






The Lived Experiences of Survivors of Child Marriage: The Case of Epworth, A Harare Municipality in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is socio-economic distress for young women and girls globally, most importantly in developing nations. Child marriage is a violation of human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16). Even though studies had been conducted on child marriages in Zimbabwe, very little has been done in relation to lived experiences of survivors of child marriages. The study's aim was to explore the survivors' experiences of child marriages in Zimbabwe. The study focused on Epworth, a Harare Municipality. It employed a qualitative research approach with thirty-six (36) participants taking part. Data was collected using semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The themes identified were causes of child marriage, challenges faced by child marriage survivors and coping mechanisms used by survivors to survive. The findings revealed that poverty and unemployment were the main causes of child marriage. As a result of these, young girls get married to secure a better life. Depression and humiliation were challenges faced by child marriage survivors. Street vending, attending churches and prayers were coping strategies used by child marriage survivors to survive. The paper concluded that child marriage is a significant socio-economic concern for young girls. It is recommended that income-generating community-based projects such as social support networks should be made available to survivors of child marriage to access basic opportunities.

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Publication History
Received 11th May, 2023
Accepted 21st June, 2023
Published online 11th August, 2023

Keywords: *Child, Child Marriage, Survivor, Lived Experience, The African Girl Child.*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that child marriage is a globally predominant phenomenon with a serious effect on the survivors' mental and physical health, as well as growth and welfare throughout their lives and, by extension, on society in general.¹ The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, agreed at the World Summit for Children in September 1990, to thrust the issue of child marriage at the centre of the development and human rights discourse. Consequently, the problem of child marriage became one of the most critical matters on the international human rights

¹ World Health Organisation, *Global estimates of health consequences due to violence against children*. Geneva: WHO. (2022).

agenda.² Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16).³ Approximately, 700 million women today are married under the age of 18, and over one-third (around 250 million) join the union before the age of 15.⁴ The Inter-African Committee (IAC)⁵ refers to child marriage as any marriage formal or informal carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage.

Africa produces roughly 700,000 child brides each year and it is estimated that four (4) out of 10 women aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18.⁶ Zimbabwe is among the 20 African countries where child marriages are most prevalent. This view is supported by the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency⁷ report which shows that 33.7 percent of girls aged fewer than 18 are married, as compared to two (2) percent of boys that got married before reaching the age of 18 years. The practice most often occurs in the poorer regions of Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland West regions, where 50 percent and 42 percent of girls, respectively, marry as children.⁸ In Harare Municipality, 23 percent of girls got married before the age of 18. Approximately, 19 percent of girls had begun childbearing at the age of 17 years after marriage.⁹ Further, 22 percent of women aged 20-24 years had at least one live birth before age 18. Poverty, traditional, cultural practices, and religious values are some of the causes of child marriages in the area.¹⁰ Child marriage survivors are exposed to sexually transmitted infections and maternal mortality. The offspring of survivors are at an increased risk for premature birth and, subsequently, neonatal, or infant death. Child rights campaigners have warned that child marriage cases have risen due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has pushed more families into poverty and kept girls out of school for a longer period.¹¹

Even though studies had been done on child marriages in the world at large and Zimbabwe in particular, there is a paucity of information regarding lived experiences of survivors of child marriage. Although it is criminal under the Domestic Violence Act of 2007 to marry off an underage girl, the age of sexual consent in Zimbabwe is 16 years; it is difficult to stop these marriages, as these marriages are complicit and secretive.¹² Besides, the existing laws such as the Marriage Act Chapter 5(11) and the Customary Marriages Act Chapter 5(7) introduced to provide for the solemnization of marriages and to prevent the pledging of children are not effectively enforced. It seems these Acts are unconstitutional because they do not provide for proper protections against child marriage and survivors, which they are obliged to provide under the Constitution and its international commitments.¹³ In addition, there is disharmony on the laws concerning the age of marriage in Zimbabwe. Consequently, these survivors and child brides are denied access to effective institutional and legal protection, while being exposed to sexual abuse, violence, and marital burdens. In addition, the January 2016 Constitutional Court ruling which outlaws any marriage with a person below the age of 18 years gives hope, but the implementation and enforcement of this law remains a challenge. The

² UNICEF, *Multiple indicator cluster survey. Snapshot of key finding*. (New York: UNICEF, 2019).

³ WHO, *Trends in maternal mortality: 1990-2015: Estimates from WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division: executive summary* (No. WHO/RHR/15.23) (2015); Benedetta Berti, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 4 (2015): 41-53; UNICEF, *Multiple indicator cluster survey. Snapshot of key finding*. (New York: UNICEF, 2021).

⁴ UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child: Report 2015, estimates developed by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation," (2022). http://www.childmortality.org/files_v20/download/IGME%20report%202015%20child%20mortality%20final.pdf; UNFPA, *Girlhood, Not Motherhood: Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy*, (New York: United Nations Population, 2022).

⁵ Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices, *Taking care of victims*. (Dakar: IAC, 1993).

⁶ J. Haro, *Being a humanitarian woman in a conflict zone*, (New York: UNICEF, 2021).

⁷ Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*, (Harare: Government Printers, 2021).

⁸ UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

⁹ Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*.

¹⁰ WHO, *Trends in maternal mortality: 1990-2015*.

¹¹ UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

¹² Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*.

¹³ Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*.

legislators are yet to come up with penalties for those who go against this law for it to be implemented.¹⁴ Therefore, this study intends to explore the lived experiences of child marriage survivors in Zimbabwe to get a better understanding of the situation. Research on child marriages and survivors might possibly trigger the Department of Women's Affairs and the Department of Social Development (Social work) and other stakeholders to implement policies that address child marriages. The study was guided by the following objectives: to examine the causes of child marriages, to identify the challenges faced by survivors and to explore the coping mechanisms of child marriage survivors. The first part of the research is the literature review and the theoretical framework. The second section is the research methodology, and the third part is the findings. The fourth section is a discussion of the findings of the research. The last part is the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

Causes of Child Marriage

Child marriage is an abuse of civil privileges and an exercise that undermines determinations to stimulate socio-economic growth.¹⁵ There are several causes of child marriages in the world at large and Zimbabwe, in particular. They include poverty and traditional, cultural, and religious values. Child marriages have a negative effect particularly on girls' well-being; physically, mentally, psychologically, and emotionally.¹⁶

Poverty remains one of the main causes of child marriage globally. For many poor families most especially in Asia and Africa, marrying young girls at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival.¹⁷ It also means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. This affects the functioning of the family and may result in girls being considered a financial burden. Marriage often seems the best way for many families with endless poverty to secure the futures of girls and to reduce their financial burden.¹⁸ In Zimbabwe, a girl from a poor household is four times more likely to marry as a child than a girl from a rich household. In impoverished situations, parents see few alternatives for their daughters, aside from early marriage.¹⁹ Ikutwa upholds that some girls are more willing to marry because they believe that it might help improve their economic and family environment, as well as improve their social status.²⁰

In addition, religious and traditional leaders' practices can play an important role in articulating and interpreting the beliefs, teachings, and laws of communities, especially, in the light of the Convention on Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments. Their role is vital in challenging faith-based justification for practices harmful to children. Religious and traditional beliefs towards marriage are deeply intertwined with attitudes towards gender roles, particularly, those of women. The focus of different religious and traditional practices on the family comes with expectations of the subordination of women within the family. That means a girl's wishes and views on her marriage are often ignored.²¹ In Zimbabwe, *Kuzvarira* (a practice that involves guaranteeing a girl to get married) is the tradition in which a child can get married before birth and it continues to exist. During the

¹⁴ UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

¹⁵ UNFPA, *Girlhood, Not Motherhood*.

¹⁶ Carolina Villacampa, "Forced Marriage as a Lived Experience: Victims' Voices," *International Review of Victimology* 26, no. 3 (September 2020): 344–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758019897145>.

¹⁷ Munyaradzi Muchacha and Abel Blessings Matsika, "Developmental Social Work: A Promising Practice to Address Child Marriage in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 3 (2018): 3–10; Carolina Villacampa, "Forced Marriage as a Lived Experience: Victims' Voices," *International Review of Victimology* 26, no. 3 (2020): 344–67.

¹⁸ Shelley Clark, Judith Bruce, and Annie Dude, "Protecting Young Women from HIV/AIDS: The Case against Child and Adolescent Marriage," *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 2006, 79–88.

¹⁹ UNFPA, *Girlhood, Not Motherhood*.

²⁰ Lucia N Ikutwa, "Factors Influencing Early Marriage on the Girl Child's Maternal Health Projects: A Case of Maralal Town, Samburu County, Kenya" (University of Nairobi, 2015).

²¹ Munyaradzi Mawere, "Girl Child Dropouts in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Chadzamira Secondary School in Gutu District," *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* 3, no. 3 (2012): 1–18; P.N. Manyalo, "The stories behind the statistics: *Adolescent pregnancy in Zimbabwe*" (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.impatientoptimists.org/Posts/2012/06/The-Stories-Behind-the-StatisticsAdolescent-Pregnancy-inZimbabwe#.V64fp7cpCUk>; N. Chikwinya, *Child Marriage*. The Herald 13 January 2016.

colonial period, *Kuzvarira* was created. This was a practice where in the event of food scarcity, families used young women and girls as financial guarantees in exchange for cereals.²² This ancient tradition was restored owing to the country's difficult economic situation. When she reaches puberty, the child is given to a man and is able to perform marital responsibilities. This ancient tradition also features child marriage in return for food or cash.²³

Challenges Faced by Child Marriage Survivors

Survivors face many challenges, and the challenges affect the survivor's livelihoods. Their future is also at risk because they do not take care of the challenges. Some of the challenges are psychological and socio-economic challenges.

Psychological challenges remain a major factor faced by child marriage survivors. Nourai argues that sexual harassment is a defilement of the rights of citizenship in and out of marriage, as well as of marriage between children.²⁴ It involves forced sexual contact and the right to self-respect abuse. Nourai further adds that child marriages under the age of 18 as a tradition encourage physical and emotional violence. Studies have shown that child marriage survivors suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and some have severe symptoms or long periods of pain, while some do not.²⁵ PTSD leads to difficulty in concentration and trouble with organizing thoughts. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder problem-solving criteria include observations of a stressful event that increases distress, vulnerability, surprise, and a number of indicators, such as the incident's hallucinations, tenacious escape-related pain-related problems, traumatic, and increased attention to surface threats.²⁶

Socio-economic challenges such as rejection from family members impact child marriage survivors. Many girls (survivors) have no idea how to get support except from the community that is giving them up to the older man. Child marriage survivors are viewed as outcasts, particularly in African countries, and are seen as having a negative impact on their peers. Survivors of child marriage in Zimbabwe find it hard to come back and mingle with their families and societies because they are branded as *mvana* (single mothers) or given names that make life after child marriage a challenge.²⁷ Although, the contribution of authors such as Berti can be commended, however, their research focused more on the causes and effects of child marriage ignoring the lived experiences of survivors.²⁸ Therefore, this paper explored the lived experiences of survivors of child marriage in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience Theory

This study utilised the resilient theory to explain the lived experiences of child marriage survivors when faced with misfortune, adversity, and frustration. This theory supports the fact that child marriage survivors continue to demonstrate resilience when faced with traumatic situations such as depression,

²² P. Kachere, "Gender-Zimbabwe: Religion and poverty force girls into early marriages,"(2009). Retrieved from <http://www.ipsnews.net/2009/04/gender-zimbabwereligion-and-poverty-force-girls-into-early-marriages/> Human Rights Watch Zimbabwe, "Ensure Justice for Zimbabwe's Child Brides: Investigate Girl's Murder, Protect Children from Abuse," (2021). Retrieved from://<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/06/ensure-justice-zimbabwes-child-brides>. Accessed Date 06/06/2022.

²³ David R Hotchkiss et al., "Risk Factors Associated with the Practice of Child Marriage among Roma Girls in Serbia," *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 16 (2016): 1–10; Richard Chinomona and Le Thanh Tam, "Creating Enabling Environment for Micro-Finance Sector Development in Vietnam: A Legal Framework Perspective," *Journal of Economics* 5, no. 1 (2014): 115–24; UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

²⁴ Nawal M Nour, "Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 12, no. 11 (2006): 1644.

²⁵ W. Gwesela, "Child marriage," *The Midlands Observer*, November, 9, 2013; UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

²⁶ Deborah L Tolman et al., *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology, Vol. 1: Person-Based Approaches*. (American Psychological Association, 2014); UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

²⁷ Mildred Mashozhera, "'What Can She Say' Exploring the Negative Impact of Child Marriages on Women's Meaningful Participation in the Public Sphere" (University of Zimbabwe, 2016); Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*.

²⁸ Mashozhera, "'What Can She Say'..."; Berti, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications."

rejection, and humiliation. Resilience theory argues that it's not the nature of adversity that is most important, but how to deal with it. Resilience is an organised network of individuals with continuing personality and exceptional ability restorations.²⁹ Resilience theory addresses the strengths that people and systems demonstrate that enable child survivors of child marriage to rise above adversity.³⁰ When faced with hardship and frustration, resilience helps survivors of child marriage to bounce back. It helps the survivors of child marriage to survive, recover, and even thrive in the face and wake of misfortune.³¹

METHODOLOGY

Study Area and Selection

The study was conducted in the Epworth, a Harare municipality of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe. Epworth with a population of 152,116 people is one of the dormitory towns in South-eastern Harare Province, Zimbabwe. It is 12 km from the town of Harare. The area is characterized by incomplete roads, unstructured houses made of undone bricks, unsafe water, no electrified houses, no sewage system, and poor toilets. Epworth is characterized by poverty, drug-infested and law-breaking residences as well as a high prevalence of child marriages. Almost half of all teenage girls in Epworth are married due to poverty.³²

Research Approach

The study adopted the qualitative research approach to answer the objective of the study. The rationale for using qualitative research methods is because it provides a detailed description of people's attitudes, and emotions and analyzes the lived experiences of survivors of child marriages. In other words, adopting the qualitative research approach helps in describing and explaining the perspectives of survivors of child marriages. Also, utilizing qualitative research methods helps provide the platform to better understand the views of child marriage survivors' experiences and perspectives.

Sample Size and Sampling Method

A sample size of 36 participants was drawn from Epworth, Harare Municipality. Twenty female survivors of child marriage, ten (10) parents, three (3) community members and three (3) social workers took part in the research. Females of different ages and levels of education were included in the sample size. In terms of sampling, the purposive sampling method was utilised to recruit participants for the study. The rationale for using purposive sampling in selecting participants was that it helps improves and provides knowledge on the different experiences of child marriage survivors.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured and unstructured interview guide were the two instruments used in collecting data from the participants. The semi-structured interview guide was employed to collect data from individual participants. This interview guide was designed to get answers on the causes of child marriages, challenges faced by survivors of child marriages and coping mechanisms used by child marriages survivors. Using a semi-structured guide made it possible to pose probing questions in relation to child marriage survivors' experiences. The unstructured interview guide was used to obtain information from the focus group. The focus group discussions took place in the Epworth community and were held between 09: am to 13:00 pm. The focus group consisted of two groups made up of six

²⁹ Małgorzata Peçillo, "The Concept of Resilience in OSH Management: A Review of Approaches," *International Journal of Occupational Safety and Ergonomics* 22, no. 2 (2016): 291–300.

³⁰K. Cherry, "What is resilience?" (2015). Retrieved from http://psychology.about.com/od/crisiscounseling/a/resilience.htm?utm_term=resilience%20theory&utm_content=p1-main-1-02:47pm 26/08/2015.

³¹ David Howe, "The Family and the Therapist: Towards a Sociology of Social Work Method," in *The Sociology of Social Work* (Routledge, 1991), 147–62; James M White, *Advancing Family Theories* (Sage, 2005); UNICEF, "Levels and trends in child..."

³²Zimbabwe Statistics, *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*.

members. The rationale for using a focus group discussion was to draw participants' perspectives about their emotions, beliefs, opinions, expectations, and thoughts on survivors of child marriage. Secondary information was also obtained to supplement the study. Data was collected from secondary sources such as the internet, unpublished and published articles, legislation, books, reports, and journals in relation to lived experiences of child marriage survivors. In terms of data analysis, the interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed before active engagement and sustained reflection on the participants' shared experiences. The transcriptions were thoroughly interrogated by a reading of the text to identify categories and themes inductively and systematically. Emerging significant components and recurrent themes or narratives were described. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Social Development. All participants were assured of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the lived experiences of survivors of child marriage in the Epworth, Harare Municipality. Thirty-six participants took part in the study consisting of twenty female survivors of child marriage, ten parents, three community members and three social workers. Themes and subthemes emerged during data analysis. The key findings of the research in line with the objectives of the study are presented in accordance with the themes and subthemes as follows:

Causes of child marriages

- Poverty and unemployment
- Teenage pregnancy
- Traditional and religious beliefs and practices

Challenges faced by survivors of child marriage

- Depression
- Humiliation
- Rejection and discrimination

Coping mechanisms used by child marriage survivors

- Attending church and prayers
- Professional assistance (social workers)
- Street vending and survival sex

The first theme that emerged during data analysis was the causes of child marriage in the Epworth, Harare Municipality.

Theme 1: Causes of Child Marriage in the Epworth Area

Sub-theme 1: Poverty and unemployment

An overwhelming majority of participants indicated that poverty and unemployment were the main causes of child marriage in the area. According to these participants, poverty and unemployment were the reasons young girls get married early to secure a better life. The participants added that young girls get married because they see it as the solution to their problems. The participants went on to say that being unemployed is devastating because they are not responsible only for themselves but also for their children. They also added that survivors of child marriages sleep in the kitchen on the floor with their sons in their grandmothers' houses, due to poverty.

One of the survivors lamented:

"I married too early because of poverty with the hope that I would get a better life. Therefore, for me, poverty was the reason I got married."

“Unemployment is a devastating experience for anyone most particularly, an unemployed survivor of child marriage. This is because some of us are not only responsible for ourselves, but we are also responsible for our children as well.”

“We now live with my elderly grandmother in her small house; my son and I sleep on the floor in the kitchen. I look for work every day, even though I have no money to get around. I have to borrow some money here and there just to get my son to school.”

A social worker also reported:

“Poverty makes these young girls think that getting married is the solution to their problems not knowing that they are adding more problems in their lives.”

Sub-theme 2: Teenage pregnancy

Majority of the participants expressed that teenage pregnancies led them to early marriage. The participants added that some are forced into marriage by their uncles when they get pregnant to get rid of them. According to the participant, families value marriage such that when a young girl falls pregnant, she is married off if the father of the child accepts responsibility. One of the survivors stated:

“I started dating when I was 15 years doing my form three while my boyfriend was 20 years because my family was poor, and my father was unemployed. We had unprotected sex, and I became pregnant; I was expelled from school and my parents sent me to my boyfriend’s place and that is how I got married.”

Another survivor revealed:

“I was forced into early marriage by my uncle who could not take care of me since my parents were late. I needed to take care of basic needs; I started dating men when I was 14 years old. That is how I got pregnant and was taken to the boy’s house by my uncle.”

Sub-theme 3: Traditional and religious beliefs and practices

Most of the participants reported that religious and traditional beliefs and practices were one of the driving factors of child marriage in the Epworth area. Religious beliefs and traditions are an important factor in child marriage. Religious leaders and communities commonly play central roles in betrothal and marriage rituals. According to the participants, members of the Johanne Marange sect mainly dominate the Epworth area. The church has its own doctrine that promotes child marriages. They revealed that Johanne Marange Apostolic Church uses divination over its members as a way of forcing marriage upon young people, most particularly girls. The churches do not give the girls any marriage option. The church also has strong support for polygamy. According to the participants, men are allowed to have as many wives as possible if they can support them. Some participants stated that before getting married they sought guidance from the Holy Spirit. The participants also indicated that if they do not marry their daughters, according to social expectations, they would not be able to marry them off at all since marriage determines a woman's status. One of the parents had this to say:

“Religious beliefs and traditions are an important factor in child marriage. Religious leaders and communities commonly play central roles in betrothal and marriage rituals. Understandings of religious and traditional obligations guide many families as they consider the marriage of their children. Concepts of family honor are tragically bound up in attitudes toward race, caste, and religion. Religious leaders are often trusted above other groups of leaders. Religious actors have an influence that can change norms and practices. We seek guidance from the Holy Spirit first before marrying. Therefore, if I am directed to a young girl, I have no option but to marry her.”

Another parent said:

“Divination is used by Johanne Marange Apostolic Church over its members as a way of forcing marriage upon young people most particularly girls. The churches do not give the girls

any option and thus, marriage is solely out of church orthodoxy, and this delights their close relatives. The cult is recognized for having strong support for polygamy. Men are allowed to have as many wives as long they can support them."

Another parent reported:

"Marriage often determines a woman's status in many societies; parents also worry that if they don't marry their daughters according to social expectations, they will not be able to marry them at all. Parents are under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible to prevent them from becoming sexually active before marriage."

Theme 2: Challenges faced by survivors of child marriages

Sub-theme 1: Depression

All the participants interviewed revealed that survivors of child marriage faced challenges, and this puts them at increased risk of sexual, physical, and psychological violence. They indicated that depression, humiliation, and discrimination are the challenges faced by survivors of child marriage. According to the participants, constant comparison with their peers' results in depression because they considered themselves failures. One survivor said:

"When I compare myself with my peers I am in a worse position, they have improved with their lives, whilst on the other hand; I feel I'm a failure. Hence, I am developing negative thoughts bordering on depression, the constant comparison with my peers makes me feel ashamed and rejected by society."

Sub-theme 2: Humiliation

Some of the participants reported that they are humiliated in the community as a result they blame themselves. They added that because of the humiliation they find it very difficult to trust men. The participants went on to say that they feel betrayed by the authorities, most specifically the government. The government legislation is weak and fails to protect them from challenges such as early marriage, humiliation, and discrimination. A community member maintained that:

"From my experience, survivors most of the time feel guilt, shame, self-blame, humiliation and an overall feeling of degradation."

Another survivor reported:

"To trust a man is so hard for me even now, because I always feel like you know, somebody could just fool me, and I just feel like you know if it happened to me, it could happen again."

A social worker said:

"Survivors of child marriage also feel betrayed by the authorities, especially the government. In most instances, government legislation is weak and fails to protect them."

Sub-theme 3: Rejection and discrimination

Some participants revealed that they face rejection and discrimination from their own family, friends, and society. The participants mentioned that it is difficult for them to interact because they are often rejected and discriminated against by friends and family members. One of the survivors indicated:

"It is difficult for me to interact with others in society; they look at me with talking eyes. I am discriminated against by everyone in society, from my former classmates to friends and other individuals. They call me Mvana (a Shona derogatory term for unmarried females with children), hence I have become a sort of disgrace within the society."

Another survivor revealed:

"I have been ultimately rejected by my family since they say I have brought shame and embarrassment to the family. Because I separated from my husband, my father disowned me."

Theme 3: Coping mechanisms used by survivors of child marriages

Sub-theme 1: Attending church and prayers

Majority of the participants interviewed expressed that one of the most common forms of coping mechanisms used by survivors was attending church and prayer sessions. The participants reiterated that attending church and praying helped them to cope with traumatic experiences such as rejection and discrimination from friends and family members. One of the survivors mentioned:

“I knew I was going to get through it. I knew there was going to help me get through it and that has carried me through right to this day, hence going to church has assisted me to cope.”

Sub-theme 2: Professional assistance (social worker)

All the social workers interviewed reported that survivors of child marriage seek professional assistance from social workers. According to them, most survivors of child marriage are abused physically and sexually by their ex-husbands. As a result, they suffer from depression which might lead to suicide. They further added that before providing professional assistance, they ask the survivors about the challenges they faced. In addition, according to the participants, if the survivors are suffering from suicidal, self-harm thoughts and depression, they are referred to experienced professionals.

“We as professionals ask survivors about their problems before providing them with professional assistance. Most survivors of child marriage were sexually and physically abused by their ex-husbands; as a result, they are suffering from depression leading to suicidal thoughts. Hence, we have to refer them to some well experienced persons in dealing with depression and suicidal, self-harm thoughts if there is a need.”

Sub-theme 3: Street vending and survival sex

Most of the survivors of child marriage stressed using street vending and survival sex to earn an income to take care of their basic needs such as clothing, food, and shelter. They also indicated that engaging in street vending relieved them from stress because they can talk to different customers and colleagues. Participants shared their experiences:

“Yes, I engage in street vending because I want to survive in life. Sitting at home, I cannot survive. Hunger will kill me and my children. I am trying to make a living for myself and my kids to buy food for my children. Because I do not want my children to suffer you see.”

“What I enjoy the most is doing this business; I think talking to the customers and my fellow colleagues relieves me from stress. I mean talking to so many people; you see I enjoy doing street vending.”

Other participants further reported that they used survival sex as a coping mechanism to take care of their basic needs such as shelter, clothing, and food and that of their children. Survival sex is a form of prostitution engaged in by a person because of their extreme need. It describes the practice of people who are homeless or otherwise disadvantaged in society, trading sex for food, a place to sleep, other basic needs, or drugs. According to participants, they are single mothers who need to take care of their children. Participating in survival sex enabled them to solve their financial woes and secure better lives for themselves and their children. Participants shared their experiences:

“In one week, I earn \$50 bond, which is a lot of money, and the money solves my financial troubles. I cannot get out of it because it is my survival strategy, although before God this is not right. However, I am a single mother with a young daughter at school and she did not know what I am doing, but she knows I always have money to support her, and I am always away at night.”

“Sex work to me is an easy and good source of income compared to other jobs.”

“I am a victim of child marriage; I left my hometown leaving my kids behind with nothing. I made the decision to escape domestic abuse. My ex-partner had control of all the finances, so

arriving in a new city completely alone with no money. I undertook survival sex to secure a better life for myself and my kids.”

However, to some participants, survival sex was a negative strategy to use to survive.

“Although survival sex is a sin against God, however, we do not have any choice but to engage in sexual acts because it is the only way to support our children. While we usually use condoms, some clients are willing to pay more for sex without a condom.”

DISCUSSION

Child marriage is regarded as a negative practice under the global law of human rights because it is an abuse against young girls. The study found that poverty and unemployment were the main reasons young girls got married early as a solution to their problems and to secure a better life. Being unemployed was devastating because child marriage survivors are not responsible only for themselves but also for their children. Child marriages are seen as chances of escaping unemployment and poverty because some parents are unable to provide for their children. Poverty and unemployment are disastrous to the well-being of families and young girls. Poverty results in homelessness and inadequate nutrition and food insecurity. With unemployment comes a loss of income, and families are left without sufficient incomes to meet living expenses. Resilience theory endorses survivors' strength towards any encounters they face in life such as overcoming the causes of child marriage. Resilience theory enables child marriage survivors to be strong in any life situation and look forward to a better future.³³ The finding agrees with studies that found that poverty is the key cause of child marriages in most households in Zimbabwe.³⁴

Also, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices were also raised as another cause of child marriage. Understandings of religious and traditional obligations guide many families as they consider the marriages of their children. With regards to tradition, the association of the honor of a girl's chastity to the honour of the family, clan, or community places parents under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible prior to her being sexually active. Families get their daughters married according to social expectations because marriage determines a woman's status. Religious beliefs are an important factor in child marriage because religious leaders commonly play central roles in betrothal and marriage rituals. Marrying through religious beliefs provides meaning to commitment in marriage because it has a sacred purpose and provides people a perspective that helps them stay together during stressful events. The traditional and religious beliefs and practices rob millions of girls of their rights and dignity. These traditional and religious practices affect survivors socially, psychologically, and financially, especially in their well-being. The finding is in line with the studies of Nguyen and Wodon and Goldbach and Gibbs, which acknowledge that traditional religious crowds support or defend child brides, particularly teenage Christian, Mainstream Jewish and Mormon societies.³⁵ The Resilience Theory also supports the study by revealing that survivors demonstrate strength when faced with many life experiences by rising above the causes of child marriage.³⁶

The findings also revealed that child marriage survivors face many challenges such as depression, humiliation, and rejection in the community. Constant comparison with their peers' results causes depression because they consider themselves failures. Depression leads to mental health issues, neglected hygiene, poor self-care practices and low self-esteem. It can also lead to changes in eating or sleeping patterns, and emotional outbursts, such as tearfulness or anger. Humiliation was also raised

³³ Pęciłło, “The Concept of Resilience in OSH Management: A Review of Approaches.”

³⁴ Mufaro G Chamisa et al., “Religious Affiliation–Child Marriages Nexus in Zimbabwe: A Case of Marange,” *Journal of Economics and Finance (DRJ-JEF)* 4, no. 2 (2019): 38–44; Fidelis Peter Thomas Duri, “Vanishing Traditions? Girl Children as Sacrificial Lambs in the Context of Shona Indigenous Transitional Justice Mechanisms in 21st Century Zimbabwe,” *Violence, Peace and Everyday Modes of Justice and Healing in Post-Colonial Africa*, 2019, 249.

³⁵ Minh Cong Nguyen and Quentin Wodon, “Global and Regional Trends in Child Marriage,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2015): 6–11.

³⁶ Marcus Herz and Thomas Johansson, ““Doing’ Social Work: Critical Considerations on Theory and Practice in Social Work,” *Advances in Social Work* 13, no. 3 (2012): 527–40.

as another challenge affecting child marriage survivors. Child survivors are humiliated in the community, as a result, they blame themselves and find it very difficult to interact and trust men. The survivors feel betrayed by the authorities, most specifically the government. The government legislation is weak and fails to protect them from early marriage. Most child marriage survivors stemmed from poor backgrounds. Incidents and feelings of humiliation can both lead to serious mental health problems. Humiliation can cause survivors to abandon their interests or stop pursuing goals. It can also lead to anger, revenge, sadism, delinquency, or terrorism which is detrimental to the community. According to Goldbach and Gibbs survivors of child marriage most often feel shame, humiliation, disgrace, and a general feeling of degradation.³⁷ These findings align with the Resilience Theory which states that child marriage survivors demonstrate resilience in themselves when faced with challenges such as humiliation, but they develop the strength to rise above hardships.³⁸

The study also found that child marriage survivors engaged in street vending because it provides them the opportunity to work independently hence, self-reliance. Involving in street vending provides a platform to take care of themselves and their children. It also provides the main source of income for their households, bringing food to their families and paying school fees for their children. Street vending enabled survivors to improve their living conditions and living standards. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Sayi and Sibanda which affirms that street vending is the most employing sector in Zimbabwe and Africa, for child marriage survivors.³⁹ The Resilience Theory also discusses the strengths that child marriage survivors demonstrate when faced with adversity.⁴⁰ When child marriage survivors are faced with hardship and frustration, resilience through street vending helps them to survive, recover, and even thrive during adversity. Child marriage survivors use survival sex as strategies for taking care of their basic needs such as clothing, shelter, and food, although seen by some survivors as a negative mechanism. Child marriage survivors participated in sex work, primarily for financial security. This finding is consistent with studies by Sibanda and Dzimiri which reveal that child marriage survivors engaged in sex work as an easy and good source of income compared to other jobs.⁴¹ The Resilience Theory also supports the study stating that child marriage survivors show resilience by facing many life experiences such as survival sex that are traumatic and challenging but keep going to rise above adversity.⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has explored the survivors' experiences of child marriages in Zimbabwe. Various challenges have been mentioned and unless they are addressed the child marriage situation might continue to worsen. Thus, social workers and stakeholders involved need to develop strategies to help survivors cope effectively and morally and if possible, eradicate the situation. The authors, therefore, recommend that parents should care and take full responsibility for educating their children about child marriage. This includes investing in girls and women, developing their social and economic assets, guaranteeing they have access to education and health services, and ensuring that they can postpone marriage until they are ready. All this means greater dignity for women, healthier families and higher levels of gender equality. This in turn makes for stronger societies and more vibrant economies. Also, it is recommended that social workers should advocate for urban families to be given food aid and grants and coordinate family counseling programs as long-term coping mechanisms. The Government should

³⁷ Jeremy T Goldbach and Jeremy J Gibbs, "A Developmentally Informed Adaptation of Minority Stress for Sexual Minority Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescence* 55 (2017): 36–50.

³⁸ Haro, *Being a humanitarian woman in a conflict zone*.

³⁹ Takudzwa S Sayi and Amson Sibanda, "Correlates of Child Marriage in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Family Issues* 39, no. 8 (2018): 2366–88.

⁴⁰ Peçiĥo, "The Concept of Resilience in OSH Management: A Review of Approaches."

⁴¹ Maureen Sibanda, "Married Too Soon: Child Marriage in Zimbabwe," *Res Advocate Unit*, 2011, 1–22; Cynthia Dzimiri, Plaxedes Chikunda, and Viola Ingwani, "Causes of Child Marriages in Zimbabwe: A Case of Mashonaland Province in Zimbabwe," *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences*, 2017; Muchacha and Matsika, "Developmental Social Work: A Promising Practice to Address Child Marriage in Zimbabwe."

⁴² Peçiĥo, "The Concept of Resilience in OSH Management: A Review of Approaches."

also ensure that avenues are created to support income-generating community-based projects such as social support networks. These should be made available to survivors of child marriage to access basic opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This article using the Resilience Theory analysed the lived experiences of survivors of child marriage in Zimbabwe with a focus on the Epworth, Harare Municipality. It revealed that child marriage presents a significant socio-economic concern for young girls in the area. Marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights and often results in early pregnancy, social isolation, and mental health. The study found that poverty and unemployment were the main reasons young girls got married early as a solution to their problems and to secure a better life. Also, traditional, and religious beliefs and practices influenced early child marriage. Families got their daughters married according to social expectations because marriage determines a woman's status. In addition, child marriage survivors encountered challenges such as depression, humiliation, and rejection. These challenges often lead to changes in eating or physical and emotional trauma. Further, survival sex and street vending were the coping mechanisms used by child marriage survivors to provide for themselves and their children. Although survival sex was a negative coping strategy, however, child marriage survivors resorted to it for survival. The authors have made various recommendations to help stakeholders develop strategies to curb this societal menace that has been in existence for so long. Curbing the rate or possibly eradicating child marriage would be of benefit to all societies across the globe.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

FUNDING

No funding was obtained by the authors to conduct this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was part of the master's research project titled "Exploring the experiences of female child marriage survivors: A case study of Epworth in Harare Metropolitan, Zimbabwe.

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