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#### **“Africa’s Socio Economic and Political Future: African Union’s Agenda 2063 in Perspective”**

#### **ABSTRACT**

##### **Poverty, Culture, Religion and Legislative Omissions- the Fourfold Catalyst for Girl Child Marriages in Africa: Nigeria as a Case Study**

Child marriage is a gross violation of the human rights of any child. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defines child marriage as a formal marriage or union before 18 years of age. Child marriage is a major issue that affects every African country in varying degrees; from 76% in Niger to 2% in Algeria.

The negative effects of child marriage are far reaching. Child marriage compromises the health and development of the child. It exposes the child bride to domestic abuse, disruption of education and limits her opportunities in life. Although child marriage occurs among boys and girls, it is about five times more common among girls than boys. This research will therefore focus on child marriage as it relates to girls.

One of the major causes of child marriage has been identified as poverty. In some instances, children are given off for marriage by poor families to reduce the financial burden on the parents or for the financial gain of the bride price. Negative cultural beliefs/ practices also encourage child marriage. In some communities, it is culturally believed that having a child marry at an early age will prevent her from being promiscuous and bringing shame to the family. Furthermore, some religions indirectly encourage child marriage; for instance, where the age of puberty for a girl which normally varies from one child to the other is seen as the age for attaining majority and being marriageable. The absence of or inadequate legislation to address fundamental issues necessary for child protection generally and child marriage specifically, is another catalyst for child marriage in Africa.

This paper will address the four identified causes of child marriage, linking them to other sub-causes. Using Nigeria as a case study, the paper will consider if Africans and African governments are ready to break free from age long negative cultures that undermine the African children’s rights in this regard. If Africans can look past religion which is a very sensitive stronghold in most communities and place the right of individual children first? If there enough political will to review outdated laws, enact new laws and implement these laws to protect children from the abuse of child marriage? In either case can the African Union aspirations for 2063- to have an Africa where children are put first, where every girl/woman is empowered educationally and otherwise, where full gender equality is achieved, where all forms of discrimination, violence and harmful socio-cultural practices against girls/women including child marriage is eliminated be achievable or is it far-fetched? The paper will canvass for a strategic and sustained grassroot and country by country mobilisation approach in addressing the menace of child marriage. The African Union’s aspirations must be matched with action, resources and engagement of intercountry and intercontinental support.

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