

## **Education and the Scourge of Child Marriages in Chegutu Urban and Peri-urban Clusters of Zimbabwe**

**Wellington Samkange**

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7802-3964>

Department of Educational Policy Studies and Leadership, Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

Email: [samkangew@staff.msu.ac.zw](mailto:samkangew@staff.msu.ac.zw)

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**Abstract:** This study sought to establish factors that contributed to child marriages in two Chegutu urban and peri-urban clusters of Zimbabwe. It used the mixed research method and the descriptive survey design. Five primary schools and five secondary schools were purposively sampled out of a total of forty schools in the clusters. Two hundred stakeholders were randomly selected from a population of one thousand five hundred. A questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data from selected school heads, teachers, parents, school development committee members and community leaders. The study established that poverty, socio-economic background, society's perception of marriage, cultural values, lack of information and religion remain major drivers of child marriages. At the same time, the school curriculum did not fully address the issues of children's rights and health education. The study recommends a radical approach to ending child marriages which may include banning religious sects and traditional practices that promote child marriages. It further recommends an improvement of the school curriculum, for it to take the issue of children's rights and health education seriously.

**Keywords:** Early and child marriages; communities; laws and policies; child abuse; social development.

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### **Introduction**

While developing countries have significantly progressed in the areas of education and economic development, countries with strained economies have made some effort in investing in education. Such investment is premised on the belief that education contributes to both social and economic development. In that regard, education is thought to have powers to change negative perceptions and views of people. The emphasis on education as a development tool has increased. Government expenditure on education takes into consideration a number of factors, which include expenditure on salaries, expenditure on primary, secondary and tertiary education, resources to support learning and teaching and human and material resources. Government expenditures on social amenities such

as education and health is very much influenced by ideological identifications and orientation (Saunders, 1985).

When education is regarded as a private good, public expenditure tends to be lower as individuals have to meet the major expenses. In cases where education is regarded as a social good and a social benefit, governments tend to spend more. The economic performance of most African countries has been low, despite the introduction of economic structural adjustment programs. In countries such as Zimbabwe, the trend has impacted negatively on human development and on the welfare of the people (Bond & Saunders, 2008; Mlambo, 1997). Due to such a situation, a number of social problems appear to be on the increase. These social problems

include early marriages, child marriages, illegal abortions and human trafficking among others.

Child marriage manifests in different forms depending on the community and the country it is practiced. Some of the countries where child marriage is high are Niger, Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Bangladesh, Malawi, Mozambique and South Sudan among others (UNICEF, 2021). While there may be laws to protect children, in some of the cases, the laws are rarely enforced. In other cases, the laws themselves support child marriages, as they state that it is legal to marry when one is 16 years old. The challenge is that there is no agreement as to the legal age of majority. The legal age of majority may range from 16 years to 21 years, depending on the country. In this regard, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child can be used as an important guide.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe defines an adult as someone who is 18 years and above. In this context, the Constitution of Zimbabwe has aligned itself with the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to the Government of Zimbabwe (2013), the rights of the child are paramount. Sections 19 (1), 19 (2), and 19 (3) advocate for the state to adopt policies and measures that promote children's rights. These sections also stipulate that the state has to ensure that children's basic needs, including education and training are provided for and they are not exposed to any form of abuse. This is a significant improvement toward children's well-being.

While the constitution of Zimbabwe provides for the protection of children, the Marriage Act, Section 22 states that girls can marry at the age of 16 and boys at the age of 18. The Act in a way exposes children to forced marriages and therefore denying them opportunities in education. In the same vein, customary marriage is recognized in Zimbabwe. Customary practices do not stipulate the age at which to marry. As the term implies, customary marriage is guided by the practices of the community and in the context of Zimbabwe, it involves the payment of *roora* (bride price). The use of the custom has seen children being used to pay for *ngozi* reparations. This is a way of appeasing spirits by forcing a girl to marry into the deceased's family. On 24 May 2022, the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe declared some sections of the Marriage Act which allowed girls to marry at the age of 16 as unconstitutional (Zimbabwe Legal Information

Institute, 2022). This can be acknowledged as a milestone in the fight against child marriages, though in practice more needs to be done in terms of coming up with Acts that are aligned to the constitution, which also operationalize the judgment of the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe.

Some of the challenges related to child marriages include violation of children's rights, poor health and complications at birth related to the age of the young mother. Child protection laws have been enacted in Zimbabwe. These include the Children's Act. However, Bhaiseni (2016) makes an observation that on the issues of education, the Children's Act has gaps and does not cover the issue of education as stipulated in the United Nations Children's Rights Charter. As such, the issues of children's education are found in the 1987 Education Act, and the 1996 Revised Education Act, which declared education a right and recognize children's fundamental right to education. The 1996 Revised Education Act further states that: Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in any other enactment, but subject to this Act, every child in Zimbabwe shall have the right to school education (Government of Zimbabwe, 1996). The same section of the Act declares that it is the objective in Zimbabwe that primary education for every child of school going age shall be compulsory.

There are at least two aspects of the Act that stand out. These are the recognition that primary education in Zimbabwe is a fundamental right and secondly that it is compulsory. The aim to make education compulsory is somehow weakened by the stipulation that lays the responsibility of educating the child solely on the parent or guardian. That requirement to a large extent makes education exclusive, as some children may fail to attend school owing to poverty and the social and economic status of their parents or guardians.

Apart from laws that have been enacted to protect children in Zimbabwe, it can be noted that different organizations continue to advocate for the recognition of children's rights. These organizations include Girl Child Network, Child Line, and Justice for Children Trust and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. ZIMSTAT and ICF International (2012) estimated that 31% of girls in Zimbabwe married before they reached the age of 18 years and about 15% of these married before they turned 15 years. The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage (2016) observed that 15 million girls

a year are married before the age of 18 and one in three girls in the developing world is married before the age of 18. The statistics suggest that a significant number of girls are entering marriage before completing primary school education at the age of 13 and others before completing secondary school education at the age of 18.

Different factors have been attributed to child marriages in Zimbabwe. Among these factors are poverty, low level of education, religious practice as well as cultural and traditional beliefs, among communities.

Reports from Manicaland province of Zimbabwe indicate that at least 415 school going girls and five boys had dropped out of examination classes in the same province during the Covid-19 lockdown period (The Herald, 12 October 2020). This is the period from March 2020 to the time the statistics were released in October 2020. On the other hand, UNICEF data shows that 32% of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 and 4% are married before the age of 15. Furthermore, 20% of children in Harare are child laborers as they are employed as domestic workers (UNICEF, 2020).

The legal age of consent in Zimbabwe currently stands at 16 years, though there are efforts to have it raised to 18 years. In this regard, some of the marriage and pregnancy cases qualify to be treated as statutory rape. The age range for primary school going children is 4 years to 13 years, thus from ECD to grade 7. The age range for secondary school learners is 13 years to 16 years, thus from Form One to Form Four and a subsequent increase in age for those who proceed to Advanced level of education. There are many factors that have been attributed to early and child marriages. Apart from those noted above, lack of guidance and counseling in schools has been blamed for the increases in child marriages and pregnancies. In addition, spiraling food prices and steep increases in school fees have led many parents to withdraw children from schools (Moyo, 2019), thereby defeating the whole aim of education for all. Some school dropouts may therefore be attributed to economic factors.

In addition to the above concerns, the death of a 14 year old girl during childbirth at a religious shrine brought shock waves to Zimbabwe as a nation. This happened on 15 July 2021 and in view of this, different child rights practitioners and human rights organizations voiced their concerns (The Sunday Mail, 15 August 2021). Among others, The Child

Rights Coalition made the following recommendations: “the need to fast-track the adoption of the Marriage Bill that recognizes child marriage as a crime and speedily roll out the national action plan on ending child marriages; ..... and the development and enactment of specific legal and policy instruments to ensure holistic child protection and safety to prevent, mitigate and respond to child ritual murders” (The Sunday Mail, 15 August 2021).

On a related matter, Amnesty International advised the Zimbabwe government to take decisive action to prohibit and end child marriages (The Standard, 15 August 2021). In its research study, Amnesty International noted a number of issues related to child marriages in Zimbabwe. These included lack of commitment by the state to effectively end child marriages, failure by the state to address the root causes of child marriages which include poverty, gender imbalances within society, gender discrimination, harmful cultural and religious practices, barriers to education and reproductive health education, delays in passing the Marriage Bill into law and the gaps that exist between the Sexual Offences Act and the Criminal Law Act on the ages of sexual consent.

There are a number of issues that emerge from the above expressed concerns. These are the prevalence of child marriages within certain communities and the murder of children for ritual purposes. What seems to be more worrying is the delay in investigation and prosecuting in these cases. While children’s rights are enshrined within the Zimbabwean Constitution, the need for a Marriage Act that criminalizes child marriages is paramount. It can also be noted that laws have to be aligned if the war against any forms of child abuse is to be won. The 2019 Marriage Bill has not yet gone through the different stages and processes, but the rampant cases of child marriages call for the need to fast-track the bill into law.

The investment in education was premised on the assumption that the education would contribute to both social and economic development. Zimbabwe is rated among the best in Africa when it comes to literacy and education. Despite the high level of education and literacy, social ills such as child abuse in the form of child marriages are on the increase. Child marriages have become a threat to the development of the girl child. The problem of child marriages, if not addressed, would contribute to

under-development. Why are these practices on the increase in a country where education is perceived as a right and where there are laws designed to protect children from any forms of abuse? The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the school curriculum cover children's rights?
2. How many learners have dropped out of school in the selected schools in Chegutu District? What factors contributed to school dropout and child marriages?
3. What are the effects of child marriages?
4. How can child marriages be eradicated?

## **Literature Review**

This section presents the literature review regarding the problem under investigation.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The study found it difficult to focus on one key concept. The study therefore chose to explore all the three concepts as central to the study. These are education, social development, and child marriage. Child marriage is treated in its broader perspective of child abuse. The study also revisited the notion that education contributes to different forms of human and social development.

### **Education and Social Development**

United Nations Population Fund (2004) referred to the role of education as that of shaping the values, attitudes, behaviors and skills which enable the individual to function effectively within a society. If education is relevant and of value to society, the skills acquired and the attitudes and values developed have to be translated into action. Education is expected to develop tolerance and accept diversity within society and cultures. Abdi and Guo (2008) advanced the argument that there is generally a positive correlation between education and social development. Within this context, education is expected to improve people's lives and well-being. On the same note, they view social development as comprising all forms of economic, political, educational, technological, emotional and other benevolences that affect lives of people. They raise very interesting prepositions about the relationship between education and social development. Their concerns are on the role of social, cultural and technological trajectory in shaping the educational program of a community. The other genuine concern is on the need to be clear on who is to be developed and in what context

is the development to take place. We at times run into the academic argument of measuring development in terms of per capita income and yet we can still have the majority of our people languishing in poverty, despite a high per capita income.

While there may be disputes on the extent to which education is related to social development, there is agreement that education in its different forms contributes to the transmission of values and skills which instigate development. The question which can be asked is very much related to the relevance of the education curriculum to bring about change in people's lives. If education ignores the individual's culture and background, it renders itself irrelevant. What we cannot afford to ignore about education and social development is the relationship between education and the promotion of access to employment opportunities and education's attempt to address imbalances within societies.

While there is no agreement on what social development constitutes, the position that it has to impact on human behaviors, practices and people's living conditions is held by many. When social development occurs, barriers and imbalances are removed and individuals are able to reach their full potential. Education becomes an important tool in social development as children are able to learn values and acquire skills that make them understand the physical and social environment. The skills they acquire make them relevant in the society they live

### **Education and Child Marriages**

There is no doubt that education has an empowering effect on both children and adults. It has an effect on the decisions we make in life and about life. Education is beneficial to the girl child in that staying in school delays marriage and helps the girl child to make informed decisions on whom to marry and when to marry. In order to address the problem of child marriages, there is need to tackle the problems of access to education. UNICEF (2015) noted that sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia had the highest rates of child marriage. It is often difficult to establish whether early marriages contribute to dropout from school or it is dropping out of school which acts as a driver to early marriages. It is safe to conclude that there is a causal relationship between the two, it does not necessarily matter which comes first. There are girls that have left school to go into early marriages and thereby contributing to the school dropout rate. In

the same vein, there are young girls who have failed to access education who consequently found early marriage an escape route from poverty, only to find themselves in worse situations.

UNICEF (2016) observed that there were two major drivers of child marriages in Zimbabwe. These are poverty and religion. It notes that the prevalence of child marriages in Zimbabwe was high in poor communities and in rural areas. Studies in Zimbabwe have shown a high prevalence rate of child marriages among religious sects. There is a positive correlation between child marriage and lack of education. In a study by Tag a Life International (2016) on child marriages in Mashonaland West, some practices by some apostolic sects and churches were identified as major contributors to child marriages, as elderly men could marry as many wives as they preferred. Other factors that were identified as major drivers of child marriages include culture, poverty, technology, child headed families, lack of mentorship and role models, lack of access to information and the overemphasis of sex in marriages. Other contributors to child marriages in Zimbabwe include lack of reproductive health education in schools, socio-economic background of the learners and their parents, lack of awareness on children's rights and the level of education for both the child and the parents. Child marriages have also been observed to have negative effects on the development of the girl child. These effects include isolation from family members, powerlessness, lack of skills because of limited education and exposure to diseases and conditions that affect young mothers. Other problems related to child marriages include early death, lack of educational opportunities, and violation of children's rights. They also have negative impact on different forms of personal development. It can be noted that the presence of laws that prohibit child marriages in Zimbabwe shows that its practice is a violation of the law and human rights. If we have laws that prohibit child marriages, why are they not being enforced? The other negative impacts of child marriages include low educational qualifications, poor family planning decisions, low economic performance and lack of development. For a country to develop, all its citizens have to contribute to its development in one way or the other.

There is general consensus that education is central to ending child marriages. As such, education has to be accessed by both the child and the parents. While education can be in the form of reproductive

health, it is important to examine the extent to which the school curriculum places emphasis on reproductive health education. If we are convinced that education has a critical role in ending child marriages, how has the school system aggressively championed the cause of the girl child in terms of teaching content and teaching practice? At the same time, are children and parents supporting child marriages out of ignorance or there are extenuating factors that contribute to child marriages in Zimbabwe?

### **The Role of Education in Ending Child Marriages**

It is important to note that education is a fundamental right. In the same vein, a girl has every right to quality education. One of the indicators of quality education is when education meets the demands and expectations of the intended beneficiaries. Quality education has to equip the learners with skills which will enable them to survive and positively contribute to the good of society. The emphasis is not just on education, but *quality* education. The Royal Commonwealth Society and Plan International UK (2016) observed that the benefits of quality education include its role in informing learners on their rights, global citizenship and sex education, promoting gender equality and developing learner's capabilities and providing for civic education and the development of critical thinking and analytical skills.

The points raised above make it necessary to examine the type of education the school curriculum is providing. It is also important to note the role of culture in shaping our behaviors and practices. There are two issues that emerge from the observation of the points raised above about the role of education in ending child marriages globally. This demands that we question the type of curriculum that different countries are providing. To what extent does the school curriculum produce an independent thinker who is well equipped with critical thinking and analytical skills? On the other hand, the provision of sex education may be lacking due to religious and cultural beliefs that make it taboo to talk about sex issues. We also have to deal with perceptions that any subject which is not examined at the end of the span is considered less important.

Similarly, Walker (2012) argues that ending child marriage needs to be an educational goal and further identifies four approaches to ending child

marriages through education. These are the social benefits and development approach, the economic benefits approach, education as empowerment approach and the legal approach. The legal approach has seen the emergence of laws and policies that make education free and compulsory. Empowerment education approach resonates well with the argument on quality education which states that one of the indicators of quality education is its ability to have an empowering effect on the learners. One of the factors that contribute to child marriages is lack of skills. Education enables learners to acquire and develop skills that they will use in life and make them employable and self-reliant. Through the social benefits and development approach, the girl child stays in school much longer which contributes to delays in marriage. It may be necessary to add the fifth dimension to the approaches. This can be referred to as education as enlightenment approach. When we talk about enlightenment, we are looking at how education develops new perceptions on how to view things and the wider world. Such enlightenment enables individuals to see things differently and thus contributing to a new value system. In the same vein, the education as enlightenment approach develops children to appreciate the need for deferred gratification.

### **School Dropout and Child Marriages**

As noted earlier, the paradox of school dropout and child marriages is that it is not clear which of the two contributes to the other. What is worth noting is that both problems need attention and there is a possible causal relationship between the two. Sekine and Hodgkin (2017) made observations about the causal relationship between child marriage and girls' school dropout in Nepal. The study sought to find out the dropout rate due to marriage among girls and the tipping point grade. The study observed that girls aged 15-17 years were the most affected by early marriages and they often dropped out of school. They also noted that the age of girls, the level of education of the household head and religion were the main contributing factors to school dropout due to child marriage. They also noted that the 15-17 years age group had the highest dropout rate due to child marriages.

Zimbabwe is one of the countries with laws that allow students who fall pregnant to continue with their education. The Education Amendment Act of 2020 outlaws corporal punishment and allows pregnant school girls to remain in school

(Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). It has to be noted that not all affected children are prepared to continue with their studies. This is due to a number of factors that include lack of proper support services at school for expecting mothers, lack of provisions to take care of the newly born children and stigmatization from other children and community. At the same time, the traumatic experiences and the psychological impact of what the girl goes through may make it difficult for her to go back to school as most schools do not have trained counselors.

Another study by Thapa and Macer (2018) in Palpa, Nepal established a link between child marriage and school dropout rate. A census survey of 2011 showed that 51 percent of the teens in the area got married. These were in the 15-19 years age group. Out of this percentage, 61.10 percent were girls. It can be observed that the problem of child marriage affects both girls and boys, though it is higher in girls. It was also noted that marriage among children aged 14 years was common in the area. The children are allowed by law to go back to school, but generally they are afraid of the pressure that will be exerted on them by peers and teachers. However, the decision not to return to school was an individual choice because of the importance that society attaches to the practice of marriage. This has much to do with the attitude of girls towards marriage. In cases where marriage is considered to be more important than continuing with education, the chances of dropping out of school to get married at a tender age tended to be higher.

Child marriage does not only have a causal impact on school dropout, but on the literacy rate as well. There have been efforts to estimate the impact of child marriage on education and very often this has been met with challenges. These challenges may be related to tradition, parents' perceptions and the children's perceptions about marriage. Another challenge may be that child marriage in itself may be a function of low education or lack of it. Nguyen and Wodon (2012) found that in Nigeria child marriage and pregnancies accounted for 15% to 20% dropouts from school. They also demonstrated the causal relationship between child marriage and illiteracy.

It is necessary to acknowledge that it may not be easy to isolate all other contributory factors to school dropout and blame it on child marriage. However, it is suffice to note that in most of the

literature where contributors to school dropout are mentioned, child marriage is one of them. Some of the factors are school related and others are socio-economic related. Examples of the school related factors are poor academic performance, an unfriendly school environment, lack of resources in schools, challenges of access because of distances involved and lack of quality education. The factors that are socio-economic related are poverty, forced marriages, pregnancy, societal negative attitudes towards the education of the girl child and the cultural perception that views children as a source of cheap labour. A study by Magwa and Ngara (2015) on causal factors influencing girl child school dropout in parts of Zimbabwe found that some of the major contributors to school dropout were early marriage, poverty and gendered social practices, and teenage pregnancy.

Attempts have been made in many developing countries to address some of the barriers to access to education. Some of the measures include coming up with policies that make basic education compulsory and free. Out of the 53 countries in Africa, 42 have laws and policies which provide for free primary education. Free and compulsory education has been able to assist in terms of controlling the dropout rate due to failure to pay school fees. On the other hand, policies on free and compulsory education, while they are steps in the right direction in terms of ameliorating the problem of school dropouts, poverty still contributes to a high dropout rate in most countries in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). For example, in South Africa it is estimated that out of each 100 learners who enroll in grade one, 50% dropout before they complete grade 12 (Lamb & Markussen, 2011). Such high percentage dropouts show that the problem of school dropout has reached a crisis point in some countries and there are multiple factors that contribute to its rise.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

The study employed the descriptive survey design. The study further used the mixed research method. The methodology was found to be pragmatic in that it allowed the researcher to examine the problem of child marriage from different perspectives.

### **Population and Sampling**

A sample of five primary and five secondary schools was purposively selected from forty schools in Chegutu urban and peri-urban clusters. Purposive

sampling was found appropriate as it allowed for the gathering of qualitative data which was able to provide insights into the problem of child marriages. The purposive sampling allowed the researcher to focus on the best-fit respondents in the form of school heads, teachers, members of school development committees and parents in the selected schools. The schools selected were also found convenient to the researcher in terms of accessibility and proximity. These were randomly selected at the ten selected schools.

### **Instruments**

Data was collected through the use of an open-ended questionnaire, a structured questionnaire and interviews.

### **Validity and Reliability**

The strategy of data triangulation enabled the researcher to guarantee the validity and reliability of the study findings.

### **Statistical Treatment of Data**

The study used the mixed methods approach. Data was qualitatively analyzed based on the themes that emerged from the research questions and the responses from participants. In some cases, descriptive statistics were used to analyze findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher had to observe COVID-19 protocols as advocated by the World Health Organization (WHO) since the study was conducted at the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher was granted permission to visit the selected schools for the purpose of conducting the study by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. The participants signed consent forms and the purpose of the study was explained to them. They were also assured of anonymity, confidentiality and that their contributions would be used for academic purposes only.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study are presented and discussed below based on research questions.

**Research Question 1:** How does the school curriculum cover children's rights?

The issue of child marriages can be viewed within the context of children's rights. It can be envisaged that advocacy and awareness of children's rights may play a pivotal role in minimizing child abuses such as child marriages. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the school curriculum

covered children's rights. The results show that 20% of the respondents indicated that the school curriculum covered children's rights to a large extent, 30% of the respondents indicated that the school curriculum covered children's rights to a limited extent, 30% were not aware of the extent to which the curriculum covered children's rights and 20% noted that the curriculum did not cover children's rights at all. Such responses had wide implications in terms of how the school curriculum covers the issue of children's rights. It would appear that most of the participants were not sure about the extent to which the school curriculum covered children's rights. The differences in opinion on the matter may also be interpreted in different ways which may include lack of uniformity and conformity on curriculum implementation, lack of interest by stakeholders, lack of clarity of the curriculum, lack of emphasis on issues of children's rights and complete absence of the matter from the curriculum.

On whether the syllabus on children's rights and health education covered the dangers of child marriages, answers like not sure and to a limited extent were also given. It would appear that the syllabus did not cover much on the issue of child marriages. As such, schools might not do much in making children aware of the dangers of child marriages at an early age of their lives. Consequentially, lack of clarity of the curriculum had a bearing on the lack or limited coverage of topics that relate to child marriages in the syllabus.

Considering that the sample comprised mostly of teachers and school heads, the responses to this question appeared to suggest that there was lack of awareness of how the school curriculum covered issues of children's rights. There appeared to be lack of clarity in terms of the position of schools and the curriculum on matters of children's rights. The results tended to demonstrate a gap between consensus and practice. While there is the view that empowerment education can contribute to ending child marriages, there has been a failure to translate the global consensus into action resulting in a disconnection as neither education nor practice on ending child marriages is maximally effective as noted by Walker (2012). One way of implementing empowerment education is through a curriculum that promotes quality education. At the same time, the responses seem to suggest lack of seriousness and commitment to implementing empowerment education.

**Research Question 2:** How many learners have dropped out of school in the selected schools in Chegutu District in the years 2018 to 2019?

The question sought to establish the number of learners who had dropped out of school during the years 2018 to 2019 in the ten selected schools. It was revealed that 115 out of 10,000 learners had dropped out of school. The data further shows that out of this total, 70 (61%) were girls and 39% were boys. This shows a higher dropout rate for girls than for boys. This seems to concur with the findings by Sekine and Hodgkin (2017) in their study in Nepal who observed that the girl child was much more affected by child marriages than the boy child and this often led to them dropping out of school.

**Research Question 3:** What factors contributed to school dropout and child marriages?

Respondents attributed school dropout to the following factors: poverty, cultural emphasis on marriage, religion, lack of reproductive health education, socio-economic background and lack of emphasis on children's rights. Prominent among these factors and drivers were poverty, cultural practices and lack of guidance. These factors concurred with the findings by Magwa and Ngara (2015) who found poverty, gendered social practices, teenage pregnancy, poverty and religion as major contributors to school dropout. Studies by UNICEF (2016) noted that the prevalence of child marriages in Zimbabwe was high in poor communities and in rural areas. Therefore, there appeared to be no distinguishing characteristics between urban and peri-urban responses in the study. This may be due to a rise in urban poverty. The World Bank (2020) observed that economic crisis and poor rains have contributed to both rural and urban poverty in Zimbabwe. It may also be necessary to view the link between school dropout and child marriages. There are a number of factors that make it difficult to establish a causal link between the two. What is worth noting though, is that child marriages, teenage pregnancy and school dropout are interlinked with social inequalities and unequal gender norms in society (Birchall, 2018).

**Research Question 4:** What are the effects of child marriages?

The respondents demonstrated an understanding of the dangers of early and child marriages as they were asked to share their experiences on the effects of child marriages. The effects that emerged from



the responses included the following: poverty, developing fistula during childbirth, high mortality rate during home deliveries, deprivation in education, poor health, illiteracy, school dropout and lack of social development. It can be noted that child marriages impact negatively on education, social and economic development and all other spheres of life. This concurred with Abdi and Guo (2008) who observed that lack of education impacts negatively on social development and affects all forms of economic, political, educational, technological and emotional development. In the same vein, if we were to take Todaro and Smith (2015)'s view on development, lack of education and health compromises the core values of development which are sustenance, self-esteem and freedom from servitude. In that regard the effects of child marriage can be argued to be multidimensional.

**Research Question 5:** How can child marriages be eradicated?

The question sought to establish ways of eradicating child marriages. One of the major strategies that were mentioned by respondents was the need to have a robust education curriculum which includes children's rights. In respect of the different views expressed by respondents on the extent to which the present curriculum addressed children's rights, it may be noted that the school curriculum in its present form may be lacking in addressing the issues of children's rights. At the same time, there seemed to be an indifferent approach to Child Rights Education, which may be emanating from the teachers attitudes, lack of knowledge and inadequacies within the school curriculum. Queen's University, Belfast and UNICEF (2015) in their study of twenty six countries in Europe and Asia noted that while some countries provided Child Rights Education, there was lack of policy alignment to support it from government down to schools and that there was need to address the knowledge base and attitudes of teachers.

In line with the suggestion, it was also suggested that guidance and counselling have to be an integral part of the school curriculum and has to be provided by qualified counselors. The role of counsellors is paramount in schools when girls who fall pregnant while at school are allowed by law to continue with their studies in Zimbabwe. While there are a number of factors that have contributed to them

failing to take up this offer, one of these factors is lack of guidance and counselling.

Other strategies to eradicate child marriages included: enacting and implementing laws that make child marriage a crime, eradicating cultural practices such as *kugara nhaka* (some inheritance practices that may involve the girl child taking the place of a deceased sister or aunt as a wife) and *kuripa ngozi* (appeasement of the deceased's spirit through using girls as forms of payment in murder cases). Such a strategy may call for a radical approach to dealing with the problem of child marriages. While the Zimbabwe constitution provides for the freedom of religion and association, the same constitution provides for Children's Rights. Children's rights therefore take precedence over all other forms of rights. Section 81 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe is a Bill of Rights which states that children are to be protected from economic and sexual exploitation, from child labour and from maltreatment, neglect or any form of abuse (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013). In addition to the constitution, Zimbabwe has ratified a number of protocols and Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 2015).

The legal instruments to deal with the problem of child abuse and child marriages are in place, though there is still need to enact more laws that deal with specific issues on children's rights. In that regard, lack of decisive actions may be attributed to male chauvinism as men tended to be the beneficiaries in the status quo. Therefore, child marriage remains a reflection of the inequalities that are still predominant in the wider society.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that the school curriculum and syllabus were lacking in terms of their coverage of children's rights and the dangers of child and early marriages. It can therefore be recommended that Children's Rights be introduced in schools as an examinable subject. Formal education appears to lack the capacity to address the scourge of early and child marriages. In that regard, education programs on the matter have to include informal and non-formal education programs for community engagement purposes.

The problem of school dropout affected both girls and boys but the number of girls who dropped out of school was much higher than that of boys. While the study could not establish a causal relationship between school dropout and child marriage, it is

important to note that it was one of the factors that contributed to school dropout. The existence of laws and policies alone may not be enough to eliminate early and child marriages. Therefore, gender mainstreaming, cultural change, collective responsibility and state institutions have a critical role in changing views, norms, values and perceptions.

It is also concluded that the drivers of early and child marriages are both push and pull factors. Despite the investments in education in most developing countries, there has not been corresponding positive development in social and economic development (Todaro and Smith, 2015). Such lack of development has significantly contributed to the emergence and perpetuation of practices that abuse children. It is hoped that the exposure of the evils of early and child marriage within society will contribute to the elimination of such practices. Citizens have a responsibility as members of communities, individuals, human rights practitioners, scholars, academics and as government to contribute to the elimination of any practices that abuse children. On the basis of this conclusion, rights advocacy groups have to be supported by government.

Effects of early and child marriages include poverty, developing fistula during childbirth, high mortality rate during home deliveries, deprivation in education, poor health, illiteracy, school dropout and lack of social development. Lack of development in different spheres of life has also emerged as one of the underlining causes of early and child marriages and as such, the provision of programs that empower the girl child and addressing the underlining causes of early and child marriages remain critical. This entails the government coming up with policies that promote economic development and poverty alleviation programs.

Suggested ways of eradicating early and child marriages included; educating children on their rights, implementation of marriage laws and policies that restrict such marriages; eradication of certain cultural practices, educating the teenagers of the dangers of early marriages, educating parents to play a pivotal role in providing sex education to their children, penalizing perpetrators of early and child marriages and the need for counselors in schools.

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