

Effects of Poverty on Early Marriages: A Case of Mansa District in Luapula Province, Zambia

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Abstract:

Early marriage perpetuates the feminization of poverty, preventing girls from attaining their full potential in terms of developing their social capabilities. Poverty on the other hand, is a state or condition in which a person or community lacks the financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Education in Zambia was a road to success and every child desired to have access to education and finish without any difficulties but many children failed to succeed in school because they were victims of early marriages. Poverty was the main reason behind early marriages in rural areas as most families had large family sizes. Hence, the study aimed at exploring the effects of poverty on early marriages in Mansa district of Luapula Province in Zambia. The study employed both the qualitative and quantitative methods and a descriptive research design that sampled community headmen, parents and girls from the selected areas. Data was obtained from the respondents by means of interviews and questionnaires. Frequency tables, graphs, figures and pie-charts were used to analyze the qualitative data. Quantitative data were analyzed by the use of software MS access and MS Excel. The findings revealed poverty to be at the epitome of early marriages hence, girls drop out of school at an early age due to poverty and end up marrying early because of not having anything meaningful to do. Other causes include cultural practices, teenage pregnancies and to a lesser extent cultural erosion. The study, therefore, concludes that the effect of poverty on early marriages exists and it affects the girl child education in Mansa district. In this respect, the study recommended that girl children and parents should be given microfinance early to finance girl children for education as well as empowering them. In line with this, there should be a deliberate policy movement aimed at dealing with underlying factors such as poverty among rural people coupled with heavy sexual reproductive health awareness among the young people in the District.

Keywords: Community, Cultural Practices, Education, Early Marriage, Equality and Poverty.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was set out to explore the effects of poverty on early marriages especially on the girl child in rural Zambia learning from the experiences of the people of Luapula Province in Mansa district. The study argued that women should be given equal opportunities with men before the law as they were also able to do what men can do. Child marriage is defined as the legal marriage or informal union before the age of

18.1 It has globally been identified as one of the major detriments to development and a major impediment to the realization of human rights. Zambia has not been spared from this: 31 percent of women marry before their 18th birthday. Poverty is the main reason behind early marriages in rural areas as most families have large family sizes. With such families, most parents are unable or unwilling to take care of their children. Early marriages are therefore seen as opportunities to reduce this burden. Zambia had been one of the highest child marriage rates in the world with 42% of women aged 20-24 years married by the age of 18. Early marriage had currently become a vital topic of discussion amongst several development platforms which had made it more visible to many that were unaware of its existence (Parton, 2009). Early marriage in Zambia lied at the intersection of broad set of problems facing girls. The practice violated girls' human rights, curtails their schooling, harms their health and sharply constrains their future. Poverty, social norms, customary and religious practices and in some cases inadequate legislative framework are among factors blamed for child marriages.

As a result of poverty, parents withdrew their daughters from school and married them off, sometimes to older men for monetary gain (Radbill, 2009). The practice of early marriage had widespread in rural areas where poverty levels were higher. Early marriage often compromised a girl's development as it resulted into early pregnancy, risks to health, poverty and interruption of education which limited they opportunities for career and vocational advancement. Zambia had been among the countries with the highest prevalence of early marriages in the world. It had estimated that almost 6% of Zambian women are married at age 13 while the legal age of marriage is 21 years (UNICEF 2013). A UNFPA sub-analysis of the 2007 Zambia Demographic Health Survey (ZDHS) had indicated that two out of five girls (about 42%) were married off before their 18th birthday. This analysis had showed that girls living in poverty and in rural areas faced a higher risk of early marriages and most especially those who had no access to education. By then, Zambia was ranked 16th amongst countries with the highest rate of early marriage in the world and although the Marriage Act establishes a legal age for marriage, and the Penal Code makes sex with a girl under 16 an offence in Zambia, these provisions rarely applied in customary law. Under statutory marriage however, child marriages were illegal, and considered a form of child abuse. The legal age for marriage under statutory law was 21 for both females and males. On the other hand, under traditional law, marriage would take place at puberty, and it was common for girls to be married or have sexual relations under the age of 16.

Although strides had been made in the fight against early marriage, one of the major challenges was the lack of a specific policy and law on child, early and forced marriage which could go a long way in ensuring that it was supported by the activities that were currently being undertaken by civil society, government, traditional leaders and other stakeholders (Wolfe, 2012). Formerly, marriage was being contracted both under statutory and customary laws. In 2013, Zambia launched the campaign against child marriage which was being spearheaded by the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs in close collaboration with Ministries of Health, Gender and Child Development, Community Development, Mother and Child Health, UNFP and Civil Society Organizations. Zambia and Canada sponsored the UN resolution to end child marriages which had since been passed.

Throughout the world, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. Sadly, as this Digest makes clear, the practice of early marriage gives no such cause for celebration. All too often, the imposition of a marriage partner upon a child means that a girl or boy's childhood is cut short and their fundamental rights are compromised. Early marriage in other countries occurs for reasons such as cultural beliefs, social norms, poverty, control over girls and religion (Tomson, 2010). Low literacy and lack of

awareness among girls and their parents, lack of decision-making power and authority of girls, gaining social prestige and support, and poverty have been identified as the most important causes of early marriage of girls in Iran (UN, 2005). Birth, marriage and death are the standard trio of key events in most people's lives. But only one – marriage – is a matter of choice. The right to exercise that choice was recognized as a principle of law even in Roman times and has long been established in international human rights instruments. Yet many girls, and a smaller number of boys, enter marriage without any chance of exercising their right to choose. Some are forced into marriage at a very early age. Others are simply too young to make an informed decision about their marriage partner or about the implications of marriage itself. They may have given what passes for 'consent' in the eyes of custom or the law, but in reality, consent to their binding union has been made by others on their behalf. While early marriage takes many different forms and has various causes, one issue is paramount. Whether it happens to a girl or a boy, early marriage is a violation of human rights. The right to free and full consent to a marriage is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in many subsequent human rights instruments – consent that cannot be 'free and full' when at least one partner is very immature. For both girls and boys, early marriage has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impacts, cutting off educational opportunity and chances of personal growth. For girls, in addition, it will almost certainly mean premature pregnancy and childbearing, and is likely to lead to a lifetime of domestic and sexual subservience over which they have no control (UN,2006).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The practice of marrying girls at a young age is most common in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. However, in the Middle East, North Africa and other parts of Asia, marriage at or shortly after puberty is common among those living traditional lifestyles (Korbin, 2005). There are also specific parts of West and East Africa and of South Asia where marriages much earlier than puberty are not unusual, while marriages of girls between the ages of 16 and 18 are common in parts of Latin America and in pockets of Eastern Europe. Zambia had been one of the highest dominance rates of child marriages in the world. On average, two out of five girls got married before their 18th birthday in the rural areas. Kay (2003) states that child marriages created problems to both sexes although girls were more affected since they were most vulnerable to early marriages and were the majority victims. Child marriage limited the child's education, affected the general health, and placed the affected in disadvantaged position. For instance, children engaged in an early marriage were more likely to drop out of school, had little or no education, were unemployed or low paid, lived in poor housing conditions and had a lot of children. The cycle would continue as these children were more likely to have no education, and would end up in an early marriage as well. If not addressed, child marriages would have undermined all developmental efforts in the country. Early marriage was not only a human right violation but it was also a barrier to social development (Kirk, 2003). The government of Zambia reacted towards early marriages by implementing measures such as hard punishment to those that were found guilty of early marriages; this was done in order to create a conducive environment for all. However, studies showed that despite the government's efforts to end the occurrence of early marriages the cases of early marriages kept on increasing rapidly. It was from this background information that this study had been designed to explore the effects of poverty on early marriages in Mansa district of Luapula Province in Zambia.

1.3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of poverty on early marriages in Mansa district of Luapula Province, Zambia.

1.4. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Identify the influencers of early marriages within families and communities in Mansa district of Luapula Province.
- Examine the effects of poverty on early marriages in Mansa district of Luapula Province.
- Recommend strategies that can be adopted to curb poverty in Mansa district of Luapula Province.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

Poverty can be defined as the state of not having enough material possessions or income for a person's basic needs. Maher (2006) added that poverty included social, economic, and political elements. Absolute poverty was the complete lack of the means necessary to meet basic personal needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter and the floor at which absolute poverty is defined is always about the same, independent of the person's permanent location or era. On the other hand, relative poverty occurs when a person cannot meet a minimum level of living standards, compared to others in the same time and place. Therefore, the floor at which relative poverty was defined varies from one country to another or from one society to another. Many governments and non-governmental organizations try to reduce poverty by providing basic needs to people who are unable to earn a sufficient income (Leah, 2007). These efforts were hampered by constraints on government's ability to deliver services, such as corruption, tax avoidance, and debt and loan conditionality and by the brain drain of health care and educational professionals. Strategies of increasing income to make basic needs more affordable typically include welfare, economic freedoms and providing financial services. Meanwhile, the poorest citizens of middle-income countries had largely failed to receive an adequate share of their countries' increased wealth (UNICEF, 2013).

Further, early marriage families were most likely to be in poverty because most of the parents in those families were not educated and this had resulted them to be poor. A poor person was not able to take proper food and nutrition and his capacity to work reduces. Reduced capacity to work further reduced his income, making him poorer. Children from poor family never got proper schooling and proper nutrition. They had to work to support their family and this destroyed their childhood. Some of them also were involved in crimes like theft, murder, and robbery, so on. A poor person remained uneducated and was forced to live under unhygienic conditions in slums. There was no proper sanitation and drinking water facility in slums and he who fell ill often and his health deteriorates. A poor person generally died an early death and so, all social evils were related to poverty. Jaffe (2009), explains that child marriage was a violation of child rights, and had a negative impact on physical growth, health, mental and emotional development, and education opportunities. While regional disparities exist, child marriage had significantly decreased from 47 per cent to 27 per cent. It also affected society as a whole since child marriage reinforced a cycle of poverty and perpetuated gender discrimination, illiteracy and malnutrition as well as high infant and maternal mortality rates (Jones, 2012).

1.6. Significance of the Study

The study was very significant to Mansa district because it was to generate information which had contributed to finding solutions to the problem. The prevalence of early marriages in Mansa district of Luapula Province was high thus this study came up with recommendations which when implemented together with existing strategies would go a long way in reducing the prevalence of child marriages in the country. Furthermore, the study was to contribute to theory because it had helped to establish that child marriages were more influenced by social-economic and cultural factors. The study also helped fill the existing gap in knowledge particularly in Mansa district with regards to the factors that had influenced prevalence of early marriages. The study further helped to establish a snapshot prevalence of early marriages in the district which provided a basis for intervention and evaluation of programs aimed at ending early marriages. Lastly, it is hoped that the findings and recommendations of this study would assist policy makers as well as the government in ensuring that issues of early marriages are not taken lightly in the district.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Study Design

The study adopted a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. Exploratory and descriptive designs were as well considered appropriate as they also allowed for more flexible strategies of data collection in order to answer the research questions. The study was aimed at collecting information from respondents on the effects of poverty on early marriages in a case of Mansa district of Luapula Province in Zambia.

2.2. Research Site

The research was conducted in Mansa district of Luapula Province in Zambia from which respondents were also sampled.

2.3. Population, Sample and Sampling Procedure

The population for the study comprised of headmen, parents and girls. The target population was 600. The sample size involved a total of 60 respondents which included two (2) headmen, fifteen (15) parents and forty-three (43) girls. The study employed both purposive and simple random sampling on different participants. Simple random sampling was used on the parents and the girls, this is because there were too many to participate, hence simple random selection was preferred. On the other hand, Purposive sampling was used on the headmen for convenient purposes.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed qualitatively as the semi-structured interview schedules were used as data collection instruments. The thematic approach was used, where data analysis started with the categorizing themes from the semi-structured interview schedules. The data gathered was analyzed according to the themes of the study and the order of the research objectives. Data generated from the questionnaires were analyzed manually by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (version 26) and Microsoft Excel (version 16) to come up with frequency tables, pie charts and bar graphs.

2.5. Ethical Issues

Permission letter from Rockview University and the Council Chairperson for Mansa district was sought in carrying out this study. Interviews were not conducted on one-to-one basis; instead, participants were grouped and identified using their titles. An informed consent was sought before collecting information from the informants and guaranteed them with security of the information they provided. Furthermore, the main objective of gathering such information was made clear to the respondents. The researchers avoided pressuring respondents to take part in the research. Alternatively, permission consents, assents were obtained from respondents involved in the research and the research topic was strategically selected to ensure that there was no harm whatsoever to the research respondents. In this study, the researchers were fully conscious of the need to abide by the ethical rule of respecting the privacy of individuals taking part in the research. In the same way, all the respondents of the research were to remain unidentified to the public as all their valuable views, opinions and perceptions were only known by the researchers for use only in the research and participant's identities will forever remain hidden.

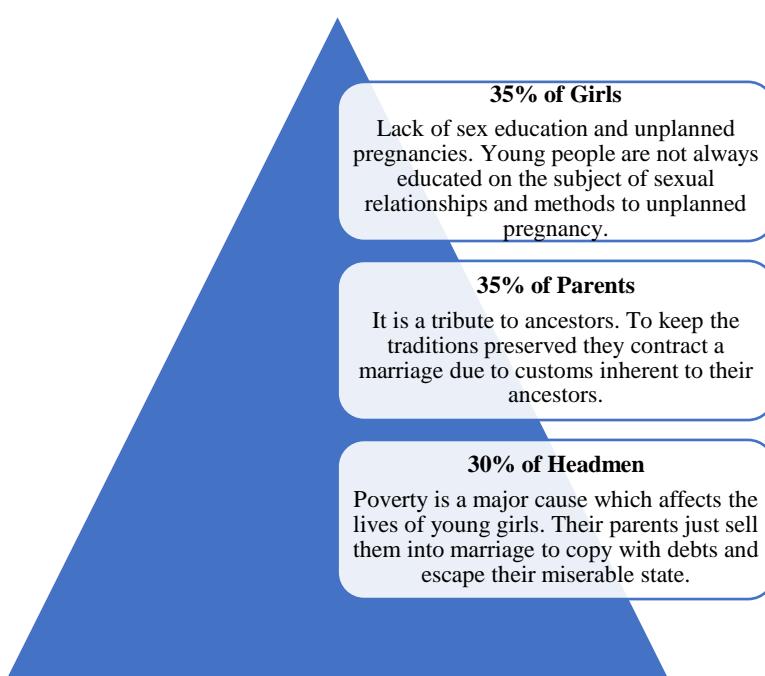
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

3.1. Influencers of Early Marriages

The following were the responses from the respondents regarding the influencers of early marriages in Mansa district. (35%) representing the girls stated that, lack of sexual education and unexpected pregnancy. (30%) representing the headmen stated that poverty is one of the causes which affect the lives of young girls. (35%) representing the parents also said that early marriage is a tribute to the ancestors.

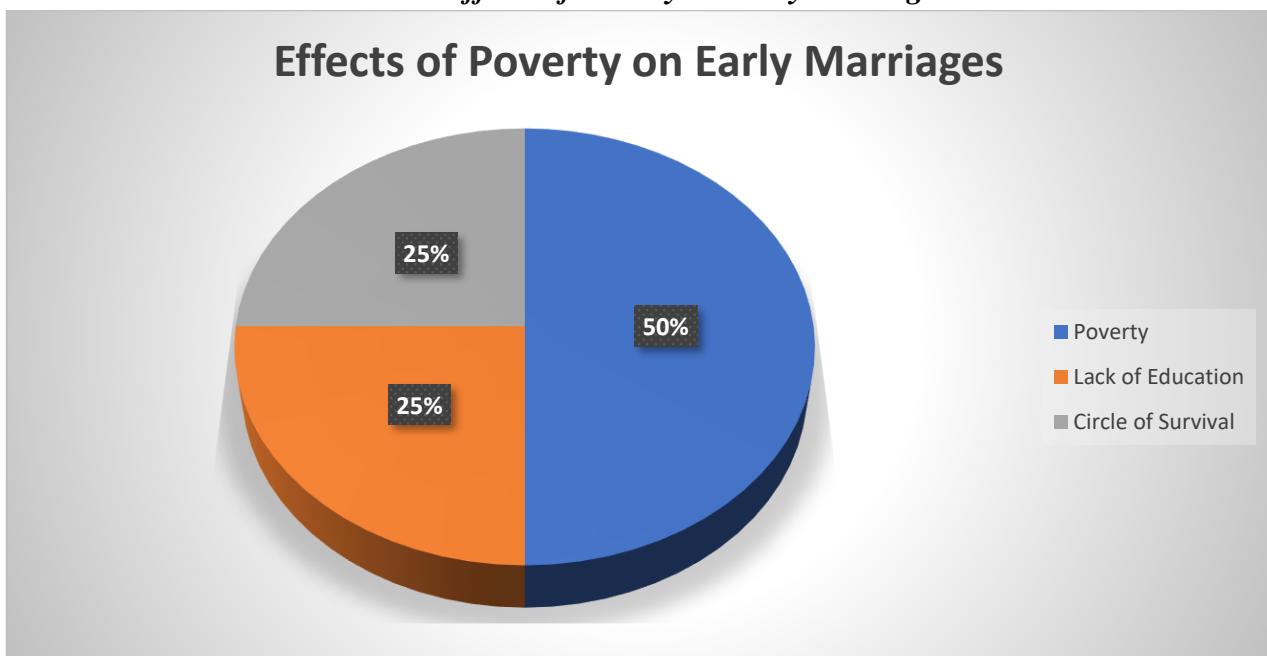
Figure 1: Influencers of Early Marriages



From the figure above, participants indicated that lack of sexual education and unexpected pregnancy. The girls said that the modern world has its own rules and no restrictions. However, young people are not always educated enough on the subject of sexual relationships and methods to avoid unplanned pregnancy. Most of the countries prohibit abortions. Furthermore, they bear criminal liability under the law. To prevent legal responsibility and any punishment the young people are obliged to get married, even if one of the “participants” is thought to be too young. Early marriage is a violation of children’s human rights. It has devastating impacts on the lives of children, particularly girls. Additionally, the headmen also stated that poverty is one of the causes which affect the lives of young girls. Their parents just “sell” them into marriage to cope with debts and escape their miserable state, parents also said that early marriage is a tribute to ancestors. To keep the traditions preserved is one of the primary tasks in many African countries. They contract a marriage due to the customs inherent to their ancestors (Kay, 2003).

3.2. Effects of Poverty on Early Marriages

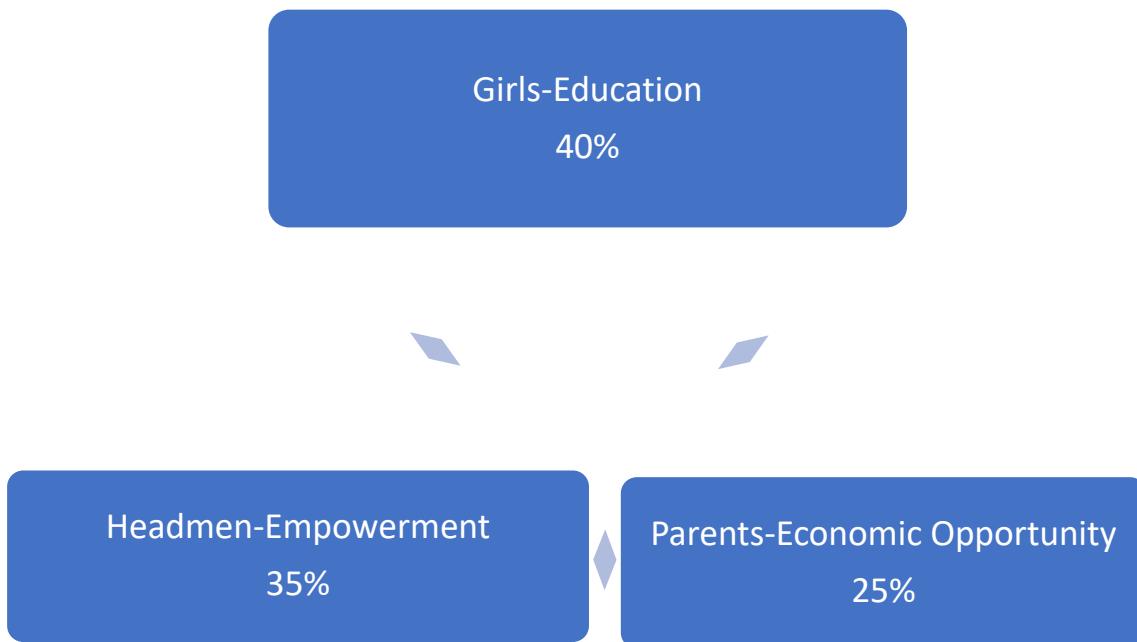
Chart 1: Effects of Poverty on Early Marriages



The headmen stated that poverty is the main reason behind early marriages in rural areas as most families have large family sizes. With such families, most parents are unable or unwilling to take care of their children. Early marriages are therefore seen as opportunities to reduce this burden. Others who cannot feed or send their children to school, give young girls off marriage to older men. Some parents arrange marriages between their children and their creditors as a way of settling debts. Additionally, girls stated that lack of education thus in most of the cultures, the primary “function” of a girl or a woman is to give birth to children and run the house. Such necessary feature as education is thought to be unnecessary for them. The girls are detached from educational establishments and are obliged to be a good wife. It is forbidden to them to have even the slightest idea to continue studying. Furthermore, the parents said that the girls find themselves being in a trap in the sense that they have to work to earn for a living, but from another hand a lack of education and necessary skills doesn’t provide enough opportunities for well-paid jobs. That is why their life turns into a “circle of survival” with no beginning and no end (Jones, 2012).

3.3. Strategies to Curb Poverty

Chart 2: Strategies to Curb Poverty



From the figure above, the participants gave different recommendations to curbing poverty in Mansa district. The girls stated that education plays a critical role in keeping girls safe from child marriage. Furthermore, said that the longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before age 18 and have children during her teenage years. In addition, education ensures girls acquire the skills and knowledge to find employment and a means to support their families. This can help break the cycle of poverty and prevent child marriages that occur as a result of extreme poverty or financial gain. The headmen also said that every girl has the right to decide her own future, but not every girl knows this that's why empowering girls is so crucial to ending child marriage. When girls are confident in their abilities, armed with knowledge of their rights and supported by peer groups of other empowered girls, they are able to stand up and say "NO" to injustices like child marriage. Empowered girls are able to re-shape perspectives and challenge conventional norms of what it means to be a girl (Herbert, 2009). Additionally, the parents stated providing girls and their families with income opportunities, providing families with livelihood opportunities like microfinance loans is an effective way to prevent child marriages that occur as a result of financial need. When families have increased economic opportunities, they're less likely to perceive their daughters as economic burdens. This is especially true if a girl is in school gaining valuable skills (Brown, 2006).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that poverty has a high negative effect on early marriages and that it affects the girl child more because it makes them not to pursue their studies more and hence, they are married off to old men by their poor families to help them clear debts. Additionally, the study concluded that poverty was the critical factor contributing to early marriage. Where poverty was acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic asset. Their parents just "sell" them into marriage to

cope with debts and escape their miserable state, parents also said that early marriage is a tribute to ancestors. To keep the traditions preserved is one of the primary tasks in many African countries. They contract a marriage due to the customs inherent to their ancestors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings of this study:

- The government and the community must come together and foster skill development in the young girls such as catering, tailoring unlike them being dormant in the community, especially those who have no access to school.
- The government and the community should promote educational awareness, advocacy and rehabilitation through different programs.
- The ward councilors and headmen should hold rallies and sensitize/educate parents and community members on the dangers of early marriages.

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