

Exploring the Socio-Cultural Drivers of Early Marriage in Zimbabwe: A Qualitative Study of Community Perceptions and Attitudes

Stanley Makuvaza

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6589-8478>

University of KwaZulu-Natal

stanmakuvaza@yahoo.com

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the socio-cultural drivers of early marriage in Zimbabwe, with a focus on girls aged 15–19. The study aimed to identify the societal and cultural factors that contribute to the practice of early marriage, using a phenomenological research design. Participants were selected based on the richness of the information they could provide. Data were analysed using thematic data analysis and NVivo software. The findings revealed that early marriage is viewed as a means of protecting girls from premarital sex and promiscuity and as a means to ensure their financial stability. Societal pressure on girls in Zimbabwe to conform to traditional gender roles also contribute to early marriage. The study highlights the complexity of early marriage, driven by a range of cultural and social norms. Community engagement and participation are critical in addressing early marriage, and policies and interventions should be developed in collaboration with community members and leaders. The study recommends engaging with community members and leaders to develop policies and implementing a multifaceted approach that includes promoting girls' education, providing economic opportunities, and challenging traditional gender roles. The study's findings have significant implications for policy and practice, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying societal and cultural factors that contribute to early marriage. By engaging with communities and promoting girls' empowerment, policymakers and practitioners can work towards ending the practice of early marriage and ensuring that girls in Zimbabwe have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Keywords: school dropout; early marriage; cohabitation; financial habitation;



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Early Marriage and School Dropout in Zimbabwe: Problem, Existing Knowledge, and the Study's Contribution

Background to the Study

School dropout linked to early marriage is a pressing and persistent problem in Zimbabwe, especially in rural districts such as Murewa (Mashonaland East). National-level surveys show that a substantial share of girls marry before the age of 18 (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2019), and the consequences of early marriage for education, health, and livelihoods are well documented (Kachingwe and Chikwigere 2017; Mupambireyi and Muchatuta 2018). Yet, despite these broad epidemiological and policy-focused accounts, a full understanding of how local socio-cultural practices, school-level dynamics, and family decision-making interact to produce school dropout and early marriage remains incomplete. This study argues that to design effective, context-sensitive interventions we must attend to the lived experiences and meanings that girls, parents, and school staff attach to marriage and schooling at the community level.

Existing literature has established three well-supported propositions relevant to this study. First, quantitative and multi-country studies show a clear negative association between early marriage and girls' education: early marriage reduces schooling attainment and access to future economic opportunities (Kachingwe and Chikwigere 2017). Second, several Zimbabwean and regional qualitative studies identify poverty, limited access to quality schooling, and entrenched cultural norms as important drivers of early marriage (Chikofa and Chikofa 2019; Chirawu and Macheso 2018; Muringani and Muringani 2019). Third, scholars have documented health and gendered harms associated with early marriage—increased maternal morbidity, greater exposure to gender-based violence, and curtailed social development (Mupambireyi and Muchatuta 2018). Collectively, these works make a strong case that early marriage is a multicausal problem with clear educational and health consequences.

Despite these contributions, there are three important gaps. First, large-scale surveys and regional reviews tend to describe prevalence and correlations but give less attention to the micro-level processes through which individual families and schools normalise or contest early marriage. Second, while some qualitative work describes drivers such as poverty and cultural norms, fewer studies systematically compare the perspectives of multiple school stakeholders (students, parents, teachers) within the same local context to reveal how school practices and community expectations interact to produce school dropout. Third, limited empirical attention has been paid to the decision-making processes surrounding underage marriages in peri-urban and rural Zimbabwean districts specifically—contexts that can differ markedly from national averages and where interventions must be tailored. This study addressed these gaps by focusing on Murewa district and by using a comparative, phenomenological case study approach to capture the lived meanings and school-level dynamics that quantitative accounts cannot reveal.

Building on the prior literature, this study argues that early marriage in Murewa is sustained not only by poverty and cultural norms (as widely reported) but also by specific school–community interactions and decision-making processes that remain underspecified in existing research. By bringing together the voices of girls, parents, and teachers from six secondary schools, the study contributes (1) a fine-grained description of how school experiences and community expectations jointly shape the pathway from school attendance to marriage, and (2) practical, locally grounded recommendations for policy and school-based interventions that can interrupt those pathways.

Methodology

Data from interviews and focus groups, drawn from participants in six secondary schools in Murewa district, were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework with NVivo software. Using a convenience sampling approach, the study involved 30 participants comprising 20 schoolgirls and 10 parents affected by early marriage. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, read repeatedly for familiarisation, and coded inductively to capture meaningful segments aligned with the research questions. Related codes were grouped into broader categories, refined for coherence, and defined clearly before being integrated into a narrative supported by participant quotes. Four main themes emerged: economic drivers of early marriage (poverty, unemployment, and marriage as financial security); cultural and religious norms promoting marriage as morally protective; gender roles and family expectations prioritising domestic and reproductive duties for girls; and school-related push factors such as inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, and negative teacher attitudes. It follows that a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of these socio-cultural drivers is therefore essential to inform interventions that are both effective and acceptable within affected communities.

Presentation of Findings

The participants’ views are presented in order of the research themes. Four themes were drawn up using the participants’ submissions. The participants’ submissions were captured and briefly analysed

Theme 1: Economic Drivers of Early Marriage (Poverty, Unemployment, and Marriage as Financial Security)

Poverty and limited economic opportunities emerged as key structural forces underpinning early marriage in Zimbabwe. Several participants noted that in contexts of chronic unemployment and resource scarcity, marriage is perceived as a viable pathway to securing a girl’s financial stability. One girl in the focus group explained:

Lack of access to education and economic opportunities for girls in Zimbabwe contributes to early marriage, as families may view it as the best way to ensure their daughters’ financial stability and break the cycle of poverty.

This view reflects the intersection between household economic hardship and marriage decision-making, where families often regard marriage as a strategy to reduce the economic burden of caring for daughters. Participants suggested that interventions should include expanding access to quality education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship opportunities for girls. Such measures were seen as vital in enabling young women to achieve economic independence, reducing the perceived necessity of marriage as an economic safety net.

Theme 2: Cultural and Religious Norms Promoting Marriage as Morally Protective

The data revealed that cultural traditions and religious beliefs strongly influence parental decisions about early marriage, often framing it as a protective measure. A parent participant expressed this viewpoint:

Early marriage in Zimbabwe is perpetuated by cultural and traditional values that view it as a way to protect girls from premarital sex and promiscuity, ensure their virginity and moral purity, and secure their financial future.

Parents reported that marriage is sometimes viewed as a way to safeguard a girl's moral standing, preserve family honour, and comply with religious expectations. One participant explicitly linked marriage to obedience and filial duty:

Early marriage is a sign of respect and obedience to one's parents, and children are expected to follow their parents' wishes and marry when they are told to do so.

Intervention proposals under this theme emphasised community engagement and social norms change, including working with religious and traditional leaders to promote messages that support girls' education, delay marriage, and encourage gender equality, while situating such messages within culturally resonant frameworks.

Theme 3: Gender Roles and Family Expectations Prioritising Domestic and Reproductive Duties for Girls

Participants also highlighted the influence of entrenched gender norms that define women's primary roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. One girl explained:

Societal pressure on girls to conform to traditional gender roles, such as taking on domestic duties and caring for their families, contributes to early marriage. ... This mindset can limit girls' agency and aspirations, making early marriage seem like the only option.

These expectations are often reinforced by extended family members and the wider community, where remaining unmarried beyond a certain age can attract stigmatisation. Another participant observed:

Societal expectations around gender roles can contribute to early marriage, as girls are expected to prioritise domestic duties over personal aspirations ... and avoid the stigma of being an unmarried woman.

To address these gendered expectations, participants recommended engaging young people and families in community-based programmes to promote healthy relationships, challenge restrictive gender norms, and develop life skills that empower girls to pursue alternative futures.

Theme 4: School-Related Push Factors such as Inadequate Resources, Poor Infrastructure, and Negative Teacher Attitudes

Although cultural and economic factors were the most frequently mentioned, some participants linked school-related barriers to early marriage. These barriers included inadequate learning resources, poor infrastructure, and unsupportive teacher attitudes, which can discourage girls from remaining in school. While not as extensively discussed as other themes, this factor interacts with poverty and gender norms, as low-quality schooling reduces the perceived value of continued education and strengthens the appeal of marriage as an alternative pathway.

Strengthening school environments, ensuring availability of learning materials, training teachers in gender-sensitive pedagogy, and making secondary education financially accessible were seen as important preventive strategies. Participants also highlighted that improving the school experience could help shift parental perceptions, making education a more attractive investment than early marriage.

Discussion of Findings

Cultural and Traditional Values

The persistence of early marriage in Zimbabwe is deeply embedded in cultural and traditional values that prioritise the preservation of a girl's virginity, moral purity, and the protection of family honour. These values are often framed as safeguarding girls from perceived moral risks such as premarital sex, promiscuity, or pregnancy outside of marriage. Such views align with findings from Khurana, Kwong, and Gupta (2017) and Mwakasango, Wamuyu, and Mwangi (2019), which indicate that marriage is sometimes considered a preventive measure against moral "corruption" and a means of securing a stable future for girls. However, this cultural framing frequently ignores the broader consequences for the girls themselves, such as diminished agency, restricted life choices, and long-term physical and psychological harm. By embedding marriage in moral obligation and family reputation, these traditions exert strong normative pressure, making deviation socially costly and often unthinkable.

Poverty and Lack of Education

Economic hardship remains one of the strongest predictors of early marriage in Zimbabwe. Families facing poverty often view marriage as a strategic means to ensure

their daughters' financial security while reducing the economic burden on the household. The lack of access to quality education intensifies this dynamic, as schooling offers both the skills and social capital necessary to delay marriage and pursue alternative livelihoods. In line with Khurana, Kwong, and Gupta (2017), families without viable educational or economic prospects for their daughters may regard marriage as the only viable path forward. The interplay between poverty, limited education, and entrenched gender expectations effectively narrows girls' life trajectories, reinforcing the cycle of deprivation across generations. Addressing this requires targeted interventions that expand access to affordable education, vocational training, and income-generating opportunities for girls.

Gender Norms and Societal Expectations

Rigid gender norms remain a central driver of early marriage, with girls expected to prioritise domestic roles over personal aspirations. Such norms not only limit opportunities for education and employment but also cultivate an environment where marriage is positioned as the ultimate achievement for young women. This aligns with Mwakasango, Wamuyu, and Mwangi (2019), who note that gender stereotypes perpetuate systemic inequality by prescribing narrow and subservient roles for women. Additionally, societal stigma around unmarried women intensifies pressure to marry early, often under the pretext of protecting dignity or avoiding shame. These gendered expectations curtail autonomy and prevent girls from envisioning futures beyond the home, making marriage appear as both the socially endorsed and safest choice.

Parental Authority and Obedience

The influence of parental authority plays a significant role in early marriage decisions. In many Zimbabwean communities, compliance with parental wishes is framed as a sign of respect and moral integrity. When marriage timing is dictated by parents, young people—especially girls—often have limited say in their own life choices. While this practice can be seen as maintaining cultural continuity and family cohesion, it undermines personal agency and may lead to forced or arranged marriages that disregard individual readiness or consent. The prioritisation of obedience over self-determination reinforces patriarchal control and constrains the development of independent decision-making skills, with long-term implications for mental well-being and life satisfaction.

Interlinking Impacts

The factors outlined above—cultural values, poverty, gender norms, and parental authority—are deeply interconnected. Poverty increases the appeal of marriage as a financial strategy, while cultural norms legitimise this decision and gender expectations frame it as inevitable. Parental authority then acts as an enforcement mechanism, ensuring compliance with these overlapping pressures. Together, these forces create a self-reinforcing system where early marriage is both normalised and sustained, despite its documented negative consequences for health, education, and gender equality.

Conclusion

Early marriage in Zimbabwe is not the result of a single driver but rather a convergence of cultural, economic, and social forces that restrict girls' agency and perpetuate inequality. Addressing this issue will require a multifaceted approach that challenges harmful cultural norms, promotes gender equality, expands access to education, and creates economic pathways that allow girls to envision and pursue futures outside early marriage. Without such holistic interventions, the cycle of poverty and disempowerment will likely persist.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion provided, the following recommendations were drawn:

- (1) Engage with community members and leaders to develop policies and interventions that address the root causes of early marriage.
- (2) Implement a multifaceted approach that includes promoting girls' education and empowerment, addressing gender inequality, improving maternal and child health, and supporting sustainable development.
- (3) Use qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and social norms that drive early marriage, and use this knowledge to inform the development of community-led initiatives aimed at reducing the practice.
- (4) Contribute to the evidence base on early marriage by conducting research and sharing findings with other countries and organisations working to address the issue.
- (5) Collaborate with community members, leaders, and organisations to develop and implement effective policies and interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence of early marriage and improving the lives of young girls and women.

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