



# The role of African Independent Churches in preventing child or early marriages in Mozambique

Hundzukani P. Khosa<sup>1</sup>  & Musavengana Machaya<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Human Sciences, University of Venda, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Chitepo Law School, Great Zimbabwe University.

## ABSTRACT

The main focus of this paper was to critically analyse the role of African Independent Churches in preventing child marriages in Mozambique. It also examined the prevalence, causes and impacts of child marriage in Mozambique. The authors used the desktop research method, focusing on the analysis of existing literature in the form of books, articles, international and regional instruments on the issue of child marriages in Mozambique. The paper highlights that the main causes of child marriages in Mozambique are poverty, initiation rites, lack of education, payment of lobolo and armed conflicts. It concludes that preventing child marriage requires the use of different methods, such as heightened awareness, law enforcement, and strengthened legal and policy frameworks. To end Child marriages in Mozambique, African independent churches must conduct awareness programs on the causes and detrimental effects of child marriages, promote the use of alternative initiation rites, partner with other organisations and the government in implementing economic empowerment programs, and also conduct counselling services to victims of child marriages. This study plays a significant role in ending child marriages in Mozambique and in Africa at large. It plays an important role in educating young girls about the harmful effects of getting into an early marriage and also provides directions on what can be done by the young girls if they become victims of ‘child marriages’. This paper reaffirms, with reference to international and regional human rights instruments, that the legal age of marriage is eighteen (18) years.

**Keywords:** African Independent Churches, Bride price, Child marriage, Economy, Mozambique.

## INTRODUCTION

The population of Mozambique is known to have a high percentage of children, as over 50% of Mozambicans are said to be children below the age of 18. The country also has one of the highest rates of child marriages in the world and the second-highest rate in the eastern and southern African sub-region, affecting almost one in every two girls.<sup>1</sup> Notably, for the past few years, the percentage of girls below the age of 18 who are being forced into early marriages or child marriages has been increasing in Mozambique. The main causes of child marriages in Mozambique are poverty, lack of education, cultural practices and conflicts by armed groups.

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, “Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS,” (Maputo, 2024).

African Independent Churches (AICs) refer to a diverse group of Christian denominations and movements that have originated within Africa, distinct from the historical mission churches established by Western missionaries. These churches are characterized by their adaptation of Christianity to African cultural contexts, often incorporating indigenous beliefs and practices. AICs emerged as a response to the cultural and spiritual needs of African communities, emphasizing autonomy from foreign ecclesiastical authority.<sup>2</sup>

In Mozambique, churches which form part of the AICs are the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Apostolic Church of Mozambique, Kimbanguist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The practice of child marriage or early marriage affects half of Mozambican girls who become married before turning 18 years old.<sup>3</sup> African Independent Churches (AICs) play a fundamental role as major religious and social institutions for many Mozambicans throughout the country.

The influential nature of AICs enables them to form cultural norms and values, especially when it comes to child marriage practices. This article, therefore, investigates AICs' work in Mozambique against child marriage by studying their present activities and obstacles alongside potential avenues for beneficial transformation and educating the young girls in Mozambique about their rights. Knowledge about the relationship between religious beliefs and cultural traditions and child marriage practices enables stakeholders to strengthen support for AICs who protect girls and young women in Mozambique.<sup>4</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The information presented in this paper is based on an analysis of existing literature on the role of African Independent Churches in ending child marriages in Mozambique. The paper used the desktop research method, mainly focusing on analysing the existing literature in the form of books and journal articles on the topic of the role of African Independent Churches in ending child marriages in Mozambique.

## DISCUSSION

### Definition of child marriage

The widely referenced and acknowledged definition of child marriage from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) clearly states that, 'child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child'.<sup>5</sup> PLAN International Organisation also defines child marriage as, 'all marriages or unions in which one or both spouses are under the age of 18 and or were not able to give their free and informed consent'. The term child marriage is often used interchangeably with the terms forced marriage and early marriage.

From a legal perspective, the foundational instrument on human rights, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 16(1), clearly states that, "men and women of full age without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution." Article 16(2) of this declaration further states that, 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses'. Article 6(a) of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, commonly known as the Maputo Protocol, states that, 'no marriage shall take place without the free and full consent of both parties'. Article 6(b) of this Protocol also states that, 'the minimum age of marriage for women shall be 18 years'. In Africa, there is a growing trend and consensus that the words 'full age' mean the age of 18 years. With reference to Mozambique, the Law on Prevention and Combat of Premature Unions, also known as Law No.19/2019 of October 22, 2019, established the minimum legal age for marriage as 18 years without any exceptions. A reading of the above Articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Maputo Protocol and the

<sup>2</sup> Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Asmara: Africa World Press Inc, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Chifeche and Yolanda Dreyer, "Faith Communities, Youth and Development in Mozambique," *HTS: Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019): 1–6.

<sup>4</sup> Chifeche and Dreyer, "Faith Communities, Youth and Development in Mozambique."

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS ."

Mozambican legislation clearly shows that only men and women of full age after giving their free and full consent are allowed to enter into a marriage.

### **The Risks Associated with Early or Child Marriages**

Child marriages create multiple negative effects that harm the health condition, along with the lifetime potential of young females and girls.

- **Health Risks**

Child marriage exposes young mothers to a greater danger of maternal death because adolescent girls face higher pregnancy and birthing complications. Young people in child marriages also face higher risks of acquiring Sexually Transmitted Infections, including HIV/AIDS, because they lack proper healthcare services. Child marriage leads to reproductive health problems, including obstetric fistula, because it results in early and high-frequency childbirths.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, child marriages can also have some negative effects on the health of young girls and their children. Compared to women who marry later in life, child brides experience higher rates of adverse sexual and reproductive health consequences not only during their youth but also throughout their life course, with malnutrition and increased maternal morbidity and mortality being some of the most notorious negative effects.

On a psychological basis, child marriages are usually associated with poor mental health, including feelings of isolation, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors, and can also contribute to poor health outcomes for future generations.<sup>7</sup> According to Kidman, child marriages frequently result in the initiation of sexual activity at a very young age, often without the girl's full consent. In regions such as sub-Saharan Africa, adolescents, especially girls, bear a disproportionate share of the HIV epidemic.<sup>8</sup> Young people in this age group experience the highest rates of HIV infections and have not seen the same reductions in HIV-related deaths that have been observed in other age groups. Due to the considerable age gap between child brides and their husbands, these young girls typically have limited power to assert their rights or negotiate the terms of sexual relations within their marriages. Additionally, because husbands of child brides often have a history of multiple sexual partners, these marriages expose the young brides to a heightened risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. For instance, in countries like Kenya and Uganda, married adolescent girls are statistically more likely to be HIV-positive compared to their unmarried counterparts.

The act of entering into marriage at a young age, often without consent and with older partners, can severely limit girls' capacity to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health rights. This includes their ability to decide if and when to engage in sexual activity, as well as whether and when to use contraception. Such a loss of autonomy and control over their reproductive choices significantly undermines their well-being, as it is a clear fact that they are exposed to the serious risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>9</sup>

Owing to limited decision-making power, child brides are at a heightened risk of experiencing early, unintended, and repeated pregnancies. Statistical evidence has proven that around 90% of adolescent births in developing countries occur within marriage. These young girls often face pregnancy before they are physically and emotionally prepared, and they encounter substantial obstacles to receiving comprehensive, respectful healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth. These challenges increase the likelihood of complications such as anemia, malnutrition, prolonged or obstructed labor, obstetric fistula, and even maternal death. In settings where safe and legal abortion services are unavailable, both married and unmarried girls face risks from unsafe abortions and inadequate post-

<sup>6</sup> Yvette Efevbera et al., "Girl Child Marriage as a Risk Factor for Early Childhood Development and Stunting," *Social Science & Medicine* 185 (2017): 91–101.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Presler-Marshall et al., "Child Marriage in Contexts of Forced Displacement: Exploring Drivers and Decision-Making in Jordan through a Gender and Generational Lens," *Frontiers in Sociology* 10 (November 21, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2025.1599991>.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Kidman, "Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries," *International Journal of Epidemiology*, October 12, 2016, dyw225, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyw225>.

<sup>9</sup> CAMFED, "Impact of Child Marriage on Global Development," 2024.

abortion care, including hemorrhage, infection, genital injury, long-term health problems, and mortality. Pregnant adolescents also have a greater susceptibility to diseases such as malaria compared to older pregnant women. Consequently, girls aged 15 to 19 experience significantly higher rates of maternal mortality worldwide than women aged 20 to 24, with an estimated 70,000 adolescent girls dying annually from pregnancy-related complications.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, child marriages significantly contribute to the high incidence of cervical cancer in Mozambique. Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, the primary cause of cervical cancer, is widespread in this region. Despite limited capacity for effective screening and detection, cervical cancer rates in many African countries remain alarmingly high. Key risk factors for cervical cancer include early marriage, low socioeconomic status, inadequate healthcare access, and husbands with multiple sexual partners.

### • Social and Emotional Risks

When a girl marries as a child, she typically faces social isolation because she must distance herself from her family and friends, as she will be someone's wife and have responsibilities. PTSD, together with depression and anxiety, emerges because of child marriage, which creates emotional trauma for the victims. The practice of child marriage removes young girls from their childhood since it forces them to take up adult responsibilities before they have finished developing. They have to become adults, as it will only be a matter of time until they become parents.<sup>11</sup>

The strong connection between child marriage and domestic violence has been widely studied, with research showing links to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Numerous studies reveal that child marriage often leads to various forms of violence.<sup>12</sup> For example, a significant number of women experienced physical violence from intimate partners during pregnancy, with factors like early marriage, rural residence, and low education levels contributing to the risk. Similarly, research from various scholars has indicated that girls living in rural or marginalized contexts in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of child marriage. These young women often have little control over when or whom they marry, increasing their susceptibility to domestic abuse.

Furthermore, child marriages typically involve forced unions, especially for girls, who enter marriage without their consent. This practice exposes them to multiple social harms, including various forms of violence and emotional abuse. Young brides frequently face physical, emotional, and sexual violence from husbands or in-laws. Additionally, child marriages often deprive girls of education and employment opportunities, trapping them in cycles of poverty and dependence.<sup>13</sup>

Irrefutably, child marriages are a prevalent form of violence against girls because girls who get married too early usually have minimal power or status within their households and relationships. Due to this lack of status, the victims of child marriages are extremely vulnerable to domestic and sexual abuse, psychological distress, and social isolation from family, friends, and communities. These conditions often result in ignorance, early separation, or divorce before girls attain the maturity needed for independent living. Consequently, child marriage restricts girls' freedom and limits their ability to participate in healthy social and personal development.<sup>14</sup>

Child marriages negatively impact girls' mental and emotional development in numerous ways. It deprives them of their childhood and limits their personal freedom, reducing opportunities to develop a sense of identity. This denial of psychosocial well-being, reproductive health, and educational access severely hinders their psychological growth.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, according to research conducted by Le Strat, girls married during childhood face a significantly higher risk of developing mental health disorders compared to those married as adults, with nicotine dependence and specific phobias being the most

<sup>10</sup> M. Qamar, N. Khan, and S. Fatima, "Mental Health Consequences of Child Marriage: A Narrative Review," *PLOS Global Public Health* 2, no. 1 (2022): e0000131.

<sup>11</sup> Efevbera et al., "Girl Child Marriage as a Risk Factor for Early Childhood Development and Stunting."

<sup>12</sup> A., et al. Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts," . . *UNICEF Mozambique, UNFPA, and CECAP*. (UNICEF Mozambique, UNFPA, and CECAP, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Kidman, "Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries."

<sup>14</sup> Nawal M Nour, "Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights Issue," *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 51.

<sup>15</sup> B Sajid et al., "The Silent Suffering: Social and Psychological Consequences of Child Marriage," *Migration Letters* 21 (2024): 1816–25.

common.<sup>16</sup> These girls are also more likely to have received treatment for various mental illnesses throughout their lives, with antisocial personality disorder frequently reported. Similar conclusions were also drawn in recent studies by Burgess C et al, which linked child marriage to depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and emotional distress.<sup>17</sup> These psychological effects are often exacerbated by compounding factors such as poverty, intimate partner violence, social isolation, difficulties related to childbirth, low self-esteem, and reduced autonomy.

Additionally, young girls forced into marriage are expected to assume multiple adult roles, including those of being a wife, daughter-in-law, homemaker, and mother. This sudden imposition of responsibilities can be overwhelming, as these girls often lack the maturity and skills necessary to navigate complex personal, familial, economic, and social relationships. As a result, many develop lasting fears and emotional difficulties that persist throughout their lives.<sup>18</sup>

### • Economic Risks

One of the most immediate economic consequences of child marriage is the disruption of education. Girls who marry early are far more likely to drop out of school, losing access to learning opportunities that are essential for developing skills and knowledge needed for gainful employment. This loss of education significantly reduces their future earning potential. Research consistently shows that girls married before 18 achieve lower educational attainment compared to their unmarried peers, limiting their participation in the formal labor market and confining them to low-paying, informal, or unpaid work.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the economy loses out on the contributions that educated women make through productivity and innovation.

Linked closely to education, child marriage also reduces women's labor force participation and earning capacity. Early marriage often leads to early childbearing and increased household responsibilities, which restrict women's ability to engage in paid work. The economic cost manifests in lost income for women and reduced household financial stability. Studies estimate that lost earnings and productivity due to child marriage run into billions of dollars annually for nations with a high prevalence of the practice. The intergenerational effects of this economic loss also impact children's wellbeing and future productivity.

Over and above that, child marriage is also associated with early and frequent childbearing, leading to higher fertility rates. Women married as children tend to have 17 to 26 percent more children over their lifetimes than those married as adults.<sup>20</sup> Elevated fertility drives rapid population growth, especially in poorer regions, exerting additional pressure on limited government resources. Growing populations increase demand for public services such as education, healthcare, housing, and social protection. This strain hampers economic development by diverting government spending from productivity-enhancing investments to basic service provision.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, large family sizes often dilute household resources, reducing per capita investments in nutrition, health, and education, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty.

To add more, child marriage poses serious health risks linked to early pregnancy, childbirth complications, and poor maternal and child health outcomes. These health challenges translate into increased healthcare costs for individuals and societies. Adolescent pregnancies often result in costly interventions and higher maternal and infant mortality rates, factors that impose financial burdens on

<sup>16</sup> Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertret, and Bernard Le Foll, "Child Marriage in the United States and Its Association With Mental Health in Women," *Pediatrics* 128, no. 3 (September 1, 2011): 524–30, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-0961>.

<sup>17</sup> Rochelle A Burgess et al., "Bringing an End to the Silence: Identifying Priorities and Solutions to Addressing the Mental Health Consequences of Child Marriage," *Health Policy and Planning* 38, no. 4 (April 11, 2023): 421–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czad006>.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Morrow, Fiona Ross, and Cindy Mason, "Editorial: Education and Learning for Digital Health," *Frontiers in Digital Health* 5 (March 24, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2023.1165504>.

<sup>19</sup> International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage," 2018; Girls Not Brides, *Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage, London Girls Not Brides* (The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Global Partnership for education, "Economic Impacts of a Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report," 2021, [https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2074-77052016000100016&lng=es&nrm=iso&tlng=en](https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2074-77052016000100016&lng=es&nrm=iso&tlng=en).

<sup>21</sup> International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage."

healthcare systems. The need to address complications arising from early childbirth affects not only the individuals involved but also limits economic productivity due to lost workdays and long-term health consequences.<sup>22</sup>

At the household level, child marriage exacerbates poverty. Early marriage usually curtails a girl's ability to contribute economically both within and outside the home. Since child brides often have limited decision-making power over household resources, family finances tend to suffer. Moreover, larger family sizes due to early and frequent childbearing increase household expenses, stretching limited incomes thinner and intensifying economic hardship. Girls trapped in early marriages frequently have restricted mobility and autonomy, further limiting their opportunities to improve their economic conditions.<sup>23</sup>

At the national and global levels, the aggregate impact of child marriage creates substantial economic inefficiencies that slow development progress. The combined effect of reduced female education and labor participation, high fertility, and increased health costs undermines the potential for economic growth and poverty reduction. The World Bank and ICRW estimate that ending child marriage by 2030 could yield economic benefits in the hundreds of billions of dollars annually worldwide, primarily by enabling investments in girls' education and reproductive health, and reducing population pressures.<sup>24</sup> Delaying child marriage aligns closely with achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those targeting gender equality, poverty alleviation, and improved health outcomes.

To tie the loose ends, one can safely come to the conclusion that child marriage carries profound economic risks that undermine individuals' futures and stall broader societal progress. By curtailing education and employment opportunities, inflating fertility rates, increasing health expenditures, and deepening household poverty, early marriage creates a cycle of economic disadvantage that is difficult to break. Addressing child marriage is not only essential from a human rights perspective but also critical for economic development. Investing in girls' education, health, and empowerment to delay marriage until adulthood represents a cost-effective strategy with enormous potential returns powering stronger economies and healthier societies worldwide.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Long-term consequences of child marriages in Mozambique**

Child marriages lead to the continuation of poverty. They force young girls to do household chores combined with other responsibilities, which denies them an opportunity to attend school. The practice of child marriage denies young girls the possibility of making their own decisions. This limits their future opportunities because they are required to carry out adult duties before they receive adequate support or education. Poverty spreads between generations when child brides take on household duties, which disrupts their ability to learn and access financial possibilities.<sup>26</sup>

One of the most immediate and enduring effects of child marriage is on the physical health of young brides. Girls who marry during childhood often face early pregnancies before their bodies are fully developed, significantly raising the risk of pregnancy-related complications, including maternal mortality, obstetric fistula, anemia, and malnutrition. These risks are compounded by limited access to quality maternal healthcare. Furthermore, early childbearing tends to lead to a pattern of rapid and repeated pregnancies, with child brides typically having higher total fertility rates than women who marry as adults. Such reproductive patterns increase exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, especially given that many child brides have older partners who may have had multiple previous sexual relationships. Health consequences extend to the children born to child brides, who

<sup>22</sup> UNICEF, "Towards Ending Child Marriage: Global Trends and Profiles of Progress," 2019; Global Partnership for education, "Economic Impacts of a Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report."

<sup>23</sup> International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage."

<sup>24</sup> World Bank, "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Work, Earnings and Household Dynamics," 2017; International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage."

<sup>25</sup> Quentin Wodon, "Child Marriage and Education: Impacts, Costs, and Benefits," Global Partnership for Education, June 29, 2017, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/child-marriage-and-education-impacts-costs-and-benefits>.

<sup>26</sup> Paulo Pires and Pam Baatsen, "Gaining Insight into the Magnitude of and Factors Influencing Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy and Their Consequences in Mozambique," 2016.

suffer higher rates of low birth weight, stunting, infant and child mortality, perpetuating a cycle of poor health that spans generations.<sup>27</sup>

Child marriage exerts a significant toll on mental health. Extensive research by numerous scholars has actually shown that heightened rates of depression, anxiety, emotional distress, adjustment disorders, and suicidal ideation among women married as minors compared to those who marry later. The emotional strain arises from multiple stressors, including social isolation, intimate partner violence, constrained autonomy, and the sudden transition into adult roles without adequate psychological maturity. Intrafamilial pressures and experiences of abuse from husbands and in-laws further exacerbate psychological distress. Despite this, the mental health consequences of child marriage have historically been overlooked in public health discourse, leaving considerable gaps in care and support for survivors.<sup>28</sup>

Child marriage is one of the leading causes of school dropout for girls globally. Early marriage and childbearing interrupt education, limiting girls' ability to acquire critical literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills crucial for economic independence. The truncated educational attainment curtails career opportunities, reduces lifetime earnings potential, and often relegates women to poverty and economic dependency on spouses or extended families. This dynamic perpetuates gender inequality and restricts female participation in economic and public life. At a macroeconomic level, high rates of child marriage undermine national development by limiting human capital formation and stalling progress towards gender equality and poverty reduction.<sup>29</sup>

Child brides frequently enter marriages characterized by large spousal age gaps, power imbalances, and limited decision-making authority, increasing their vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence. These dynamics often result in the erosion of personal agency and autonomy. Social isolation is common, as early marriage frequently removes girls from peer networks and their natal families, heightening loneliness and decreasing access to social support systems. The expectation to immediately assume multiple adult roles, as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and household manager, places significant emotional and physical burdens on girls ill-prepared for such responsibilities. These social challenges disrupt normal psychosocial development and limit girls' capacity to advocate for their rights.<sup>30</sup>

By and large, the consequences of child marriage ripple beyond individual girls to affect families and communities. Children born to child brides experience elevated health risks and limited developmental opportunities, often replicating cycles of deprivation. Large family sizes resulting from early and frequent childbearing can strain household resources and reduce investments in each child's health and education. At a societal level, child marriage contributes to sustained poverty, gender inequality, and social instability. Its prevalence, therefore, correlates strongly with high maternal mortality rates and elevated population growth, which exert pressure on national healthcare, educational, and social systems. Ending child marriage is therefore integral to achieving sustainable development goals aimed at improving health, education, equality, and economic growth.<sup>31</sup>

Taking cognizance of the above, it can therefore be concluded that the long-term effects of child marriage are profound and multifaceted, intersecting health, mental well-being, education, gender equality, and economic development. Girls married at an early age, tend to face heightened risks of adverse health outcomes and psychological distress, curtailed educational and economic opportunities, and increased exposure to violence and social isolation. These individual burdens aggregate to slow national development, entrench poverty, and perpetuate cycles of disadvantage for future generations. Addressing child marriage requires coordinated efforts encompassing legal reform, education, health services, and community engagement to empower girls, protect their rights, and break the persistent

<sup>27</sup> PLOS, "Global Public Health, Mental Health Consequences of Child Marriage," 2022; Brides, *Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage*.

<sup>28</sup> PLOS, "Global Public Health, Mental Health Consequences of Child Marriage."

<sup>29</sup> International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage"; CAMFED, "Impact of Child Marriage on Global Development."

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF, "South Sudan. Early Marriage Effects.," 2020.

<sup>31</sup> International Center For Research on Women (ICRW), "Economic Impact of Child Marriage"; CAMFED, "Impact of Child Marriage on Global Development."

cycle of harm. Only through such comprehensive approaches can the devastating long-term effects of child marriage be mitigated, enabling millions of girls worldwide to realize their full potential.

### **AIC's strategies in preventing child marriages in Mozambique**

AICs have been using various measures to raise public understanding of what happens when girls get married before age and why they need education. They collaborate with community leaders, civil society organizations, and government authorities to spread awareness about the new law that makes child marriage illegal.<sup>32</sup> AICs take part in community outreach activities, which aim to transform how people view child marriage and their behaviors toward it. These independent churches have collaborated with influential community leaders to advance positive transformation within their social networks. They have also given support to child marriage victims by offering counseling and educating them while providing economic development opportunities.<sup>33</sup>

### **Obstacles faced by AIC's in preventing child marriages in Mozambique**

Culture and traditional beliefs in Mozambique act as powerful barriers for AICs to implement change against the practice of child marriage. The effectiveness in stopping child marriages remains delayed by AICs mainly because they do not have enough resources that including money and staff members.<sup>34</sup> In addition to this, Community leaders may oppose child marriage prevention attempts because they feel this interferes with their cultural traditions or threatens their authority.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Causes and Possible Solutions to Child Marriages in Mozambique**

There are a number of causes of child marriages in Mozambique. This article shall focus on initiation rites, poverty, and cultural and social norms.

#### **a. Initiation rites in Mozambique**

This is one of the reasons why girls get married before turning eighteen years old. Mozambican cultures observe female initiation rites, which they term 'kuhomba' or 'makonde' as rites of passage into womanhood. Initiation ceremonies teach girls about domestic skills, marriage practices and child-rearing methods. Rite of passage completions in particular communities are taken as indications that young people should start getting married. Pressure increases for young girls to marry within a short period after finishing their initiation rites.<sup>36</sup>

#### **Examples of initiation rites**

Male and female initiation rites among the Chokwe people of Mozambique instruct girls about marriage practices as well as childbearing responsibilities and domestic tasks. The completion of initiation rites normally leads to immediate marriage for girls. The people of Makonde, located in northern Mozambique, perform an initiation rite through which they teach girls about marrying and keeping house. Marriage occurs frequently in early years for the Makonde people.

### **Methods which can be used by the AIC's to prevent initiation rites from influencing child marriage**

#### **• Awareness programs**

Through different awareness programs, members of religious congregations can receive information on educational programs that expose them to child marriage risks as well as older initiation timeframes.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts."

<sup>33</sup> Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts."

<sup>34</sup> Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts."

<sup>35</sup> Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts."

<sup>36</sup> Pires and Baatsen, "Gaining Insight into the Magnitude of and Factors Influencing Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy and Their Consequences in Mozambique."

<sup>37</sup> Pam Baatsen et al., "Situation of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage among In-School and out-of-School Youth in Nampula and Rapale, Mozambique, 2017 Study," *Universidade Lurio*, 2018.

Furthermore, awareness programs can be effectively used through diverse methods, including media campaigns such as radio, TV, social media, school programs like debates, seminars, group meetings and also the involvement of trusted local leaders such as religious figures who can influence attitudes at grassroots levels. Integrating child marriage content within girls' empowerment and life skills sessions has broad support and is seen as particularly impactful because it combines knowledge sharing with the development of agency and networks that girls need to avoid early marriage. Evidence also suggests that combining awareness activities with economic incentives, such as scholarships or conditional cash transfers supporting girls' continued education, strengthens outcomes by addressing underlying poverty and insecurity.

- **Use of alternative initiation ceremonies**

Through new initiation ceremonies, AICs should establish rites which enhance girl empowerment through educational growth, health achievements and social development instead of marriage preparation.<sup>38</sup>

- **Supporting education and economic empowerment**

AICs should back programs that connect girls to educational opportunities along with economic self-sufficiency because these aspects make them less susceptible to getting married too early.<sup>39</sup>

A report compiled by UNICEF suggested that supporting education and economic empowerment is a critical and proven method to reduce child marriages in Mozambique, a country where over half of girls are married before 18. Recognizing the deep links between poverty, low educational attainment, and early marriage, the Mozambican government, together with partners like UNICEF and UNFPA, has implemented multifaceted strategies aimed at keeping girls in school and equipping them with skills for economic independence.<sup>40</sup> Education is fundamental in changing the trajectory for girls at risk of early marriage. Girls who remain in school for longer are less likely to marry early because they gain knowledge, confidence, and aspirations that expand their life choices beyond immediate marriage and childbearing. Mozambique's National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Child Marriage explicitly prioritizes expanding access to quality education and improving retention rates of girls in schools, particularly in rural and vulnerable communities where child marriage prevalence is highest.<sup>41</sup>

Initiatives such as life skills programs delivered in schools focus on empowering girls with critical information on their rights, sexual and reproductive health, and building their decision-making capabilities. UNICEF's peer mentoring activities engage thousands of in-school adolescents to support each other in resisting social pressures to marry early.<sup>42</sup> Scholarship schemes and conditional cash transfers help alleviate the financial burdens families face, reducing the economic incentive to marry off daughters early.<sup>43</sup>

In the same light, economic deprivation remains a powerful driver of child marriage, as families often view daughters as economic burdens whom they hope to secure financially through marriage. To address this, Mozambique has integrated economic empowerment within its prevention frameworks. Programs that provide vocational training, entrepreneurship education, and small grants or savings opportunities enable adolescent girls and young women to develop skills needed for income-generating activities.<sup>44</sup>

For instance, mentorship initiatives like UNFPA's Action for Girls link vulnerable adolescent girls with safe spaces where they receive guidance on reproductive health alongside training on economic skills. This combination not only builds self-confidence but also creates financial

<sup>38</sup> Baatsen et al., "Situation of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage among In-School and out-of-School Youth in Nampula and Rapale, Mozambique, 2017 Study."

<sup>39</sup> Baatsen et al., "Situation of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage among In-School and out-of-School Youth in Nampula and Rapale, Mozambique, 2017 Study."

<sup>40</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS."

<sup>41</sup> UNFPA in East and Southern Africa, "Child Marriage," 2025, <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/topics/child-marriage>.

<sup>42</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS."

<sup>43</sup> Brides, *Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage*.

<sup>44</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS."

independence pathways, delaying marriage and reducing vulnerability.<sup>45</sup> Broadening economic opportunities for girls thereby shifts norms by making them seen as valuable beyond childbearing roles, enhancing their negotiation power within families and communities.

Also, the synergy between education and economic empowerment is especially vital. Educated girls with marketable skills hold greater bargaining power and are less dependent on marriage for security. Mozambique's multi-sectoral approaches actively promote this link as part of their National Strategy pillars. Civil society organizations support these efforts by engaging communities in dialogue to change perceptions around girls' roles, emphasizing the long-term economic and social benefits of delayed marriage.<sup>46</sup>

Efforts also extend to engaging boys and men to challenge harmful gender norms, thereby creating a supportive environment for girls' education and economic participation. Additionally, legislative reform, including the 2019 law raising the legal age of marriage and restricting exceptions, complements these programs by setting a clearer protective legal framework.

- **Challenges likely to be encountered**

While progress is promising, challenges remain. Poverty, sociocultural norms, and weak enforcement of laws continue to perpetuate child marriages. Rural areas with limited schooling infrastructure and economic opportunities demand sustained investment. Ensuring quality, inclusive education and linking it systematically with viable economic empowerment programs will be crucial to accelerating the decline in child marriage rates.

In Mozambique, supporting girls' education and economic empowerment is a cornerstone approach to combating child marriages. By increasing girls' access to education, building their life skills, and offering economic alternatives through training and income opportunities, these strategies jointly tackle the root causes driving early marriage. Combined with community engagement and strong legal frameworks, this holistic approach fosters an environment where girls can grow, thrive, and choose their futures free from the constraints of early marriage.<sup>47</sup>

- **Possible solution**

#### **Working together to offer counseling and support services**

The African Independent Churches should unite with community leaders and traditional authorities to modify cultural traditions which lead to child marriage. AICs should provide counseling services and support initiatives to initiated women and girls to help them obtain informed decisions about their lives and futures.<sup>48</sup> AICs can reduce the effect of initiation rites on Mozambican child marriages by using these proposed program strategies to promote a culture that protects girls' educational development and health needs.

#### **b. Poverty**

Mozambique is a developing country and the majority of citizens or families there are known to be poor. Most families marry off their daughters at a young age in exchange for a dowry to try to reduce their poverty. This is due to a lack of knowledge about different ways that the family could reduce their poverty.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, poverty is a key factor that sustains the practice of child marriages. Parents, seeking to secure their daughters' financial future, often view their daughters as an economic liability. The costs associated with feeding, clothing, and educating girls can be burdensome, especially when girls are expected to eventually leave the household. For many families, marrying off a daughter in exchange for a dowry represents a way to recoup this investment. In certain countries, dowry payments even decline

<sup>45</sup> UNFPA in East and Southern Africa, "Child Marriage."

<sup>46</sup> Brides, *Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage*.

<sup>47</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriages in Mozambique (2024). Health Results 2024: HIV and AIDS."

<sup>48</sup> Baatsen et al., "Situation of Teenage Pregnancy and Child Marriage among In-School and out-of-School Youth in Nampula and Rapale, Mozambique, 2017 Study."

<sup>49</sup> Pires and Baatsen, "Gaining Insight into the Magnitude of and Factors Influencing Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy and Their Consequences in Mozambique."

as the girl ages, which creates an incentive for parents to marry their daughters off at a younger age. These decisions are not necessarily made from a lack of care but rather reflect the harsh realities that families face for survival. Beyond economics, child marriage also serves to forge alliances between tribes, clans, and villages, reinforcing social connections and maintaining important social status.

Parents frequently express concerns about preserving their daughters' virginity and chastity. With this borne in mind, it is imperative to underscore that child marriage is consequently viewed as a protective measure that prevents premarital sexual activity, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections. When these young girls marry men from other villages, they often have to leave their familiar surroundings, leading to feelings of deep loneliness and isolation. As they take on the roles of wives and mothers, they also assume primary responsibility for domestic work. Since husbands would have paid substantial dowries, there is added pressure on these girls to quickly demonstrate their fertility. To establish their identity, status, and respect within their new family, many young brides hasten to bear children, resulting in high fertility rates. Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of experiencing a normal childhood, including play, friendship-building, education, and social development.<sup>50</sup>

The men who marry young girls tend to share similar characteristics. Because they must pay large dowries, most men spend years working to save enough money, leading them to marry at an older age. This age gap often results in little common ground between husband and wife beyond household duties and child-rearing. Men are also expected to be sexually experienced with multiple partners, and due to fears surrounding HIV/AIDS, they often prefer very young, virgin brides whom they assume are free from infection.<sup>51</sup>

### **Methods which can be used by the AICs to prevent poverty from forcing young girls into marriages.**

- **Raising awareness and education**

AICs can provide essential information about child marriage hazards and educational value to their members and community residents, specifically looking at the importance of female education. AICs benefit members by helping them acquire better economic capabilities that enable them to escape poverty patterns.<sup>52</sup>

- **Community Development and Empowerment**

AICs organizations can develop community development initiatives, which include educational training courses alongside microfinance services and medical care delivery services. Such initiatives can enable girls to make rational decisions about their future.<sup>53</sup>

- **Advocacy and Policy Influence**

According to Molobi, AICs should work to gain support for policies which safeguard the fundamental rights of women and children regarding educational access, healthcare and economic independence.<sup>54</sup> Through their collaboration with governmental and civic bodies as well as leaders in local communities, AICs can establish conditions that enable complete individual growth.

### **c. Cultural and Social Norms**

Cultural and Social norms are also the drivers of child marriages in Mozambique. These cultural and social norms include initiation rites, gender inequality and subservience, parental consent and decision making and bride price or lobolo. As mentioned in the above paragraphs, initiation rites are normally seen as a 'green card' for sexual activities and indicate a girl's readiness for marriage and a transition to adulthood. Hence, it can be noted that after the initiation ceremonies, girls under the age of 18 often

<sup>50</sup> Kidman, "Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries."

<sup>51</sup> Qamar, Khan, and Fatima, "Mental Health Consequences of Child Marriage: A Narrative Review."

<sup>52</sup> Victor M S Molobi, "Dealing with Poverty, Health and Maternal Child Survival: The Organisation of African Independent Churches Perspective," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (2016): 1–8.

<sup>53</sup> Molobi, "Dealing with Poverty, Health and Maternal Child Survival: The Organisation of African Independent Churches Perspective."

<sup>54</sup> Molobi, "Dealing with Poverty, Health and Maternal Child Survival: The Organisation of African Independent Churches Perspective."

indulge in sexual intercourse, leading to early pregnancies and consequently early marriages. In terms of gender inequality and subservience, in Mozambique, young girls are often groomed into traditional domestic and reproductive roles, while boys are groomed into or prepared for the job market. To the girls, marriage is the ultimate experimental ground for the lessons taught at home. Regardless of age, the girls will be 'ready' to take the lessons taught at home to their own matrimonial homes.<sup>55</sup> In terms of the practice of "lobolo", where a girl's family receives a payment or assets in exchange for her marriage, this makes child marriage an attractive economic coping mechanism for impoverished families. The issue of lobolo is directly linked to two other factors, which are the main causes of child marriages in Mozambique, namely poverty and parental consent. In light of the latter, due to the harsh reality of the economic meltdown in Mozambique, many families live under the global poverty datum line and marrying off their young children becomes the fastest panacea to poverty.<sup>56</sup>

## **Methods which can be used by the AIC's to address cultural and social norms which promote child marriages.**

### **a. Education and Awareness**

The AICs must use educational content about child marriage alongside girls' rights and empowerment when delivering church-based programs.<sup>57</sup> AICs should employ biblical teachings to emphasize three key principles of the importance of education, equality and human dignity.<sup>58</sup> AICs should also welcome speakers who possess expertise in child marriage alongside education and human rights expertise to deliver presentations for their girls.<sup>59</sup>

African independent churches in Mozambique play a crucial role in preventing child marriage through education and awareness. Trusted and influential within communities, especially in rural areas, they can effectively share information on the harms of early marriage, promote girls' rights, and advocate for education during sermons and community gatherings.<sup>60</sup>

These churches must tailor messages to fit cultural and spiritual contexts, using scripture and dialogue to gently challenge harmful traditions. Training must be offered to church leaders so as to ensure accurate knowledge of reproductive health and legal reforms, enabling them to engage congregations meaningfully. They must also create safe spaces like youth groups where girls build confidence and life skills to resist early marriage pressures, while involving boys to promote gender equality. By partnering with government programs, UN agencies, and civil society, churches strengthen national child marriage prevention strategies. Their awareness campaigns must address economic drivers by encouraging families to value girls' education and delayed marriage as investments in the community's future.<sup>61</sup>

In summation, African independent churches must leverage their moral authority, cultural relevance, and community reach to educate, shift norms, and empower youth—making them key allies in Mozambique's fight against child marriage.

### **b. Empowerment and Life Skills**

AICs must train girls in fundamental life capabilities, including basic literacy and numeracy, alongside trade skills that boost their capability to make sound decisions.<sup>62</sup> AICs must implement mentorship programs through which older female and teenage individuals would guide and nurture younger

<sup>55</sup> Plan International, *The State of the World's Girls 2025-Let Me Be a Child, Not a Wife-Girls' Experience of Living through Child Marriage* (Policy Brief, 2025).

<sup>56</sup> Brides, *Lessons Learned from National Initiatives to End Child Marriage*.

<sup>57</sup> S. Kapindu, "The Role of Churches in Promoting Girls' Education in Malawi," *Journal of Education and Human Development* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–8.

<sup>58</sup> P. Mwaura, "The Role of Biblical Teachings in Promoting Girls' Education in Kenya," *Journal of Education and Human Development* 6, no. 1 (2017): 1–9.

<sup>59</sup> F. Machingura, "The Impact of Community Outreach Programs on Girls' Empowerment in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Community Development* 49, no. 2 (2018): 1–12.

<sup>60</sup> Gebrezgi, "Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts."

<sup>61</sup> Chifeche and Dreyer, "Faith Communities, Youth and Development in Mozambique."

<sup>62</sup> B. Chilisa, "The Role of Churches in Promoting Girls' Education in Botswana," *Journal of Education and Human Development* 6, no. 2 (2017): 1–9.

participants.<sup>63</sup> AICs must create support groups to help girls who have faced child marriage or are at risk by providing those safe interactions and support.<sup>64</sup>

### c. Community Engagement and Outreach

The establishment of community outreach programs by AICs allows them to educate girls outside their church community about child marriage while defending their rights.<sup>65</sup> Local organizations, including schools, community centers and non-profit groups, become strategic partners of Alliances for Incident Prevention to spread their information widely among girls.<sup>66</sup>

AICs should employ media platforms together with technology tools like social media, radio and television stations to create extensive awareness about child marriage prevention and girls' fundamental rights for widespread impact.<sup>67</sup>

### d. Advocacy and Policy Influence

The organization should support legislation changes which establish protective rights for girls by partnering with relevant stakeholders, such as government agencies, along with NGOs.<sup>68</sup> They should also start programs which empower girls to receive education and vocational training for enhanced decision-making capabilities.<sup>69</sup> The AICs should connect with community leaders at traditional and local government levels to promote change in ideas about child marriages and protect girls' rights.<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The practice of marrying children creates significant health and social dangers which particularly affect female children. Amendments in education and advocacy policies alongside policy changes are fundamental to provide every child with their rights and access to their opportunities.

In a nutshell, the African Independent Churches (AICs) play a pivotal role in preventing child and early marriages in Mozambique by leveraging their deep-rooted community influence and spiritual authority to challenge harmful cultural norms and practices that perpetuate this issue. Given that Mozambique faces one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with almost half of girls married before 18, the engagement of AICs is critical in complementing national efforts such as the government's National Strategy for Preventing and Combating Child Marriage.

AICs provide safe spaces for dialogue, educate communities on the harmful consequences of early marriage, and advocate for girls' rights to education and bodily autonomy. Their involvement bridges gaps between legislation such as the new comprehensive ban on child marriage and grassroots acceptance, helping to shift social attitudes which often tolerate or even encourage child marriage due to poverty, gender inequality, and traditional practices. Through fostering mentorship programmes, collaborating with civil society, and supporting empowerment initiatives, these churches contribute to building a socio-economic and cultural framework that enables girls to exercise their right to choose if and when to marry.

Ultimately, the collaboration between African Independent Churches and national strategies is indispensable for a holistic approach to ending child and early marriages. Their ongoing commitment is thus crucial to securing the well-being, education, and empowerment of girls, thereby nurturing a new generation free from the cycles of poverty, discrimination, and health risks associated with early marriages.

<sup>63</sup> N. Kamau, "The Impact of Mentorship Programs on Girls' Empowerment in Kenya," *Journal of Mentoring and Coaching* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–12.

<sup>64</sup> M. Mhaka-Mutepfa, "The Role of Support Groups in Empowering Girls Who Have Experienced Child Marriage in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Women's Studies* 28, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

<sup>65</sup> Machingura, "The Impact of Community Outreach Programs on Girls' Empowerment in Zimbabwe."

<sup>66</sup> Kapindu, "The Role of Churches in Promoting Girls' Education in Malawi."

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## ABOUT AUTHORS

Hundzukani Portia Khosa holds a Doctorate in Theology from the University Of Pretoria . She is an associate Professor at North-West University at the school of Christian Ministry and leadership. Prior to joining North-West University , She was a senior lecturer in the Department of human sciences .

Musavengana Machaya is a Lecurer at Great Zimbabwe University, Herbert Chitepo Law School. His research intrests are in the field(s) of Human Rights Law, Gender, HiV/Aids and the Law, Customary Law and Constitutional Law.