009) captures the sense of constrained articulation that characterises women's accounts, exploring the scope for resistance within these accounts. We highlight the limited space

women have to express experiences that run counter to dominant cultural ideas about women and mothers, but also consider the limited ways that women can and do articulate counter-hegemonic self-identities in their stories of their lives.

***'I wash, I cook, I clean': Young women's preparation and expectations of marriage***

In the early part of the interview, we asked participants about their preparation for marriage – what they had been told about and expected from marriage. Two key experiences were narrated here: 'not knowing' about marriage, and very limited expectations. All participants described themselves as minimally prepared for marriage, with little sense of what to expect:

YG: What were you told about marriage and what was your understanding of it as young girl growing up?

Hauwa: Truly, I don't know. Wasn't told anything.

YG: You mean you don't know anything about marriage, either your mother, father or friend have not told you anything about marriage?

Hauwa: Nobody told me anything.

Women reported being kept ignorant about their futures as wives. As girls they ‘did not know’ because they ‘were not told’ about marriage. Halima describes her experience of ‘not knowing’ about marriage:

Halima: The truth is I was a very young girl and didn’t know anything about marriage when I was taken to my husband. It was there that I grew and became mature and knew things about marriage. My husband, when he saw me he told me that he wants to marry me, then I told my parents.

Halima describes herself as a naïve young girl, someone who did not know about marriage, and entered very passively into marriage – she was ‘taken’ to her husband, and he ‘told her’ that he wanted to marry her. She describes marriage as the context within which the young girl ‘grows up’, and the movement from ‘not knowing’ to ‘knowing’ is part of the process of maturing; there is no preparation for marriage, but rather you come to know and understand married life by living it. (We return to this notion of maturing in marriage in a later theme.) Participants describe minimal preparation for marriage, and no preparation for the sexual or relational aspects of marriage.

When asked specifically about things they had been told about marriage, a very instrumental account emerges, recited in a formulaic, almost clichéd way.

Bilkisu: The few things I know about marriage helped me to stay at peace with my husband. Also to keep my house clean, to respect my husband and obey him.

YG: What were you told about marriage as a young girl growing up?

Asha: To respect and be obedient to my husband, keep the house clean, give him food and drink and have a happy life. This is what I know.

Halima: I was happy. It helped me to respect my husband so I will not get angry because I was doing all the house chores that is expected of me and I was not lazy when I got married.

The notion that obedience and respect is all a girl needs to know about marriage is repeated in all interviews: married women are expected to be competent domestic labourers, to 'do their duty', and to maintain a happy demeanour. They understand their primary role in marriage more as domestic labourer than as being a relational or sexual partner. Indeed, participants made no reference to sex, intimacy or relationality, in these interviews.

Several examples illustrate a stereotypy of response, reproducing a normative view of women's role in marriage.

YG: What do think your parents expected of you, in terms of education, work and family life?

Hauwa: Truly I don't know, when I was married, I was told to keep the house clean, feed my family and respect my husband.

YG: How do you respect your husband?

Hauwa: To be obedient to him.

YG: How helpful was your knowledge about marriage to you when you got married?

Hauwa: Yes it was, I know my duty. Every woman should know, I wash, cook and clean.

YG: The advice given by your parent, how did it help you?

Hauwa: It helped me.

YG: How?

Hauwa: It helped me to keep my house clean, respect my husband and I wash his clothes.

This unquestioning formulaic response is one of the most notable features of these interviews. These are not typical phenomenological interviews – superficially, they do not appear to be ‘thick’ descriptions of personal experience. Rather they are sparse, repetitive, clichéd. When there is such stereotypy of response, how can we comment on the ‘experience’, or claim to have given ‘voice’ to those experiences? However, suggesting that only verbally ‘rich’ accounts can convey personal meanings would miss the power of these interviews. The phenomenology of the experience is embedded in the stereotypy of response – the sense of repetitive routine, of constrained possibilities for agency and for meaning, as women are slotted very young into pre-existing, pre-written roles. A clear formula is in evidence – ‘*Clean, cook, obey, respect, be happy*’. The lifeworld (Husserl 1936; Merleau-Ponty 1962) of these young women is revealed, not in the content, but in the *way* they describe their experiences. The culture they describe leaves minimal space for reflection on women’s marriage role, as can be seen by the circularity of logic in evidence in Hauwa’s interview, where she repeatedly returns to the view that to have a good marriage, she must ‘*keep my house clean, respect my husband and wash his clothes*’. The ‘experience’ is in the repetition. The density and complexity of this material is not in its elaboration, but in its communication of what cannot be expressed: the meaning of the experience is captured in the rigidity of the set response – it is a constrained articulation of

her marital experience. These extracts have a certain claustrophobic inevitability to them, and despite the apparent sparseness of the responses, the meaning can be found in the shape and form of the response – the experience of early marriage is narrated in the sparseness itself.

### ***Running away and growing up***

Describing their experiences of being ‘taken’ into marriage at an early age, the women we interviewed described their transition into married life in ways that signalled a discontinuity between their childhood experiences and their experiences of being married women. Nearly all the women described at least one incident of running away in the early phases of their marriage. This extract from the interview with Hauwa is a typical example of this:

YG: What was your reaction when you found out you are getting married?

Hauwa: I did not feel anything when I was told that I was going to get married.

YG: What kind of marriage did you have?

Hauwa: Islamic marriage.

YG: How did you feel when you got married?

Hauwa: I was happy.

YG: How would you describe how you felt when you first got married?

Hauwa: I ran away, but my parent brought me back.

YG: Why did you run away?

Hauwa: Because I was a teenager.

The juxtaposition of Hauwa's reported feeling '*I was happy*' and her reaction '*I ran away*' is jarring. Hauwa does not explicitly name her marriage as traumatic, but the apparent paradox in her statements 'I was happy...I ran away' is important in terms of the experience being narrated. Something of the lived experience of being a young bride is captured in the contrast. Again, this is a constrained articulation, captured in the forms of speech, and in the gaps between what is, and is not said. She describes running away here as an immature choice, something that teenagers do. In contrast, the lesson of marriage that she has learned is that a mature woman is married, 'knows her place' and is 'happy'. A mature woman does not 'run away'; she only ran away 'because she was a teenager'. Farida narrates a similar experience:

I did not have the understanding of what was happening and was not happy, because they separated me from my mother. Who wants to separate from family under normal circumstances? I was still young then.

...

YG: How would you describe the first few months of your marriage?

Farida: I was not happy because I was not used to it for one year I kept running away. It is something new to me and you know you have to get used to everything and when you are used to it you will not run, isn't it? When you don't know someone you must run way from that person.

Farida describes marriage as an unwanted rupture with childhood. Just 13 years old when she was married, she experienced the loss of her mother as very difficult (something 'no-one would want'). Farida and Hauwa both describe learning to endure, learning not to run away as a normal developmental process - part of growing up, and growing into marriage. Resistance to marriage is framed as childish and immature. For Farida, the only way out of the sadness and loss she feels is not 'running away', but 'getting used to it'.

In Nigeria, there is a pervasive cultural view that, once a girl is married, she is a *woman*, regardless of her age (UNICEF, 2005), and the social value of women is secured in their marital status. This cultural context offers limited space for women to resist. Growing into womanhood requires submission to the position of married woman, framed as the ultimate developmental achievement for a girls. To understand Nigerian women's experiences of

early marriage, it is important to consider the role of social context in constructing those experiences. Context restricts Hauwa's voice, but her constrained speech nonetheless articulately conveys how she takes on and lives the role of 'married woman'. Unterhalter (2012) notes that listening to voices requires that we attend to what accounts reveal about what it is possible to say, how cultural contexts constrain the range of experiences that can be narrated. The experience of the transition to marriage as a traumatic rupture with childhood is told, not explicitly in words, but implicitly in the contradictions and tensions in the account. Accepting their position as married women is really the only way for these young women to manage the transition, and any resistance to the 'proper role' of women as wives becomes unthinkable in a cultural context where being a wife is the appropriate way for women to grow up.

### ***Being married: Duties and limitations***

Women's descriptions of themselves as wives reflect cultural constraints on what can and cannot be explicitly said. For instance, Maryam talks about the physical restrictions placed on her as a married woman – that she cannot go out to social events, or walk in public, as she did as a girl:

YG: What are your responsibilities as a wife now that you are married?

Maryam: I don't go out, I don't go to weddings or peeping.

YG: Why is it that you don't go out to weddings or take a walk?

Maryam: Because I am married.

Maryam understands these restrictions on her movement as one of the responsibilities placed on her, as a consequence of her status as 'wife'. This sense of constraint is a taken-for-granted part of being a married woman. This is expressed in her circular logic - that not going out is a responsibility placed on her as a married woman, and that she cannot go out because she is a married woman. Farida reports a similar experience of being married:

Nothing has changed, but I don't do... When you are with your parents they give what you want, isn't it and I go where I want to go. Now I don't go to weddings, naming ceremonies and I am under Islamic rule. You do only what he wants you to do.

YG: Why is it that you don't go out?

Farida: Because I am watched and will not go out. You know when you are married to a Muslim leader you are hardly allowed to go out.

The sense of constraint here is narrated as assumed – described as if it simply is what it is, and there is nothing unexpected for Farida about her experience. In Sokoto state, women are expected to see themselves as wives and mothers first, and consequently to expect that

marriage will limit their mobility and personal agency (Smith, 2010). While Farida is not explicitly critical of this cultural expectation, her description of her experience, positioning herself as 'watched' and doing 'only what he wants to do' does hint at a sense of dissent. There is an element of her account in which she still resists her role, harking back with nostalgia to her childhood home, and the relative freedoms she experienced there.

Married life is conceptualised in constrained and functional ways, as we can see in this extract from Bilkisu:

YG: How do you and your husband spend your leisure time? When you are not busy or working, do you spend time together?

Bilkisu: Yes, we do sleep.

YG: Only sleeping

Bilkisu: Yes

When not busy or working, Bilkisu does not see herself as sharing leisure or social time with her husband. Again, it is notable here that she does not refer to sex, intimacy or relational experiences. Asked if they spend time together when not working she suggests that they 'sleep'. The women we spoke to described their experience of married life in terms of being confined, largely within the marital home. Bilkisu describes her experience

of the marital home purely as a functional context of labour and sleep, and her relationship with her husband is understood in very pragmatic terms. This is so taken for granted that she seems puzzled by YG's question, when she notes that of course, she and her husband do sleep. Leisure and relatedness is confined purely to the realm of the marital bed, which is described in terms of shared sleep (not shared pleasure). This pragmatic approach to marriage echoes women's earlier articulation of their marital role – that they should *'respect and be obedient to my husband, keep the house clean, give him food and drink and have a happy life'*. The stereotypy of response suggests difficulty in framing any alternative to a dominant economic model of married life – this *is* what marriage is, there are no particular cultural alternatives available to these young women. This underscores a perhaps fundamental problem in envisioning 'solutions' to the issue of early marriage, particular within a western, human rights framework of 'gender parity' and 'choice'. The lack of available cultural alternatives to a specific model of marriage in which women are positioned primarily as domestic workers makes it difficult for women and girls to resist their positioning in the home, or to form alternative identities for themselves as women defined as anything other than or in addition to their roles as wives.

### ***Becoming a mother***

Another important element of being a ‘good woman’ in Nigerian culture is becoming a mother, a transition understood, not as a choice, but as inevitable:

YG: How did you feel about becoming a mother?

Hajara: Yes since I am now married and is now time for me to become a mother, so I have to be a mother since time was passing by, that is the truth.

YG: What was your husband’s reaction?

Hajara: He felt what he was supposed to feel. He was very happy.

Becoming a parent is framed in terms of roles and responsibilities. *Time was passing, it was ‘time’ to be a mother.* As a good wife and a good woman, Hajara’s role is to simply accept the inevitability of motherhood, whether it is something she explicitly wants or not. The transition is choiceless, with everything simply falling into place, as she assumes her socially prescribed role. How she ‘feels’ about this becomes a puzzling question: she feels as she must; her husband feels what he must. As a woman she must successfully bear children. This is an important route to security for married women, and having children represents a limited resilient strategy – failing to produce children can leave young married women extremely vulnerable. Describing an experience of stillbirth, Hajara explains:

After my long stay here the hospital gave a job. (quietly) You know when you have good relationship with people you will be rewarded. At home I

clean the house and harvest grain, but when I came here... (sadly) but when I came here... You know when they rejected you ... God helped me and the hospital gave me work. I thank God for them and may he reward them.

Hajara highlights the profound vulnerability of young married women. She has done all that was expected of her. She has performed the role of wife – being obedient, respectful, doing domestic chores, getting pregnant. Nonetheless she ‘failed’ to produce a live baby. This, combined with the damage done to her body as a consequence of a long, unassisted labour results in ‘rejection’: abandoned by her marital family, and with no possibility to return to her family of birth, Hajara’s economic and emotional dependency leaves her extremely vulnerable. In her case, she was fortunate to be given a job at the hospital where she was treated. That many young girls would not be so lucky gives us some indication of why their adherence to marital expectations is so apparently unquestioning. The personal and social consequences of not being a ‘good enough wife’ can be extremely severe.

***Let them grow...***

Despite their apparently uncritical acceptance of their position as young brides, when asked about their hopes for other girls, the hints of resistance found in their stories about their

own early marriage coalesce. All six participants felt that it was important to allow girls to grow up, before they were married:

YG: What would you advise the parents of a teenage girl who are about to give their daughter in marriage?

Hauwa: I don't have any advice.

YG: Do you have any advice to the girls?

Hauwa: They should be allowed to grow before marriage

It seems important here that Hauwa does not feel able to offer advice *to the parents*, but her advice to their daughters is that they 'should be allowed to grow'. Her view of early marriage is clear – she feels that girls should grow up before being married – but she cannot articulate this view to her elders. This kind of culturally constrained construction is in evidence in other young women's accounts too.

YG: What will be your advise the parents of a teenage girl who are about to give their daughter in marriage?

Bilkisu: Every mother should allow their daughters to reach at least 15, 20, or 25 years before marriage.

YG: Why do you say this?

Bilkisu: This is because when they are grown up, they won't have much problem; especially during child birth. And for the girls.

YG: What advice do you have for teenage girls going into marriage?

Bilkisu: They should be obedient to their husbands and do what he wants them to do.

Bilkisu's advice is not delivered to men in families. Rather she directs her advice to other women – to the mothers. It is clear that there are cultural constraints on her ability to 'advise' fathers and other men. As a consequence the role of protecting girls falls to women. Undoubtedly, this difficulty in speaking out *to men* about cultural practices women find unacceptable or oppressive is a significant issue in working to shift early marriage practices. Mothers are not really in a position to prevent their girls from entering arranged early marriages. As we have seen already, the capacity of married women to move beyond a position in which they should 'obey, respect and clean' is extremely limited, and these are reiterated even as the women resist the idea that girls marry young.

Hajara: Children are taken to marriage when are still young, now they should allow them to grow and reach a mature age before they marry that is the truth. Why? Because of this health problem that is affecting women it is too much on us. It is not a nice thing I am telling... (quiet)

Like Bilkisu, Hajara suggests that girls should be allowed to grow to avoid difficulties in childbirth, and the negative health consequences of early pregnancy. Resistance to the practices of early marriage are ratified by an appeal to the idea of women's culturally proper (or only possible) role as mothers. Girls should be 'allowed to grow' because they will be better mothers. Being a 'good wife' and a 'good mother' enables access to more powerful and privileged status in Northern Nigerian culture, and by 'allowing them to grow', the mothers of potential young brides are encouraged to consider an alternative to early marriage – the possibility of a more successful marriage for slightly older women, who are more able to successfully bear offspring. Again, there is minimal resistance to other cultural constraints on being 'good women' and 'good wives' – all the participants still enjoin girls to respect, to obey, to be happy – as if once they have married, any possibility to resist these positionings evaporates. Halima suggests:

Halima: Now they should allow their children to go to school and they should grow before they are married. So we can increase in knowledge and for the girls when they are married they should respect their husbands, do all the domestic chores, washing, sweeping and cook food so they can stay in happiness.

The slivers of resistance we have noted in the earlier themes are not sufficient to undermine the dominant ideal of wives as domestic workers, and as obedient and respectful. It is

difficult to envisage possibilities for women actively resisting practices of early marriage as long as their social position is one of such obedient quietness. Further, their economic dependence, first on their birth family, and then on their marital family, places significant practical constraints on their capacity for direct resistance, through for instance, leaving home, or becoming independently economically productive (Unterhalter, 2012).

Nonetheless, participants firmly indicated a sense that early marriage should not continue.

As Farida notes ‘marriage is not for children’:

My only advice is they should allow the teenage girls to be matured because marriage is not for children. It’s difficult, especially the issue of childbirth and nobody wants to suffer. Like this women’s sickness that brought us here. Even house chores is difficult for young children to do. You get tired. You allow a child to suffer when you let them marry at very young age because they will be the ones to do all the house work and you know our body will suffer. For a young girl I will still say mothers should not let their children marry when they are too young because the work is too much.

Farida’s statement is perhaps the most outspoken one of all our participants. She suggests that early marriage produces suffering for young girls, but her understanding of that suffering extends beyond difficulties in childbirth. She sees

the experience of early marriage as more generally problematic for girls, suggesting marriage is 'difficult'. Her account here amplifies the resistances we have noted in earlier themes, explicitly challenging practices that position very young girls as domestic labourers, as mothers, as 'good wives'. However, this capacity to resist is always constrained both by the cultural positioning of women as wives and mothers, and the practical limitations imposed by their economic dependency.

## **Conclusion**

Our exploratory study aimed to address a gap in the literature on early marriage practices, through interviews with a small homogeneous sample of young women from Northern Nigeria who experienced early pregnancy and fistula as consequences of very early marriage. Our analysis suggests a constrained space for the articulation of both the experience of marriage, and of resistance to dominant ideas of marriage. The young women described in very stereotyped ways their experience of marriage, confined to normative ideas of what it means to be woman, wife and mother. They described themselves as poorly prepared for marriage, with marriage itself experienced as a traumatic rupture with childhood. Marriage is represented as the only appropriate way for women to 'grow up', a

developmental achievement for mature women. Marriage itself is described through constrained and repetitive accounts of domestic labour, respect and obedience. Participants described the transition into motherhood as an inevitable and required one, to which they choicelessly acquiesced, and about which they felt they must be happy. However, despite this rather bleak depiction of their lives, and despite the very powerful cultural script to which they felt they must conform, the women were able to articulate resistance to the construct of early marriage itself, by using the very limiting cultural discourses of womanhood available to them. They described early marriage as problematic because it prevents girls from entirely fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. They suggested marriage is 'not for children', and that girls who are 'allowed to grow' will ultimately make better wives, and will avoid the health challenges that are often associated with early marriage and childbirth.

The dominant representation of 'young brides' as passive, voiceless and in need of rescue is challenged when we attend to their capacity for 'constrained articulation'. They can speak, even if their talk is highly constrained. Resistances to dominant constructions of Nigerian Muslim femininities can be found in the discursive fissures in their accounts.

Universalising concepts of 'women's rights' are insufficient to engage the complex

positioning of women in contexts where gender roles are highly restrictive and culturally over-determined. Focusing only on a very narrow notion of liberation for women risks missing their subtle voicings of experience and resistance.

Women could articulate their experiences of early marriage, and constrained resistance to the problematic aspects of such marriage. However, hearing them required that we paid attention not just to what was said, but also to *how* it was said, who was addressed, and what was *not said*. Our focus on 'voice' needed to be tempered by an interrogation of what it was culturally possible for women to say within that specific situated context and interaction, and to pay attention to experiences that were perhaps less directly expressed. This socially constituted experience of being a young married woman is captured in the stereotype of response, the sparseness of the interviews, the starkness of the contrasts. Young women's 'voice' here does not speak of some pure experience, but rather it articulates the limits of what can be spoken, the boundaries around what can be seen as a *legitimate and expressible experience* in particular social contexts.

Our analysis revealed a complex interplay of conformity to dominant ideas about femininity and women's place in marriage, and subtle resistances, often expressed through contradictions and tensions in the narrative. Women did not directly express resistance to patriarchal power. Compliance to masculine power is reiterated through stereotyped explanations of women's role in the home – obey, do domestic labour, be happy. Nonetheless, the stereotypy of this constrained narrative hints at women's experience of marriage as a claustrophobic and repetitive cycle. The stereotyped response itself expresses the experience of marriage in the interview context, without it being overtly articulated. This represents a resistant strategy for women for whom overt expression of dissent would place them in a precarious social position. The sense of inevitability of certain roles for women likewise powerfully expresses the lived experience of moving from girlhood to marriage. Nonetheless the narrated experiences of a traumatic rupture with childhood, the distressing accounts of early childbirth, and the dire consequences of 'failing' to produce babies signal disquiet with the taken-for-grantedness of this particular form of marriage. This becomes more explicitly framed in these women's advice for other girls and their families. While they do not seem able to directly express their distress about their own experiences of marriage, they are able to articulate it *for others*.

The complexities involved in listening to women's voices in circumstances where possibilities for self-expression are culturally very limited has important implications for those working to tackle the problems associated with very early marriage. The stories we have presented here give clear insight into both the lived experience of very early marriage, and the regulative cultural constructions that secure its reproduction. At first glance, cultural values around early marriage might seem to have women in a headlock, but a closer and more nuanced analysis reveals spaces of resistance where a foothold might be gained in helping women resist these practices for themselves. However, this requires balancing the rescuer discourse so often found in NGO accounts of early marriage with a more nuanced approach that takes into account the complexities of cultural and socioeconomic practices for women. Simple solutions like keeping girls in school do not provide a sufficiently robust response to the powerful discourses of womanhood that hold cultural practices of very early marriage in place. However, as we have illustrated, listening to women is perhaps more challenging than it might initially sound.

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**Table 1: Biographical sketches of participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Age when married</b>	<b>Relevant biographical information</b>
Hauwa	25	9	Has two children. In hospital awaiting operation for fistula.
Bilkisu	30	10	First baby was born when she was 15. Has lost several babies in childbirth and early infancy.
Halima	35	Under 15	Does not remember age of first marriage precisely. She lives at the hospital permanently, having been separated from her husband as a result of having fistula.
Zainab	26	15	Has one child (7 years old) but lost her first baby in childbirth, and is being treated for fistula.
Hajara	25	8	Gave birth to her first child at 12, separated from husband after childbirth. In hospital awaiting third fistula operation.
Farida	33	13	Has had several pregnancies, but has lost all her babies in childbirth or early infancy. Separated from husband. Lives and works at hospital.