



An Assessment on the Factors Influencing Early Marriages in MG'OMBA Community

Jenifer Kalamula Mponda ^{1*} Dr. T. Velumruga ^{2*}

1. P.G. Student, Department of Social Work, DMI – St. Eugene University, Lusaka Zambia.

2. Associate. Professor, Department of Social Work. DMI – St. Eugene University, Lusaka Zambia.

Date of Submission: 24-08-2023

Date of Acceptance: 06-09-2023

ABSTRACT:

The central focus of this paper centres on the examination of determinants contributing to early marriages within the Mg'omba community. The issue of child marriage constitutes a breach of human rights, and despite legislative measures aimed at curtailing it, the practice persists predominantly due to enduring poverty and gender disparities. Child marriage imperils the well-being and health of young girls, while also curtailing their future prospects. A staggering 40 percent of girls in sub-Saharan Africa are wedded prior to reaching 18 years of age, with African nations representing 15 out of the top 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage. This practice unequivocally infringes upon human rights, depriving every child of protection against its pernicious implications that affect both individuals and society.

Despite an observed increase in the average age of initial marriage for women in Malawi rising from 17.8 years in 1992 to 18.2 in 2015 among women aged 25 to 49, the phenomenon of child marriage, encompassing unions before the age of 18, remains a significant concern. To enhance comprehension of this topic, the Ecological Systems Theory will be applied as a framework.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative elements. This entails the utilization of focus group discussions and questionnaires as research instruments, facilitating the acquisition of qualitative and quantitative data, respectively, from a purposively sampled cluster of 110 individuals. Qualitative data derived from these focus group discussions will undergo Thematic Analysis, while quantitative data will be subjected to analysis through SPSS software.

KEYWORDS: early marriages, factors influencing, assessment, child marriage, Malawi, prevalence.

I. INTRODUCTION

Child marriage, deemed a violation of human rights despite legal prohibitions, persists due to entrenched poverty and gender inequality (UNFPA, 2013). This practice endangers girls' lives, health, and future prospects. Early marriages frequently lead to adolescent pregnancies, elevating the risk of childbirth complications, a prominent cause of death among young women in developing nations. Despite these harmful effects and discrimination against girls, progress in ending child marriage remains slow. The issue exacerbates with growing youth populations in developing countries (Choe et al., 2004).

The term "child marriage," universally known, describes a marriage where one or both spouses are under 18 years old. Equivalently, "child bride" and "early marriage" are interchangeably used. "Early marriage," however, lacks clarity in denoting child involvement, while "child bride" may inadvertently glorify the union. UNICEF's preference for "child marriage" emphasizes that it pertains to children under 18 and underscores its violation of rights, portraying gender inequality (UNICEF Ghana, 2015).

UNICEF defines early marriage as formal or informal marriage where one or both parties are under 18. In Indonesia, it refers to those under 19 according to Law Number 16 of 2019. Generally, it encompasses ages 10 to 12 up to 18 to 21. Early child marriage transpires before 18, when young individuals aren't physically prepared for marital and parental responsibilities (Shehu, 2010). Despite bans, it prevails in developing countries.

Approximately 650 million females globally married before 18, with over 50 million in Eastern and Southern Africa. Child marriage, a



global economic and health concern, persists, particularly in developing nations like Malawi. It especially affects girls, hindering education, health, and subjecting them to vulnerability. Child marriage strips childhood, education, health, and freedom, exposing girls to lifelong abuse (Nyanthi, 2010).

Child marriage, often labelled "early and forced," heavily impacts girls who rarely choose partners or understand commitments due to their youth (Nyanthi, 2010). Boys also suffer, but girls are disproportionately affected. The practice obstructs girls' autonomy, perpetuating cycles of abuse. Despite legal measures and attempts at prevention, this practice remains a pressing concern, necessitating continued global attention and intervention.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The issue of early marriages was a significant problem, especially in developing countries like Malawi. In Malawi, a substantial number of young people were getting married before reaching adulthood, and it was found that 42.1% of women aged 20–24 were married before they turned 18 (World Vision, 2014). However, there was a considerable gap in our understanding of early marriages in Malawi. Not many studies had closely examined the reasons behind early marriages there. Despite efforts from the government and various organizations to prevent them, early marriages continued to occur, particularly in rural areas. Additionally, most of the existing research on early marriages came from other countries like Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique, rather than directly from Malawi.

Most of the existing research focused on immediate consequences – such as young people engaging in early sexual activity, teenage pregnancies, and dropping out of school. Yet, a crucial aspect was missing we did not fully comprehend why young people chose to get married early. It was like putting together a puzzle where each piece represented a different reason, and these reasons were connected in various ways depending on the situation and location.

In the realm of research, the emphasis was often on numbers, facts such as how many people were involved, and the differences between boys and girls. However, behind these numbers were real stories – the personal experiences of the girls themselves. These stories held immense importance,

and there were not enough of them. This study served as a journey into the world of these girls who had entered early marriages. It was akin to using specialized tools to gain a deeper understanding of their emotions and experiences. Different theories, which were different ways of looking at things, were employed to comprehend why these girls felt the way they did and how they displayed their strength even in challenging circumstances.

In essence, this study aimed to illuminate the stories of early marriage, moving beyond mere numbers. By listening to the experiences of these girls and applying unique ways of thinking, the study sought to learn more about their challenges and triumphs. This newfound understanding could then contribute to creating more effective plans and regulations to alter the course of the early marriage narrative.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter synthesized existing data regarding child marriages on a global, regional, and national scale. It encompassed studies on child marriages conducted worldwide, explored the consequences of such marriages, and delved into strategies aimed at their cessation. Alongside the literature review, this chapter also encompassed the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpinned the study.

Child Marriage definition

The United Nations as the marriage of anyone under eighteen years of age defines Child marriage. While it has long been recognized as a violation of human rights, the specific age limit wasn't outlined until the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1990 (United Nations 1989; African Union 1990).

Concerns about child marriage's potential health implications have emerged relatively recently. In the early 2000s, researchers began investigating the link between age at marriage and the risk of HIV infection (Glynn et al. 2001; Clark 2004). Following that, subsequent studies have explored the connection between child marriage and various health outcomes for both women and children. While international institutions and national governments have increasingly focused on child marriage, estimates of changes in its prevalence have not been updated for a decade.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that disproportionately affects girls in low- and middle



income countries. These rights are alluded to in numerous human rights instruments, including the United Nations Convention on the Consent to Marriage.

Causes of Child Marriages

There are several researches that were conducted in the area of child marriages and a number of underlying causes have been cited (ICRW, 2013; World Bank, 2009; ZIMSTAT, 2015; Sibley, 2012). Some of the underlying factors reported are gender inequality, obstacles to human rights, poverty, sexual violence and coercion, national policies restricting access to contraception, lack of age-appropriate sexuality education, and lack of access to education and reproductive health services and under investment in adolescent girls' human capital (UNFPA, 2013).

Laws and Legal Loopholes about Child Marriage in the Malawian

It has been widely argued that Malawi's existing laws bear inconsistencies and gaps in effectively ending child marriages. In Malawi, not all marriages are officiated by a religious institution or by magistrate court registration, according to Human Rights Watch (2014, p.35) most marriages in Malawi are entered into by customary law or by repute and permanent cohabitation. However, on various grounds, the spouse's family or community members may not recognize some marriages, even when the couple themselves define their relationship as a marriage. This reflects the flexibility inherent in the understanding of who is married, and what marriage is.

The minimum age for marriage in Malawi, as set by the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act No.5 of 2015, is 18 years old (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act also defines anyone below the age of 18 years as a child. However, it does not define forced marriage or child marriage, nor does it create a specific offense of the practice of child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Adverse Effects of Child marriage

Child marriage is not a new phenomenon and the negative repercussions of this widespread social issue are evident upon the physical and mental health of young girls who are victims of this situation. Various research studies indicate it is evident that child marriage has negative

consequences upon the "economic, social, demographic, and health" of child brides and their families. The connection between adverse effects of child marriage and the health of young girls is perhaps most clearly apparent.

According to the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), child brides under 15 years of age are at risk of being "five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s and face higher risk of pregnancy-related injuries such as obstetric fistula. "Complications in childbirth can have adverse effects upon these young girls' mental health and development, which they still undergo since most are not close to adult stages of their lives. Child brides who are expectant mothers before 18 years of age face sixty percent more risk of losing their babies in the first year compared to girls who give birth after that age. Furthermore, girls who are trapped in child marriage face problems connected to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a general set of assumptions about the nature of phenomena. (Kombo and Tromp, 2006) this research used,

Ecological Systems Theory: Bronfenbrenner developed it in 1979. Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognized that human development occurs in a multifaceted network of interactions between the individual person and the broader society. As such, he developed a model outlining four layers of ecological structures from direct contacts, beginning with social agents to broad-based institutional systems.

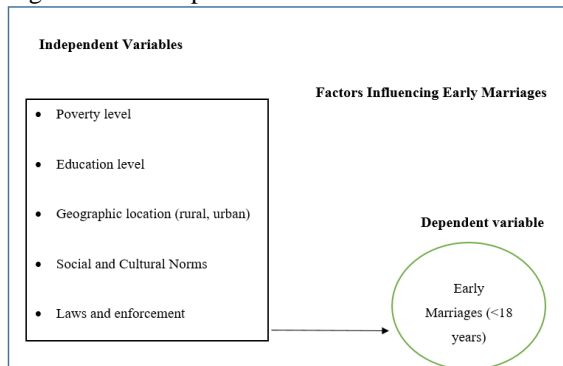
The innermost circle (also known as the microsystem) represents the social environment that an individual child lives in, which is bounded by close family, school, peers and the neighbourhood. The next layer is the mesosystem that forms the interactions between the microsystems, peers, school experiences and the family.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 2.1 below shows the conceptual model of this study.



Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher, 2023

Significance of the Study

The research will greatly benefit policymakers by enhancing their understanding of the influencing factors behind early marriages in Malawi. This understanding will empower relevant authorities to formulate effective policies aimed at addressing this issue. Furthermore, the study will initiate actions by civil society, NGOs, and other stakeholders

Additionally, students stand to gain from this study. The final draft of this document will be accessible in the university library, serving as a valuable resource for future reference. Students with an interest in exploring or conducting research within the same thematic focus, as this study will find it particularly useful.

III. Scope of the Study

As part of the Master of Social Work program at St Eugene University in the area of project implementation monitoring and evaluation, this study is primarily for academic purposes. The scope of this study is to assess the factors influencing early marriages in Mg'omba community in Nkhotakota district in Malawi. The core of this research is to assess how factors such as economic status, culture, education and reproductive health practices influence early marriages in the study area.

IV. Objectives of the study

1. To identify the prevalence of early marriages in Mg'omba community
2. To investigate the causes of early marriages in Mg'omba community
3. To explore solutions that can help combat early marriages in Mgomba community

V. Research questions

1. What is the prevalence of early marriages in Mg'omba community
2. What are the causes of early marriages in Mg'omba community
3. What strategies can be adopted to combat early marriages in Mgomba community

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory research design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research was carried out within the Mgomba community in Nkhotakota, encompassing a population of 1721 individuals. The sample size for the study was determined to be 110 participants, calculated using Cochran's Formula with a 5% margin of error. Respondents for the questionnaire were selected using a simple random sampling approach, ensuring equal chances of selection for each unit in the study population. Focus group discussions utilized purposive sampling.

A triangulation strategy involving both quantitative and qualitative methodologies was adopted. In the quantitative phase, 70 questionnaires were administered, while the qualitative component involved the conduct of four focus group discussions. Questionnaires were chosen for their capacity to delve deeply into research, capturing comprehensive information and experiences in a condensed timeframe. The study distributed 70 questionnaires to participants, and four focus group discussions were organized, each comprising ten members – two groups for males and two for females.

To ascertain the reliability of research instruments, a pilot study was executed. This preliminary study allowed the researcher to assess the viability of the main study and make necessary adjustments. Insights garnered from the pilot study guided refinements, such as clarifying ambiguous questions, integrating missing variables, and eliminating irrelevant queries.

Following data collection, quantitative data from the questionnaires underwent analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative data gathered from the focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis, revealing underlying patterns and themes within the responses.



IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Research Objective 1: To ascertain the prevalence of early marriages in the Mg'omba community.

During the observation period, the prevalence of early marriages in the Mgomba community stood at 40%. This statistic was derived from a comprehensive review of both primary and secondary data sources. Approximately 40% of girls were found to be married before reaching the age of 18, with 9% being married before turning 15.

Research Objective 2: To investigate the underlying causes of early marriages in the Mg'omba community.

Economic factors play a significant role in driving early marriages in both Mg'omba community and Malawi as a whole. 55% of participants cited financial difficulties as a primary reason for early marriages. This aligns with the broader Malawian context, where poverty often leads families to marry off their daughters at a young age due to economic pressures.

Traditional and cultural norms have a strong influence on early marriages in Malawi. 48% of participants indicated that cultural practices contribute to the continuation of early marriages. Malawi's diverse ethnic groups each have their own customs and traditions, and in some cases, these traditions condone early marriages, particularly for girls.

Limited access to education and awareness is a widespread cause of early marriages in Malawi. 62% of respondents mentioned that lack of education and awareness contributes to the perpetuation of the practice. In the national context, girls with lower levels of education are more likely to be married early, emphasizing the link between education and delayed marriage.

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue driving early marriages in Malawi. 67% of participants acknowledged that deeply rooted gender norms contribute to the prevalence of early marriages. This is consistent with the national context, where addressing gender-based discrimination and promoting gender equality are recognized as crucial steps in eradicating child marriage.

Research Objective 3: To explore potential solutions for addressing early marriages in the Mgomba community.

The suggestions presented by respondents included the following:

Improving educational opportunities is crucial for reducing early marriages in Malawi. 61% of respondents highlighted the importance of providing quality education, particularly for girls. Nationally, initiatives have been launched to promote girls' education, including scholarships, school construction, and policies aimed at keeping girls in school.

Awareness Campaigns: Organize public awareness campaigns to enlighten communities about the adverse implications of early marriages on girls' health, education, and overall well-being. Collaboration with community and religious leaders is crucial for advocating and supporting the prevention of early marriages.

Community-based interventions are effective strategies to combat early marriages in Malawi. 70% of participants expressed that raising awareness within the community about the negative effects of early marriages can lead to attitudinal shifts. This aligns with national efforts, where NGOs and local organizations conduct workshops and awareness campaigns to educate communities about the consequences of child marriage.

Legal reforms and enforcement are essential components of combating early marriages in Malawi. 52% of participants emphasized the need for stricter enforcement of legal age limits for marriage. Malawi has made legislative changes to increase the legal marriage age and discourage early marriages, but effective enforcement remains a challenge.

Holistic approaches are necessary to combat early marriages in Malawi. The findings reveal that early marriages arise from a complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, educational, and legal factors. Therefore, comprehensive strategies that consider the multifaceted nature of the issue are more likely to yield successful outcomes.



VI. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen Women's Organizations:** Provide support to enhance the capacity of women's organizations, enabling them to effectively advocate against child marriage. Collaborate with religious, health, and educational entities to spread awareness about the negative consequences associated with child marriage.
- **Community Awareness Programs:** Develop community-based initiatives targeting parents, teachers, religious leaders, and local community members. These programs should aim to educate them about the detrimental impact of child marriage on a young girl's health, personal development, and future prospects.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Focus on economically empowering young girls by offering opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. Addressing poverty, a key driver of early marriage, involves expanding economic prospects for both married and unmarried young girls. Micro-credit programs can provide essential economic opportunities and a support network that encourages attitudinal and behavioural changes.
- **Government Youth Development:** Government initiatives should intervene to equip youth with employable skills, enabling them to disengage from factors that contribute to early marriage, such as
 - commercial sex and inadequate parental care.
- **Legal Framework Enhancement:** Address child marriage through legal means, including amending the Constitution to eliminate ambiguities. Creating protective legal structures must be substantiated by the effective implementation of national development plans focused on realizing the rights of children, particularly girls.
- **Health and Awareness Programs:** Government bodies, such as the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, and Children Affairs, should conduct programs addressing early marriage and its connections

to HIV/AIDS infections. Targeting both rural and urban areas, these programs should tackle the underlying factors contributing to early marriage.

- **Youth Involvement:** Facilitate the involvement of teenagers in decision-making processes. Ensuring access to education, especially for girls, granting land ownership rights, providing control over family resources, and involving them in decision-making processes are pivotal steps. This presents a challenge for the government and all stakeholders.
- **Education Promotion:** Advocate for increased access to affordable, secure, and quality education. If education systems in these countries meet these fundamental criteria, more parents would feel comfortable sending their daughters to school.
- **Community Counselling Programs:** The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, in consultation with relevant bodies, should initiate community-counselling programs as a long-term solution.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research underscores the prevalence, causes, and solutions regarding early marriages in the Mg'omba community in Malawi. With a prevalence rate of 40% in Mg'omba, echoing the national trend, early marriages demand immediate attention. Economic factors play a key role, driven by financial constraints within families. Cultural norms perpetuate the practice, while limited education and gender inequality contribute significantly. To combat this issue, recommendations include enhancing education, awareness campaigns, empowering women's organizations, and promoting economic empowerment. Legal reforms and youth involvement are also crucial. By addressing these facets, collaborative efforts can be directed toward eradicating early marriages, empowering girls, and creating a brighter future for Mg'omba and beyond.



REFERENCES

- [1]. UNFPA. (2012). *Marrying too young: End child marriage*. New York: UNFPA.
- [2]. UNICEF. (2010). *Early marriage advocacy program: Fact sheet on early marriage and early union*.
- [3]. Shehu, M. (2010). Poverty of economically deprived women and children in emerging countries. *International Journal of Social Issues*, 29(1), 73-86.
- [4]. Nyanthi, P. (2010). *Cultural heritage with Pathisa Nyathi: A closer look at who the Kalangas are*. Bulawayo
- [5]. World Vision Bangladesh. (2014). *Report on campaign called 'Bride not before 18' to end child marriage*.
- [6]. United Nations Children's Fund. (2001). *Early marriage and child spouses*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF
- [7]. United Nations Children's Fund. (2005). *Early marriage: A harmful traditional practice*.
- [8]. Glynn, J. M., Lustig, R. J., Berlin, A., & Chang, F. (2001). Role of bud6p and tea1p in the interaction between actin and microtubules for the establishment of cell polarity in fission yeast. *Current Biology*, 11(11), 836-845.
- [9]. Clark, S., Bruce, J., & Dude, A. (2006). Protecting young women from HIV/AIDS: The case against child and adolescent marriage. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 32(2), 79-88.
- [10]. World Bank in Africa. (2009). *Poverty has a female face*. Washington.
- [11]. Sibley, I. (2012). *The burden of daughters: Understanding the impact of responses to child marriage and gender discrimination in Nepal*.
- [12]. Kombo, D. K., & Tromp, L. A. D. (2006). *Proposal and thesis writing: An introduction*. Paulines Publications Africa.
- [13]. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.