

Survivors' perspectives on the causes and consequences of child marriages in rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study explored the causes and consequences of child marriages from a survivors' perspective in Chireya Ward 3, Gokwe North, Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. A phenomenological design was used in this study. The sample comprised 6 survivors of child marriages. Data were collected using interviews with the 6 survivors of child marriages. Data were thematically analysed. The study revealed that underage girls were largely forced into early marriages by poverty. A majority of rural girls from poor families dropped out of school in lower levels and were forced into early marriages as the only prospect for the future. The narratives by survivors also revealed that child marriages were detrimental to child development, as the girl child was deprived of her freedom, opportunity for personal development and other fundamental rights. Thus, the practice creates a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability in girl children, their families and impacts negatively on national development. Recommendations were made.

Key words: *Girl child, survivors, child marriages, poverty, Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

The term 'child marriage' has been defined variedly by society. Varied definitions for this practice emanate from the existence of different meanings of a child (Nour, 2009). For many countries that have signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is a person below the age of 18 (Nour, 2009). Based on this universal definition, child marriage entails any marriage carried out with and by persons below 18 years of age, this is before the child is physiologically, mentally and physically ready to bear sexual, marital, and reproductive responsibilities (IPPF, 2007; Walker, 2002). In this study a survivor of child marriage entails any girl who was married before 18 years, who has since been divorced, separated or widowed.

While the practice of child marriage affects boys and girls under the age of 18 years, girls are disproportionately affected (Farberov, 2012; Dziva & Mazambani, 2017; UNICEF, 2014). Globally, 720 million women alive today were married before turning 18 years (UNICEF 2014, p.1). Thus, a considerable number of young girls are married before they are emotionally or physically mature enough to become a wives or mothers.

Studies acknowledge that accurate data on the extent of child marriages is difficult to obtain because many such marriages go unregistered and girls' ages may be falsified (IPPF, 2007; UNICEF, 2014). Available data shows how the practice is rampant, especially in rural areas of the global South. An estimate of 60 million young girls are believed to have married before attaining 18 years of age the world over (UNICEF, 2014). Africa is home to 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriages the world over (UNICEF, 2014). In sub-Saharan Africa, 40% of women are married as children (UNICEF, 2014). In Zimbabwe's rural areas, an estimated 8 000 girls have been forced into early marriages or held as sex slaves since 2008 (Sachiti, 2011). Thus, a considerably high number of young girls are married before they are emotionally or physically mature enough to become wives or mothers.

The above statistics are worrisome, something which forced international institutions, and States to come up with instruments and policies to deal with the problem. These instruments include the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1990) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC 1991), both to which Zimbabwe is a signatory. In addition, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2015) 5.3 calls on member states to eliminate child, early and forced marriages. Regionally, Zimbabwe ratified the African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights (ACHRPR) alongside the African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Specifically, article 21 of the ACRWC calls for member states to eliminate all harmful practices: including child, early and forced marriages. Nationally, a landmark development was marked when the Domestic Violence Act (2007) and the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) were promulgated to criminalise a series of harmful practices affecting women and the girl child. Under section 78 (1), the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) accords the right to marry and found a family to anyone who has attained the age of 18 years in line with the CRC, ACRWC and other best practices in child development.

Available studies on child marriages reveal how the practice is intrinsically linked to poverty (UNFPA, 2006; ICRW, 2007; RAU, 2014; CCZ, 2016; Warner, 2004). In most rural communities of the global South, deplorable living standards and conditions create a strong incentive for child marriages (Gemignani & Wodon, 2015; Singh & Samara, 2004). According to UNICEF (2012), child marriages are prevalent in poverty ridden societies, where girl children are given into marriage to boost livelihood prospects of a poverty stricken family. Warner (2012) noted how child marriages are influenced by a myriad of factors that include the search for economic survival, peer group and family pressure, protection of young girls, civil wars and conflicts, controlling female behaviour and sexuality, and socio-cultural and religious beliefs. Conversely, child marriages have been noted to be detrimental to child development. The practice increases vulnerabilities on the child bride's rights, as she often faces challenges in satisfying critical human needs like quality health care, freedom, education and employment opportunities (CCZ, 2016; Warner, 2004). When this happens, the child bride can get trapped in a cycle of vulnerability and misery.

The causes, consequences and strategies to end child marriages have been often told from secondary stakeholder's perspectives rather than the survivors who lived the phenomenon. This study invokes survivors of child marriages to add their voices to the somewhat, dominant secondary stakeholder perspective of the causes and consequences of child marriages. The research was carried out in ward 3, Chireya area, Gokwe North District in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. In 2015, the prevalent rate of child marriages in Midlands province was 31% (Makuzva, 2016). The authors therefore, found this area a good study area to solicit survivors of child marriages to reveal their perspective on the causes and consequences of the practice. A study of this nature adds an important voice to the numerous calls for empirical studies and strategies to end child marriages in society. The study is of the belief that interventions to deal with child marriages in rural areas are most powerful when they are informed by the survivors' perspective.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological research design to understand survivors' perspectives on the causes and consequences of child marriages in rural Zimbabwe. Phenomenology as a method can work with a limited number of participants allowing

researchers to gain a deep insight of personal experiences, through recollections and descriptions of life stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Sample and sampling procedures

Table1: *Demographic Data of Survivors of Early Child Marriages*

<u>Survivors</u>	Age of marriage	Current age	Level of education	Marital Status	Number of children	Religion and denomination
Survivor1	14	25	Primary	Separated	5	Christianity Classical Pentecostalism
Survivor 2	16	20	Secondary	Widowed	3	Christianity- African Initiated churches
Survivor3	15	19	Primary	Divorced	2	African Traditional religion
Survivor 4	16	22	Primary	Divorced	4	Christianity- African Initiated churches
Survivor 5	15	20	Secondary	Widowed	3	Muslim
Survivor 6	15	21	Primary	Separated	2	Christianity- African Initiated churches

Source: Field Data (2017).

The sample was made up of 6 purposively sampled survivors of child marriages in Chireya. Table 1 shows the survivors of child marriages' age when they got married, current age, level of education, marital status, number of children and religion. Survivors interviewed for this study got married when they were aged between 14 and 16 years. Their current age ranged from 19 to 25 years. The level of education for the majority was primary level and only two had gone up to secondary level. The number of children ranged from 2 to 5. Most respondents' religion was Christianity, mainly from the dominant apostolic denomination.

Instrumentation

The study used in-depth interviews for data collection. The use of in-depth interviews ensured that survivors of child marriages provided clarified and detailed accounts of the causes and consequences of the practice.

Data Collection Procedures

The first 2 authors collected data from Chireya, whilst the other author was mainly responsible for review of the data against secondary sources. The first 2 authors visited the study area and interviewed identified survivors of child marriages. One of the authors used to work with survivors of child marriages, thus making it easier to recruit the respondents. The survivors were visited in their places where they lived and this provided them with a relaxed environment to freely explain their opinions on the causes and consequences of child marriages. Each interview took about an hour of the participant's time.

Data Analysis

The Giorgi's method and Phenomenological Analysis methods were used to analyse the data. The interpretive phenomenological analysis is based on thematically structuring of experiences for analysis, whereas the Giorgi's approach is highly descriptive in nature, and is rooted in Husserl's phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Using these thematic analysis techniques, authors understood and derived meaning from survivors' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

The study observed various ethical issues. The authors made sure that participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Authors assured respondents that their names would not be revealed in the study as pseudo names were used.

Results

The following findings arose with regards to survivors' perspectives on the causes and consequences of child marriages. In this section, pseudo names were used in order to protect the identity of the participants.

Survivors' perspective on the causes of child marriages

Survivors of child marriages identified a number of interrelated causes of child marriages, including poverty, cultural and religious influences. Poverty was perceived

by the majority of survivors to be the main factor behind the upsurge in cases of child marriages in Gokwe.

Poverty

A number of survivors re-called that they entered voluntarily or were forced into early marriages because their families were poor and unable to take care of the survivors. Thus, many survivors entered freely or were forced into early marriage to ensure that their families benefit some financial and material stability. Survivors revealed how poor families used the *kuzvarira* (child pledging) and payment of *roora/lobola* (brideprice) cultural practices to ensure that young girls are married off to better families for guardians to benefit. The following quotes illustrate the above findings:

My uncle left me to stay with a couple in their 70s there about. One day the old man came to my hut in the middle of the night and had unprotected sex with me... it was a painful experience but I had no choice since my uncle had told me never to come back. To the shock of my life, the old man's wife knew about these developments, and kept on encouraging me to be steadfast, and endure the pain. I later on discovered my uncle had given me into marriage. When the old man passed away in 2015, I was chased away by his wife and their children (Survivor 2).

I was encouraged to get married to an elderly man with a large herd of cattle in our village. At first I resisted but with mounting pressure from them, I later on conceded and a secret marriage ceremony was arranged... Close to \$350 and two cattle were paid to my uncle as roora/lobola, and it helped them a lot since they now own a herd of cattle enough for draught power ... (Survivor 1).

My stepmother used to tell my father to find a place for me to stay since I was an additional burden for the family. One day my father was informed by our neighbour that they saw me with my boyfriend on my way from sports. On arrival, he asked me to go back to my boyfriend. My stepmother was very happy for they received roora ... (Survivor 4).

Religious practices

Survivors of child marriages also perceive religion to be a cause of child marriages in rural Zimbabwe. Survivors mentioned the presence of religious sects, such as the *vapostori* that support child marriages. This dominant religious group in Chireya tolerates child marriages as long as the marriage is sanctioned by "the Holy Spirit". The general belief of the *vapostori* churches is that whatever the prophet or leader says should be religiously followed. Most of the church leaders of this sect are in polygamous relationships, and they continue to marry young girls of their choice from their congregants. The quotes below reveal the influence of religious practices:

... I used to suffer from drowsiness ... so in the process of seeking answers from church leaders, a prophet told my mother that I should marry him in order to dispel and protect the family from bad spirits that caused this feeling. At first I refused but my mother convinced me, and I was the younger wife amongst all the 5 wives the prophet had (Survivor 6).

Our church leader told me of his desire to marry me as his third wife. I refused at first but later on conceded to the idea as I was afraid that my mother was going to be expelled from the church (Survivor 3).

Pre-marital sex and bad parenting

Pre-marital sex and bad parenting were also perceived to be causes of child marriages. Some survivors confessed that they indulged in sexual intercourse at a tender age, something which resulted in them getting pregnant or being forced into early marriages by guardians. The quotes below reveal these sentiments:

I had unprotected sex with my boyfriend and later on discovered that I was pregnant. I went to stay with him but my in laws later chased me away saying their son was too young to marry (Survivor 5).

My father was influenced by my step mother to chase me away from home. I had no option, I went back and started staying with him ... but he later chased me away saying I was rude ... (Survivor 4).

The next section presents findings on the perceived consequences of child marriages.

Survivors' perspectives on the consequences of child marriages

The most animated discussion between survivors was that child marriages comes with short and long term consequences to the girl child. Below are some of the noted challenges.

Dropping out of school

Most survivors bemoaned the fact that they dropped out of school at lower grades to get married. Without education, many survivors are finding it difficult to secure better employment opportunities. The following quotes confirm this:

Life has not been better without education. I'm failing to get a job anywhere besides being a sex worker (Survivor 2).

I can't get better employment because I'm not educated. This makes it difficult for me to even raise school fees for my children, who ended up dropping out before reaching grade 7 ... (Survivor 4).

Infringed childhood

Participants of this study also mentioned how their childhood and youthful lives were affected by child marriages. Whilst in marriages, they missed playing with friends and the love of their parents. A majority of the survivors wish to be young again to enjoy their childhood and youthful lives which they missed because of early marriages.

The above issues were revealed in the quotes below:

When I got married, I was only 15 years old, and lost on the opportunity to be loved by my relatives and play with friends (Survivor 5).

My husband used to threaten or beat me up whenever he found me playing or even talking to girls of my age group in the village (Survivor 1).

I was so traumatised during the first days because the husband would keep me in doors, with no one of the relatives and my friends to talk to... (Survivor 6).

If it was possible, I would have loved to be a teenager again and get the chance to play with my friends and be loved by guardians (Survivor 4).

Limited civic participation

Some survivors also mentioned their inability to participate in civic life whilst in child marriages. These sentiments were revealed in the quotes below:

I was like a prisoner... I was not allowed to speak to outsiders and to even go for shopping alone (Survivor 1).

I was not allowed to go outside, even to attend community meetings. Some women would go for community gatherings where they were addressed by outsiders on socio-economic and political issues ... but I was not allowed to go... unless I was going with someone (Survivor 2).

Health challenges

Survivors of child marriages also perceive premature marriages to be causing sexual and reproductive, and other health challenges. Narrations by survivors revealed how they experienced child mortality and maternal and morbidity challenges. Many

survivors confessed that they had faced complications whilst giving birth for their first born child at a tender age. Survivors revealed these issues in the following quotes:

Sometimes I would cry during sex because of pain... but my husband would tell me that uchajaira zvako (you will get used to it)... (Survivor 1).

When I got married, I lost the opportunity to be given advice about marriage by my relatives since they didn't want me to visit them. I strongly blame this lack of knowledge for the death of my first born, weeks after I had given birth, because I didn't know the best way to keep my new born baby (Survivor 2).

... I faced challenges in having a normal delivery and I was transferred from our local clinic to Chireya Mission Hospital. Whilst at the hospital, I spent a day in agony and then gave birth the next day through an operation. Since then I have been giving birth through operations (Survivor 3).

High incidences of domestic violence and divorce

Survivors also perceive child marriages to be drivers of domestic violence, high divorce rates and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases. In most cases, the low maturity level of the bride, heavy responsibilities and misunderstandings account for high rates of domestic violence and divorce rates. The quotes below reveal the above:

My husband was selfish and abusive. Thank God I left the union alive. I could have been infected with AIDS or killed because he used to beat me with clenched fists for being promiscuous when in fact he was the one who went around sleeping with other women (Survivor 4).

He was spending all his money on girlfriends. Asking him about that issue was calling for trouble... He would force me to have unprotected sex and beat me whenever I refused (Survivor 3).

My husband and the older wife accused me of eating too much and being wasteful and also stealing groceries brought by their children. We used to quarrel ... (Survivor 6).

Limited family planning

Child marriage survivors also perceive the practice to be limiting the child bride's involvement in family planning and child spacing. In relation to this, survivors revealed that girls who get married early bear many children in a short space of time and are often neglected by their husbands. Survivors interviewed in this study had 2 to 5 children born within a short space of time. Survivors also highlighted that it was not

out of choice to have many children but the husband made the decision. These consequences were revealed in the following quotes:

He wanted many children and wanted me to continue giving birth yet he did not want to give me money to buy food and clothes for the children ... I decided to leave the relationship (Survivor 6).

In a space of 6 years, I had given birth to 4 children, including one who died a few weeks after birth (Survivor 2).

Discussion

The perspectives of child marriage survivors pointed to poverty as a major leading factor of children being forced into child marriages. In most cases, girls are sent as if they are to help the rich family with household chores, when in actual sense they have been pledged for marriage purposes (Human Rights Watch, 2015). With this cultural practice, a girl child can be married before they are even born, or at a tender age. The results confirm previous studies (Nguyen & Wodon, 2015a; UNICEF, 2014) which revealed the existence of the *kuzvarira* practice even before the colonial era, when elders were able to accumulate young wives through pledging in exchange for grain during times of food shortages. Today, the practice has revived amid harsh socio-economic conditions to secure wealth and command basic needs.

Another practice perceived by survivors to lead to child marriages was the payment of bride price, which was equivalent to viewing children as an economic resource, with an exchange value disguised as the bride price. It is expected by guardians with girl children that their children will get married and dowry/bride price will be paid to them by the groom. As the girl child will be from poor to better-off families, it means cementing a beneficial relationship for the poor family. In most cases, the poor family gets livestock, cash, and assistance during bereavements; clothes and other goodies such as cellular phones. A study by Human Rights Watch (2015) in South Sudan also noted that the need for all these goods force poor parents to calculate the gains to be derived from dowry/bride price of their daughters even long before they are born. This practice has created the zeal in many parents or guardians to force young girls into child marriage to get dowry/bride price which acts as their saviour in poverty situations.

The study also revealed the influence of religion in causing child marriages. A similar finding was reported in India in a study that was conducted by Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah and Silverman (2009). Many religious beliefs in India do not condone marrying off

young girls. Similarly, some African initiated churches, including the *vapostori* were found to be using the “Holy Spirit” as an intimidating tool to instil fear in their members, and to force them not to reject what has been sanctioned by the so-called “Holy Spirit”. In a way, the Holy Spirit is used to validate child marriages as the prophets would have been ‘directed’ by the divine force to marry young girls. As the apostolic sect is quoted as one of the largest growing spiritual groups in Gokwe, this means that with its growth child marriages are also on the increase in the area.

The study also revealed limited awareness on the best child development practices as a perceived cause of child marriages. Limited sex education and parental guidance has seen many children engaging and being forced into pre-marital sex resulting in early pregnancy and marriages. Even with strong legislative frameworks such as the Constitution of Zimbabwe that condemn rape and child marriages, rural girl children continue to be abused as their guardians are not aware of these instruments and the procedures when faced with such problems. As aptly captured by Himonga (2002), African communities do not always observe the relevant human rights instruments that protect children from harmful practices or are not aware of them.

Survivors perceived child marriages to be a lost opportunity and hope for attaining education, getting better employment opportunities, independence, the ability to command basic needs, and to rescue their households out of poverty. This confirms the results of previous studies that pointed out the inability of child brides to attain education as one of the detrimental effects of the practice (Basiyange, 2011; Dziva & Mazambani, 2017; Warner, 2004). Similar studies also place child brides as comprising the majority of girl children with limited literacy, numeracy, decision making, and even basic financial management skills in society (Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle & Lee-Rife, 2011; Vogelstein, 2013; Gemignani & Wodon, 2015). Without these attributes, survivors of child marriages have fewer employment opportunities to earn income and financially provide for themselves and even to send their children to school. Thus intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Narrations by many survivors revealed how early marriages were imposed on them by their guardians against their best interests of playing with their friends and pursuing education. Indeed, this confirms results of previous studies which revealed how the practice robs child brides of their childhood and youthful lives (Gemignani & Wodon, 2015; Warner, 2004). At a tender age, brides are expected to take on reproductive roles for which they were not mentally, physically emotionally and psychologically

prepared. This violates the rights of the girl child's best interests and other rights emphasised in the CRC, ACRWC and section 19 and 81 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe.

Survivors also perceived child marriages to have widespread negative health consequences on the child mother. As aptly captured by Singh and Samara (1996), young women who marry early are more likely than their peers to experience earlier and more frequent childbearing, complications in pregnancy, higher maternal mortality. Below the age of 18, the mother will not be biologically ready to continuously bear children. Yet child mother continuously bear children as they are not well versed with family planning methods. This also emanates from the fact that within her marital household, a young wife typically has little bargaining power and ability to make decisions regarding family planning and various aspects of her life.

The study's results also revealed how the effects goes beyond child mothers themselves to affect their children. The practice is associated with high mortality and morbidity rates. This confirms findings of the UNICEF (2014)'s study which found infant mortality to be 60% higher amongst babies born out to mothers under age 18 compared to mothers over 18 years. Similarly, previous studies noted how children of child mother are more likely to suffer from malnutrition and to experience low birth weight (Wachs, 2008).

It also emerged from the survivor's perspective that child marriages expose girls to sexual violence. By nature, sexual violence exposes young girls to sexually transmitted diseases including the deadly HIV and AIDs (Nour, 2006). A study by UNAIDS (2008) noted that young girls in child marriages are highly vulnerable to HIV infection due to tenderness of their bodies. Vaginas of young girls are not yet well lined with protective cells and their cervix may be easily eroded (UNICEF, 2014). In addition, child mother often lack the ability to negotiate sexual activity, safe sex in particular (Raj, 2010), and in many cases are treated as sex slaves by their old aged husbands. Again this exposes the mother to sexually transmitted diseases.

Survivors of child marriages also perceived the practice to be characterised with frequent incidences of domestic violence and divorce. Narrations by survivors revealed sexual violence, physical, verbal and emotional abuse as some forms of gender violence suffered by a girl child in marriage. This confirms the findings by existing literature that child brides experience severe abuse, isolation and depression whilst in the union

(Gemignani & Wodon, 2015; Nour, 2009). These forms of violence against the bride ultimately reduces her confidence and self-esteem in life.

In their perspectives, survivors revealed how their in-laws and husbands controlled and determined the bride's roles, movement and socialisation with others. Thus limiting the child mother's social capital, agency and independence. Those brides who are often strong to resist manipulation are often subjected to repeated emotional and physical abuse by in-laws and the husband, and subsequently divorced. As revealed by Heise (1999), couples marrying early tend to end their relationships within a few years because of heavy responsibilities, persistent fights and low maturity levels of the child bride. Subsequently, child marriage survivors become more desperate after divorce, with some ending up surviving on sex work at local townships. Thus making themselves more vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, and ultimate poverty as uttered by Lewis' theory of poverty.

Conclusion

This study invoked survivors of child marriages to reveal their perspectives on the causes and consequences of child marriage in rural Zimbabwe. In this study, survivors revealed how the practice is largely influenced by a confluence of factors that are closely linked to poverty. Due to poverty, girls are coerced into child marriages, which is viewed by many poor communities as strategy to satisfy the parents or guardians' vital needs and improve social status. Yet, child marriages turn to be harbingers for more poverty, abuse and limited freedom to the girl child. The survivor's perspectives revealed that child mothers are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and comprise the bulk of the poorer young girls in respect to accessing justice, income, health, education, civic participation. In some instances these consequences transcend to survivors' adult life, and some have far reaching impacts to their children and the wider society. The voices of survivors anchors the results of previous studies conducted with secondary stakeholders on the causes and consequences of child marriages to indeed show the intricate nexus between poverty and child marriages.

Recommendations

From the findings above, the study recommends that:

- The government and non-state actors identify, counsel, empower and capacitate survivors of child marriages with knowledge and skills to live better and sustainable lives;
- Survivors of child marriages be identified and given another chance, through provision of scholarships and necessary support to access conventional education and trainings in life skills for sustainable livelihood;
- Responsible government ministries and civil society establish social media community based watch groups to educate, denounce and whistle blow cases of child marriages to law enforcement;
- Further research be conducted to reveal dynamics of child marriages by focusing on empirical studies on the links between poverty and the practice, especially the correlations between age of marriage and first pregnancy, maternal mortality, and morbidity and the incidence of HIV and AIDS.

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