

Early Marriages and Its Impacts on the Balikumbat Community, Northwestern Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

Early marriage or child marriage is one of the cultural practices that do not only deprive a woman of her legal rights, but also of her social and economic opportunities. The pertinence of this topic is seen when ironically, men are not the only ones who promote this practice; the mothers of these girls are equally perpetrators of this act. The primary cause of this phenomenon is the high illiteracy rate, especially among the womenfolk of Balikumbat. More so, the customs and traditions of the people have predominantly contributed to the practice of early marriages in this community. A girl not married by the age of 20 was believed to be probably barren, unattractive, or to have a bad family history. This belief has encouraged most young girls to be interested in early marriage for fear of stigmatization by the community. However, our findings reveal that the situation has greatly changed with the coming of many primary, secondary, and high schools in the Balikumbat to sensitize and educate the population about the ills of this practice. The bone of contention in this write up is to examine prima facie the causes and extensively, the impacts of early marriage in general and on the Balikumbat community in particular. This paper reveals that cultural norms, poverty, illiteracy, male chauvinism, and female subordination are some of the main causes of child marriage.

Keywords: Balikumbat community, early marriages, girl child, marriage

INTRODUCTION

Balikumbat is a village situated in Ngo-ketujia division in north-west region of Cameroon. Balikumbat is a subdivision created by the presidential decree No 92/187 of 1st September 1992 which is made up of five villages, namely Balikumbat, Bafanji, Bamunkumbit, Baligashu, and Baligansin. It is bounded to the east by the Noun division (Foumban), to the south by the Galim subdivision under the Bambotos division, in the west by the Santa subdivision, in the northwest by Bamenda 1 and Tubah in the north, including Ndop central subdivision in the northeast. It has as primary source of livelihood—farming or basically, subsistence food cropping. It has an approximate population of about 58,374 inhabitants on an estimated surface area of about 434.5 square kilometers, giving a population density of about 134 persons per square kilometer. The youth population comprises 60% of those aged 0–25 years, with 50.3% women and 49.7% men. The landscape is made up of a high plateau, usually called kayitbi [1], found in Balikumbat, with savannah vegetation, red ferrallitic soil, and steep slopes. With a prominent residual relief which rises abruptly for about 1500m above sea level. The temperature generally varies between 16°C and 28°C and may sometimes be lower on the high plateau. It equally has an average annual rainfall range between 2500mm and 3000mm. This zone experiences the humid tropical climate and precisely of Cameroon type. It is characterized by a daily temperature range of about 24° to 27°C. The prevalence of wind is relative, and it gets very dry during the dry season. It mostly receives Hamattan wind in the dry season and highly saturated wind during the rainy season.

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This study's main goals were to produce quantitative and qualitative data and analyse the causes and effects of early marriage in the Balikumbat community. Presently, there is a lack of data on all aspects of early marriage in this part of the region of Cameroon, mainly because there has been little or no research done so far on this field of study especially with respect to the Balikumbat village.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To evaluate the current rate of early marriage in the Balikumbat community;
2. To identify and research the demographic, cultural, socioeconomic, and other factors that contribute to early marriage;
3. To look at the demographic, socioeconomic, psychological, and socio-reproductive effects of early marriage;
4. To assess the impact of legal guidelines on early marriage on marriage stability; and,
5. To provide programmatic advice that will aid in the development of initiatives by policymakers to lessen the negative effects of early marriage.

This study involved direct observations, interviews, and group discussions. Direct observation enabled the researcher to get involved in the daily activities of the Balikumbat people. The researcher is an indigene of Balikumbat; he observed and participated in activities like the traditional ceremonies of womanhood and has an in-depth knowledge of the culture of the people. This was enough to confirm prior information and correct data. A semi-structured interview was used because it gives room for open ended questions which helped in the collection of in-depth answers and spontaneous comments from the respondents. The relevance of this method is that the researcher does not monopolize the interview by excessively controlling the respondent. It consequently produced satisfactory responses from interviewees. Also, the use of an interview guide helped the researcher stay on track (Appendix i). Individual in-depth interviews were instrumental in this study because they enabled some issues to be discussed in privacy, one-on-one, with individual men, women, and married girls. Group discussion was meant to complement data that could not be acquired through interviews and observations. This was organized with the mothers, the married girls, and the men separately to get their opinion with respect to this problem. Men who were considered as custodians of the tradition in Balikumbat held higher grounds on this (Appendix ii).

This paper addresses two related issues:

1. Causes of early marriages, and
2. Impacts or effects of early marriages on the Balikumbat community.

With the advent of the Anglophone crisis in 2016 in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, there has been a rise in early marriages because many schools have been closed down. Marriage of young girls below the age of 15 is common in Balikumbat, like in other rural communities in Cameroon. It was not until late 2021 that a few communities and mission schools went operational in Balikumbat (Appendix iii).

LEGAL CONSIDERATION OF EARLY MARRIAGE

Although early marriage has become less widespread internationally over the past 30 years, it is still prevalent in rural Cameroon and among the poorest of the poor. 42% of girls in Africa get married before they turn 18 [2]. In Cameroon, 61% of females get married before they turn 18 years old [3]. According to Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "child marriage" is defined as any marriage of a child younger than the age of 18 years. Due to the fact that the majority of girls in Balikumbat are pushed into marriage at the age of nine, they are victims of early marriage. As a result, they suffer from a lack of education, low self-esteem, and limited opportunities for personal and social development. The young girls are consequently caught in the terrible cycle of destitution, ignorance, and illness.

Child marriage in Balikumbat is a cultural norm acceptable to most men and women (Appendix iv). This is reinforced through the various rites ("*nyong fehtibia*"), values, and practices ("*nkeensobi*")

which are detrimental to the wellbeing of women and girls. One such rite is the passage from childhood to maturity, which is not determined by the age of the girl but rather by the fact that she starts to menstruate, develop breasts, and change physically. The practice of child marriage in Balikumbat is therefore considered normal and is continuously carried out due to ignorance of the consequences.

Marriage is an institution that is highly respected in our society today. Marriage celebrations in Balikumbat are contracted among all classes of people in the community be it rich or poor. Child betrothal is a very common form of marriage in the Balikumbat community. This is a practice where a child is given out for marriage at birth through an indication of interest by a male adult or decided unilaterally by both parents of the child (Appendix v). Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys are outlawed under Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990, and adequate measures, including legislation, must be implemented to set the minimum age for marriage at 18 years.

The magnitude of the ceremony for most marriages in this community depends on the amount of wealth in the family, but the marriage rituals remain the same. Items demanded from the groom's family reflect the culture of the people. For example, hoes are always demanded from the groom's family which is an indication that farming is one of their main activities in this community. Other items like a calabash of fresh palm wine and some cola nuts are some common requirements (Appendix vi). Some items like a cock, a blanket, tins of palm oil, etc. may equally be demanded by the family of the bride as part of the bride price. However, it should be noted that when it comes to bride prices, the Balikumbat community does not expect much from the groom's family.

Based on the study carried out in Balikumbat, in April and May 2021, by this researcher on teenage mothers, out of the 65 girls interviewed, 40 had a child before the age of 15. From the interviews carried out in the field, it was glaring that most of the girls were forced into marriage or got themselves involved without actually knowing what they were doing (Appendix vii).

According to statistics on child marriage in the rural communities of Cameroon carried out by UNICEF (1987–2006) [4], 57% of girls were married under the age of 18 (Appendix viii). The phenomenon of early marriage and early school dropout is very evident in Balikumbat. Balikumbat community rather has a high illiteracy rate with majority of school dropouts being girls. In addition, girls' education is sometimes viewed as a waste of resources. This is because she will soon be married off to stay with the husband's family who will take full charge of her. The family views a married daughter as a source of honour. This explains why in Balikumbat, most girls are school dropouts. The situation got out of hand with the advent of the Anglophone crisis in late 2016 where many schools in the northwest and southwest were closed down or burned down by the secessionists.

CAUSES OF EARLY MARRIAGES IN THE BALIKUMBAT COMMUNITY

The practice of child marriage in Balikumbat is an old phenomenon that is rampant in this community as their culture promotes polygamous marriages (Appendix ix). These marriages encourage the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the area as many get involved without knowledge of the health status of their partners. Besides, their consent is often not sought before giving them out for marriage [5]. The causes of child marriage in Balikumbat include poverty, high illiteracy levels, cultural norms, and beliefs.

Poverty

Poverty is also a serious factor influencing child marriage and one of the major reasons why parents encourage their female children to marry. A young girl in Balikumbat is regarded as an economic liability and forced to marry an elderly man to enable her family and the child to benefit financially from the man. In Balikumbat, just like other communities where child marriage is practiced, marriage is viewed as a deal often representing a significant economic and social activity for a family. Girls in Balikumbat are often given out for marriage as a means to settle debts, for exchange or to cement a good relationship. In this community, marriage is an institution that is respected and gives the girls financial stability especially in times of uncertainty (Appendix x).

In Balikumbat, the practice of paying the bride price encourages child marriage. In some communities in Cameroon [6], bride wealth is higher for girls between 9 and 16 years of age because men in the area believe that a young girl's virginity has been preserved and fertility is guaranteed. Families often receive gifts such as palm wine, cola nuts, palm oil, high quality cloth, etc. from the grooms, or grooms' family, as part of their daughter's bride price (Appendix xi). This practice is known in Balikumbat as "*nkeensoohbah*". It is also a customary right for the groom to assist the bride's family in times of misfortune and acute difficulties and even help in farmland cultivation (Appendix xii). Though the bride price and dowry help to bring the groom and bride's families together, it could sometimes be dangerous to the girl if it is considered a financial strategy or if one spouse does not have a voice in the arrangement.

Illiteracy

The high rate of illiteracy among girls and women in Balikumbat has equally contributed greatly to high level of child marriage in the area. Though the government has made efforts to construct schools, people in the area are reluctant to send their female children to the schools particularly those in the remote areas. They believe that school has a negative impact by delaying marriage, especially as early marriage earns them a higher bride price. The fact that girls do not go to school makes them have very low self-esteem and self-actualization. They are usually not able to make decisions especially in relation to their own sexuality. They have little or no knowledge of contraceptives, the spacing of children, and the health needs of the children (Appendix xiii). Our study showed that, out of the 150 young girls interviewed, 30 had never gone to school, 50 had been to the primary school, and 70 had dropped out of secondary school [7].

Undoubtedly, a lack of education among young girls undermines their ability to resist early marriages. Those few who bravely refused were obliged to leave the villages for fear of possible threats to their lives. As Grace Muhnyong [8] recounts: 'when I refused the old man of about 65 years, I was forced to escape from Balikumbat for fear that my parents would kill me'. Elizabeth, now 20 years old, revealed that she was given to her husband at the age of 14 without her consent. 'The first time I had sex, I cried because it was painful and I did not know what it meant or what to do' (Appendix xiv). Illiterate girls and women who are abandoned, widowed, or divorced, or who are victims of acute poverty, are forced to leave Balikumbat for other cities for jobs such as cleaning, cooking, or housekeeping. A good number of highly desperate girls even enter the commercial sex trade. Due to this, HIV/AIDS and STDs have become widely prevalent among young girls (Appendix xv).

Cultural Norms and Beliefs

Cultural norms and beliefs are also a contributing factor to the practice of child marriage in Balikumbat. In this community, it is believed that a woman has no voice in the presence of a man. According to them, a woman should be seen and not heard. This is a cultural norm that does not exist in official principles or policies. Unfortunately, some women have taken it as truth and adopted the response 'yes' to everything a man says. This explains why mothers have no objections to their daughters' marriages. The decisions taken by men are reinforced by women.

Security

Parents frequently resort to child marriages in order to provide for their daughters' futures. This situation was prevalent in Balikumbat during the old days. Some families use this as a survival strategy and a way of fighting acute poverty (Appendix xvi). Today, this factor has greatly diminished especially with the putting in place of the forces of law and order in Balikumbat (Appendix xvii). "The Bali man is always protective of his own because as a born warrior, he will not want any harm to come to his family. Thus, we envisage early marriage as a way of always protecting the girl child because she is often considered the vulnerable one" (Appendix xviii).

Women as Perpetuators of Early Marriages in Balikumbat

Cultural norms of the people in Balikumbat, like early marriages, denied access to education, and perceptions of fertility, reflect the values and beliefs of members of the community. Most often,

decisions are taken by men and executed by women. In almost all the rural communities in Cameroon, women are very influential especially in the lives of their children. The practice of child marriage and refused access to education helps to strengthen and reinforce gender roles and stereotypes in the Balikumbat community. The women, who spend more time with their children than men, prepare them for marriage and socializes them towards cultural stereotypes that helps to maintain a woman in a subordinate position. This inferior status makes women 'undervalued' and considered as 'property', a view reflected clearly in practices such as early marriage, wife inheritance, and dowry payment. Women are easily manipulated and used. In such situations, violence is perpetuated by men against women and sometimes by women against other women (Appendix xix).

The ability to bear children is considered one of the most important factors in every marriage in Balikumbat. Since most people believe that a woman's most fertile period is in her teens, and that it can be difficult for a girl to get pregnant after the age of 20, most parents would like to give their daughters away for marriage early in life. When these girls fail to get married, the blame goes to the mothers for a lack of proper home education and training. This pressure and blame usually come from the girl's father as well as her extended family. The girl's mother is often embarrassed in society. In Balikumbat, perceptions of a good family include stable early marriages for the daughters. These cultural beliefs push mothers to be perpetrators of early marriages. A mother's pride is to see her girl child gets married as early as possible so as to give her grandchildren. This has also encouraged the practice of early marriage in the community under study.

EFFECTS OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON THE BALIKUMBAT COMMUNITY

A violation of human rights is child marriage. The effects of early marriage cannot be overemphasized. It represents a grave threat to the young girl's life, health, and future dreams. It may have negative effects on pregnancy and birthing problems. In developing countries like Cameroon, it is the main cause of death among young girls of ages between 15 and 19 during childbirth (Appendix xx). Young girls forced into early marriage are easily exposed to sexually transmitted infections or sexually transmitted diseases including HIV. For a girl child, early marriage can mean an end to her education, end to her dreams, and end to her career and fundamental life choices. This section analyses the effects of early marriage on the girl child, on the community as well as a range of violations of children's rights. A few of these results are listed here.

Girls' Dignity and Integrity

Numerous children's rights are violated by early marriage, which also affects their dignity and integrity. It deprives the girl child of the possibility of enjoying her childhood. This is the most important period for her to develop herself physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Early marriage inflicts great emotional and psychological stress on the young girl caused by the early removal of the child from the comfort of her parent's home to that of her husband or in-laws which is totally strange to her. Her husband, who is of course many years older than her, will seldom share common feelings with the teenager except that of sexual intercourse which mostly aim at getting her pregnant and not for pleasure. The young girl will be relegated to making babies for her husband. One of our informants revealed her experience with tears: '...since I got married to this man, I have never been free in his presence... I always regard him more as my father than my husband because of our age difference. There are moments I will cry alone in the room and when I complain to my mother, she will shout at me...telling me that she went through a similar experience and saw nothing wrong with it... It is my friend who is a student in the Government High School in Balikumbat that advised me to escape to the city', she narrated. The young girl was subjected to this old man and forced to develop an intimate, emotional, and physical relationship with this old and strange man. She was forced as well to have intercourse, although physically she was not fully developed nor emotionally prepared.

Another case was that of Emilia, who was betrothed to a man when she was just 3 months old. Though such practice is no longer very common in the area, we found some women who narrated their experiences. The common experiences shared by these women were that: their parents were already

receiving items such as food, dresses, jewels, and other items from the groom's family when the girls were as young as 3 months. As they were growing up, they noticed some degree of 'generosity' through 'gifts' and other 'services' from these men to their parents. One of the women said: 'I was handed over to this man at the age of 9 on condition that he will not have sex with me until I am mature enough, but 2 years later, he had sex with me... it was so painful, and I bled out much blood'. Most of the early marriages in the area lead to violence against the young girls by their husbands.

Education

Early marriage greatly affects children's education especially the girl child. Many international and state law documents have the right to education as a foundational principle.

The rate of school dropout in Balikumbat has increased in recent times (Appendix xxi). This has greatly contributed to societal ills in the Balikumbat community, like youths involved in armed robbery, vandalism, prostitution, and excessive alcohol consumption. However, with the creation of more secondary and high schools in Balikumbat (Appendix xxii), there has been a drop in the rate of early marriages due to continued sensitization in schools.

It is impossible to overstate the value of education in any modern nation. Several international treaties, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, have also acknowledged the right to education as a fundamental human right. In accordance with this convention, everyone has a right to free and compulsory primary education. Additionally, everyone has a responsibility to create secondary education that is accessible to all, particularly through the gradual introduction of free secondary education, as well as a responsibility to create equitable access to higher education. The need to provide basic education for those who have not finished primary school is a component of the right to education. The need to prevent discrimination at all levels of the educational system, to set minimum standards, and to enhance the quality of education are all included in the right to education in addition to these requirements about access to school. The government's policies for satisfying the needs of the population, especially in the fields of education and health, resulted in significant improvement. However, the prolonged recession damaged operational capabilities as demonstrated by the decline in human capital, the disintegration of the social sector, ongoing inequities, the significant impoverishment of the nation, and lastly, the decline in life expectancy.

The Cameroon Penal Code stipulates that; "any parent with sufficient means who refuses to send his child to school, shall be punished with a fine of from 50,000 to CFAF 500,000" [9] and should a parent repeat that act of not taking proper care to educate the child or train him or her, the punishment shall be imprisonment for from one year to two years. The law has particularly targeted parents who have means but have been unwilling to submit their children to education. However, the government remains the number one authority competent to encourage the aspects of education especially basic education for an effective realization of its vision of emergence by 2035.

Health

According to the United National Fund for Population (UNFPA) child marriage advocacy program (2005), child marriage exposes girls to diseases like HIV/AIDS, cervical cancer, and fistula. Compared to elder women, adolescent mothers have a 35–55% greater birth risk [10]. The study is therefore designed to show that early marriage has biological, physical, and psychological effects on the health of girls in Balikumbat. No girl should become pregnant before the age of 18 since she is not yet physically prepared to give birth, according to UNICEF (2010). Premature birth and low body weight are common among newborns born to women under the age of 18; these babies have an increased risk of dying within the first year of life. This is risky for the health of most young mothers (Appendix xxiii). Some of the young girls we interviewed were widows. These young widows suffer from psychological stress. Most of them are mocked by the entire village and as a result, they move to the nearest villages or towns for safety (Appendix xxiv).

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is frequently more common among child brides, and they are also less inclined to speak out against it. Girls who marry young are also more inclined to justify a man's beating of his wife [11]. Some men in Balikumbat have turned their wives into punching bags. Numerous studies link child marriage, which is also a health problem, to girls' susceptibility to domestic abuse. In addition to the associated verbal, psychological, and possibly physical violence, adolescent girls, and young adults may also experience domestic crisis, separation, and divorce as a result of coping mechanisms that include active or passive resistance to their new husband and family. All of these events can have a lasting impact on these groups of people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Child marriage does not only deprive girls of their legal rights, it also creates serious biological, physical, social, and psychological effects on the young girls in the Balikumbat community. Generally speaking, the practice of child marriage is reducing in most of the rural areas of Cameroon but there is however need for continuous education and sensitization so as to completely eradicate this harmful cultural practice. Eradicating child marriage will involve the sensitization of young girls, their fathers, mothers, and even their relatives. The entire community should be educated about early marriages. This will therefore include the traditional rulers, the religious authorities, the government, and other stakeholders.

The government will have to strictly enforce the laws and international conventions that protect the rights of children especially those related to child marriage. International treaties that have been ratified by Cameroon need to be respected by adopting national laws that are in line with these international treaties and equally drafting their statute of application to make the law go into force (Appendix xxv). There is a lack of political will for change at the legislative and judiciary levels. Legal proceedings in cases of child marriage are often hindered by government officials and law enforcement. Overall, the police ignore the problem, cases are dismissed by the courts, and judges will accept bribes from men who seek to marry underage girls. The researcher thus proposes the setting up of a commission that will work underground to unravel these vices and bring them to justice. Equally, the lack of a competent body to control the practice in this part of Cameroon is another weakness that encourages child marriage. The writer therefore proposed that a control unit to check such practices be set up and be disseminated to the least remote villages of Cameroon where the degree of early marriage is still at a rise, Balikumbat not being an exception (Appendix xxvi).

The eradication of child marriage will mean combating the causes such as poverty, high illiteracy rates, ignorance, and detrimental cultural norms [12–14] (Appendix xxvii). To effectively do so, women and girls must be educated. The government and stakeholders must take particular action in order to promote the education of the girl child in Balikumbat and other rural areas in Cameroon. This can be done by providing free education to girls and by opening up more adult literacy and vocational training centers for women and school dropouts, and even granting scholarship by the members of the elite, organizations and other establishment like the council (Appendix xxviii–xxx) [15].

Education will not only break the yoke of ignorance, but it will also go a long way to increasing the ages of marriage, creating employment, and helping the girls develop self-esteem and self-actualization [16–22]. It is true that there are primary, secondary, and high schools in the Balikumbat community to curb the illiteracy rate, but there is still a need to sensitize the population to send their children to school. More so, there is still a lack of access to secondary and high schools in some remote areas of Balikumbat like Deilu, Fatfat, Fumangum, etc. which are distant away from the existing schools. The government should also come up with effective programs that can help in the economic empowerment of women and the girl child. This can be done by introducing them to income generating activities and giving them microcredits to help support their activities [23].

Another measure will be for the government and stakeholders to develop health sensitization programs, especially on reproductive health. These programs will enable the community to be aware of the health risks involved in early or child marriage [24].

Our findings also show that early marriages cause physical, biological, and psychological harm to young girls under the age of 15 in Balikumbat. This paper calls for the local inhabitants of the Balikumbat community, the government, and other stakeholders to take measures to reduce the rate of early marriage in Balikumbat in particular and Cameroon in general, as well as reinforce the laws and conventions to mitigate its negative effects [25].

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APPENDIX

- i. People that were interviewed in the course of this research were basically youths and particularly young girls with fresh experiences. However, some old parents were consulted to throw more light on the concept. (For example, the former Chairman of The Balikumbat Traditional Council, Doh Ndimeya Peter).
- ii. Doh Pello (100 years old), one of the old custodians of the Balikumbat customs and traditions, holds the view that culture is the strongest weapon a man can use to shape his future. “We should not forget where we are coming from, for if we do, we will definitely not be certain of where we are heading to. Culture is a man’s true identity” he added. Consulted on 5th of August 2020.
- iii. Section 6 of the March 2010 United States Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices for Cameroon, under the heading ‘children’ states: “While the minimum legal age for a woman to marry is 15, many families facilitated the marriage of young girls by the age of 12. Early marriage was prevalent in the northern regions of Adamaoua, north, and particularly the remote far north region, where many girls as young as nine faced severe health risks from pregnancies. There were no statistics on the prevalence of child marriage.” (United States Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor) (11 March 2010) 2009 Human Rights Report: Cameroon).
- iv. Particularly inhabitants of most remote areas like Deilu, Formangum, Fatfat, Munchu-munanji, Wapuh, etc.
- v. A practice which was considered very normal in the past effected by our forefathers. For instance, when female child is delivered, the parents decide her husband at the minimal age of three.
- vi. So says the then Chairman of the Balikumbat Traditional Council, Doh Ndimeya Peter, consulted on the 5th of August, 2016.
- vii. Kahbinseh Relindis, a 16-year-girl from the Formangum quarter in Balikumbat actually confessed in confidence that she ran away from her 35 years old husband when the so called marriage was unbearable. She was given to this man at the tender age of 11.
- viii. Whereas in 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development stated that the minimum age of marriage which is 18 should be raised and enforced, while all forms of coercion and discrimination should be eliminated and marriage should be entered into with free consent and as equal partners. See United Nations Fund for Population (UNFPA, 2004).
- ix. In the days of the old, the people of this locality believed that getting married to many wives portray the strength of the man and wealth.
- x. However, it should be noted that with the coming of globalization, many of these beliefs have weathered away.
- xi. Bride price requirements in Balkumbat demand the groom family to come with a five liters jar of palm wine, some cola nuts, “three-stone fire side” money, a blanket, bride mother child birth money, and a male cock.
- xii. For example, the groom is expected to assist the parents of the bride at the beginning of the farming season by contributing in the tilling of the soil or provide seedlings.

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- xiii. For girls, research shows that those with more years of education marry later, have smaller families and survive childbirth at higher rates. They experience reduced incidences of HIV/AIDS, earn more, and live in societies with higher national rates of economic growth. See Hargreaves, J. et al. Systematic review exploring time trends in the association between education attainment and risk of HIV infection in sub-Saharan Africa. 2008; 22(3): 403–414.
 - xiv. Lack of schooling in the area also means that those girls and women who must work to earn a living have no skills and qualifications.
 - xv. Many become young widows due to marriage with elderly men.
 - xvi. Situations of insecurity and acute poverty can prompt parents to resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy.
 - xvii. Unlike before, Balikumbat now has a National Gendarmerie Brigade and a National Public Security Unit (the police) to maintain peace and order.
 - xviii. So says Doh Pello, one of the old custodian of the Balikumbat culture and customs (late).
 - xix. Female genital mutilation, for example, is a cultural practice that is carried out by women on girls in some communities. This alone is considered as violence on girls with physical, psychological and health consequences.
 - xx. Marrying too young end child marriage. Published by the United Nations Population Fund UNFPA, New York. copyright © 2012 United nations Population Fund all rights reserved. United Nations Population Fund 605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158, USA. Also see Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin Executive Director, UNFPA.
 - xxi. In G.H.S. Balikumbat for example, by the end of the 2015/2016 academic year, close to about 15 girls has drop out from school because of unwanted pregnancy.
 - xxii. At the time this study was carried out, we had basically five secondary schools and three high schools in Balikumbat (GHS Balikumbat, GTHS Balikumbat, GBHS Balikumbat, GSS Nyugu-Backyit Balikumbat, and GSS Joguru-Balikumbat).
 - xxiii. Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15–19 year-old girls (married and unmarried) worldwide.
 - xxiv. When you visit neighboring villages, like Bamunkumbit, Baligshu, Baligansin, Bafanji, etc., you will see Balikumbat girls or woman who fled from the village for fear to be forced into early marriages.
 - xxv. Cameroon has ratified several international human rights documents, but they are not always enforced; in fact, international agreements are often in direct conflict with national legislation. For example, while Cameroon has ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, Cameroon's legal age of marriage is 15 for girls with parental permission, and 18 for boys. See Research conducted by the Institut Supérieur du Sahel at the University of Maroua (Cameroon), in partnership with ALVF-EN, supported by IWHC.
 - xxvi. A good example of such unit is the Association to Combat Violence against Women-Extreme North (ALVF-EN). The ALVF-EN is a feminist organization that aims to eliminate all forms of violence affecting women and girls, including early and forced marriage, in the northern regions of Cameroon. ALVF-EN sponsored a major study to better understand the practice and help its members and other organizations more effectively advocate against child marriage as well as promote women's empowerment.
 - xxvii. Asongu NA. Child marriage in rural Cameroon: The case of Magba in the west region. Researcher/Anthropologist National Centre for Education Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation. P. O. Box 1721, Yaounde, Cameroon.
 - xxviii. Njiei AF. Child marriage in rural Cameroon: The case of Magba in the west region. Researcher/Anthropologist National Centre for Education Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation. Yaounde, Cameroon.
 - xxix. Child marriage is a worldwide practice but while the practice has decreased globally over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas of Cameroon and among the poorest of the poor. In Africa, 42% of girls are married before the age of 18(Sharon La Frantere, 2005).
 - xxx. UNICEF. (2005). Early marriage: A harmful traditional practice. New York: United Nations.
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