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Adult Education Programmes as Strategic Tools for Preventing Gender-Based Violence and Early Marriage in Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State

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Abstract- ***Gender-based violence (GBV) and early marriage remain persistent threats to the rights, dignity, and socio-economic well-being of women and girls in the Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Despite the domestication of legal reforms like the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) (VAPP) Act, these challenges continue due to entrenched cultural norms, poverty, and low literacy levels. This paper examines the role of adult education programmes, specifically functional literacy, human rights education, and community mobilization as strategic tools for addressing these underlying drivers. Findings indicate that adult education significantly improves legal awareness, strengthens women's economic empowerment, and enhances reporting behavior by breaking the "culture of silence". Specifically, functional literacy integrated with vocational skills provides women with the economic independence necessary to resist financial exploitation and early marriage. Furthermore, educational workshops that engage community gatekeepers help redefine toxic masculinity and challenge harmful traditional practices. The paper concludes that adult education is a powerful mechanism for social transformation, creating informed communities capable of resisting violence and protecting vulnerable girls. To maximize the impact of adult education as a preventive tool in Port Harcourt Metropolis, it was suggested among others that there should be an Implementation of rigorous Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) mechanisms to track the effectiveness of these programmes in reducing GBV rates and increasing school retention for adolescent girls***

Index Terms- ***Adult Education, Programmes, Gender-based Violence, Early Marriage***

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) and early marriage are significant public health, human rights, and development challenges in Nigeria. GBV includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm inflicted on individuals due to their gender, with women and girls disproportionately affected. Early marriage, defined as any marriage involving a person below the age of 18 violates human rights and compromises the health, education, and future prospects of girls. According to UNICEF (2024), Nigeria has one of the highest child marriage rates globally, with about 40% of girls married before age 18. In some communities in Rivers State, socio-economic pressures, traditional norms, and weak enforcement of protective laws contribute to ongoing cases of early marriage and GBV. Although Rivers State has domesticated the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP), awareness and implementation are inconsistent.

Adult education distinct from child education is a practice in which adults engage in systematic and sustained self-educating activities to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values. It can mean any form of learning adults engage in beyond traditional schooling, encompassing basic literacy to personal fulfillment as a lifelong learner (Wami, 2020). Based on the above assertions put forward, it becomes imperative to improve and maintain the quality of adult education in order to give its contents and programmes the desired and expected propagation; innovate the curriculum and give it a new look, make it more relevant to the needs of the society and meet the expectations of the nation. Adult education is an important element in the development of human resources; it serves as a means of public enlightenment to the masses and plays a crucial role in the development of any society including the rural areas (Barikor in Wami, 2020).

Adult education programmes, particularly functional literacy, civic and human-rights education, health education, and community mobilization play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of GBV and early marriage. These programmes equip adults with knowledge, improve confidence and agency, challenge harmful cultural norms, and enhance reporting behaviours. As Nweke and Otamiri (2022) found in Rivers State, adult education significantly improves attitudes toward GBV and increases willingness to report or intervene.

II. ADULT EDUCATION AS A MULTI-SECTORAL INTERVENTION

The core components of adult education includes but not limited to functional literacy, civic/human rights education, health education, and community mobilization, directly target the vulnerabilities that perpetuate harmful practices:

i. Functional Literacy and Economic Empowerment: According to Akko and Paiko as cited in Wami, Nwafor and Deekor (2019), the main distinctive feature in functional education is that learner is taught how to read and write using familiar words of his or her trade or occupation. Low educational attainment is significantly linked to higher rates of early marriage and early childbirth, as well as reduced decision-making ability in the household (World Bank, 2018). Poverty often drives families to marry off their daughters, viewing them as an economic burden or seeking greater economic security for them (Kidman, 2016). Functional literacy programs, integrated with vocational and livelihood skills training, provide women with the economic independence and human capital to avoid financial exploitation and resist early marriage (Amin, 2011; World Bank, 2018). For instance, enhancing girls' educational access and providing financial assistance to needy families are pivotal in eradicating child marriage (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024).

ii. Civic and Human Rights Education: To give the adult citizens of Nigeria civic education is one of the objectives of the National Policy on Education (FRN in Wami, 2019). To say that someone is civil is to say that, that person conforms to the rules and regulations of the society. Adult education, particularly through civic and human rights components, is crucial for fostering a proactive stance against violence (Palermo et al., 2013). Many GBV cases go unreported due to fear of stigma, a culture of silence, and a lack of awareness of available services or confidence in the justice system (Palermo et al., 2013). By clarifying legislation and rights, adult education empowers individuals to identify violence and increases the propensity for victims to report it (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024; see also Nweke & Otamiri, 2022). In a broader context, training key school personnel and fostering proactive behavior among girls has been shown to increase the reporting of GBV incidents, which is a critical step in deterrence and prevention (Poverty Action Lab, 2024).

iii. Challenging Harmful Cultural Norms: Adult education serves as a platform for community development and norm transformation. Community education is a problem-solving process that emphasizes citizen participation and the transformation of citizens, who in turn transform their communities (Akande, n.d.). By engaging both women and community gatekeepers (parents, leaders), educational workshops provide a safe space to discuss and critically evaluate entrenched gender norms, such as the view of girls as an economic drain or the use of early marriage as a safeguard against premarital sex (Amin, 2011). Successful interventions have focused on shifting couple relationship dynamics by addressing traditional gender norms, leading to significant reductions in physical intimate partner violence (IPV) through improved communication and conflict management (Shaw et al., as cited in Ajuwon et al., 2025).

iv. State-Specific Empirical Support: The finding by Nweke and Otamiri (2022) that adult education significantly improves attitudes toward GBV and increases willingness to report or intervene is empirically grounded within the context of Rivers State. Their study, which

surveyed members of community-based women's organizations across the three senatorial districts of Rivers State, explicitly revealed that mass mobilization, functional literacy, human rights education, and health education programs effectively reduce gender-based violence against women in the state (Nweke & Otamiri, 2022). This highlights the direct applicability and proven effectiveness of these educational models in the local environment.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is one of the most severe and pervasive human rights violations globally. It is an umbrella term encompassing any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will and based on socially ascribed gender differences (WHO, 2013). GBV is not confined to physical acts but includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty (Amnesty International, 2020).

While GBV can affect individuals of any gender, it disproportionately impacts women and girls due to entrenched global power imbalances and patriarchal structures (UN Women, 2021). The major forms of GBV include:

a) Intimate Partner Violence (IPV): Physical, sexual, or emotional harm inflicted by a current or former partner.
b) Sexual Violence: Including rape, sexual assault, and harassment.
c) Harmful Practices: Such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Early/Child Marriage (which is recognized as a form of GBV).
d) Economic Violence: Denying access to finances, employment, or education.
e) Digital Violence: Online harassment, cyberstalking, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Council of Europe, 2023).

III. ROOT CAUSES: INEQUALITY AND NORMS

The primary driver of GBV is the systemic inequality between genders (UNFPA, 2022). Violence is used as a tool to maintain power and control.

a) Patriarchal Norms: Societal beliefs that grant men authority over women, often defining masculinity through dominance and aggression, directly fuel violence (Popoola & Adewale, 2020).
b) Economic Vulnerability: Poverty and lack of economic independence make women more susceptible to violence, as they lack the financial means to leave abusive situations (World Bank, 2018).
c) Weak Legal Enforcement: Even where comprehensive laws exist (like Nigeria's VAPP Act), poor implementation, institutional apathy, and a culture of impunity undermine victims' confidence in reporting (Ugbana & Okoro, 2019).

IV. THE CURRENT CRISIS AND INTERSECTIONS

Contemporary crises have amplified GBV, exposing vulnerabilities:

a) The "Shadow Pandemic": The COVID-19 pandemic led to a global surge in IPV due to lockdowns, economic stress, and restricted access to support services, leading to the term "shadow pandemic" (UN Women, 2021).
b) Intersectionality: GBV is not experienced uniformly. Women who face intersecting forms of discrimination—such as those who are refugees, disabled, members of minority groups, or live in rural areas—experience compounded risks and face greater barriers to accessing justice and support (Crenshaw, 1989; UN Women, 2020).
c) Conflict and Displacement: In conflict zones, GBV, particularly sexual violence, is frequently used as a weapon of war and a tool for displacement, leading to mass trauma and humanitarian crises (OHCHR, 2024).

V. STRATEGIC RESPONSES

Effective strategies for combating GBV must be multi-sectoral and focus on prevention, protection, and prosecution:

a) PreventionthroughEducation: Interventions that target the root causes, such as adult education and community programs, are critical for shifting harmful gender norms and engaging men and boys as allies (Ajuwon et al., 2025). Programs focused on functional literacy and legal rights increase victims' agency and willingness to report (Nweke & Otamiri, 2022).

b) Survivor-Centred Services: Responses must prioritize the safety and needs of the survivor, providing "one-stop shop" services that integrate legal aid, medical care, psychosocial support, and shelters (UNFPA, 2022).
c) StrengtheningLegalAccountability: Governments must ensure swift, transparent, and fair prosecution of perpetrators, fully resourcing the institutions responsible for implementing anti-violence legislation (Ugbana & Okoro, 2019).

GBV is a profound barrier to achieving global goals like SDG 5 (Gender Equality). Its eradication requires sustained political commitment and a societal transformation that recognizes and upholds the dignity and autonomy of all individuals, regardless of gender

Gender Equity, in contrast, is the ultimate goal of fairness and the non-existence of discrimination on the basis of gender (Holzner et al., 2010, Solomon & Memar cited in Wami, 2025). It acknowledges that achieving equality requires addressing the historically embedded imbalances and discrimination faced by women, often demanding proactive measures to ensure their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities are not determined by their sex (UN Women, 2024). The strategic importance of adult education programmes lies in its capacity to address GBV on three distinct levels: the individual, the relational, and the community/structural.

VI. INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT AND RESPONSE MECHANISMS

Adult education directly targets the vulnerability of potential victims by building internal resources:

a. Legal Literacy and Awareness: Providing survivors and potential victims with an understanding of their rights under legal instruments like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act is paramount (Ugbana & Okoro, 2019). When individuals are educated on the specifics of the VAPP Act including what constitutes violence, the penalties, and the process for seeking redress, it demystifies the legal system and increases confidence in reporting (Fasina & Ayodele, 2021). This empowerment is essential, as many GBV cases go unreported due to a lack of legal awareness and fear of institutional apathy (Palermo et al., 2013).
b. Safety Planning and Self-Efficacy: Beyond legal knowledge, adult education programs offer practical skills. Training in safety planning, basic first aid, and accessing emergency social services strengthens a survivor's ability to respond during or immediately after a violent incident (Popoola & Adewale, 2020). By enhancing functional literacy and vocational skills, adult education also bolsters women's economic self-efficacy, reducing financial dependence on abusive partners, which is a major barrier to leaving violent relationships (Amin, 2011; World Bank, 2018).
c. Psychological Well-being: Non-formal education settings often create safe spaces for group dialogue and peer support, contributing to the psychological healing and increased self-worth of participants (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024). This collective support counters the isolation and psychological suffering inflicted by violence (WHO, 2013).

VII. REDEFINING GENDER NORMS AND MASCULINITY

For prevention to be truly effective, adult education must engage the perpetrators and the community, shifting the relational dynamics:

a. Engaging Men and Boys: The most current and effective interventions against GBV strategically involve men and boys in educational programs (Ajuwon et al., 2025; Popoola & Adewale, 2020). These programs work to redefine toxic masculinity, the societal pressures that equate manhood with dominance, aggression, and sexual entitlement by promoting positive fatherhood, shared household responsibilities, and non-violent conflict resolution (Shaw et al., as cited in Ajuwon et al., 2025).
b. Challenging Harmful Practices: Through critical pedagogy, adult learners are encouraged to scrutinize and reject harmful traditional practices prevalent in Rivers State that may underpin GBV, such as specific widowhood rites, female genital mutilation (FGM), or discriminatory inheritance laws (Ugbana & Okoro, 2019). This collective

critical reflection is the engine of sustained social change (Freire, 1970).

VIII. COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The aggregated effect of individual and relational change leads to community-level transformation:

a. Increased Reporting and Intervention: As demonstrated by the empirical findings of Nweke and Otamiri (2022) in Rivers State, adult education fosters positive attitudes toward GBV. This translates directly into a higher willingness among community members, including bystanders and community leaders, to report incidents and intervene (Nweke & Otamiri, 2022). This cultural shift from silence to action is crucial for deterrence.
b. Structural Advocacy: Empowered adults become advocates for systemic change. They are more likely to pressure traditional rulers, local government officials, and law enforcement agencies to enforce the VAPP Act, establish safe houses, and provide appropriate medical and legal aid services, thus closing the implementation gap between the law and its application (Poverty Action Lab, 2024).

IX. ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN PREVENTING EARLY MARRIAGE

Early marriage is defined as any formal or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024). It is driven primarily by poverty, patriarchal norms, and low educational attainment (Owobamigbe, Oni & Sunday, 2025; World Bank, 2018). Adult education programs offer an effective, long-term preventative strategy by building agency and enabling structural change. While early marriage disproportionately affects certain regions, the risk is not confined to one zone: socio-economic vulnerability, low educational attainment, and weak enforcement of protective laws make girls across diverse states including southern states susceptible.

Marriage at times may be wanted or unwanted at a particular time, depending on the situation that leads to contracting it. Socio-cultural demand and unwanted pregnancy can propel individuals particularly women to marry early, even when the female children are not fully prepared for it (Adebowale, Fagbamigbe, Okareh & Lawal, 2012). Whereas marriage is often characterized by moments of celebration and a landmark in adult life, the practice of early marriage may not permit such celebration. The imposition of a marriage partner upon a female child means that their childhood is cut short and their fundamental rights are compromised. While much of the impact remains hidden, it is clear that millions of young girls continue to suffer the negative consequences of early marriage worldwide (UNICEF, 2021).

Globally, about 39,000 girls under the age of 18 years marry daily, culminating in more than 14.2 million annually which is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. About 700 million women alive were married before their 18th birthday with more than one in three (250 million) entering into a union before age 15 years (UNICEF, 2021). It is projected that, given the prevailing trends, up to 280 million girls alive are at risk of becoming brides by the time the female children turn 18 years old. Nigeria is the country with the highest overall prevalence followed by Bangladesh, which has the highest rate of child marriage involving girls less than age 15 (UNICEF, 2021). In Nigeria, about 44% of girls are married before the age of 18 years and 18% are married before the age of 15 (World Bank, 2017). This makes Nigeria the third country with the highest absolute number of child brides in the world but at 3.5 million (Obaje, Okengwu, Uwimana, Sebineza & Okorie, 2020).

Several studies have revealed the negative impacts of child marriage on the economy of a country, psycho-social effects and the health of the child (Fry, Ren, Jin, Zhu, Sesay, Abba, Bollinger & Wakerle, 2024; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014). The effects on the economy include high under-five mortality rates due to lack of or inability to provide appropriate nutrition by the young mother; high divorce rate and poverty rates; high population growth rate; and the most common is low educational attainment for the child brides (Lemmon & ElHarake, 2014; Obaje e al., 2020) noted that about 70% of maternal deaths can be

averted through 10% reduction in child marriage. Parsons *et al., (2015)* suggested five domains in which child marriage has an impact including fertility, educational attainment, health, labour force participation, and decision making. Because of early and frequent exposure to sexual activities, the women tend to have more children than their counterparts who marry late; their educational pursuits are often truncated leading to a low capacity to actively participate in high-paid jobs (Gayawan and Adebayo, 2013).

A study by Adeyemi and Gayawan (2022) reported that younger women who are in a marital union have a lower ability to participate in household decision making including the ability to negotiate for the use of contraceptives or healthcare utilization, whether for themselves or their children. Pregnancies, when a woman's body mechanism is not fully mature, can constitute a major risk to the survival and future health of both the mother and the child; early sexual activities and childbearing can lead to a condition called Vesico-Vaginal Fistulae/Recto-Vaginal Fistulae; high maternal and child mortally, obstructed labour, postpartum haemorrhage, obstetric fistula, and also lower birth weight of infants due to lack of appropriate nutrition and high exposure to sexually transmitted infections and diseases (WHO, 2013). The psycho-social effects include early widowhood, mental disorder, sexual abuse, child labour, and no or low participation in the family decision-making process (World Bank, 2017). Although higher levels of education, socioeconomic status, and urban residence are precursors for reducing child marriage practice, variations subsist due to ethnic and religious differences (Mobolaji, Fatusi, & Adedini, 2020). For example, in Malaysia, despite the country's economic progress and high education level, the prevalence of child marriage remains high and is underpinned by religious and cultural beliefs (Kohno, Dalui, Nik Farid, Safi & Nakayama, 2020). The same exists in parts of Nigeria (Mobolaji *et al.*, 2020).

Globalization, urbanization, and rising educational attainment are now changing marital patterns in different parts of the world (Kamal, Hassan, Alam & Yingi, 2015). A high level of education has drastically reduced the prevalence of child marriage; that is, keeping girls in schools is one of the best ways of delaying marriage. On average, the likelihood of girls marrying as a child is six per cent points less for every additional year spent in school (Kamal *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, successive Nigerian governments have made concerted and practical efforts to improve girl-child education throughout the country but particularly in the northern fringe where Almajiri schools were specifically sited, to reduce the age-long divide in educational attainment, social status, and economic empowerment between the north and the south (Aghedo & Eke, 2013). Existing companies and other corporate bodies have increased their corporate social responsibility targets on creating opportunities for women and girls, particularly by expanding the chances of getting them to school. For example, many multinational oil companies operating in the country have been involved in a wide range of scholarships and educational programs, especially for women and girls in the Niger Delta areas (Uduji *et al.*, 2020). These efforts are expected to have an impact on the pattern of child marriage in different geographical settings in Nigeria.

X. FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Functional literacy is the foundation for resisting early marriage. It moves beyond basic reading and writing to equip individuals with the skills necessary to function effectively in their social and economic environments.

a. Combating Poverty Drivers: Poverty is the single greatest predictor of early marriage, as economically stressed families often view marriage as a means to reduce the financial burden of raising a daughter or to secure a perceived financial future for her (Owobamigbe et al., 2025; Kidman, 2016). Adult literacy programs, when integrated with vocational training and micro-enterprise skills, provide women and parents with alternative sources of income. Economic empowerment decreases the perceived necessity of marrying off daughters early, effectively interrupting the poverty-to-marriage pipeline (World Bank, 2018; Amin, 2011).
b. Enhancing Maternal and Household Agency: Women with higher literacy levels have

greater confidence and decision-making power within the household (UNICEF, 2024). They are more likely to utilize healthcare services, understand the risks associated with early pregnancy, and, crucially, advocate for their daughters to remain in school, which is one of the strongest buffers against early marriage (Ben-Kalio, Oguche & Usman, 2024).

c. Improving Educational Attainment: Functional literacy in adults correlates with valuing education for their children. The increased school enrolment and retention of adolescent girls are directly tied to lower rates of early marriage (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024).

XI. CIVIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION AND EARLY MARRIAGE

Early marriage is a human rights violation that deprives a girl of her right to education, health, and choice. Civic and human rights education directly equips adults to uphold these legal standards.

a. Awareness of Legal Frameworks: Programs must specifically educate adults on the Child Rights Act and other relevant laws which set the legal age of marriage at 18 (Molokwu, 2012; UNICEF, 2024). By clarifying the legal mandate, education removes the excuse of ignorance and establishes clear benchmarks for prosecution and protection (Ugbana & Okoro, 2019).
b. Fostering Self-Advocacy in Girls: While targeting adults, these programs indirectly benefit girls by establishing a supportive educational environment. Girls who are taught about their rights in school or community programs are more likely to recognize that early marriage is unacceptable and possess the language and confidence to negotiate against it or seek assistance (UNICEF, 2024).
c. Encouraging Reporting and Intervention: Educated community members are more likely to reject the notion that marriage is a private family matter and understand their civic duty to report child marriage to authorities or social welfare services (Nweke & Otamiri, 2022). This vigilance acts as a community-level deterrent against the practice.

XII. CHALLENGING HARMFUL CULTURAL NORMS

Challenging harmful cultural norms (HCNs) requires sensitive and participatory adult education, as these norms are often tied to community identity, perceived honour, and tradition.

a. Engaging Community Gatekeepers: In many Nigerian communities, early marriage is viewed as a necessary practice to prevent premarital sex, maintain family honour, or ensure adherence to tradition (Owobamigbe et al., 2025). Adult education programs must engage traditional rulers, religious leaders, and parents are the primary gatekeepers in structured, non-confrontational dialogue (Popoola & Adewale, 2020).
b. Facilitating Norm Change: Effective adult learning utilizes critical pedagogy to enable community members to reflect on the negative consequences of EM, such as high maternal mortality rates, fistula, and the curtailment of human potential, thereby encouraging a collective decision to reform or abandon the harmful practice (Freire, 1970; Deekor, Taylor & Okpoyo, 2024).
c. Promoting Positive Masculinity: Adult education directed at men and boys can challenge the perception of women as property or dependents (Popoola & Adewale, 2020). By fostering gender-equitable norms, it lessens the pressure on families to marry girls early to secure their 'purity' and builds a community where women's autonomy is respected.

Furthermore, adult education provides the knowledge, skills, and critical awareness necessary to dismantle the three key drivers of early marriage: poverty, legal ignorance, and harmful social norms. It is an indispensable strategic tool for social transformation in regions like Rivers State.

CONCLUSION

Adult education programmes are a powerful mechanism for preventing gender-based violence and early marriage in Rivers State. By enhancing literacy, strengthening legal awareness, empowering women economically, and challenging harmful cultural

norms, adult education programmes create informed communities capable of resisting violence and protecting vulnerable populations.

To maximise their impact, adult education interventions must be scaled, properly funded, integrated with legal and health services, and carefully monitored using robust M&E mechanisms. Stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, donor organisations, and community leaders should therefore prioritise adult education as a central pillar of GBV and early marriage prevention strategies in Rivers State.

SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions were made in line with findings of the study:

1. Scale and Secure Funding: Policymakers and donor organizations must prioritize adult education by providing adequate and sustained funding to expand these programmes across all local government areas.
2. Integrate Multi-Sectoral Services: Adult education interventions should be integrated with legal and health services to provide a "one-stop shop" for survivors, ensuring they have immediate access to medical care and justice.
3. Engage Men and Community Leaders: Programmes must move beyond targeting victims alone; they should strategically involve traditional rulers and men to reshape patriarchal norms and promote gender-equitable behaviors.

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