



# THE FACE OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN MASHONALAND WEST

Girls Voices on Child Marriages in Zimbabwe  
Girls Indaba, Zvimba

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Informed by 10 Focus Group Discussions with 333 Girls from 4 schools in Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe, this document explores the causes and effects of child marriages. It seeks to learn from the girls' experiences in their communities and provide possible mitigating wisdom according to their context. This study is based on the voices of girls themselves without the influence of others, as the facilitators of the program ensured that any authority figures such as

teachers were removed during the focus group discussions. This ensured that the girls led their own conversations, documented their responses and presented them before the group. The presentations were made to the girls present as well as staff from Tag a Life International (TaLI), Higherlife Foundation and relevant ministry representatives such as Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Ministry of Women Affairs and the District Administrator's Office Mashonaland West.



1.

# INTRODUCTION

Early marriages are a common phenomenon in Zimbabwe and their prevalence has been accorded to a number of factors ranging from poverty, religion, abuse and peer pressure. Statistics from the 2014 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey show that 24 per cent of girls aged between 15 to 19 years are married or in a union (UNICEF, 2015).

Mashonaland West province from where this study has been derived is not unique to this narrative as child marriages have also been rampant in its various districts. Following several studies and reports, there was a realization that early marriages, unwanted teenage pregnancies and failure of the girl-child to appreciate the importance of education were amongst the major challenges faced by adolescent girls and young women in Zimbabwe and that applies to Zvimba district. (Changachirere G, The Young Women

in Marginalised Communities of Africa: The Forgotten lot, osisa.org), (Kanjanda O, Chiparange GV, The Effects of Early Girl-Child Marriage in Mutasa District, Manicaland Province: A Cases Of Samanga ‘A’ Ward in Honde Valley).

Having conducted a national Girls Indaba in 2016 which brought 103 participants from 30 organizations working in the space of education, Higherlife Foundation, TaLI and Women’s Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ) produced a report which outlined the key advocacy issues surrounding girl’s empowerment. Among the issues discussed the list of the following were identified as advocacy areas-:

Item	Key Points
Infrastructure and WASH Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is need to advocate for decent sanitary facilities in schools</li> </ul>
Feeding Schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To advocate for feeding schemes and food distribution to curb nutrition issues in the schools</li> </ul>
Textbook & E-learning Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is need to advocate for e-learning facilities and materials in schools.</li> </ul>
Sexual and Reproductive Health Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To advocate for sanitary ware distribution as part of the educational package to be offered in schools.</li> <li>• Sexual &amp; Reproductive Education for all girls in schools, communities and churches.</li> </ul>
Mentorship and Life Skills Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide mentorship platforms for girls at all ages and provide life skills training to students</li> </ul>
Early Child Marriages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is need to campaign against child marriages and raise awareness on the consequences of child marriages and the law.</li> </ul>
Gender Based Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is need to campaign against Gender Based Violence in public and private spheres.</li> </ul>

*Adapted from Higherlife Foundation Girl Child Indaba Report 2016*

As part of the Higherlife Foundation advocacy campaigns, it was decided that the Girl Child Indabas be decentralized to each particular province in order to tackle the relevant issues with the students them-selves.

### **Mashonaland West Province Indaba**

Initiated and funded by the Higherlife Foundation, the HLF provincial team partnered with Tag a Life International (TaLI), a Zimbabwean girls and young women's rights organization to facilitate the Girls Indaba with a specific focus on early child marriages. As a Girls and young women's rights organization, TaLI realized this opportunity provided by Higher Life and decided to learn from girls what their experiences and issues were regarding child marriages in Zvimba District, and initiated the documentation of this report which was led by the TaLI Director Ms Nyaradzo Mashayamombe.

The Girls Indaba brought together a total of 333 girls between the ages of 14 to 18 from four secondary schools in Zvimba district which are Matoranhembe, Murombedzi, Nyamangara and Kawondera.

In a bid to unpack the problem of early marriages at different levels and empower the girls to speak for themselves, 10 focus groups (consisting of girls from each school mixed together) were created and issued with pointer discussion questions which explored the causes, effects and probable solutions of the subject matter. The exercise also sought to have girls get information about child marriages and to learn from each other. These ten questions are going to be unpacked below in line with the responses from our participants in each focus group in below:



## 2.

## DRIVING FACTORS OF CHILD MARRIAGES

### Religion

Some Apostolic sects and churches were identified as a major contributor to child marriages. Both apostolic sects, some modern Christian churches doctrine and African Traditional Religion which are practiced in Zvimba district were recognized as hubs for the perpetuation of early marriages. In some of the apostolic sects, a traditional sitting arrangement adhered to during worship, insisted that teenage girls sit directly opposite to elderly men who have the privilege to marry as many wives as they want in the church regardless of their age. This was acknowledged as a vice that was exposing girls and young women, making them prone to abuse by their male counterparts both young and old. Because it is an accepted practice in the sects, girls often have no-one to protect them since their parents support these practices and doctrines. Going against such doctrines for a family may also mean the family can be an outcast to the sect.

### Culture

Although gender marginalization has been widely accepted, negative culture effects have further oppressed the girl child and made her vulnerable to early marriages. Culture stereotyping and practices such as “*kugara nhaka*” (wife inheritance), “*kuroodzwa*” (being married off) and *kuripiswa ngozi* (appeasing avenging spirits) were identified as common practices that led to young girls being forced into marriage to older men. While such practices have been dismissed as general beliefs, the driving force behind child marriages in modern day Zimbabwe is more ominous and pervasive. It is therefore not only an issue of culture but a deep rooted issue of patriarchy and power, such that such atrocities against the girl child have been normalized.

### Poverty

Poverty has always been a major driving factor in the continued practise of early marriages due to the commercialization of young girls caused by economic depressions within families. In one of the stories shared by a participant at the Girls Indaba, there was a case of a 15 year old girl who eloped to a housekeeper in rural Zvimba and became pregnant. Apparently the young girl was lured into believing that her ‘*boyfriend*’ was living at a family home when in fact he was an employee there. Upon realizing that their daughter had eloped, her parents did nothing to bring her home and seemed relieved that an economic burden had been lifted. Whilst marriage at any age in Zimbabwe has been upheld as a ‘*family breakthrough*’, the marriage of a child only worsens poverty and widens its circle since the burden and psychological strains associated with marriage plunge further responsibilities on the already poor families.

### Technology

The girls also cited the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a contributor to child marriages. The widespread use of uncensored internet and social media such as Whatsapp platforms in the district made the girls prone to ideas and information that is not be-fitting for their age. Some of the concerns raised were associated with widespread distribution of pornographic material in their communities which resulted in experimental practices and in girls getting pregnant and marrying prematurely. While ICTs are the wave of a new age, information on management, use and the vast opportunities associated with technology has not been properly disseminated in rural Zimbabwe. Some of the girls shared that there is also pressure to acquire a mobile phone, tablets or be associated with a boy or a man who owns one, causing girls to be vulnerable to sale their bodies to use the gadgets or to own them.

## DRIVING FACTORS OF CHILD MARRIAGES

### Peer Pressure

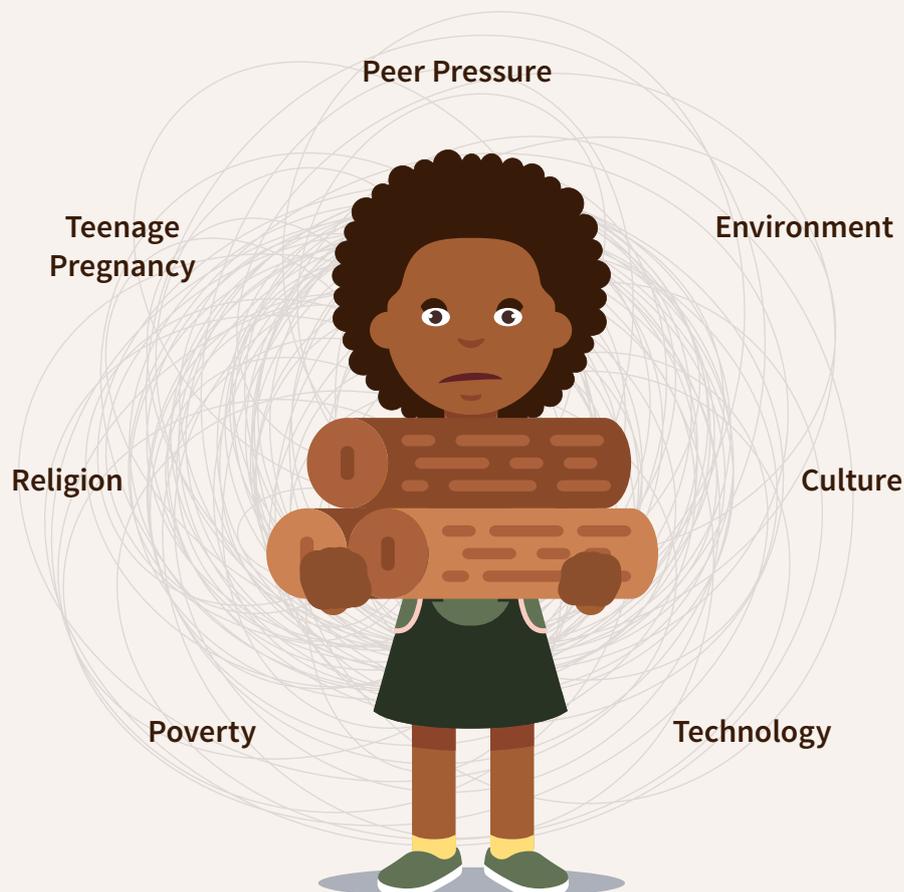
The pressures exerted on girls and young women by society and their peers lead to early marriages according to the participants at the Girls Indaba. Some of the girls influence others based on how they act and who they hang out with. A fast food outlet at a growth point nearer to one of the schools was identified as a hub for the perpetration of abuse of girls by older men. The girls were being lured into premature sex and relationships through unscrupulous means. Some of the concerning were such that girls as young as 14 would be abused because of a piece of chicken and French fries that these men buy the girls to lure them. Due to poverty, poor backgrounds and lack of exposure, some of the girls would be pressured into doing the same.

### Teenage Pregnancy

Due to the 'respect' placed upon marriage in the Zimbabwean culture, it is difficult for girls to make sound choices when one becomes pregnant. When a young girl becomes pregnant in spite of her age, she is expected to stay with the person responsible for the pregnancy as a wife. This does not only affect the right to choice but is also a celebrated culture of abuse that leads to child marriages. Such practices have contributed to gender based violence as girls narrated seeing some of their friends being abused by older men who are their husbands. Research also links early child marriages, sexual gender based violence with HIV and AIDS, as well as virtuous cycles of poverty together with emotional abuse.

### Environment

The issue of exposure was raised as a driving factor to early marriages. In rural Zvimba, most of the girls have not travelled to any major city in the country even though some of the cities are a few hours from the district. Owing to the prevalence of child marriages and overvalued cultures in their communities, most of the girls marry young because they know nothing else beyond what they are exposed to.



3.

## IDENTIFYING MAJOR PERPETRATORS IN EARLY MARRIAGES

### Parents/ Guardians

One shocking reality was the identification of parents by the girls as major executors in early marriages. There was a realization that some parents were pushing their children to marry young for the purposes of economic benefit. Participants stated that other mothers were sex workers and would bring their clients home and indulge in sex in the presence of their children. There was a case of a 14 year old girl who started engaging in sex and fell pregnant by her mother’s boyfriend. The mother was held responsible for this outcome since she allegedly introduced her young child to this man. Other parents purportedly arranged their daughters’ marriages either to strengthen relationships or to ‘become wealthy’. This was done through marrying off their child to a wealthy men or the son of a wealthy man.

### Religious Leaders

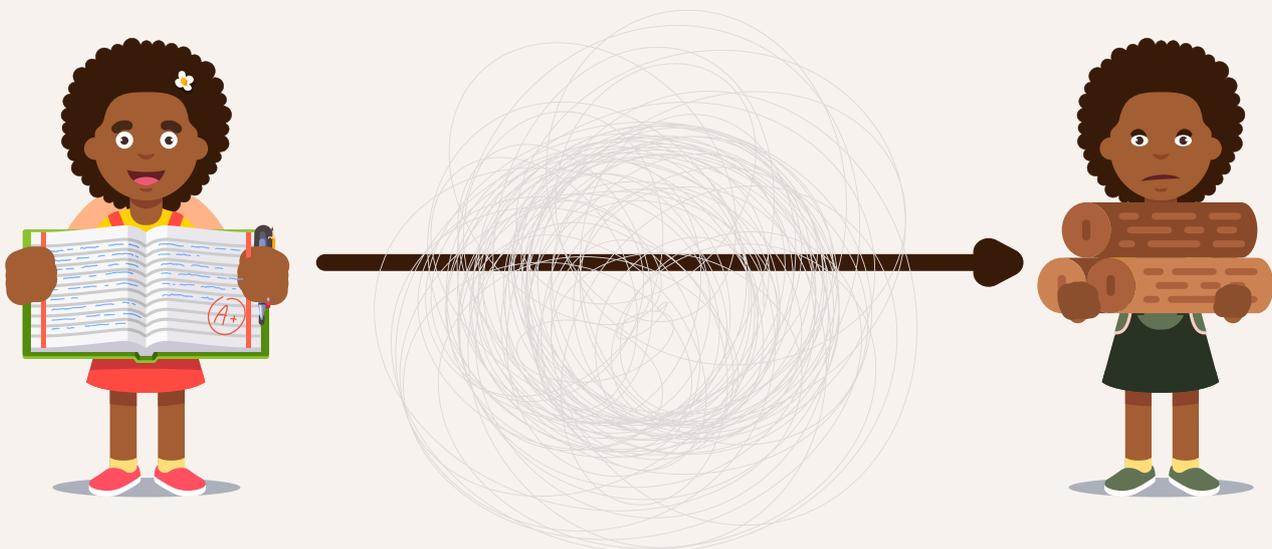
The issue of prophets in apostolic sects was raised again in this session. Prophets supposedly make up dreams during church services were they identify young girls under the ‘*ministry of the Holy Spirit*’ to become their wives. The girls however challenged the legitimacy of such prophecies by challenging why the old men always dream about smaller girls and not mature women.

### Peers

As alluded to before, the influence of friends could result in early marriages. For instance, the need to find a ‘*blessor*’ because of pressure, experimentation and economic benefits resulted in child marriages.

### Men

The girls identified patriarchy and the gender imbalances in society as big contributors in early marriages. Men are the major perpetrators because they participate directly in marrying children. Whilst the new constitution in Zimbabwe prohibits gender inequality and is explicitly on the age of marriage to be 18years, the implementation of the law is complicated as the courts in Zimbabwe still recognise the age of consent and marriage for girls as 16 whilst for boys its 18. This disharmony between the courts practice and the Constitutional Court ruling of the 20th of January 2016 that out lawed child marriages still puts thousands of girls in vulnerable positions. This discrimination makes girls prone to abuse and exposes them to early marriages. It also gives men a leeway to abuse and control women without being charged or criminalised. Rape victims often become wives of their abusers due to the stringent nature of such laws. The issue of lobola(bride price paid by the man) as well in the Zimbabwean culture also allows men to objectify women therefore, when a man pays a certain amount of money to a girl’s family, they immediately become a husband to that girl.



## CITED REASONS FOR MARRYING YOUNG

### Child Headed Families

The rise of child headed families due to various factors such as orphanage due to HIV, migration of parents and family disintegration has resulted in early marriages. Without monitoring, children are likely to engage in activities that make them prone to early marriages. In cases where the children live alone, they might end up involving themselves in relationships which result in child marriages for the purposes of financial assistance. Others get abused by their guardians and those of their neighbours. Girls are therefore forced to marry when faced with such predicaments.

### Lack of mentorship and Role Models

The importance of mentorship at any stage in the human cycle can never be overemphasised. Children and adults relate to each other and to the world based on the motivation they receive from their peers and role models. The lack of exposure and the minimal positive influence given to young girls in rural areas has resulted in early marriages. Having been raised in homes and communities where child marriages are a socially accepted vice, it is sometimes difficult to escape these bondages. The girls requested such initiatives to be running in their schools to keep learning from each other and to share their knowledge with their peers.

### Lack of Access to information

The inadequate circulation of information in the rural areas due to poor infrastructure and services that allow dissemination; most of the girls have no access to knowledge that can advance and empower them. This insufficiency leaves a few options on how one proceeds in adult life thereby encouraging marriage.

### The Overemphasis of Sex in Marriages

The general belief and emphasis placed upon *'marriage and sex'* is another reason that causes girls to marry early. When growing up, music, expectations from girls by parents and beliefs centred on marriage often portray sex as the core reason to get married. This constant hammering of such notions makes girls believe that as soon as they start indulging in sex, they can get married and be in a position to handle everything that comes with it. One of the participants said *'We think that marriage is about sex only'*, thereby confirming this myth and its contribution to early marriages. It can also be argued that the way girls are raised and the tendency by parents especially mothers, to relate household chores mastery to marriage puts pressure on girls to mature fast and to only think of marriages. It is common for mothers when teaching their girls household chores to hear statements such as *"ukatadza kubika sadza kana kutsvaira mumba uchanotinyadzisa kwauchanoorwa"* (If you fail to cook 'Sadza' or sweep the house you will embarrass us when you get married", and these statements are said to girls and young as 11 years old. When girls are growing up they are over surrounded by marriage notions.

5.

## WHAT ARE THE REALITIES OF GIRLS IN CHILD MARRIAGES (FROM OTHER GIRLS' PERSPECTIVES)?

In this discussion, the participants shared on what they had witnessed and heard in their communities concerning girls who had married young. It was astounding to hear some of the stories shared and the depth of understanding exhibited by the young girls in this focus group discussion. The spread of communicable diseases and infections such as HIV was identified as a battling space for girls in early marriages. The possibilities of getting such infections is high amongst adolescent girls and young women, primarily because they do not have full knowledge and understanding of their sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR) coupled with lack of power and access to negotiate protective health practices and services in their relationships such as contraceptives and family planning.

Being married young also means sexual indulgence before one matures thereby hindering one from making sound choices about their bodies and what they want as well as being unable to come out of abusive relationships which are prevalent in such settings.

Additionally, dropping out of school is another sad reality for girls who marry young. It is usually very difficult to pursue education once one becomes pregnant. The shame and responsibilities thrust upon the girl are just too burdensome and depressing. This kind of damage could kill even the dreams of young mothers as they begin to subject themselves to household duties only unless there is assistance and support. Limited access to health information and services has proven to be a major concern

when child marriages are perpetuated. Problems ranging from lack of access to family planning, contraceptives information and services, delivery problems and poor immunisation of children were amongst the most disturbing realities. When family planning services are scarce, the girls can have more children than they can manage within a short space of time. In a case mentioned by a participant, a girl who was married off at the age of 15 birthed 3 children by the time she reached 18 although one of them had died a few days after birth. Infant mortality and medical affordability are high hence, a sad truth in child marriages.

The right to choice is also infringed when girls marry prematurely. Since girls' lives are dictated from an early age, they usually do not have a choice to choose the partner they want. These dictates are passed on even after marriage where men are expected to make decisions pertaining their children's welfare, economic choices and even on intimacy issues. Lack of choice results in dormant lifestyles where dreams cannot be explored and the true idea of freedom is partial. This also leads to premature divorces and ultimately family disintegration.

Moreover, the perpetuation of domestic and gender based violence was veracity for girls who married young. Cases of domestic and gender based violence are on the rise in Zimbabwe especially amongst young women. The preceding factors to child marriages which have been reviewed in this paper can result in girls becoming the victims of abuse.



## HOW CAN MEN AND BOYS ASSIST IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGES?

In emphasizing the role of boys and men in ending child marriages, the presenter in this group said *'Men and Boys must respect women'*. This was a desperate cry from the group that, men and boys commodify and objectify women and girls. The girls generally agreed that men do not seem to understand the amount of pressure exerted on women from the time they are born until they mature into adults. The practice of child marriages is a negative reflection on societal tendencies where women's sexuality, choice of partners and marital decisions are controlled by others from an early age to an old age (M. Sibanda: Research and Advocacy Unit, 2011). The girls agreeable that men and boys should be included in conversations around child marriages in order to end them.

Engaging men in conversations around women's challenges is thus crucial in this fight. Participants agreed that gender norm transformation awareness and trainings were essential. Educating men and boys on the challenges faced by girls was an essential tool in ending early marriages. Societal norms and beliefs define men as brave, bold and strong whilst girls are depicted as weaker and subjected to more free care work, household chores which sometimes encroach into play time and affect their studies.

This affects the psychological upbringing of girls and their physical nature as the girls are often malnourished because of the belief that they should ensure that their brothers, fathers and uncles are comfortable, giving them more food for further body strengthening. If men are educated on gender roles and stereotypes they will eventually let go of some traditional privileges and assist in ending child marriages.

Additionally, conferences, clubs and programs that are meant to empower girls should also be inclusive of men and boys. The girls noted that programs that did not accommodate men and boys exposed the girls to further oppression. This was because, after girls became empowered, they would go back to homes and societies that had no understanding of issues that were critical in the fight to end child marriages resulting in them being labelled as rebels or nuisances. If empowerment programs became more inclusive, communities would be able to speak the same language and communicate effectively against the perpetuation of early marriages.

The other recommendation given was that, men and boys should become advocates in ending child marriages. If fathers refused to accept money paid to them as lobola and reported cases of child marriages to law enforcement, it would be easier to end them. Considering how patriarchy has shaped societies, some of the energy used by men in social activities, political battles and trying to prove their masculinity could be directed to this cause and change the fate of girls and young women in Zimbabwe ultimately improving communities as it is known investing in girls means investing in communities.

However, whilst these recommendations were brought up, there was a realization that beyond what meets the eye, attitudes and behaviors were the major barriers to men involvement. Moral aspects such as self-respect, honesty and faithfulness are hard to quantify and yet they are the main ingredients in ensuring change. It would take more work to engage, teach and change society.

## 7.

# CONCLUSION

Child marriages should be viewed aggressively when looking at issues around lack of choice, ruined opportunities, potential death of girls at child birth, the coercion, force and the abuse involved. It is not a light matter and should never be treated as such. Collective responsibility should be thoroughly exercised from the family, community, national regional and international level in order to protect children and uphold their rights. Although reasons for child marriages vary, effort should be placed on curbing them due to their implications on girls' rights and wellbeing. (Girls not Brides, Ending Child Marriages in Africa, a Brief by Girls not Brides, [www.girlsnotbrides.org](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org)).

Child marriage is a phenomena interlinked with other rights such as education, social protection, economic inclusion, governance and accountability, human rights as well as national building and should be top at the national investment agenda. Schools should be made accessible for girls to keep learning and protected. There should be good appropriation of resources and their governance as well as accountability to ensure the scarce resources are distributed in line with future investment thus the next generation.

The national fiscus should demonstrate a deliberate investment in children in ensuring good health, quality education, social services and protection and non-corrupt justice systems that protect and upholds the rights of children. Removal of corruption ensures a better socio-economic and political environment for girls

and all children to grow up in a respectful and functioning society that enables them to have self-respect, respect for humanity, respect for systems and breeding a responsible society whose next generation is empowered to take development forward.

However, behavioral change is a long term solution that should not be thwarted but pursued in order to decrease the practice of the child marriages and demystify beliefs that encourage child marriages. Mature men should uphold their lives as examples to boys and younger men in what it is to be a responsible and protective men, while women should seek to uphold goodness, protect their own right and speak out against patriarchy that keeps them passing it on from one generation to the next, in fulfilling the best interests of men.

Girls must be brought up surrounded by good role models, mentors of women who are themselves empowered and uplift each other to create a possible freedom for the womanhood. Ultimately girls, young women and young men should be brought up in free society, a '*Safe World*' where girls are free to dream, empowered to become whatever they want to be. A world where they can make social and economic choices free without negative influences from others but rather with community support. Girls, boys, young women, young men should be treated equally in every aspect of life, and allowed to be children and youths enjoying their equal rights.

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