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Child Marriages in Zimbabwe and Implications to the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

This study explored how early marriages threaten the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among form four girl learners at two secondary schools in Masvingo rural, Zimbabwe, with the aim of proposing sustainable measures and policies to curtail the effect of early marriages. The case study research design was used in this study. Data was collected through interviews from four girl learners and four teachers. An inductive method to analyse findings was used to derive major themes from the gathered findings. The study established that early marriages are a severe violation of children's rights and directly hinder the achievement of the first six SDGs (1, 2,3,4,5 and 6), the promotion of basic education and the fight against poverty as well as gender equality. The study also established that the married girls drop out of school, engage in full time household chores, are exposed to serious health risks such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV and AIDS and domestic violence all of which negatively affect the achievement of SDGs. On the way forward, the study proposed that all perpetrators of early marriages be given tough sentences and the majority age of marriage be raised to twenty one as the one currently stipulated by conventions is too low. There is also need to empower girls and the need for governments to continue to make efforts to address the root causes underlying child marriages.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, child marriage, Sustainable Development Goals, sustainable development, early marriage poverty, secondary schools

Introduction

Child marriage remains a violation of the education, health and development and a threat to the social, emotional, physical, and moral rights of girls despite the existence of numerous international and regional human rights laws and conventions against the practice (UNICEF, 2015). Clark (2004) and Greene, Rao and Perlson (2015) argue that child marriage, also known as early marriage, is defined as any marriage carried out by children below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. Child marriage involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious, or customary laws. Child marriage affects both sexes, but to a larger extent, girls are disproportionately affected (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014) as they are the majority of the victims. Thus, this research examined how early marriages affected the implementation of the first six Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, one, two, three, four, five and six) among form four girl learners at two secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) follow and expand on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expired in 2015. Even though the SDGs aim to eradicate poverty and hunger by 2030 (SDG 1 and 2), to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages (SDG 3), to achieve equitable quality education (SDG 4) and to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDG 5) and sustainable economic growth (SDG 6) (UNICEF, 2016), some girl children continue to be faced with many psychosocial challenges perpetuated by rising child marriages in Zimbabwe. It has to be noted that the

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above stated six SDGs are inextricably interwoven with the remaining eleven SDGs (UNICEF, 2016).

A comparison of the proportion of young women and men aged 15-19 who were married in 2013 found the ratio to be 72 to 1 in Mali, 8 to 1 in the US, and 6 to 1 in El Salvador (Bruce, 2015). Several studies acknowledge that accurate data on the true extent of child marriage is difficult to obtain because many marriages go unregistered and girls' ages may be falsified (IPPF, 2007; UNICEF, 2015). However, UNICEF (2011) estimates that globally, some 64 million young women (aged 20-24) were married before the age of 18. According to a British community development charity, one girl below the age of 18 is married off every three seconds worldwide (Mhembere, 2011 & UNFPA, 2012). It should be noted that allowing people to marry whilst below the age of 18 is against several United Nations conventions and the practice is outlawed in most countries, but other countries turn a blind eye, especially in poorer communities (Basiyange, 2011; Greene, Rao & Perlson, 2015). Child marriage is also a direct form of discrimination against the girl child, who, as a result of the practice, is often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, development, and equality (Mhembere, 2011). Tradition, religion, and poverty continue to fuel the practice of child marriage, despite its strong association with adverse reproductive health outcomes and the lack of education for girls (Chinyoka, 2013).

Child marriage is common in Zimbabwe, and 21% of children (mostly girls) are married before the age of 18. According to the Girl Child Network (GCN), a civic organisation whose mission is to shelter, educate, and empower female victims, an estimated 8 000 girls have been forced into early marriages or were held as sex slaves since 2008 (UNICEF, 2012). Chief Chiduku, a senator for Manicaland province in Zimbabwe and a member of the African Apostolic Church was quoted as having said there was nothing wrong with marrying off underage girls in a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting (Herald, 2015). The question which many researchers, religious groups and human rights advocates ponder on is whether early marriages are something that society should perpetuate in view of the negative effects of the practice on the girl child. Whilst to some extent, it appears that the legal framework to protect girl children from child marriages in Zimbabwe exists (UN, 2015), a problem lies in the Customary Marriages Act which does not provide a minimum marriageable age (UN, 2015) and has therefore been abused.

There have been calls from the women's movement in Zimbabwe for the government to harmonize the marriage laws in the country in order to rectify the discrepancies (IPPF, 2007). This study examined how early marriages threatened the implementation of the first six Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among form four girl learners at two secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe. Findings of the study may enlighten the society at large on the girl child's right to education as advocated by the Salamanca Statement and framework for Action, (1989), United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Children, the 1990 Jomtein Declaration and the World Summit on children (Basiyange, 2011) and the SDGs. These advocates promulgate education for every individual as a basic human right for all, irrespective of sex. With little access to education and economic opportunities, the girl learners and their families are more likely to live in poverty (Mhembere, 2011). Thus, child marriage drains countries of the innovation and potential that would enable them to thrive.

The Zimbabwe Constitutional Court has with immediate effect outlawed child marriage and struck off the statutes section 22(1) of the Marriage Act, which for decades had allowed children under the age of 18 years to get into marriage (UNICEF, 2016). The Constitutional Court said section 22(1) of the Marriage Act was inconsistent with section

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78(1) of the Constitution which sets 18 years as the minimum age of marriage in Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2016). The ruling by the ConCourt followed an application by two Harare women, Loveness Mudzuru and Ruvimbo Tsopodzi, who approached the court, through their lawyer Tendai Biti, seeking to challenge the Customary Marriages Act, arguing the said Act was infringing on the constitutional rights of young girls and boys who were getting married at an early age (News Day, 2016). Despite the new marriage act, the perpetrators of child marriages continue, hence the need to explore the impact of early child marriages on the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to provide an answer to the following research question:

- To what extent are child marriages in Zimbabwe a threat to the achievement of sustainable development goals, one, two, three, four, five and six?

Research design

The study adopted a case study design in order to examine how early marriages threatened the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among form four girl learners at two secondary schools in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. One of the advantages of the phenomenological design is that it allows the researcher to gain an understanding of social phenomena from participants' perspectives in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study, participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences regarding how early marriages threaten the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among form four girl learners at two secondary schools in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

Sample and Sampling

The sample comprised 4 purposively selected Ordinary level girl students (who once dropped out because of child marriages) and 4 purposively selected teachers (two from each school). The four selected teachers were responsible for guidance and counselling at the two schools. The four girl learners were all young mothers whose marriages failed and had to come back to school to complete their ordinary level. In this study, purposive sampling was found to be more realistic than other sampling methods in terms of time, effort and cost needed in finding informants as propounded by (Bernard, 2012).

Instrumentation

Data was collected through face to face interviews. Creswell (2013) argues that, capturing what people say in their own words is the most important contribution of qualitative research to understanding human behaviour and perception. The advantages of using interviews in this study was to allow the researcher to adapt the questions as necessary, clarifying doubt and ensuring that the responses were properly understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions. Another advantage of using face-to-face interviews in this study lies in that the participants were in a position to seek further clarification on some of the responses through probing. Each interviewee's tone, voice and facial expression helped to provide information that could not be revealed by the questionnaire and other methods of collecting data. To allow for the collection of as much relevant information as possible, the interviews to 4 selected teachers and 4 form four girls were not tightly structured. Therefore, relevant issues which were not included in the interview guide but arose during the process of conducting the

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interviews were explored and noted in impromptu supplementary questions. This was in line with the flexible nature of qualitative research (Yin, 2012).

Data Collection Procedures

Permission to conduct the study was secured from Masvingo Provincial Education Office, Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, as well as from the selected school headmasters. Further permission was sought from the parents and guardians of the selected participants. The consent of the respondents was sought before the face to face interviews were conducted. The interviews with the four girls were done after school in the senior mistress's office. Sometimes interviews were done during sporting activities. There were no disturbances in the office. All the four girls were not active in sports. The environment was very conducive and the students were quite relaxed. The teachers were interviewed in their respective offices after work. The interviews took about ten days. The interviews were audio-taped and the researcher made observations and copious notes during interviews. This strategy helped to eliminate the problem of inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data which, according to Maxwell (2006), is the main threat to the valid description of what the researchers saw or heard.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The research instruments were validated by research experts and a pilot study was conducted hence trustworthiness of data was ascertained. Strategies were applied to counteract credibility threats. Information was obtained from individuals in their respective interviews, cross-checking and verifying sources of information (Creswell, 2013). Credibility is concerned with the extent to which research findings are congruent with or approximate to 'reality' (Patton, 2012). In this study, credibility was achieved through the adoption of research methods that are well established; triangulation, member checks and thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny and the examination of previous research findings.

Data Analysis

The thematic content analysis was used. This process involved identifying, coding and categorising patterns in data as espoused by (Creswell, 2013). In order to identify themes and categories, the researcher applied Tesch's (2006) open coding method of data analysis. Tesch's method is a systemic process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data to unpack the major research question of the study (Yin, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

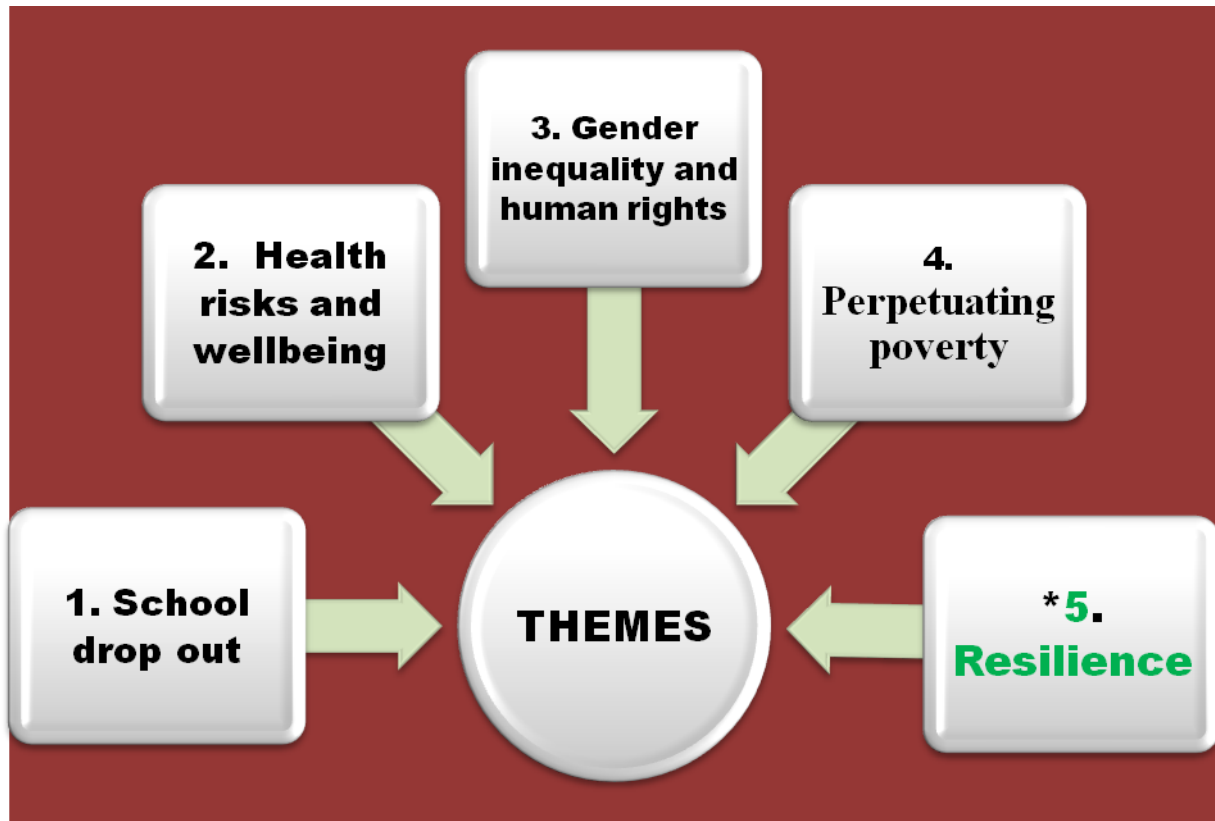
Permission to conduct the study was secured from Masvingo Provincial Education Office and Masvingo District Office, Zimbabwe. The selected teachers and girl learners who participated in interviews completed consent forms to show their willingness to participate in the research. The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the interviews if they were not comfortable. Participants were assured of anonymity in participating in the study. Confidentiality and privacy were upheld. Participants were also assured of anonymity in the research report.

Results and Discussion

This study which sought to provide an answer to the extent to which child marriages in Zimbabwe are a threat to the achievement of sustainable development goals has different

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issues that emerged from the interviews with four teachers and four ordinary level girls who were once victims of child marriages before they enrolled back to school as summarised by fig 1.



Field data, (2017): Summarising emerging themes derived from the study.

The discussion of the findings was done in line with the major research question. From the above diagram, fig 1, the themes that were yielded by the empirical study are school dropout, perpetuating poverty, health risks and well-being, gender inequality and human rights, and resilience.

Theme 1: Dropping out of school

The study established that the increase in unplanned pregnancies leading to early marriages has precipitated a multiplicity of problems to many girl learners. During interviews, three of the four teachers lamented that, once married young girls drop out of school, they become full time housewives or workers for their new husbands; this negatively impacts on the community and society as a whole as well as the well-being of future generations. A ripple cycle of poverty ensued as a result. Because dropping out of school perpetuates poverty, it is also in direct conflict with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals such as the promotion of basic education and the fight against poverty as well as gender equality (UNICEF, 2016). Cutting off a young girl's education was noted to have a drastic effect on her employment opportunities in the future and this effectively undermines development efforts in Zimbabwe and the world over. Findings of this study also reveal that most girls from the Vapositori sect stop schooling in July when the sect celebrates Passover, a religious festivity during which marriage ceremonies take place (this was explained by two girl learners who attended the vapositori church).

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The following sentiments were echoed by the girl participants:

... it is difficult to stop these marriages, as members of the sect are complicit and secretive. In most cases we are forced by economic circumstances to give up to the demands of these old men. As a result, a majority of girls end up dropping out of school because of early marriages and poverty (G1).
...most men from the vapositori religious sect and others in our community want to get married to docile women, hence they prefer under age girl learners. The younger the bride the more chances for dominance for the man (G3).
Old men in my community, irrespective of church denomination prefer to marry under-age girls because it is easier to control them. The married girls became victims of school dropout since their husbands were not comfortable with sending them back to school (TM1).

From the above-mentioned snippets of conversation, it is seen that early marriages affect the girls' education. The girls are either taken out of school, or the opportunity to attend school is taken away from them. Early marriages inevitably deny girls of school-going age their rights to education, which is crucial for their personal development and their effective contribution to the future wellbeing of their families and societies. The lack of access to formal education means that these girls are also denied the needed technical know-how and professional skills that is a pre-requisite to their attaining jobs that can earn them a good living. The study also established that depriving girls of basic education is a serious violation of children's rights impeding SDGs 4, (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all). As long as early marriages are perpetuated in Zimbabwe the above mentioned SDGs will not be met thus derailing socioeconomic and the holistic development of girl learners.

It is apparent from this study that early marriages are a violation of the children's basic rights to a safe childhood, education, good health, thus, perpetuating gender disparities among learners. Despite all the Conventions, for example the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2012), and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (UN, 2012), the Zimbabwean law does not even have any definition of what 'early marriage' means, hence the girls' plight is exacerbated (Chinyoka, 2013).

Married girls often leave school and thus may lack the skills to help lift their families out of poverty. Thus, without addressing child marriage, the international community will fail to achieve its commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals (goals one and two) to reduce global poverty.

During interviews, teachers highlighted that:

Early marriages threaten national economic development, as bright and intelligent girls are forced out of school to become cheap labour and child bearers in their homesteads. Most of the girls become farm labourers on their husbands' farms (TM1).
...children born to teenage mothers are more likely to experience social, emotional, cognitive and intellectual problems. These children born to teenage mothers are less likely to receive proper education, nutrition, health care, and

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cognitive and social stimulation. As a result, they are at risk for lower academic achievement and dropping out of school (TM4).

Thus, in this respect, parenthood is a leading cause of school drop-outs among the girls. The early marriages of the girls are therefore a barrier to their education. The practices of the early-age marriages of girls are continued, despite the legal stipulations for the age of marriage hindering the achievement of the SDGs.

THEME 2: Health related issues and wellbeing

This study also established that the high unplanned pregnancy rates which lead to child marriages are of great concern because teen mothers and babies face increased risks to their health, especially in respect of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Also, their opportunities to build a respectable future are diminished, according to a teacher from one of the schools. In agreement, three students who participated in the interviews purport that serious health problems were noted among young mothers together with their children. According to Sachiti (2011), many child brides are not rescued from such marriages, and end up in nasty situations, like teenage motherhood, and the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. In line with this view, Mwilu (2010) cites the case of a thirteen year-old Yemeni girl who died from internal bleeding after intercourse with a sixty-five year-old man. This is a gory example of the vulnerability that young girls can be exposed to by 'forced' early marriages. Quite a number of deaths, associated with this vulnerability, are not reported. At the brunt of the suffering is the girl child. In terms of vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, this cannot be excused, as these wealthy men are not tested before taking in the young girls as wives. After all, the young girl would not have been sensitised on the essence of HIV testing. If she had at all, she would have been too weak to ask her husband to do so. Furthermore, G4 and G1 agreed with the above comment, saying that their parents believed that marriage was an effective tool for safeguarding the health of their girl children and upholding the family honour.

Given the above, the young girl would have been literally thrown on the death bed. Although there is evidence in the Global Aids Response Progress Report (2012) to support the assumption that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe is on the decline, it is still a major concern in the wellbeing of the young people who are victims of early marriages. It was furthermore established that though the culture of silence surrounding sex may fade due to some sensitisation programmes, the plight of women and girl children was further exasperated because of economic dependence (Hlupo & Tsikira, 2012). In light of this, it may be stated that poverty reinforces harmful cultural practices, such as intergenerational sex and early marriages for girls, which are detrimental to their health, cognitive and intellectual development, as well as to their academic performance. During interviews with the teachers, almost all teachers highlighted that the child mothers suffered physical and sexual abuse leading to a myriad of diseases like HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, complications in giving birth. This was confirmed by students who participated in interviews who also mentioned the challenges of birth associated complications, the mother's risk for anemia and postpartum depression is heightened, and the baby is more likely to be born prematurely and have a low birth weight. During interviews, teachers and the girl learners highlighted that:

Teens, in general, have a higher risk of preterm birth, which often goes along with low birth weight. Teens may also be in danger of not receiving the right

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amount of nutrients (such as in prenatal vitamins) during pregnancy. Regular prenatal visits, pursuing a healthy lifestyle and taking childbirth and parenting classes can help to reduce these risks and prepare a young mother for a great pregnancy, birth, and postpartum period (TM3).

...teen mothers face significant levels of stress that can then lead to increased mental health concerns. In addition to higher rates of postpartum depression, teenage mothers have higher rates of depression in general. Teenage mothers are less likely to gain adequate weight during their pregnancy, leading to low birth weight. Low birthweight is associated with several infant and childhood disorders and a higher rate of infant mortality. Low-birthweight babies are more likely to have organs that are not fully developed (TM2)

...underage marriages are rife in this area, affecting the education of the girl children, and exposing them to HIV/AIDS at a tender age. Child mothers suffer physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse. Because of these early marriages, we are exposed to many pregnancy related complications, diseases like HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and stress related ailments (G2).

In line with the above, recently released research by Harare-based non-governmental organisation Women and Law Southern Africa (WLSA) has shown that young girls in early marriages are likely to suffer birth complications, some of them resulting in death (WHO, 2014). To a larger extent, child brides are often disempowered, dependent on their husbands and deprived of their fundamental rights to health, education and safety (IPPF, 2007). Neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers, child brides are at greater risk of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth (Basiyange, 2011), becoming infected with HIV/AIDS and suffering domestic violence (Machingura, 2008).

The Child brides are less likely to receive adequate medical care while pregnant. The lack of care, and the fact that girls are not physically mature enough to give birth, put both mothers and their babies at risk (WHO, 2014). Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death for girls between ages 15 and 19. And babies born to under age mothers are 1.5 times more likely to die during the first 28 days than babies born to mothers in their twenties or thirties (UNICEF, 2015). A pregnant teenager faces the risk of immature uterine muscles and mucous membranes that pose a serious danger and a high risk of a ruptured uterus in cases of prolonged labour. It should be noted from this study that child marriages undermine progress towards reducing maternal and infant mortality (SDGs, goals four and five). The following SDGs are also undermined, SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages) and SDG 8, (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all). Child brides are often pressured to have many children within a short space of time leaving them and their children vulnerable to injuries and even death.

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Theme 3: Perpetuates poverty

The study established that some of the girls voluntarily entered into the marriage to escape poverty, while some were forced to do so under the (*kuputsa* or *kuzvarira*) tradition. *Kuputsa* or *kuzvarira* is a form of marriage where a young girl, sometimes as young as from birth is given to another family in exchange of either food or livestock. Marrying off young girls was a tradition in some parts of Zimbabwe, especially those which are still backward and remote (Chinyoka, 2013). People in rural areas perceive a girl child as a source of wealth and would readily give the girl away in marriage to raise funds for the boy child and the family. Research by Kapungu (2007) attests to the above.

This observation was also reinforced and supported in the interviews when the teachers spoke of the experiences of children who engage in early pregnancies and premarital/teenage sex. According to Mwilu (2010) in Hlupo and Tsikira (2012), in many African communities, cultural provision is made for the parents to marry off their daughters when and to whom they choose (*kuzvarira* in Shona). During interviews with both girls and teachers, it was highlighted that girls as young as twelve, thirteen or fourteen years have found themselves married off as the third, fourth or even fifth wives to polygamous men, who are old enough to be their grandfathers. The peak of such marriages was during the economic meltdown of 2008 in Zimbabwe. The major reason behind the continued practice was the parents' desire to cushion themselves during drought and economic turmoil. The other reason is grounded in some parents' belief that marrying off their daughters is a manner of ensuring their future security.

Related to this is the fact that the parents are securing a guardian, not only for themselves, but also for the other children who are the siblings of the one being married off. This was observed to have a detrimental effect on the schooling and academic performance of girl learners at the two schools studied. Given the above, one can safely argue that these early marriages perpetuate the cycle of poverty because the girl child is denied education, the very thing that can break this cycle of poverty. Her marriage would yield children who would be subjected to the same cycle, as she would not be an educated parent who can understand the importance of education for her children. It therefore becomes a vicious circle of poverty.

This study also established that many girls perceive marriage as an escape route from family poverty, while the common cultural practice of charging bride price brings quick and substantial income to her family. During interviews, girls and teachers highlighted that:

Taida chikafu, nhumbi dzekupfeka uye kuti vamwe vana vamai vangu ava vaende kuchikoro. (we needed food, clothes and money to send my siblings to school) (G3).

...kufara nemadhara ane mari kuri nani pakufa nenzara uye kutambura, (it's better to be intimate with older men in order to get food, clothing and money than to experience a serious lack of basic commodities) (G2).

...vabereki vedu vanoti kurudzira kutsvaka mari nenzira dzose...(our parents do not mind if we became intimate with older men and engage in prostitution as long as we bring money and food home). I can't go against [the will of] my elders and leave my husband in order to attend school. Besides, where would I go if I leave? My parents will not welcome me (G4)

These sentiments were also echoed and reinforced by the teachers who were interviewed who posit that the repercussions are too ghastly to contemplate on the part of the girl child because

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of the gross violation of her rights, as that forces her into circumstances she did not choose and is hardly ready for, psychologically and physically (T2). In support, Kachere (2010) cited the case of a 14 year-old girl from Chakari (a mining town in Zimbabwe) who was forced into two marriages by her parents. This girl is not alone in her plight, as the girl respondents in this study narrated a story of girls who had fallen prey to affluent polygamous men. This issue of marrying off young girls violates the Child Protection and Adoption Act (UN, 2015). The most disturbing fact is that these violations go unreported because they are done in the guise of culture and religion. The girls are seen as important sources of income for their families. This means that marriage is given more priority than education by the parents from poverty-stricken households. Thus without addressing child marriage, Zimbabwe will fail to achieve its commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals to reduce and end global poverty (goals number 1 and 2). Thus, child marriage violates girls' rights to health, education and opportunity.

This study also established that the marriages exposed girls to domestic violence throughout their lives, and traps them in a cycle of poverty (T3). The majority of the girls indicated that in these cases pregnancy and marriage were a consequence of poverty and also the major reasons for girls being withdrawn from school. This confirms Baden's (2008) findings that girls too, in some instances, may finance other children's education. It should be noted that education is the right of every child everywhere, and key to transforming her life and her quality of life of the community. It should be realised that education promotes national development, social order and sustainable development.

Theme 4: Violation of human rights and promotion of gender inequality

In this study, the girls' cultural and religious practices were noted to be a violation of the girl child's rights. In this study, child marriage was noted to reinforce gender inequality and violates human rights. During interviews with girls and teachers, the following were noted to derail the achievement of SDGs:

...leaving school early both contributes to, and results from, marrying young (G1). Other impacts include marital rape, heightened risk of domestic violence, poor access to decent work, exploitation, doing unpaid labour, risk of HIV transmission (G4), and a range of health problems due to early childbearing (T1).

The above was authenticated by Human Rights Watch investigations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Yemen, and Zimbabwe that have found out that early marriages have dire life-long consequences often completely halting or crippling a girl's ability to realise a wide range of human rights (UNICEF, 2016; Greene, Rao, and Perlson, 2015). All these are a violation of the achievement of the SDGs in Zimbabwe.

The problem of early and unplanned pregnancy affects the girls almost exclusively because of the cultural practices which expect them, instead of the boys, to care for the unwanted/unplanned child. This study also established that *Chimutsamapfihwa* continues to be a flourishing cultural practice. This is whereby young girls may replace a dead sister in marriage. Marrying-off young girls is believed to appease the spirits, or to settle long-standing disputes between families. The girls are also being given to their living sister's or aunt's

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husband, when the aunt or sister fails to conceive. All this was observed to be more apparent in poor families in even in urban communities.

The teachers interviewed were of the opinion that prior to 1996, a girl who fell pregnant at school in Zimbabwe faced expulsion, with no possibility of re-admission into the mainstream school system after giving birth. She could, however, further her education through the informal education system. According to the Secretary's Circular Minute no. 35 of October 1999, girl pregnancy at secondary school level was described as misconduct and a disciplinary issue, punishable by exclusion from school. However, the girl could regain entry elsewhere after giving birth. This caused the girl child to lag behind at school. Consequently the girl would suffer at home and at school, because the Zimbabwean culture is conservative with regard to pregnancy at school. It is not surprising that the Nziramasanga Commission (1999), which looked into the entire education system, discovered that a high percentage of drop-outs in the schools consisted of girls, and most of them due to pregnancy. The Commission expressed great concern about the ill-treatment the girl child was given by the school administration and the education authorities. Thus, in August 2010 the government of Zimbabwe amended the disciplinary code and granted the girls maternity leave of up to three months, instead of automatic exclusion for those who fell pregnant as a result of consensual sex.

The prevalence rates of child marriage is closely linked to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goal three, for instance, which sought to promote gender equality and empower women yet made no mention of child marriage. How can we empower women when so many girls are married off and denied their rights to health, education and a life free from violence and exploitation? Child marriage and education (goal two) are intrinsically linked too. Girls without any education are three times as likely to marry before 18 as girls with secondary or higher education (UNICEF, 2016). This in turn affects efforts to eradicate extreme poverty (goal one and two), since child brides miss out on the educational and economic opportunities needed to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

Theme 5: Resilience

Despite coming from poor backgrounds, some teachers noted that some girls defied the odds and excelled in their academic performance. Other factors like resilience, inborn factors and relative support and motivation (self-efficacy) come into play. The ordinary level girls lamented the following verbal quotes:

As the first born, I cannot afford to be lazy at school. I work harder than all the other students because I have a family to look after. I need a good job in order to be in a position to look after my siblings. I was also taught the virtues of hard work by my late parents... Poverty will not rob me of my future. If it means engaging in paid work before and after school, I will do that to earn school fees for myself and other siblings (G4).

I do not have problems in balancing household chores like cooking for the family, washing clothes, fetching fire wood and water with my studies. These duties do not compromise my studies in any way. In my community, its cultural and God given that women should work for the survival of the families. I have learnt to efficiently organise my time (G2).

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The onus is upon us teachers to motivate girls and survivors of early marriages to work hard in class. We instill self-efficacy and we also give unconditional positive regard (T3).

This is in line with some sentiments raised by two teachers during interviews that purport that poverty has motivated some girl learners to work even harder. They argued that girl learners had defied their odds and vowed to excel in their studies. So, to say that all children from poor backgrounds and neighbourhoods will underperform at school and impede the development of SDGs, will be myopic, and an underestimation of a rather complex issue. More research on this area is therefore called for.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that setting a target to end early child and forced marriage by the Zimbabwe government will also help speed efforts towards achieving a number of the proposed SDGs (1, 2,3,4,5 and 6) on poverty, nutrition, health, education, economic growth and reduction of inequality, especially gender equality. Child marriage hampers countries' efforts to improve the health of mothers and children, fight malnutrition and keep children in school. When girls are married as children, they cannot help but pass on poverty, low education and poor health into which they themselves have been trapped to the next generation. Child marriage may seem like an intractable problem. It happens because societies often place a lesser value on girls so they don't get the same chances as their brothers and because poverty and other forms of disadvantage, like low levels of education, further constrain their opportunities, making marriage seem like the best option to secure a girl's future.

Ending child early and forced marriages is a concrete and measurable target that will contribute significantly to the achievement of gender equality while also accelerating efforts to achieve a safe, healthy and prosperous future for all. The reality is that sustainable development cannot be achieved without the universal consciousness and protection of human rights. In many respects, despite the work that has gone into them, the SDGs now present a greater challenge for rights advocates than their predecessors.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study, it is recommended that all stakeholders should work hard to minimise the root causes of child early marriages (poverty, religious, cultural factors and factors within the girl children themselves).

There is also a dire need to empower the girl child to make better futures for themselves and their societies. This involves increasing girls' access to education, empowering girls with knowledge and skills, educating parents and communities, increasing economic incentives and supporting families.

Education is a paradoxical part of the solution. Girls who have little or no education are more likely to be married as children than girls who have secondary schooling. Schools should empower girls, enabling them to develop skills and knowledge, and to forge social networks that equip them to communicate and stand up for their interests.

There is need for early marriage laws and legislation to target parents and guardians who accept bride prices. In Zimbabwe to date, many parents and guardians continue to support under-age traditional marriages and withdraw rape charges in exchange for a bride price.

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The child marriage Act should make it an offence for a guardian or other person to enter into a lobola agreement or other customary arrangement or ceremony in respect of a person under the age of 18. This reinforces sentiments of the President Mnangagwa last year in October in parliament. Last but not least, religious communities and traditional leaders are uniquely positioned and should take a leading role to fight, prevent and respond to the call to end child marriage.

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