



Research Article

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Understanding Early Child Marriage: A School-Based Survey of Drivers and Outcomes for Girls in Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Early child marriage remains a persistent social challenge with deep-rooted cultural, economic, and gender dynamics that disproportionately affect young girls. This paper explores the underlying factors driving early child marriages and examines their far-reaching consequences on the physical, psychological, educational, and socio-economic wellbeing of girls. Mashonaland Central is predominately rural, with economy largely dependent on subsistence farming and small-scale gold mining. It has some of the highest rates of child marriages in Zimbabwe, with UNICEF data suggesting that approximately 40% of girls are married before the age of 18. The dynamics leading to early marriages are multifaceted, often streaming from poverty, gender inequality, traditional norms, limited access to education, and socio-cultural pressures that value girls primarily as wives and mothers rather than as individuals with potential for personal development. In many countries, early marriage is perceived as a strategy to secure economic stability, protect family honor, or reduce financial burdens. However, the consequences are severe and enduring. Girls married at a young age face heightened risk of domestic violence, early and frequent pregnancies, and related health complications such as obstetric fistula and maternal mortality. Moreover, early marriage disrupts girls' education, curtailing their opportunities for empowerment and limiting their ability to participate meaningfully in social and economic development. This study is grounded in Gender Inequality as a framework for analysis. Mixed research methods were employed and focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were utilized as qualitative data collection instruments. The study findings reveal that poverty is a key contributing factor to early child marriage among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools. Other factors including socio-cultural, lack of education, peer pressure and economic struggles play key role in perpetuating early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools. The study recommends education awareness campaign and non-formal education system as strategies to curb early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central.

Keywords: Child marriage, 2 Social-Economic, 3 Gender Equality and 4 Interventions.

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriages rates among young girls in Mashonaland central have become immediate social problem that meditate broader societal challenges. Different factors lead to these situations, including poverty, cultural beliefs, and lack of access to education (Smith, 2022). Poor background often compels families to marry off their daughters at a young age, viewing it as a financial solution (Jones, 2021). Additionally, fixed culture cultural beliefs may sustain the cycle of early marriage, as communities may highlight traditional roles over education (Moyo, 2020). The connection of the factors not only change the personal lives of young girls but also prevent community development and economic growth (Chirwa, 2019). Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique context of Bindura, Mount Darwin and Rushinga Districts.

Early Girl Child Marriages: Concept and Issues

It is primarily important to understand the phrase child marriage in a certain condition that gives

meaning and direction to the whole study. The Children's Act of Ghana, Act 560 (1998 Section 1) defines a child as a person below the age of eighteen (18) years. This is the similar standpoint adopted and crystallize to become law in Zimbabwe that any person below the age of eighteen is a child. Early girl child marriages (those of people below eighteen) are a widespread issue globally, with over 700 million women alive today having married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020). A sharp increase from the 2014 record of having approximately 15 million girls marry before their 18th birthday each year (UNICEF, 2014). The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in Ghana (2015) argues that majority of recorded child marriage cases reveal that girls are actually being married to boys of their age and slightly older. This found quote in quote with the abuse of human rights particularly right to education and fair reproduction. Researches by UNICEF (2014; 2020) and Gender, Children and Social Protection Ministry in Ghana reveals high prevalent of early child marriages with top scores in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Early child marriages are ubiquitous and Africa is not an exception. In Africa, specifically, 38% of girls marry before the age of 18 coupled with an alarming projection of sharp increase of child marriage in future owing to rapid population growth, poverty and other serious drivers (UNICEF, 2020). The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in Ghana (2015: 2) projects that the “number of child brides in Sub-Saharan Africa will double by 2050, and Sub-Saharan Africa will overtake South Asia to become the region with the highest number of child brides in the world.” This makes UNICEF (2021) to argue that, the global burden of child marriage is shifting from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, 1 out of 5 girls in Ghana is married before their 18th birthday that account for 21 per cent at national level (Ghana DHS, 2014; 2020). In Ethiopia, despite the recent trends of slight decline of early girl child marriages, the general overview of the trends denotes otherwise (2021). For instance, Mali, reported a child marriage prevalence rate of 71% in 2006 and 55% in 2010 (Stefiszyn & Painting, 2018). Overall, child marriage affects girls as compared to boys. Statistics in Ghana reveals that child marriage disproportionately affects girls over boys with boys aged 20-24 years accounts for only 2% which were married before the age of 18, as compared to horrendous 21% of girls (DHS, 2014).

Several efforts were made to overcome such a growing pace of child marriage in Africa. For instance, in 2015, the Heads of State and Governments of the AU announced that they had formally adopted an African common position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa that popularly known as the AU Common Position (Stefiszyn & Painting, 2018). The position was underpinned by three important cornerstones that include: the development of national strategies and action plans aimed at ending child marriage; the enactment and implementation of laws that set the legal minimum age for marriage at 18 years of age or above; implementation of all continental policies and legal instruments relating to human rights, gender equality, maternal and child health, and harmful traditional practices for the empowerment and participation of girls and women in development (UNFPA, 2014). These development and other regional framework play a pivotal role in reducing child marriage in Africa, but the undertone is that early girl child marriage is a worrisome issue and a growing concern. As a result, Africa was predicted to become the region with the largest number and global share of child marriages by 2050 (UNICEF, 2015).

Research Studies

United States of America (USA)

Child marriage between young girls in USA are joined issues affected by many socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors (Husseini, 2023). Understanding factors is critical for dealing with the problems effectively. The origin of the problem can be traced to the legal

framework around marriage in many states, where laws permit individuals to marry before the age of 18. Between 2000 and 2018, nearly 300,000 minors were legally married in the U.S., with a significant number being girls married to older men Unchained (At Last, 2021). This legal allowance creates an environment where child marriage is normalized.

In additionally, economic factors play an important role. Poverty often drives families to marry off their daughters early as a means of financial relief or to secure economic stability (Husseini, 2023). Economic pressure frequently correlates with higher dropout rates, as girls may leave school to fulfil domestic roles and due to the responsibilities, that come with early marriage. Additionally cultural norms also contribute to that problem, as many communities prioritize marriage over education for girls. Some areas strongly believe that marrying young is a way to ensure a girl's safety and honour yet it led to early school dropout (Husseini, 2023). Also, educational barriers, such as a lack of access to quality education and support systems result in school dropout rates. Girls who marry young often face increased responsibilities that hinder their ability to continue their education (Efevbera *et al.*, 2017). Child marriage is associated with a lot negative outcomes, including health risks, economic disadvantages, and limited educational opportunities. Girls who marry young are often forced to leave school, continuously a cycle of poverty and limiting their future prospects (Unchained At Last, 2021). Lack of education increases abusive relationships, as young brides may have fewer resources and options for escape (Husseini, 2023).

In addressing child marriage among young girls in the USA include legislative changes, educational programs, community awareness, and support services. Advocacy groups are pushing for laws to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 without exceptions, and some states have begun to enact such laws, recognizing the need to protect minors from early marriage (Unchained At Last, 2021). Initiatives aimed at keeping girls in school and providing them with resources and support are essential to reducing dropout rates (Efevbera *et al.*, 2017). Raising awareness about the negative impacts of child marriage and the importance of education for girls can help shift cultural norms that support early marriage (Husseini, 2023). Additionally, providing support services for at-risk girls, including counselling and mentorship programs, can help them navigate challenges and stay in school (Unchained At Last, 2021).

Canada

Child marriage rates among young girls in Canada are influenced by a variety of socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors. The origin of the problem can be traced to the legal framework surrounding marriage, where the minimum age for marriage varies by province and minors can marry with parental consent. This legal

allowance led to situations where young girls are married off before they reach adulthood, often without fully understanding the implications of such a decision (UNICEF, 2021). Economic hardship is a driver of child marriage. Families facing financial difficulties may view early marriage as a means to alleviate economic burdens or secure financial stability for their daughters (Husseini, 2023). This economic pressure frequently correlates with higher dropout rates, as girls may leave school to take on domestic responsibilities or due to the demands associated with early marriage. Additionally, cultural beliefs and practices contribute to the prevalence of child marriage. Some communities, marrying young is perceived as a way to ensure a girl's safety and honour, which can lead to early school dropout (Husseini, 2023). The implications of child marriage and school dropout are profound. Child marriage is associated with numerous negative outcomes, including health risks, economic disadvantages, and limited educational opportunities. Girls who marry young are often forced to leave school, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and restricting their future prospects (UNICEF, 2021). The lack of education increases the likelihood of remaining in abusive relationships, as young brides may have fewer resources and options for escape (Husseini, 2023).

To address child marriage among young girls in Canada include legislative changes, educational programs, community awareness, and support services. Advocacy groups are working to strengthen laws regarding the minimum age for marriage, aiming to prevent child marriage by raising awareness about its negative implications (UNICEF, 2021). Initiatives aimed at keeping girls in school and providing them with resources are essential to reducing dropout rates (Husseini, 2023). Furthermore, raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of child marriage and the importance of education can help shift cultural norms that support early marriage. Providing support services for at-risk girls, including counselling and mentorship programs, can assist them in navigating challenges and staying in school (UNICEF, 2021).

South Africa

The origins of child marriage in South Africa can be traced to deeply rooted gender inequality and socio-economic challenges. The legal framework permits marriage at a young age with parental consent, which can lead to young girls being married before they reach adulthood. This legal allowance normalizes the practice, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (Plan International Australia, 2020). Economic pressures also play a significant role; families facing financial hardship may view early marriage as a way to reduce their economic burden and provide financial stability (Husseini, 2023). Additionally, cultural norms often dictate that marrying young is a means of ensuring a girl's safety and honour, which further perpetuates child marriage (UNICEF, 2021). The implications of child marriage and school dropout are

severe and far-reaching. Child marriage is associated with various negative outcomes, including health risks, economic disadvantages, and limited educational opportunities. Girls who marry young are frequently forced to leave school, thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty and restricting their future prospects (Plan International Australia, 2020). Moreover, the lack of education increases the likelihood of remaining in abusive relationships, as young brides may have fewer resources and options for escape (Efevbera *et al.*, 2017). The emotional and psychological toll of these experiences can lead to long-term consequences for both individuals and communities.

In addressing child marriage and school dropout rates among young girls in South Africa involve a multi-faceted approach that includes legislative reforms, educational initiatives, and community awareness programs. Advocacy groups are actively working to strengthen laws regarding the minimum age for marriage, aiming to prevent child marriage by raising awareness about its harmful implications (UNICEF, 2021). Educational programs focused on keeping girls in school and providing them with essential resources are critical for reducing dropout rates. Initiatives that empower girls through education and life skills training are essential for helping them navigate challenges and remain in school (Husseini, 2023). Additionally, raising awareness about the detrimental impacts of child marriage and the importance of education can help shift cultural norms that support early marriage (Plan International Australia, 2020).

Child marriage and school dropout rates among young girls in Mashonaland central are pressing issues that stem from a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and legal factors. Understanding the origins of these problems, recognizing their implications, and exploring management strategies are essential for addressing these challenges effectively.

Statement of the Problem

In Mashonaland central, Zimbabwe, child marriages among young girls are critical issues. Approximately 34% of girls in Chiweshe District marry before age 18 (UNICEF, 2022). Nearly 30% of girls in Gunguhwe drop out of school before completing secondary education, often due to early marriages (Husseini, 2023). Likewise, in the quiet village of Mt Darwin, a shocking case has laid bare a crisis festering beneath the surface: A 15-year girl reportedly has 10 boyfriends, many of them older men. According to the Village Head, Richard Ngapasare recounts how girls as young as nine are being married off, often with the complicity of their families (Saturday, Herald of 02 August 2025). This situation leads to diminished economic potential and increased vulnerability to domestic violence for young brides if not addressed. It is against this unequal background that the study seeks to

unearth the dynamics of early marriages and its consequences on young girls in primary schools.

Research questions

- What factors are contributing to early child marriage among young girls?
- What challenges are faced by teachers and headmaster at school because of early child marriage in schools?
- What possible strategies can be employed to reduce child marriage among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to assess the factors contributing to early child marriages among young school girls in Mashonaland Central primary schools.

Conceptual Framework: Gender Inequality

The factors that contribute to early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools' area can be efficaciously studied and understood from the lens of gender inequality. Stefiszyn & Painting, (2018) assert that, child marriage is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of younger girls being married to older men. As a result, social, cultural and economic factors of child marriage cannot be effectively comprehended without reference to the inferior status accorded to girls and women in all the societies. Therefore, gender inequality is a cause, a result and a worsening factor of child marriage as indicated in the figure below.

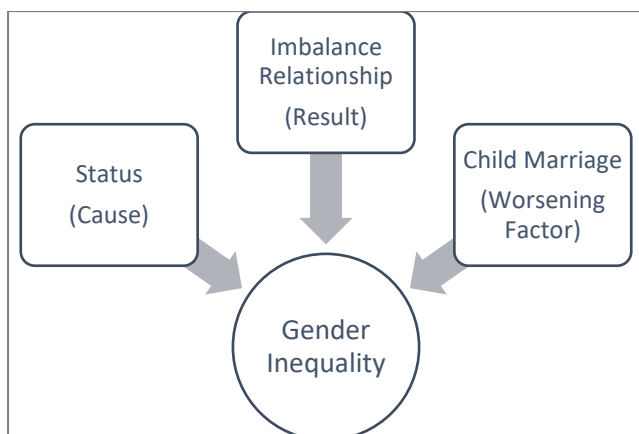


Figure 1: Gender Inequality as a Framework of Analysis Stefiszyn & Painting, (2018)

Why gender inequality for this study? Because:

- gender inequality is a cause of child marriage
- gender inequality is a result of the early child marriage
- gender inequality is a worsening factor of early child marriage
- and gender inequality intersects with other causes of early child marriage that include social, economic and cultural factors.

The figure and points listed reveal that gender inequality is a valuable framework to evaluate factors that contribute to early child marriage among young girls in primary schools in Mashonaland central. All forms of child marriage can be easily linked to gender inequality.

Target population

The population of a study refers to the participants or objects involved in the study (Mijid, 2018 and Pilot and Humler, 1999). In agreement, Du-plooy (2002), Babbie and Mouton (2001) opine that the population of the study refers to all components that are being studied. Therefore, this study's target population consists young girls that is all girls under 18 years, teachers, headmasters and community members of Mashonaland. Grounded on the logic informed by Cresswell (2009) and Kuper *et al.* (2008) who argue that a researcher must identify participants that can have a significant contribution to the study, this study utilised teachers, headmasters and community members to understand the factors that contribute to early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools. Participants and respondents were taken from three primary schools in the following Districts namely Bindura, Mount Darwin and Rushinga: These schools were selected because they have possibility of giving results that represents the whole Mashonaland central due to their geographical location and dispersion.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised mixed methods, that is semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and closed ended questionnaires as data collection tools. This mixed methods approach provides a powerful, evidence based and holistic understanding of the problem, which is essential for advocating for targeted policy changes and supporting systems for educators in these districts.

Validity and Reliability

Triangulation was adopted for reliability. The use of three different tools (interviews, focus group and closed questionnaires) further ensured the reliability of the data.

Ethical Considerations

While there is a plethora of ethically important principles, the researchers took cognisance of the ethical aspects relevant to the study. Participants were not coerced to take part in the study hence, it was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time they felt to do so. The study appreciates that every individual has the right to privacy. It is the right of the individual to decide when, who, where and to what extent his or her attitudes, behaviours and beliefs will be revealed (De Vos *et al* 2012). Privacy, a primordial value, a basic human right and its corollaries, confidentiality and anonymity (Cohen *et al* 2011) was seriously taken into cognisance in this study. The interviews and participant's names shall remain anonymous. Actually, pseudo names were used instead of real ones.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question wanted to gather data on factors contributing to early child marriage among young girls?

A survey of 150 pupils revealed the following primary reasons they perceived for early marriage.

Causes of Early Marriage	Percentage of pupils citing this cause	Common supporting Statements for Survey
Poverty and economic hardship	28.7%	<i>Families cannot afford school fees or basic needs.</i>
Cultural practices e.g Kuripa Ngozi	08%	<i>A girl is given away to appease spirits for the death caused by her family.</i>
Peer and family pressure	34%	<i>My families who dropped out and got married seem to have money for clothe.</i>
Lack of Educational prospects.	22%	<i>What is the point of school if there are no jobs after.</i>
Unplanned pregnancies.	39	<i>When a girl gets pregnant, she must marry the man responsible.</i>

By analysing the data closely, economic factors are dominant with 28.7%. The inability to afford education costs is a direct catalyst for drop out and subsequent marriage. The link between lack of education and early marriage is strong. Many pupils see education as a dead end, reducing the opportunity cost of leaving school for marriage. The harmful cultural practices though cited by smaller percentage (0.8%), remains a significant and devastating driver for those affected.

Thematic from Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Interviews

The qualitative data provides depth, context and nuance to the numbers.

Theme 1: Poverty as a structural driver

Interview with Headmaster, Bindura

“We lose at least 5-10 girls per term, especially after harvest failure. The parents come and say, we have found someone who can look after her and help us with the younger ones.” It is a transaction often framed as protection, but in actual fact it is economic desperation.

FGD with mothers, Mt Darwin

One participant stated that, *“If a man offers to pay the dowry (lobola) and can buy her shoes and uniform for the other children, what choice do we have? It is better than watching your children suffer.”*

Cultural and Religious Norms- Rushinga

The practice of Kupira Ngozi (Blood money) is still prevalent in remote areas. A girl sometimes as young as 12, is given to a family to atone for murder. This is not marriage, it is servitude, but the community accepts it as a tradition.

FGD with Apostolic Sect members

A church elder explained, *“We believe in early marriage to protect the girl from moral decay and promiscuity. It is a blessing to be married under the eye of God. Education beyond a certain age exposes them to world sins.”*

Interviews with the school counsellor

“The girls are not foolish. They see their older siblings who completed O Level, selling tomatoes at the bus stop. A minor or cross border trader with money presents tangible escape for poverty. School promises future that never comes.”

FGD with Adolescent Girls

“When you fail your examinations or your parents can not pay your fees, you feel like a burden, so when a man proposes, it feels like a solution. You get status, a phone and your own house hold. School shame and marriage gives you value.”

The causes of early marriages are deeply interlinked for example, poverty (economic), leads to school drop outs (educational) which increases the risk of unplanned pregnancy (social), which is then ‘solved’ by early marriage (cultural). Without breaking this interconnected web of causes, efforts to end early marriage will remain partial and unsustainable.

The second question wanted to uncover the challenges that are faced by teachers and headmaster at school because of early child marriage in schools?

Thematic analysis

School head interview

“when a girl drops out, it is not just a name off the roll. There is a huge amount paperwork...we must report to the District Education Officer, sometimes to the police, and then the endless meetings with the parents who often see nothing wrong with the marriage.”

A teacher (FGD)

“we spend hours trying to track the girl down, to convince the family. This is time taken from lesson planning and other pupils.”

An FGD with teachers in Rushinga revealed a deep sense of helplessness and grief. *“You invest in these girls, you see their potential... and then one day they are gone, taken for lobola. It feels like a death. We cry for*

them, but we are powerless against culture and poverty.”

Another mentioned the strain of providing psychological support to friends left behind.

“The classmates are traumatised. They are sad and scared. We are not trained counsellors, but we have to try and comfort them.”

Early child marriage does not just harm the children involved but it places heavy, under-recognised

burdens on teachers and school heads thereby, undermining learning and school functioning. The data reveals that the challenge is not merely administrative but profound human. Educators suffer significant secondary trauma, compounded by a lack of training and support structures to deal with emotional fallout of early marriages, leading to burnout and decreased morale.

The third research question was to explore possible strategies that can be employed to reduce child marriage among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools?

Data was gathered from different targeted groups

Target Group	Key Findings	Recommended Strategies	Percentage of group citing this strategy
School Heads	Lack of monitoring and community engagement	Establish Anti- Early Marriage Taskforces	92%
Teachers	Curriculum gaps and lack of resources	Strengthen guidance and counselling, life skills education	95%
Teenage girls	Poverty, lack of mentorship	Girls Empowerment programmes, scholarships.	92%
Teenage boys	Cultural attitudes and peer influence	Gender Equality campaigns, Awareness activities	91%

- Ninety-two (92%) of the first group which composed of school heads recommended the establishment of Anti-Early Marriage Taskforce in each district (Bindura, Mt Darwin and Rushinga). They argue that the Taskforce should have close linking with ZIMSTAT, Ministry of Women, Health, Education, Traditional Leaders, NGOs and youth reps to implement the National Action Plan locally. They also suggested that the taskforce should also have the power to Track frequent meetings, actions taken, and monitor number of reported child marriages, prosecutions, and interventions. In addition to this, it should conduct awareness campaigns, and tracks at risk-learners (Mutukwe & Modiba, 2019).

One School head also pointed out that, “The taskforce should intervene when child marriage or forced union is imminent.”

- Ninety-five (95%) of teachers who were interviewed in the three districts suggested re-introduction of school guidance and counselling programmes in educational institutions to educate learners on the dangers of early marriages. Peer Empowerment clubs were also proposed as it focused on life planning and education continuity of children in marginalised communities (UNICEF, 2021).
- Nine-two (92%) of the teenage girls suggested girl empowerment in the form of scholarship programmes and income generating projects particularly for vulnerable families.

In the same vein, some teenage girls also suggested in focus Group Discussion that, “mentorship and

clubs, especially for girls, led by successful female role models.”

- Last but not least, ninety-one (91%) boys suggested recommended for the introduction of gender equality campaigns in schools that involve both boys and girls in dialogue and joint activities to discourage early marriage (Mawere, 2020).

In viewing the above strategies that were put forward by various groups, all of them are above 90% meaning to say all the strategies are more less the same in terms of importance. In order for the responsible authorities to effectively implement the strategies, they need to take on board all the strategies suggested. This is because, the weaknesses of one strategy will be complemented by another.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals several factors that contributes to early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central. Poverty was mentioned as a major driving force for child marriage among young girls as they perceive marriage as a form of relief. Other contributing factors include limited or lack of education, socio-cultural factors and peer pressure. Teachers and headmaster perceive that early child marriages are a result of the multifaceted factors that include poverty, family issues and socio-cultural beliefs. Education awareness campaign and the provision of the non-formal education systems are proffered as feasible strategies to curb early child marriages among young girls in Mashonaland central primary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools should provide second chance to education. Actually, schools should be adolescent-friendly and reduce barriers to attendance (scholarships, Chiefs and village heads are often gatekeepers of custom and can provide deep insights into the local practices and the effectiveness of monitoring., sanitary pads, safe transport, flexible schemes). Schools should again strengthen adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) services youth-friendly clinics, comprehensive sexuality education, contraception access.) to reduce unintended pregnancy, a common proximal driver of marriage. Track contraceptive uptake, pregnancy rates and resulting marriage rates.

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