

Research Article

Understanding Child Marriage Among Girls in Nigeria: A Focus on Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State

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Abstract

The right of choice in marriage is universal and it is enshrined in international human rights instruments. Yet, many girls under 18 years enter into marriage without a chance to exercise that right. This has proved problematic as the situation often results in negative outcomes including school drop-out, pregnancy risks, diseases and sexually transmitted infections, unhappiness, and even death. This study therefore examined the factors influencing child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. It specifically investigated the cultural and sociodemographic factors influencing child marriage among girls in the study area. The ethno-cultural theory of pedogamy guided the study. The mixed method research design was employed with structured questionnaire and key informant interviews utilized in the collection of data. Data was retrieved from 183 respondents, and it was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. Results from the study showed that the practice of arranged marriage and beliefs that marriage brings honour to a girl and her family contributes to child marriage. Also, ignorance of fundamental human rights among girls and peer influence, as well as financial difficulties in families, illiteracy among parents and weak enforcement of legal sanctions against child marriage contributes to the practice of child marriage. The study recommends, among others, promotion of education and awareness programme that challenge cultural beliefs that perpetuate child marriage, and implementation of interventions that address poverty in Nasarawa Eggon LGA.

Keywords

Child Marriage, Culture, Marriage Act, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The three key events in people's lives are birth, marriage and death, but only marriage is a matter of choice. It is a social contract in which a person of either sex has a subsisting claim to the right of sexual access to his/her partner, in which it is culturally acceptable for children to result [27]. Marriage exists to bring a man and a woman together as husband and

wife, so that they can be father and mother to any children that may result from their union. The right of choice in marriage is universal and is established in international human rights instruments. Yet, many children enter into marriage without an opportunity to exercise the right to decide. These children are forced into marriage at a very early age when they are too

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young to make informed decisions about a partner or about the implications of marriage itself [7].

Globally, around 21% of young women are married before their eighteenth birthday [22, 25]. The practice is common in developing countries and is most prevalent in Africa and Asia. It remains between 50% and 60% across Sub-Saharan Africa [8]. In Nigeria, an estimated 44% of girls are married before their eighteenth birthday, suggesting one of the highest rates of girl-child marriage globally [19, 10]. For example, Imo State, a predominantly Igbo Christian state in southeastern Nigeria which adopted the Child Rights Law in 2004, is still confronted with the problem of child marriage. The challenge is also common in the South West, North West and North East regions of Nigeria where 68% and 57% of women aged 20-49 reportedly marry before their 18th birthday [9]. Moreover, the rates of child marriage in the Sharia-legislated Kano State are some of the highest in Nigeria. In North Central Nigeria particularly in Nasarawa State, the high rates and practice of child marriage is endorsed by traditional practices.

Child marriage is a violation of a number of International Human Rights Charters and Conventions, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEFDW), the 1989 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Women, and the Nigerian Child Rights Act (2003) [36]. Child marriage violates the rights of children with often more negative consequences on the girls than boys, leaving them socially isolated with little or no education, skills and opportunities for employment and self-realization [17, 18].

The practice of child marriage among girls mainly arises due to poverty, civil strife and low level of development. Some families believe that it limits and discourages promiscuity [6]. For the girl child, it discriminates against her right as a child, limits her freedom to make decisions, isolates her from her peers, increases her risk of intimate sexual violence and sexually transmitted infections including HIV infection, and predisposes her to complications of child birth including obstructed labour and obstetric fistulae. Child marriage forces children to assume responsibilities and handle situations for which they are physically and psychologically unprepared. It causes children to discontinue their education, increase maternal mortality in pregnancy and launches the girl on a cycle of poverty for generations to come [11, 26].

The best approach for reducing child marriage is through child education [26]. However, not much has been observed particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria where the progress in the educational sector is still very slow and many girls still enter into marriage too early. Surprisingly, the presence of the Marriage Act in Nigeria which sets the legal age of marriage at 18 years and above irrespective of religious or cultural affiliations has not halted the practice and prevalence of child marriage among girls in the country. More worrisome is the fact that in spite of the few studies such as [28, 15, 6, 12] and efforts by organizations [23, 21] aimed at

understanding the increasing rates and the nature of child marriage in Africa and indeed Nigeria, most of the studies are centered on the phenomenon of child marriage within the context of urban areas with little or no attention to rural communities and especially communities in Nasarawa State. These realities have created a serious gap in knowledge on the subject matter and partly accounts for the difficulty in curbing the practice of child marriage which is frowned at globally. The desire to fill the lacuna created by previous researches has necessitated the conduct of this study in Nasarawa Eggon local government area where the researcher observed incidents of child marriage. The study particularly seeks to examine how cultural factors influence child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State; and find out the socio-demographic factors influencing child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. There is no significant relationship between cultural factors and child marriage among girls.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Marriage

Marriage refers to a group's approved mating arrangement, usually marked by a ritual of some sort (the wedding) to indicate the couple's new public status [33]. But for [30], marriage is the union of male and female that is recognized by society. Marriage is also seen as a social contract in which a person of either sex (corporate or individual) in person or by proxy has a subsisting claim to the right of sexual access to his/her partner(s) in which it is culturally acceptable for children to result [27]. From the definition, it is obvious that marriage involves at least two people (most commonly of the opposite sex) who agree to live together (or sometimes apart) in a relationship capable of producing children who are recognised as legitimate constituents of the society.

Marriage is an institution by which a male and a female get social, religious and legal permission for living together, involving in sexual intercourse and reproducing children [32]. Similarly, [34] see marriage as a uniquely comprehensive relationship involving a union of hearts and minds, but also – and distinctively – a bodily union made possible by sexual complementarity. According to the definition, marriage unites a man and a woman holistically – emotionally and bodily, in acts of conjugal love and in the children such love brings forth. It is inherently extended and enriched by family life and calls for all-encompassing commitment that is permanent and exclusive.

Marriage includes the coupling of two people possessing different interests, desires and needs. It is a special association given shape by social rules and laws and significantly affects individuals' development and self-realizations [35]. Functions such as meeting the need for love and being loved, meeting both individuals' biological, social, psychological and moti-

vational needs, bringing new generations to world, gaining a place in society, the feelings of being safe and protected, the sense of cooperation, being confident about the future, feeling proud of each other and healthy functioning of sexual life make marriage universal and significant for societies [29].

In a different note, Max Weber sees marriage as a “stable sexual relationship” allowed and legitimized by the larger kin group and used to determine rules about property rights for children [14]. It is a legally recognized social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship and implying a permanence of the union. Marriage is a legal union between a man and a woman for performing social roles as husband and wife, and it is universal in Bangladesh [30]. For the purpose of this study, the later definition of marriage captures most of the features of what is marriage like union of two people, legality, permanence which is most applicable to the study.

2.2. Child Marriage

Child marriage is usually interchanged with early marriage. It means marriages which involve individuals who are below 18 years. It is a union between a boy and a girl under the age of 18 years [3]. According to [25], child marriage implies any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. The definition resonates with Article 1 of the Convention on the Right of the Child [4] which conceptualizes child marriage as a marriage of a child younger than eighteen (18) years. Similarly, child marriage is seen as the marriage or union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than eighteen years [13].

Child marriage contravenes Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which indicates that individuals who wish to enter into marriage must be at “full age” and that marriage should be entered into “freely” and with “full consent” [14]. The authors posited that child marriage involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws. Child marriage involves formal or informal marriage arrangements where either the boy or girl is not up to the age required for marriage which is 18 years and above. Although child marriage includes both boys and girls, most children married at less than 18 years of age are usually girls. Thus, any country that allows child marriage is violating the fundamental human rights of the children.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation offered a very comprehensive conceptualization of the term child marriage when it viewed it as any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. In Nigeria, child marriage is not legally permitted, and it is also known by other terms such as “early marriage” and “child brides” [5].

2.3. The Ethno-Cultural Theory of Pedogamy

The ethno-cultural theory of pedogamy, introduced by Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo in 2022, is rooted in four core cultural principles. Firstly, it posits that an individual's existence and social development, especially that of a girl-child, are significantly shaped by cultural factors encompassing cognitive and social elements. Secondly, it asserts that the cultural ideal for a girl-child is to adhere to societal expectations related to marriage, including beliefs, norms, values, and perceptions about women and girls. Thirdly, it contends that the value attributed to a girl-child is mainly external, contingent upon her compliance with social and cultural norms. Lastly, the theory emphasizes that in societies endorsing early marriages, the social aspect of a girl-child's identity, shaped by cultural and social influences, takes precedence over her personal identity reflecting individual values and aspirations [31].

In the context of these principles, child marriage in Nasarawa Eggon LGA is viewed as a form of social and cultural conditioning. It arises from internal ethnic-cultural factors, such as cognitive beliefs and socio-cultural expectations, which sustain the practice. According to the ethno-cultural theory of pedogamy, external factors like poverty can contribute to early marriages, but their impact depends on the strength of prevailing cultural and cognitive factors in specific contexts. Additionally, the theory highlights a causal sequence wherein cognitive beliefs give rise to cultural values and norms, shaping perceptions that reinforce these beliefs and practices. Indeed, the intensity of belief systems directly influences the prevalence of early girl-child marriages; stronger beliefs lead to more enduring norms, values, and practices, whereas weaker beliefs result in less prevalent instances of early girl-child marriage.

A major limitation of theory, however, is that it primarily focuses on cultural and cognitive factors, potentially neglecting other crucial aspects like economic factors, legal frameworks, and women's rights. Researches have shown that child marriage is often influenced by poverty, lack of education, and legal loopholes and the theory does not adequately address these factors. Notwithstanding, the theory sheds light on the significance of cognitive-cultural factors, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the deep-rooted cultural foundations of child marriages. Furthermore, by emphasizing the social and cultural conditioning of individuals within specific contexts, the theory encourages a nuanced perspective, considering the intricate web of factors contributing to this practice.

2.4. Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods research design. It was carried out in Nasarawa-Eggon Local Government Area of Nasarawa State which consists of 14 council wards. The target population for the study comprised adults aged 18 years and above who are resident in Nasarawa-Eggon Local Gov-

ernment. A sample size of 204 was determined by using the Taro Yamane approach.

The study adopted multistage sampling techniques. In the first stage, the study area was clustered into three based on the existing internal structural arrangement in the study area which include Anzo, Eholo and Eggon Erro. Thus, six (6) wards were selected. Proportional sampling technique was used for selecting the sample size within each of the clusters. 64 respondents were from Anzo, while 87 from Eholo and 53 respondents selected from Eggon Erro ward making for 204 respondents. From these wards, a simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents using the lottery method.

The data for this study was collected using structured

questionnaires and key informant interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Both instruments were administered in person by the researchers and they were retrieved immediately after completion by the respondents. Consent of respondents were sought and they were assumed of confidentiality and anonymity. Data obtained through the questionnaire was compiled, coded and filled into the statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) software, Version 26. This facilitated in testing the hypothesis and in running the mean, standard deviation and simple percentages and the results were presented in tables. Meanwhile, the qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews was reported verbatim.

3. Results

Table 1. Cultural factors and Child Marriage among Girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA.

S/N	Cultural factors and child marriage among girls	Responses		
		Yes (3)	No (2)	Not Sure (1)
1	Do you know any traditional practice(s) that encourage child marriage	128 (69.9)	18 (9.8)	37 (20.2)
2	Is it common for family in Eggon to arrange marriage for their underage child	173 (94.5)	7 (3.8)	3 (1.6)
3	Do beliefs about the role and status of girls promote early marriage among them	159 (86.9)	17 (9.3)	7 (3.8)
4	Child marriage is a way to maintain social and cultural status	166 (90.7)	13 (7.1)	4 (2.2)
5	Do you believe that early marriage can bring honour to a girl and her family	169 (92.3)	12 (6.6)	2 (1.1)
6	Do you think girls who marry early are more obedient and respectful	175 (95.6)	5 (2.7)	3 (1.6)

Source: Survey, 2023

Data were collected on cultural factors that influence child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA. From the data, most of the respondents were aware of the practice of early child marriage in the area. Also, many of the respondents affirmed that it is common for families in Eggon to arrange marriage for their underage children. Regarding the status of the girls, the majority of respondents submitted that the girl's roles and statuses influenced their early entry into marriage. On maintenance of social and cultural status, most of the

respondents observed that early marriage among girls was a way to sustain social and cultural dignity of the people in the area. With regard to honour, many of the respondents submitted that early marriage brings honour to a girl's and her family. Similarly, the study finding showed that girls who marry at an early age are more submissive, obedient and respectful to their partners. The practice of early child marriage was confirmed by most of the respondents as being influenced by cultural beliefs in the area.

Table 2. Socio-Demographic Factors and Child Marriage among Girls in Nasarawa Eggon.

S/N	Socio-demographic Factors and Child Marriage among Girls	Rating		
		Yes (3)	No (2)	Not Sure (1)
1	Have you observed families marrying off their daughters due to financial difficulties	169 (92.3)	14 (7.7)	-
2	Limited access to education by girls expose them to the risk of early marriage	152 (83.1)	20 (10.9)	11 (6.)
3	Are you aware of any legal consequences for those who are involved in child marriage	48 (26.2)	92 (50.3)	43 (23.5)
4	level of parental education influences the level of early marriage among girls	171 (93.4)	4 (2.2)	8 (4.4)
5	Non-availability of vocational training contribute to early marriage among girls	82 (44.8)	49 (26.8)	52 (28.4)
6	Is the idea that girls should delay education and marry supported in your community	50 (27.3)	108 (59.60)	25 (13.7)
7	The influence of peers make girls to marry at a very young age	158 (86.3)	9 (4.9)	16 (8.7)
8	Lack of access to reproductive health services make girls to go into marriage early	63 (34.4)	35 (19.1)	85 (46.4)
9	Girls see unintended pregnancies as shameful act and marriage as a solution	172 (94.0)	8 (4.4)	3 (1.6)
10	Girls have no power to make decisions concerning their own lives	133 (72.7)	34 (18.6)	16 (8.7)

Source: Survey, 2023. (N= 183)

Socio-demographic factors were examined as one of the causes of early child marriage. For majority of the respondents, early child marriage is influenced by financial gain. Furthermore, illiteracy enhanced early marriage among girls. Majority of the respondents were not aware of any legal consequences for those who are involved in child marriage in the area and thus encouraged the practice. The findings revealed that most parent’s level of education influences the level of early marriage among. Meanwhile, many of the respondents confirmed that most families did not support the notion that girls abandoned education for marriage. Analysis of the peer influence among the respondents revealed most of the early child marriage was facilitated with the aid of peer

influence. The result showed that most of the respondents are not sure whether lack of access to reproductive health services makes girls go into marriage early in the area. The study found that the unintended pregnancies among girls make them engage in early marriage as they avoid shame and disgrace to their parents or family. From the findings, the majority of the girls were not aware of their rights concerning marriage due to their youthful and educational attainment. Furthermore, many of the respondents confirmed that the inability of the girl child to make decisions on her own about when and who to marry greatly influenced her choices of getting married at a tender age. It could be inferred from the table the various ways individual factors influence early child marriage.

Table 3. Pearson correlation between Cultural Beliefs and child marriage Nasarawa Eggon LGA.

S/N	Variables	Mean	STD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Cultural practices	1.50	.811	1					
2	Arrange marriage is common	1.07	.315	.418**	1				
3	Role and status of girls	1.17	.467	.673**	.776**	1			
4	Social and cultural statuses	1.11	.382	.557**	.844**	.875**	1		
5	It bring honour to family	1.09	.320	.508**	.865**	.820**	.907**	1	
6	Obedient, respectful/submissive	1.06	.300	.372**	.944**	.751**	.803**	.805**	1

** Correlation is Significant at 0.01 Level (2 tailed). Source: Field Survey (2023)

The test of hypothesis was done using Pearson Moment Product of Correlation Coefficient (Pearson's r). It was supported by qualitative data obtained from KII conducted. The hypothesis tested in the study was cultural factors are not significantly associated with child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA. Findings on the correlation of cultural factors and child marriage indicated a significant influence at 0.01 and 0.05 level. The result in [table 3](#) showed most of the cultural factors examined correlated with child marriage significantly at 0.05 and 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis "there is no significant relationship between cultural factors and child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA" was rejected and the alternate accepted to read "cultural factors have significant influence on child marriage in Nasarawa Eggon LGA".

The results from KII corroborated the findings from the quantitative data. A 42-year old man observed that:

Traditional beliefs such as dowry, bride price and early marriage for girls are considered a norm, resulting in social pressure and expectations on families to marry off their daughters early. He added that cultural beliefs and practices promote gender inequality and view girls as inferior to boys, leading to early marriage as a means of protection and control.

This was also supported by a 51-year-old mother of five children who asserted that:

Entrenched patriarchal norms that view women as property and allow men to make decisions for them, including when they marry and who they marry. Also, girls who marry early are more virtuous and honourable, increasing their family's status and reputation in the community.

Furthermore, a 25-year-old man opined that:

Early marriage is often seen as a solution to curb premarital sex and other immoral behaviours. He concluded that the role of men as decision-makers and protectors of women, restrict girls' autonomy and influence children.

According to a 17-year-old girl:

Poor economic conditions and limited opportunities in rural communities, forced some families to give out their daughters for marriage as a way to ease financial burdens and ensure their daughter's security.

A 45-year-old traditional leader, have this to say:

My culture emphasizes male children. This encourages and motivates many persons to marry, not minding the age as far as they can have a male child. My wife couldn't bear me a male child so I decided to marry a young girl who can do that, and I have no regret at all.

The findings from KII, therefore, confirmed the influence of cultural factors on child marriage in Nasarawa Eggon LGA.

4. Discussion

The first objective of the study was to examine how cultural factors influence child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon

Local Government Area. The results showed that cultural factors influence child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA. According to majority of the respondents, practices such as arranged marriage and beliefs about the role and status of girls as well as perception of marriage as a way of maintaining social and cultural status and honour to a girl and her family, and the notion that girls who marry early are more respectful and obedient promote the phenomenon of child marriage among girls in the study area. This finding is consistent with [\[1\]](#), who stated that Marriage is a union between two families and some parents lure their girl-child into marriage in order to consolidate family alliances. Empirical evidence further confirmed that due to cultural expectation, young girls marry early in order to fit into the expectations of their community [\[2\]](#).

Indeed, societal expectations and value attached to marriage pressures some parents to allow their girls under the age of 18 years to marry due to the prestige that comes with it. Failure to conform with these expectations may lead to ridicule and disapproval. The findings are supported by studies which established that women are regarded as inferior in African and Asian societies and they face pressure girls face as a result of their status in the society [\[16, 32\]](#). This contributes to early marriage among girls as it remains a major channel which can enhance their social status and make them better recognized and respected in the society. Furthermore, a report by UNICEF established that unmarried girls are seen as a liability to the honor of the family and in order to guarantee chastity and virginity of the bride they are married off early to avoid dishonoring the family [\[24\]](#).

The second objective was to find out the socio-demographic factors influencing child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon local government area. Result on the objective revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that the following reasons including giving out a girl child by parents in marriage in order to overcome financial challenges, lack of access to education among girls, unawareness of the legal consequences of child marriage among parents, lack of opportunities to train girls in vocational and technical skills contribute to the practice of child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA. This finding is corroborated by scholars who concluded that young girls are regarded as an economic burden in impoverished families and many parents marry off their daughters so that they can benefit financially and socially [\[15\]](#).

Marriage is considered a survival strategy in societies that practice early marriage and parents to wed their girls as soon as possible with the intention of satisfying their own economic needs. Furthermore, illiteracy is to a very large extent the number one factor responsible for child marriage [\[20\]](#), and the Child Rights Act that has been enacted to guard against child marriage in Nigeria has been particularly weak with respect to enforcement [\[21\]](#). In fact, eleven out of thirty-six states (grouped under Northeast (NE) and Northwest (NW) have not implemented the Child Rights Act because

they have internal laws (mostly customary and sharia laws) that allow marriage for girls as young as 11 years old [15].

Results from responses on this objective showed individual factors cause child marriage among girls in the study area. This includes peer influence, unplanned pregnancies, lack of awareness of human rights to choice, and girl's lack of power to make decisions about their lives. When girls below the age of marriage see that their friends who are married are to some great extent living independent lifestyles, they are motivated to get married as soon as possible. Also, there is to a great extent the lack of awareness to rights as individuals, and considering that the girls are in rural communities where most enlightenment exercises often do not reach them, they are not only aware of their right to choose whom to marry, but also lack the powers to make informed decisions about themselves. This condition exacerbates the condition of child marriage in the study area. Moreso, unwanted pregnancies can result in early marriage among girls because not every girl will be able to bear the shame and stigma that accompanies having a child out of wedlock. Moreover, not many families will accommodate such a child who may be seen as a disgrace to the family.

It was similarly reported that as a result of religious expectations, parents force their daughters to marry whomever they get pregnant for [16], and situations involving unintended pregnancies are precursors to child marriage among girls as most societies in Africa and Asia frown upon pregnancy prior to marriage [12]. As such, most families seek to marry off their girl child before they get pregnant outside marriage or outrightly give them out in marriage to whoever is available when they get pregnant before marriage.

5. Conclusion

The researcher's assumption that there is no significant relationship between cultural factors and child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA was rejected as the study found that cultural beliefs significantly influence early child marriage in the study area. Practices such as arranged marriage, beliefs about the role and status of girls as well as perception of marriage as a way of maintaining social and cultural status and honour to a girl and her family, and the idea that girls who marry early are more respectful and obedient promote the phenomenon of child marriage. Moreover, individual factors including motivation from friends, unintended pregnancies, lack of awareness of human rights to choice, and girl's lack of power to make decisions about their lives also result in the practice of child marriage among girls. Financial difficulties in families, lack of access to education by girls, unawareness of the legal consequences of child marriage, lack of opportunities to train girls in vocational and technical skills have also contributed to the practice of child marriage among girls in Nasarawa Eggon LGA. In all of these, the girls are the ones at the receiving end as they suffer emotional, physical and economic consequences, leading to unhappiness, dropping out of school, poverty, health risks and so on. It is

therefore suggested that;

- 1) The government of Nasarawa State, Non-governmental organizations, civil society groups, traditional and religious leaders should collaborate in promoting education and awareness programmes in Nasarawa Eggon so as to challenge traditional cultural beliefs that perpetuate child marriage among girls, emphasizing the value of girls' education, equal status, and empowering of girls to make choices about their own future.
- 2) Girls should be empowered with education, information, and decision making opportunities to reduce child marriage by countering the negative impact of child marriage, unplanned pregnancies, ignorance of their fundamental rights and a lack of power to make informed decisions.
- 3) It is essential to implement holistic interventions that address poverty, improve access to education, raise awareness about the legal consequences of child marriage, and provide opportunities for technical and vocational skills training for girls.

Abbreviations

IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child

Author Contributions

Terhile Jude Ahoo is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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