



RESEARCH REPORT

# OUR VOICES, OUR FUTURE

Understanding child marriage  
in food-insecure communities in  
Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe

June 2022



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**The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)** improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programmes and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice.

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This study is part of a multi-country research series under Plan International's Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings Initiative, a phased approach to delivering evidence-based programming to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings.

The report was jointly written by Co-Principal Investigators Katherine Gambir of WRC, Dr. Abel Blessing Matsika, an independent research consultant and Clare Lofthouse of Plan International. Contributors to the report include Ilenia de Marino of Plan International Global Hub; and Eleanor Snowden and Anna Panagiotou of The Cynefin Company. We are grateful to Diana Quick of WRC and Anna Brown for editing the report.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ASRH</b>	Adolescent sexual and reproductive health
<b>CAMFED</b>	Campaign for Female Education
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organisations
<b>CCW</b>	Community child care workers
<b>CEDAW</b>	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
<b>CEFMU</b>	Child, early and forced marriage and unions
<b>CMR-IPV</b>	Clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease 2019. Also known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)
<b>CP</b>	Child protection
<b>CPC</b>	Child protection committees
<b>CSE</b>	Comprehensive sexuality education
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>ECPs</b>	Emergency contraceptive pills
<b>FAO</b>	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>FSL</b>	Food security and livelihoods sector
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>INGO</b>	International nongovernmental organisations
<b>IPC</b>	The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
<b>IPV</b>	Intimate partner violence
<b>KI</b>	Key informant
<b>KII</b>	Key informant interview
<b>MHPSS</b>	Mental health and psychosocial support
<b>NGO</b>	(National) nongovernmental organisation
<b>SDG</b>	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals “2030 Global Goals”
<b>SOGIESC</b>	Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics
<b>SRHR</b>	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
<b>STI</b>	Sexually transmitted disease
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<b>VAW</b>	Violence against women
<b>VFU</b>	Add- Victim Friendly Unit
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>WRC</b>	Women’s Refugee Commission

# TERMINOLOGY

## CHILD MARRIAGE

Child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) are any marriage or informal union, whether under civil, religious, or customary law, with or without formal registration, where either one or both spouses are under the age of 18 and/or where the full and free informed consent of one or both of the parties has not been obtained (Plan International, 2021a). The comprehensive term “child, early, and forced marriage and unions” encompasses a number of different scenarios:

- **“Child marriage”** is a formal marriage or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age and where full consent is therefore lacking. The vast majority of child marriages are considered forced since children and adolescents have limited power to consent given their age, and other determinants.
- **“Early marriage,”** which is often used interchangeably with “child marriage,” refers to marriages or unions involving a person under 18 in countries where the age of majority (meaning the age at which someone is considered an adult) is attained earlier than 18 or upon marriage. Early marriage can also refer to marriages where both spouses are 18 or older but other factors make them unready or unable to consent to marriage, such as their level of physical, emotional, sexual, or psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person’s life options.
- **“Forced marriage”** is where one or both partners, regardless of age, have not given, or been able to give, their full and free consent to the marriage or union and are unable to leave the marriage, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure. Forced marriage can involve physical, psychological, or financial coercion, and can occur in a variety of circumstances, such as human trafficking or arranged and child marriages. Adults and children can experience forced marriage.
- **“Unions”** are informal marriages or free unions that are to all intents and purposes equivalent to formal marriage, though without the legal status of a marriage. These unions are often not formalised by the state or religious authorities, making it difficult to account for them and collect sufficient data on the issue. Several different terms are used to name and describe these unions, including consensual or self-initiated union, early union, and cohabitation.



12-year old girl participating in an accelerated learning programme to catch up on education after COVID-19 lockdown.

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For the purposes of this research and report, the term **“child marriage”** will be used to refer to any marriage, formal or informal union, or cohabitation, where at least one party is under 18. It considers that the majority of child marriages are forced, given the power dynamics or a lack of alternative options.

## ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood when a young person experiences several drastic changes in their body and mind and the way they relate to the world. Adolescents start to form stronger connections with peers, while seeking more independence from their parents and families. While gender norms are shaped from early childhood, adolescence is a critical time to influence gender norms, roles, and expectations of young people as they become more solidified (Plan International, 2020). While the changes that adolescents experience are universal, the understanding and definition of adolescence varies across cultural contexts. Adolescence is the period from 10 to 19 years of age, along with the following age definitions: early adolescence: 10 to 14 years; and late adolescence: 15 to 19 years (Plan International, 2020; Compact for Youth in Humanitarian Action).

The data in this report refers to adolescents 10 to 19 years of age. However, some terms and phrases used in this report use “child” or “children,” for example violence against children and child protection. When these terms are used, we are referring to children and adolescents 10 to 19 years old unless otherwise specified.

## PREGNANCY

In Chiredzi District, and in Zimbabwe more broadly, specific terminology is used to imply how pregnancy has come about. Specifically, to be *impregnated* implies that the pregnancy was unplanned and, in some cases, not by consent. In Shona, a majority local language, this is called *kumitiswa*. In contrast, to say that someone *is pregnant*, or *became pregnant*, assumes that the pregnancy was planned and wanted.

# 01

## INTRODUCTION



*Adolescent girl discussing how she has been trained in sewing to generate income, Zimbabwe.*  
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**In 2019, Plan International and the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) launched the Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings Initiative. It is a phased approach to delivering evidence-based and practice-informed programming to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings.**

The initiative includes girl-centred, community-based research in communities experiencing food insecurity in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe, and communities affected by conflict and displacement in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), Philippines. Guidance on how to prevent, delay, and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings will be developed, leveraging lessons learned from this research and from Plan International and WRC’s programmatic experience and research (Hunersen et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2021; WRC, 2021; and Leigh et al., 2020), in addition to other relevant evidence.

**This report documents the research process and findings from the Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe.**

This study was commissioned by Plan International Zimbabwe in partnership with WRC and implemented in-country by Dr. Abel Blessing Matsika. It is an effort to investigate the needs and priorities of adolescents in selected Urban and Peri-Urban wards in Chiredzi, with the overall goal of developing a tailored, girl-led, community-grounded approach to child marriage prevention and response that transforms girls and their communities from beneficiaries to engaged and empowered leaders. The findings from this report will be used to inform child marriage programming responses in Zimbabwe as well as in other humanitarian contexts experiencing food insecurity.



**TRIGGER WARNING:** This report contains content that some readers may find distressing, including first-hand accounts from adolescents and other community members that reference severe mental health issues; gender-based violence; and self-harm, such as suicide, violence, and exploitation.



02

**BACKGROUND**

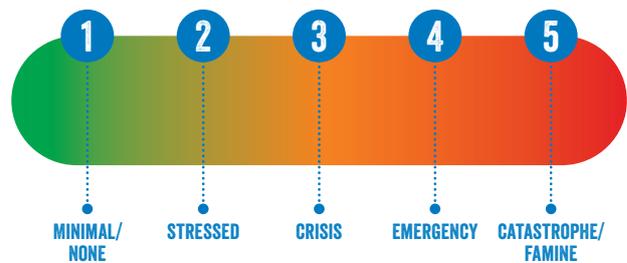
*A 14-year-old girl does the washing up at her home.*  
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Peanuts being processed to make peanut butter, Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

## FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is defined as “a lack of access to the kinds and amounts of food necessary for each member of a household to lead an active and a healthy lifestyle” (Babu et al., 2022). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) has identified five levels of severity of acute food insecurity:



Each phase is based on a rigorous assessment of the context and international standards, including food consumption levels, livelihoods changes, nutritional status, and mortality, and triangulates them with the five determinants of food insecurity: food availability, access, utilisation, stability, and malnutrition. Vulnerability and crises, including extreme weather events, are causal factors that impact these five determinants (IPC, 2022). According to the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), organised violence or conflict are the primary drivers of food insecurity globally, while weather extremes such as heavy rains, tropical storms, hurricanes, flooding, drought, and climate variability are significant drivers. For example, the 2021-22 La Niña episode, which in southern Africa resulted in wetter-than-normal conditions and a high risk of flooding and associated water-borne diseases. These episodes cause disruption to crop yields and production, thereby increasing the number of people at risk of food insecurity (WFP and FAO, 2022; UNICEF, 2022a).

The COVID-19 containment measures that led to global and national economic disruptions created (and continue to create) uncertainties in the financial market that negatively affected national economies and contributed to food insecurity. The World Bank estimated that 97 million more people globally were living in poverty in 2021 compared to 2019 due to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahler et al., 2021). High food prices that spiked in 2021 and lowered household purchasing power are major economic concerns for increasing global acute food insecurity. To summarise, most of these intersecting factors often co-exist and reinforce one another, adding to income losses and rising prices, and contribute to further reducing household purchasing power (WFP and FAO, 2022).



A 13-year-old collects firewood at her home in Zimbabwe.  
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## FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIREDDI DISTRICT

Chiredzi District is located in Masvingo Province, in the south-eastern part of Zimbabwe, bordering Mozambique and South Africa. The district is arid and characterized by erratic rainfall, droughts, and high temperatures, especially in summer. As in many parts of the region, Chiredzi has heavy clays and is therefore not suitable for agriculture. Despite these unfavourable conditions, the population relies largely on agriculture and livestock production (Defe and Matsa, 2021). The worsening impacts of climate change make Chiredzi one of the most chronically food insecure districts in the country. The poor rainfall, recurrent poor agricultural seasons, and the increasing price of food and commodities across the country were only worsened by the COVID-19 restrictions that resulted in household incomes being reduced by more than 50 percent (IPC, 2020).

In the latest available IPC classification, 2021 data projections put Chiredzi District at IPC level 3 “crisis,” with 30 percent of the population severely affected including 10 percent at IPC level 4 “emergency” (IPC, 2020). The Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee estimated rural food insecurity prevalence for the district at 57 percent during the peak lean season from February to March/April (ZIMVAC, 2021). With livelihoods options generally constrained, and household incomes not enough to meet basic food and other needs, communities seek other opportunities, such as cross-border trading and migration (especially men and adolescent boys), typically to South Africa (Defe and Matsa, 2021).

## FOOD INSECURITY IN ZIMBABWE

The severity of Zimbabwe’s food security situation is classified by the 2021 Global Hunger Index as “serious” (von Grebmer et al., 2021). The rating is premised on a range of factors, including the economic instability and recurrent climate-induced shocks, such as erratic rainfall and changing rainfall patterns, increased temperatures, frequent droughts, and prolonged heat waves. As a result, the WFP estimates that around 5.3 million people in Zimbabwe are food insecure as a result of climate change and protracted economic instability and the resulting humanitarian crisis, with at least 49 percent of the population living in extreme poverty (WFP, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the food crisis, adding 1.3 million people experiencing extreme poverty (World Bank, 2021). Further, UNICEF projects that 4.3 million people, including 2.2 million children, will be in urgent need of humanitarian assistance due to the complex humanitarian crisis, including more than 21,000 children with severe acute malnutrition in need of medical treatment (UNICEF, 2022a). The more frequent droughts, erratic rainfall, and soaring temperatures compromise crop and livestock production. Climate change, together with job losses and food price increases, has worsened the humanitarian crisis. Food insecurity was also exacerbated by inadequate coverage of essential social protection programmes, with less than a quarter of people in extremely poor households receiving food aid in June 2020, dropping to 3 percent of rural households in September 2020 (ZIMSTAT, 2020<sup>1</sup>).



1. This is a high frequency telephone survey to track the social, economic, and welfare impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on households.



Women tend to their garden in Zimbabwe's Chiredzi District.  
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## FOOD INSECURITY AND CHILD MARRIAGE

During crises, agricultural livelihoods, food production and distribution, agricultural assets, and safe access to water or food may be disrupted or destroyed. In many settings, crises also negatively impact social protection systems that can result in increased risks for adolescents (CP AOR, 2018).

A small but growing body of literature shows that food insecurity can be both a driver and a consequence of child marriage (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020; Plan International, 2021b; Plan International, 2019; Girls Not Brides and International Center for Research on Women (GNB and ICRW, 2015; Glinski, 2015; CP AOR, 2018; World Vision, 2021a). As a form of gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage is underpinned by gender inequality. The intersections of harmful gendered norms that seek to deprioritise girls compared to boys, coupled with food insecurity and increasing poverty, can create strong motivation by caregivers or parents to marry off girls early to increase household income through dowry or gifts, or by improving social status. Child marriage may also be an attempt to conserve already limited resources by reducing the number of children to feed or care for. Marriage decisions may also be perceived as a way to secure a better future for daughters, for example, through marriage to wealthy men who can meet girls' needs or to those who are more food secure (GNB and ICRW, 2015). Equally, girls themselves may seek out relationships or marriage as a way to meet their own needs and escape household poverty or other concerns.

In countries where child marriage is already occurring, economic pressures caused by climate disasters on the agriculture sector can increase the incidence of child marriage due to added

economic strain on households. This may push parents to remove their daughters (more than boys) from school to conserve family finances, or to have their children engage in child labour activities (Mesfin et al., 2019). This removes the protection provided by education and future economic empowerment, and puts girls at risk of child marriage.

Many women, especially in rural areas, produce most of the food for family consumption, as well as being primarily responsible for household food and nutrition security. However, women also tend to have less access to, use of, control over, and ownership of agricultural land and productive resources, and their rights are often insecure and go unrecognized (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). This lack of access and rights can both motivate child marriage and exacerbate its effects. When only men are entitled to land ownership and inheritance, it forces women and girls to rely on men for access to land and food security. The phenomenon of "famine brides" has been observed across different countries and regions, such as Kenya during the drought in 2010 and recurrent crises in Ethiopia (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020; Glinski et al., 2015), South Sudan (Plan International, 2021b) and southern Africa (Plan International, 2019). Adolescent girls living in rural crisis settings therefore tend to be more at risk of food insecurity and child marriage that together create a vicious vulnerability cycle that girls struggle to break free from (CP AOR, 2018). While food insecurity can be a driver of child marriage, the practice can also perpetuate the cycle of food insecurity and malnutrition known as "the vicious cycle of malnutrition." This cycle impacts adolescents throughout their lifetimes, for example, by negatively impacting on educational attainment and health (GNB and ICRW, 2015).

## CHILD MARRIAGE IN ZIMBABWE

There are over 1 million girls today who were married as children in Zimbabwe; with more than 1 in 3 (34%) young women aged 20–24 years having been married before age 18, and 5 percent married before the age of 15. Adolescent boys in Zimbabwe also marry before they are 18 years old, and 2 percent of young men aged 20–24 years reported being married as children (UNICEF, 2022b).

Child marriage rates differ by province, ranging from 11–70 percent prevalence. The child marriage rate in Masvingo Province, where the study was conducted, ranges between 41 and 50 percent of girls married by 18 years (UNICEF, 2022b). Prevalence of child marriage in Zimbabwe is higher in rural areas compared to urban areas, and a clear correlation exists between girls in the poorest quintile, with those with no or little education being distinctly more vulnerable to child marriage than girls from higher wealth quintiles and education levels (UNICEF, 2022b). Girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be married before 18 (44%) compared to girls in urban areas (21%) (ZimSTAT, 2019). Further, almost 100 percent of girls who were married before 18 years gave birth before they reached 20, with over 60 percent doing so before they reached 18. Child marriage rates in Zimbabwe have in fact slightly worsened over the last 25 years (UNICEF, 2022b). Moreover, given that many child marriages are underreported or unregistered, especially in rural areas, the true prevalence of child marriage is likely to be underestimated (Sabbe et al., 2013).

In addition to poverty, available literature indicates three key drivers of child marriage in Zimbabwe – lack of policy enforcement, religion, and cultural and forced marriage practices. Although child marriage is prohibited by Zimbabwe’s constitution, enforcement of the law is weak, enabling child marriage to continue without fear of legal or penal repercussions (Hallfors et al., 2016) – see *Legal Framework*. Affiliation with apostolic sects, notably the Apostolic Church of Johane Marange, has been associated with increasing girls’ risk of child marriage (Chamisa et al., 2019). These groups force adolescent girls to marry older men whom church leaders claim to be directed by the “Holy Spirit” (Hallfors et al., 2016).



**1 MILLION+**  
GIRLS IN ZIMBABWE WERE  
MARRIED AS CHILDREN

### YOUNG WOMEN AGED 20–24 YEARS »

**34%**  
(1 IN 3) WERE MARRIED  
BEFORE AGE 18

**5%**  
WERE MARRIED  
BEFORE AGE 15

### YOUNG MEN AGED 20–24 YEARS »

**2%** WERE MARRIED  
AS CHILDREN

### IN MASVINGO PROVINCE »

**41%-50%**  
OF GIRLS WERE MARRIED  
BEFORE AGE 18

### RURAL AREAS »

**44%**  
OF GIRLS WERE MARRIED  
BEFORE AGE 18



### URBAN AREAS »

**21%**  
OF GIRLS WERE MARRIED  
BEFORE AGE 18



### YOUNG WOMEN WHO WERE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18 »

**±100%**  
GAVE BIRTH  
BEFORE AGE 20

**60%+**  
GAVE BIRTH  
BEFORE AGE 18

Harmful marriage practices, such as *kutizira* (unplanned pregnancy marriages, where the girl is expected to elope to the house of her boyfriend or the person responsible for pregnancy to protect family honour), *kuripa ngozi* (virgin pledging, where girls are married to appease an evil spirit), and *kuzvarira* (transactional marriages, where girls are married off at younger ages in exchange for cows, money, or grain) continue to be used to justify forced marriages of adolescent girls (Chitakure, 2016). *Khomba* (initiation) is another cultural practice that has been associated with driving child marriage among Shangaani communities in Zimbabwe (Naidu, 2019)- see *Khomba text box below*.

## Khomba

Social norms and cultural practices such as *Khomba* have been cited in literature as a unique driver of child marriage among Shangaan communities in Zimbabwe (Chikunda, Marabire, and Makoni, 2006). *Khomba* is a Shangaan initiation ceremony for both girls and boys as they progress from childhood to adulthood. The practice is highly respected in the Shangaan community; a person who has not been initiated commands less respect within the community than an initiated person, which can result in exclusion from some community activities (Naudi and Muchono, 2019). Although the practice is elusive, available evidence suggests that *Khomba* includes education and training on Shangaan social values and norms, such as spousal responsibilities, including on women sexually satisfying their husbands, and family care and household duties, such as home building, warming water for bathing for the husband and children, and preparing meals (Chikunda, Marabire, and Makoni, 2006; Naudi and Muchono, 2019). Adolescents are sent to a secluded place to participate in *Khomba* activities for approximately two to three months (Naudi and Muchono, 2019). Upon graduation, adolescent girls are considered ready and available for marriage, while adolescent boys tend to seek sexual experiences with less expectation and societal pressure to marry young (ibid.).

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Zimbabwe is a signatory to various international frameworks that prevent and protect children and adolescents from child marriage, including the Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), including Article 21, which calls for the elimination of all harmful practices, including CEFM; and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR), on the Rights Of Women in Africa or “*Maputo Protocol*,” including Article 6, which sets the minimum age for marriage as 18 (GNB, 2022). By ratifying these instruments, Zimbabwe made a commitment to take appropriate measures, including legislative measures, to promote, protect, and enforce the rights of children, and specifically girls. In 2014, Zimbabwe petitioned for a specific Human Rights Council (HRC) resolution on child marriage, and then in 2017 co-sponsored the HRC resolution on CEFM in humanitarian settings – again emphasizing the government’s mission to prioritise the elimination of child marriage across the country and globally.

In 2016, as part of Zimbabwe’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) commitment to eliminating CEFM by 2030, the age of marriage was raised to 18 years for both sexes by the Constitutional Court. Today, the major challenge in addressing child marriage in Zimbabwe remains the outstanding alignment of marriage laws with the Constitution. In response, the *National Action Plan and Communication Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2019–2021)* was launched. It is a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach led by the Ministry of Women Affairs, in partnership with civil society organisations, religious and traditional leaders, and the private sector to address the inconsistent legal framework; namely, the legislative and policy frameworks that “still provide for and protect the right to enter into marriage for persons under the age of 18” (National Action Plan and Communication Strategy on Ending Child Marriage, 2019–2021). In addition to strengthening the legal framework, the goal of the NAP is to prioritise prevention and response to child marriage and meet SDG target 5.3 on the elimination of all harmful practices by 2030 (Zimbabwe Ministry for Women, 2019).

# 03

## METHODS



*A 19-year old girl participating in sexual and reproductive health projects, Zimbabwe.*  
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Girl attending school, Zimbabwe.  
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## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

There is a dearth of evidence about effective and ineffective approaches to preventing and responding to child marriage, and how to address key drivers of child marriage across the socio-ecological model (Chandra-Mouli and Plesons, 2021; Lee-Rife et al., 2012). A recent systematic review (Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021) concludes that single-component interventions, particularly those focused on increasing adolescent girls' human capital and opportunities, are likely more practical for investment in terms of scale-up and sustainability compared to multi-component interventions. However, there are counter-arguments to this conclusion, including the need for additional research prior to making programmatic recommendations (Chandra-Mouli and Plesons, 2021). In humanitarian settings, the evidence is nascent and even more ambivalent (Chae and Ngo, 2017). Therefore, there is an urgent need to learn about the needs and priorities of adolescent girls in crisis-affected contexts, including intersecting risks and protective factors of child marriage, to design programmes that prevent child marriage and support married adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.

This study aimed to establish an evidence base on the drivers of child marriage in humanitarian settings with food insecurity, such as Chiredzi, and systematically document the needs and priorities of adolescent girls and the system of support required to prevent and mitigate risks of child marriage. This foundational research provides key learnings for practitioners to develop more tailored approaches, keeping girls and communities at the centre of this work.

Specifically, the study explored the following research questions:

- 01 What are the needs and priorities of adolescent girls living in Chiredzi?
- 02 What are the key drivers of child marriage in Chiredzi?
- 03 What assets and adaptive capacities of adolescents and the community promote risk mitigation and positive health outcomes for girls?
- 04 What resources and adaptive capacities exist within families, communities, and systems to support, care for, and protect adolescent girls from child marriage in Chiredzi?
- 05 How do existing programmes and services in Chiredzi respond to the needs of adolescent girls? And what are the key barriers preventing adolescent girls from accessing and using them?
- 06 How has COVID-19 impacted child marriage practices in Chiredzi, including child marriage decision-making pathways within households?

This study used a mixed-method participatory design and a girl-centred, community-based approach. This means that adolescent girls and adult community members were involved in research tool design, data collection activities, data analysis, and solutions. Methods included a desk review, participant-led storytelling via SenseMaker®, and key informant interviews (KIs). Globally, the majority of adolescents affected by child marriage are girls (UNICEF, 2021). As such, efforts were made to capture more perspectives from adolescent girls and women to centre their experiences and needs. The voices of adolescent boys and men were also captured to ensure that gender dynamics, power imbalances, and the impact of marriage on boys and men also inform future programming.

Data were collected from January to April 2021. Methods were adapted where necessary to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and in accordance with local government health guidance, and KIs were facilitated online rather than in person.



Group of schoolgirls on their way home from school in Zimbabwe.  
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## STUDY JUSTIFICATION

This research contributes to the growing evidence on the needs and priorities of adolescents in humanitarian settings and will inform girl-led, community-grounded approaches to address child marriage in humanitarian settings in Zimbabwe and globally. Participatory methods were selected to amplify the voices of adolescents to define their own priorities, identify risks and supports, and prioritise what should be addressed. The methodology sought to identify who and what contributes to adolescent resilience from the broader ecosystem of support people, community resources, institutions, programmes, and services that support, care for, and protect adolescents in Chiredzi. The methodology encouraged adolescents and caregivers to develop adolescent-driven solutions to filling the gaps in this ecosystem of support. Given that unequal gender norms and power dynamics underpin child marriage, an adapted social norms framework was employed for analysis. The adapted framework was used to understand how programming can mitigate risks and prevent drivers of child marriage. It also explored how the adaptive capacities of adolescent girls, their families, and broader ecosystems support healthy trajectories for adolescent girls across all levels of the socio-ecological model, including social and structural factors inherent to crisis settings.

## DESK REVIEW

From May 2020 to August 2020, a desk review of published articles; grey literature; and publicly available statistical data on child marriage prevalence, practices, and prevention and response programming in Chiredzi and within Zimbabwe was conducted. The desk review also included an assessment of the humanitarian situation, including food insecurity, in Chiredzi. Approximately 50 resources were selected for full review and data extraction. The desk review was used to help contextualise the research questions, methods, and study parameters.

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

KIIs were conducted via the Zoom online communications platform from January 2020 to March 2021 using a semi-structured guide that was contextualised by partner organisations. KIIs were conducted with community-based organisations (CBOs), national nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), civil social organisations (CSOs), international NGOs (INGOs), service providers, United Nations (UN) actors, and government officials. KII guides were developed to provide insights on the needs and priorities of adolescents, child marriage practices, and barriers and facilitators to accessing existing services and programming in target communities. KIIs were conducted with individuals purposively selected to provide insights on child marriage practices and/or programming among food-insecure communities in Chiredzi. Most KIIs were conducted one-on-one; however, two interviews were conducted with up to three persons from the same organisation. The length of the interviews was between one and two hours. KIIs were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Shona or English. The Shona transcriptions were then translated into English for analysis.

# SENSEMAKER®

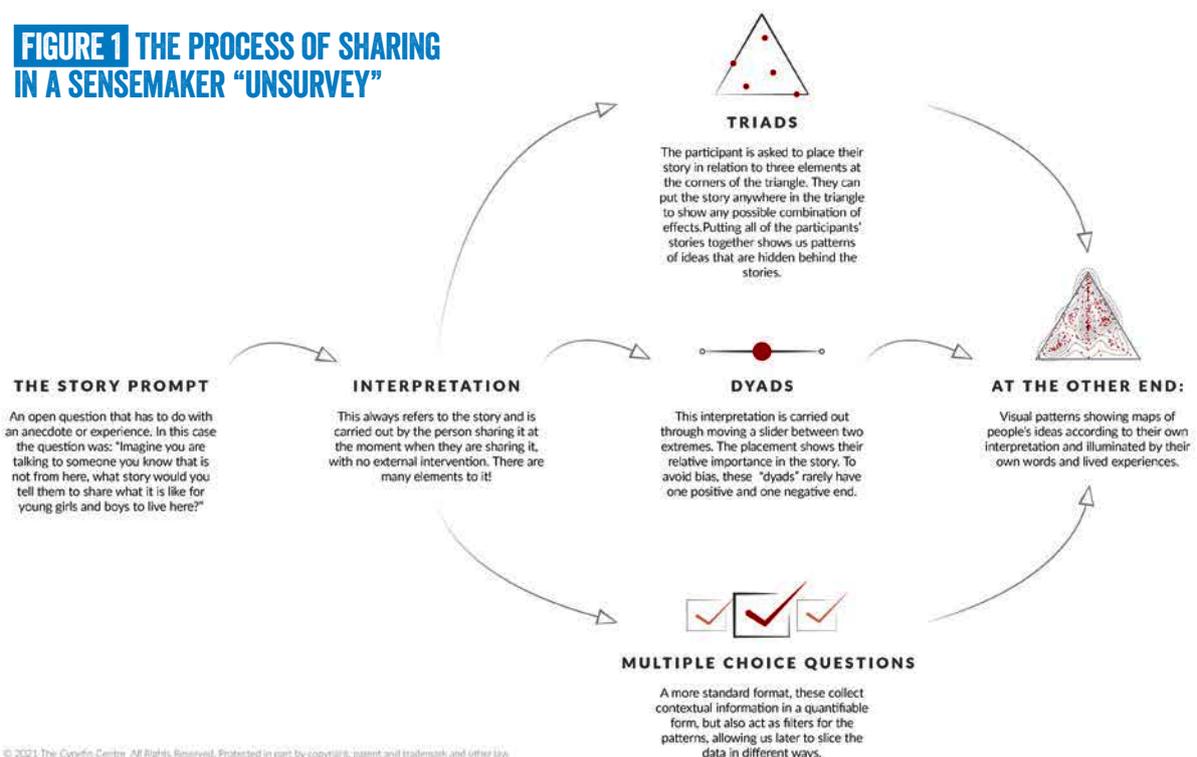
SenseMaker data collection was conducted from 13 to 24 April 2021. SenseMaker is a mixed-method research and analysis tool that facilitates respondents, or storytellers, to record micro-narratives (short, open-ended stories) about their lived experiences. SenseMaker is a participant-led research method because it provides an opportunity for respondents to interpret or give meaning to their own story and to convey its importance using a signification framework. The signification framework is a set of questions based on the research questions that allows the storyteller to analyse their own story (Van der Merwe et al., 2019). By allowing the respondent to analyse their own story, SenseMaker prioritises the respondent’s views within the analysis. This approach a) lessens interpretive and cultural bias; b) makes the research process more democratic by making the respondent’s perspective central to the process; and c) generates a large amount of quantitative data points, or metadata, that enable researchers to harvest thousands of perspectives and facilitate pattern recognition (see Figure 1).

The SenseMaker tool was co-designed with married and unmarried adolescent girls, as well as with caregivers and other adult community gatekeepers. In order to identify the core concepts for use in the signification framework, two co-design workshops

were held on October 22, 2020, in Chiredzi Urban Ward 4 and Chiredzi Peri-Urban Ward with up to 16 adult community members and 16 married and unmarried adolescent girls in each site. Participatory group activities were conducted during co-design workshops to identify dominant issues facing adolescents in the target communities. The core concepts were based on these issues and concepts identified by the desk review and research questions. The final assembly of the signification framework was translated from English to Shona and built into the app-based software.

The SenseMaker tool was pilot-tested with community members, including adolescents. Data collection was conducted by a team of young male and female enumerators trained to work with the SenseMaker app-based tool to collect stories using tablets. Male enumerators interviewed boys and men and female enumerators interviewed girls and women. Stories shared by respondents were audio-recorded through the tablet. Then, respondents responded to a series of visual prompts and multiple-choice questions to analyse their stories (the signification framework) and share demographic information. Interviews lasted approximately 15–35 minutes and were conducted in private locations inside or outside of the homestead. Enumerators also recorded salient points of each story in text, which was then uploaded onto the software.

**FIGURE 1 THE PROCESS OF SHARING IN A SENSEMAKER “UNSURVEY”**



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## SELECTION OF STUDY SITES

The research team used purposive sampling to select wards and villages within Chiredzi. The sampling frame was guided by the following considerations:

- 1 Selecting an urban area for comparison and contrast with a more rural setting to better understand how different socio-economic contexts and access to social services influence findings;
- 2 Selecting areas that are accessible to the research team from Chiredzi Urban;
- 3 Prioritising areas experiencing intermittent or protracted humanitarian emergencies; and
- 4 Prioritising areas where child marriage is known to be most prevalent.

Chiredzi Urban was selected because it is the main urban centre, comprised of eight wards, but considered as one ward for programming. At the time of the study, Plan International was implementing several programmes in Chiredzi Urban, including a cash transfer program, the second phase of an adolescent girls empowerment project focused on supporting youth with vocational skills like carpentry and construction; and a comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programme for in-school youth that integrated GBV and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) information and life skills. Ward 3 was selected as a Peri-Urban area given Plan's well-developed relationships with stakeholders (e.g., traditional leaders, school headmasters) and community members, and Plan International was implementing similar programming in Ward 3 as in Chiredzi Urban. Due to movement restrictions during the COVID-19 containment measures, more remote wards were not feasible.

Plan International leveraged its existing relationships with stakeholders and community members in each study site to support the research team to sensitise the community about the study and identify marginalised groups, including married adolescent girls and boys.

The size of the villages (number of homesteads and households) varied from village to village and there was no distinct geographical boundary to demarcate individual villages. Within the villages, the spatial distribution of the homesteads varied, but they were largely sparsely populated. The research team clustered geographically adjacent villages, so the enumerators had a larger geographical area from which to target homesteads from which to sample participants.

STUDY SITE	WARD	VILLAGE CLUSTER
Chiredzi Urban	4	
Chiredzi Peri-Urban	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manatsa (± 19 villages)</li> <li>• Tshamiseka (± 6 villages)</li> <li>• Chikwekwe (±7 villages)</li> <li>• Khomazvitiya (± 11 villages)</li> <li>• Hleketelani (± 12 villages)</li> <li>• Tiyambilu (± 12 villages)</li> </ul>



## SAMPLING

### KIs

Service mapping was conducted to identify national NGOs, CSOs, CBOs, INGOs, social service providers, UN actors, and government officials working to advance community and/or adolescent health and protection outcomes in Chiredzi.

Interviews were conducted with key informants (KIs) identified through this mapping until saturation was reached. The study targeted up to six KIs per subgroup: (1) national NGO, CSO, and CBO staff; (2) INGO staff; (3) social service providers; and (4) UN actors and government officials.

### SenseMaker

To achieve the target sample size, purposive and snowball sampling were employed for SenseMaker to allow for disaggregation of the data based on key participants. Male and female adolescents aged 10 to 19 years old; parents and guardians of adolescents; community gatekeepers (e.g., traditional and community leaders), and local government officials (e.g., councillors) were eligible to participate in SenseMaker data collection. The list of prospective participants per subgroup was identified by Plan Zimbabwe. In order to reach additional married adolescents, data enumerators also employed snowball sampling, whereby married adolescents were asked if they would feel comfortable referring enumerators to other married adolescents in the community. Participants were assigned sex (i.e., female or male) by the enumerator based on the participant's physical appearance. Given the sensitivities regarding sexuality in the country, it was advised to not explicitly ask participants their gender or for enumerators to assign a non-binary gender such as "other."



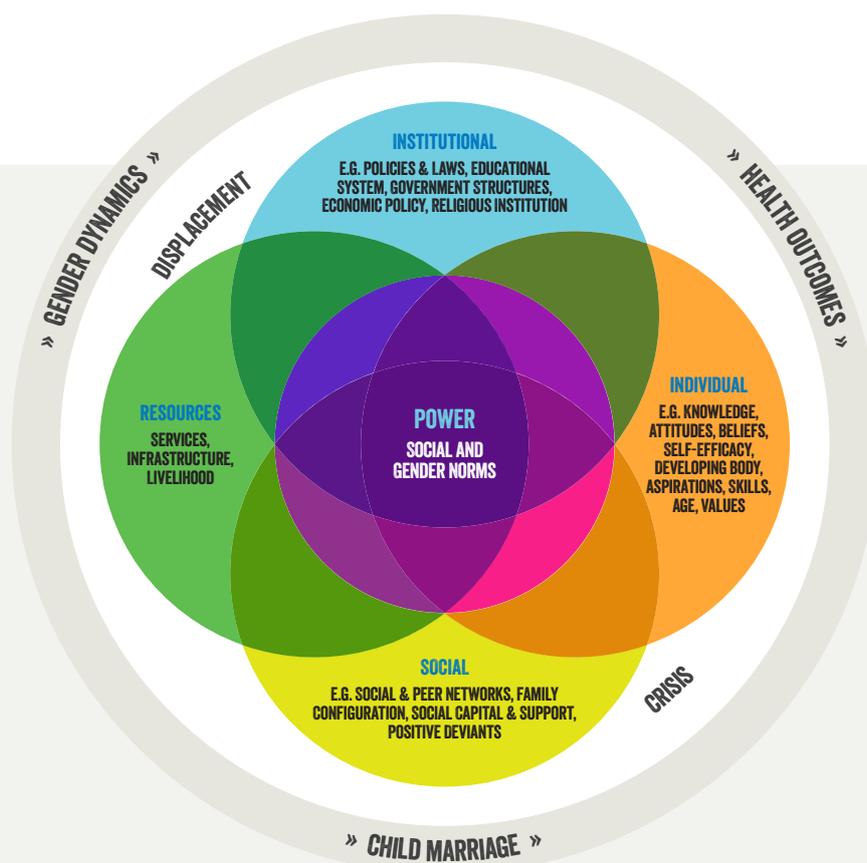
*An 18-year-old Zimbabwean girl on her way to collect water.*  
© Plan International

The sample size per subgroup (n=50) and per study site (i.e., Chiredzi Urban and Chiredzi Peri-Urban) aimed to provide enough data points for visual patterns to emerge on the SenseMaker data analysis dashboard. Therefore, the study aimed to collect a total of 1,500 stories, including 400 stories from adolescent girls, inclusive of girls who were unmarried, married, divorced, in informal unions, living with a disability, and identifying as diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Based on guidance from Plan Zimbabwe and the country-based research team, enumerators did not collect information on participants' SOGIESC. The sampling framework targeted stories from 200 married and unmarried adolescent boys, 200 young married and unmarried men (20–24 years), 200 young women (20–24 years), 200 parents of adolescents (male and female), 100 men 25 years and older who are married or formerly married to an adolescent girl, and 200 community leaders and gatekeepers (male and female).

## ANALYSIS

### Analytical Framework

**FIGURE 2**  
ADAPTED SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL  
FRAMEWORK HIGHLIGHTING  
THE CENTRALITY OF SOCIAL  
AND GENDER NORMS AND  
POWER ON CHILD MARRIAGE IN  
HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS



This study employed an adapted conceptual framework that articulated the relationship between social norms and adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) outcomes (Pulerwitz et al., 2019; Cislighi and Heise, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 2009) by adding a crisis as a fifth domain and child marriage as an outcome.

**First**, power is a key domain that underpins and enforces social norms, as well as actions and health outcomes. **Second**, understanding gender roles requires an understanding at all levels of the socio-ecological system; this subset of social norms determines relevant rules of engagement, relationships, and responsibilities. They contribute to the formation of power relationships, which results in a range of threats and opportunities.

**Third**, the framework focuses on the numerous connections between socio-ecological domains (individual, social, resources, and institutional). At the intersections of these domains, opportunities for disruption, growth, and transformation exist. In other words, multi-level approaches that leverage these intersecting opportunities may improve health (and other development) outcomes for girls. **Fourth**, social norms are central to the model because they have a significant impact on health (and other development) outcomes (Pulerwitz et al., 2019).

The adapted analytical framework (Figure 2) demonstrates the critical role of norms while also recognising the critical role of systemic factors in the development and maintenance of dominance, shaping gender and other social structures, and affecting child marriage practices in crises. **Therefore, a fifth domain was added to this framework**, which represents the influence of crisis and displacement on health and development outcomes, namely child marriage, and the adaptive capacities, or resilience, of adolescent girls, their families, communities, and wider ecosystems of support. This domain addresses how structural and social factors inherent to humanitarian settings interact across all other domains. **Further, child marriage was added as an additional outcome** to assess how child marriage is impacted by and impacts all aspects of life, including health, protection, wellbeing, education, and economic domains. The adapted framework may be used for other formative studies on child marriage in humanitarian settings and as an approach to designing and evaluating child marriage programming.



An 18-year-old prepares meals for her siblings at home in Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

## KII Analysis

KIIs were audio-recorded and transcribed and translated to English. The research team developed, piloted, and implemented a codebook using an iterative process. Each transcript was uploaded to NVivo 12 Plus (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2020) for thematic content analysis. Any discrepancies between coding were resolved through discussion-based consensus and/or adaptations of the codebook. Key themes were further explored across study sites and respondent affiliation to explore linkages and discordances in the data.

## SenseMaker Analysis

Following the completion of data collection and data cleaning, key patterns were identified from the SenseMaker dataset that were later compiled into “storybooks” based on meta-data pattern analysis. Themes were defined in relation to the research questions, with a strong focus on the voices of adolescent girls. For storybooks consisting of more than 30 stories, a random subset of 30 stories from each storybook was translated. Facilitated collective co-analysis exercises were held with the research team and stakeholders to further uncover the key themes present within the chosen storybooks. These exercises were also used to identify emergent questions and probes for community and adolescent SenseMaking workshops, where community members and adolescent girls made sense of the data through participatory group analysis activities.

Between 5 and 8 October 2021, community co-analysis (or “participatory community analysis”) sessions were held in Chiredzi Urban and Chiredzi Peri-Urban with adult and adolescent girl groups. In both Chiredzi Urban and Chiredzi Peri-Urban, eight adult community stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, community leaders), four unmarried adolescent girls aged 10–18 years, and four married girls aged 13–19 years were engaged in participatory community analysis. The workshops aimed to provide an opportunity for community members to analyse the SenseMaker data through participatory group activities and identify girl-led and community-grounded solutions to the challenges that emerged in the data. During participatory community analysis, participants were asked to read selected stories and to share their own group interpretations based on open questions, such as: “In these stories, what influences people’s reasons for getting married or having a child?” Participants were asked to contribute “insight to action” ideas around what might make things better in the context of the stories they were reading: “What small change would work for you as a young girl or for young girls?” The adult groups were asked: “What could be done differently and who could support those changes?”

In November 2021, Plan Zimbabwe facilitated a virtual workshop with key institutional stakeholders based in Harare and Chiredzi to elicit feedback on research findings, and identify priority areas and next steps towards collaborative action to implement effective advocacy and child marriage interventions in Chiredzi.

## ETHICS

The study procedures received ethical approval from the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe (MRCZ) and the Research Council of Zimbabwe (reference no: MRCZ/A/2594), and Allendale Investigational Review Board (reference no: IRB-WRC0001). The study procedures were approved by the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare (reference no: SW 8/26). The research team obtained informed consent and assent prior to all data collection activities. Names and other identifying information used for recruitment were recorded in a separate document from study data and this document was shredded immediately following data collection. The study team provided an information sheet for each respondent with the research team and Plan Zimbabwe's contact information, and directions for anonymous reporting channels as per safeguarding policies. Activities were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent. Any names mentioned during the research activities were deleted during transcription. All appropriate measures were taken to ensure that data collection and associated activities were followed.<sup>2</sup>

## LIMITATIONS

Despite leveraging existing relationships and connections in the study sites to engage relevant community stakeholders and conducting community sensitisation activities to introduce community members to the study, the researchers experienced challenges in identifying married adolescents, especially young married adolescent girls (10–14 years) and married boys (10–19 years). Therefore, the study did not reach its target sample size for married adolescent boys and girls per method. Given the small sample size of adolescents self-reporting as married or having been married, meaningful pattern extraction and comparison specifically for that group was not possible using SenseMaker data. However, given the diversity of research methods used in the study, the researchers were able to triangulate findings from across methods to illustrate a clear picture of the needs and priorities of married girls in Chiredzi and perceptions around marriage in the community.

Further, enumerators reported challenges in determining the exact age of participants. Due to social desirability bias, we expect that married adolescent girls reported being older than 18 years; therefore, it is likely that the study reached more married adolescent girls than those who self-reported as being married. Also, the study did not reach its target sample size of at least 10–15 percent of the total sample for people with disabilities. Therefore, the study does not adequately document the unique needs and priorities of adolescents with disabilities.

2. WRC's Ethical Guidance for Working with Displaced Populations (WRC, 2016), WRC's Child and Vulnerable Adult Safeguarding Policy (WRC), and Plan International's Global Policy on Safeguarding Children and Young People (Plan International, 2017), and The Practitioner's Guide to Ethical Conduct of Research on Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings (Robinson, 2021).



# 04

## FINDINGS

*A 17-year old girl advocating for girls rights in Zimbabwe.*  
© Plan International

## PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

A total of 1,690 people participated in data collection. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the overall number of respondents by data method.

**TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS BY AGE, GENDER, AND LOCATION**

DATA METHOD	WOMEN/ GIRLS	MEN/ BOYS	MARRIED*	UNMARRIED**	ADULTS (20+ YEARS)	ADOLESCENTS (10-19 YRS)				TOTAL
						10-12	13-14	15-16	17-19	
SenseMaker	1,098	570	857	789	954	56	151	344	163	1,668***
KII	12	10	N/A	N/A	22	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	22
	<b>1,110</b>	<b>580</b>	<b>857</b>	<b>789</b>	<b>976</b>		<b>714</b>			<b>1,690</b>

\*SenseMaker married category includes 578 married, 5 engaged, 123 widowed, and 140 divorced participants and 11 cohabiting.

\*\*SenseMaker unmarried category includes 739 single, 50 in a relationship, 11 cohabiting

\*\*\* Includes 22 participants who preferred not to disclose their marital status.

### SenseMaker

Overall, 1,668 adult and adolescent community members participated in SenseMaker data collection activities across four provinces (see Table 2). A total of 1,098 participants (66 percent of the sample) were female compared to 570 participants (34 percent) who were identified as male. A total of 954 adults (57 percent) and 714 adolescents aged 10 to 19 years (43 percent) participated. Adolescents aged from 15 to 17 years are represented to a slightly higher degree. There were low numbers (n=48, 7 percent) of adolescents (aged 19 and under) who were married (defined as either self-reported married or co-habiting), including 43 married girls and 5 married boys. The majority (n=605) of adolescents identified as single, while 16 were divorced (all girls); one was engaged, 25 were in a relationship, and 19 preferred not to respond to the question about

their relationship status. In addition, 69 girls were mothers. Among the adult married sample, of those who responded to the question (n=813), 56 percent (n=454) were married between 12-19 years. This is much higher rates of child marriage than recorded from among the adolescent sample. This may suggest some intergenerational differences or change over time in the rate of child marriage in these areas. When comparing Urban and Peri-Urban locations, the numbers show a higher instance of married participants in Peri-Urban areas across all age ranges. In Peri-Urban sites, 525 participants (39 percent) were married, as were 53 participants (16 percent) in Urban sites. Peri-Urban areas in general also had as many single participants as they had married (single n=552, 41 percent); whereas in the urban setting, the majority of respondents were single (n=187, 55 percent).

**TABLE 2 SUMMARY OF SENSEMAKER RESPONDENTS BY WARD, AGE, AND GENDER**

CHIREDDI-URBAN	10-12	13-14	15-17	18-19	20-22	23-25	26-29	30-39	40-49	50	TOTAL
Men/boys	0	12	52	14	10	1	2	2	1	2	96
Woman/girls	2	27	59	19	18	27	21	39	20	9	241
CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN	10-12	13-14	15-17	18-19	20-22	23-25	26-29	30-39	40-49	50	TOTAL
Men/boys	16	38	100	66	41	37	17	37	57	65	474
Woman/girls	38	74	133	64	55	53	54	142	116	128	857

### Key informant interviews (KIs)

A total of 17 KIs were conducted with 22 individuals (12 female, 10 male) across diverse positions and types of organisations. The research team conducted interviews with staff from 12 organisations based in Harare and from five organisations based in Chiredzi. Among five KIs held with staff based in Harare, four were with staff from INGOs and

one was held with staff from a UN agency. Among 12 KIs held with staff based in Chiredzi, seven KIs were conducted with NGOs and community-based organisations, four KIs were conducted with staff from government ministries, and one interview was conducted with a health service provider.

## KEY CONCERNS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN CHIREDDZI

Data from across methods revealed a range of key concerns facing adolescents in Chiredzi. While KIs shared key issues facing adolescents based on their programmatic and service provision experience, SenseMaker provided opportunities for adolescent and adult community members to describe these concerns based on their own experiences. The SenseMaker story prompt (the main open-ended question asked to participants) was directly about child marriage: “Think about young people getting married in your area. Can you share a story about what it’s like for a young person in your community to be married?”. It is therefore not surprising that child marriage emerged as a dominant issue facing adolescents. Other key concerns discussed by KIs and which emerged from SenseMaker data include poverty and unmet basic needs, child-headed households and parental migration, food insecurity, limited access to education, adolescent pregnancy and unmet ASRHR needs, child protection concerns (e.g., child abuse, physical and sexual violence, and abandonment by parents), and lack of peer support. These issues were frequently discussed in relation to how they elevated adolescent girls’ risks and/or were consequences of marriage within the broader context of socio-economic inequality and gender inequity.

### Child marriage

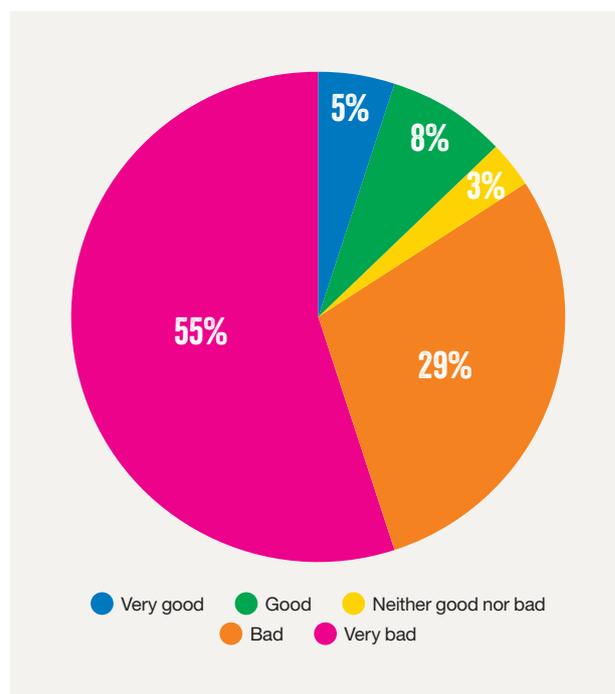
Child marriage emerged as a key concern of adolescents across methods. Overall, study findings show that child marriage is perceived as a common practice among communities in Chiredzi despite growing awareness that child marriage is illegal. An adult community member shared:

“ I do not have a story to tell you because this community has problem when it comes to child marriages. They take it as light thing. They take it as something that is normal and they do not consider the implications it has on the child’s life. Thus, I cannot single out a story because it is something that happens all the time. We hear stories of girls that we know getting married all the time. They do not consider it as an offence, even if the child is married as a minor ... Most of these things are done because people do not have adequate knowledge. ”

ADULT WOMAN, 30–39 YEARS,  
MARRIED, CHIREDDZI PERI-URBAN

KII data revealed mixed findings related to differences in severity or prevalence of child marriage in Urban compared to Peri-Urban wards. However, there was agreement that cultural norms and attitudes towards marriage were strong drivers across all settings. For example, several interviewees explained that once a girl has a marriage proposal, she must get married regardless of her age due to the expectation for girls to be married before 18 years.

**FIGURE 3** RESPONSES FROM THE PROMPT: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR STORY? (N=1,668)



However, SenseMaker data paint a different picture of child marriage practices in Chiredzi. Although KIs and some SenseMaker stories depict child marriage as a community norm, the overwhelming majority (84 percent) of SenseMaker participants interpreted their stories as *emotionally very bad* (55 percent) or *bad* (29 percent) (see Figure 3). This suggests that child marriages are largely perceived as negative despite being normatively practised. All 1,668 participants responded to this question. Often the stories shared depicted marriage as a negative consequence of socially unacceptable behaviour of adolescents, such as breaking curfew or interacting with boys and men. Similarly, in participatory community analysis discussions, child marriage was discussed in a disapproving tone. When asked to read a collection of stories, adult community members in both Urban and Peri-Urban wards interpreted marriage as the result of

poor parenting, or more commonly, that marriage was used as a route out of poverty. Adult groups mentioned the normality of adult men getting married and then divorcing, but that for women and girls the effects of divorce were likely to be felt more severely. Adolescent girls discussed marriage more commonly as a way out of abusive family dynamics.

All data indicate that child marriage manifests in different types of relationships and marriage customs at the community level in Chiredzi. Co-habitation was the most common marriage relationship type. According to participants, co-habitation is when no customary processes, such as the payment of lobola (bride price), or legal registration occur to formalise the marriage. Consequently, an adolescent girl and an adolescent boy (or man) simply live together as husband and wife. At times, co-habitation begins with elopement – when an adolescent girl and her boyfriend decide to live together:

“There is a friend of mine that became pregnant last year when she was 15. After she became pregnant she then eloped to the man’s place. She did not want to elope, but she did so because she had had an argument with her sister. As she was staying with her husband, the husband would beat her every day. She came to my place yesterday and told me how she is beaten every day. While she was at my place, her husband came and started beating her.”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREDCI URBAN

The data also describe marriages that centred on the involvement of the paternal aunt (*tete*). In these instances, girls told stories about the aunt accompanying them to the boy’s family, a practice known locally as *kutizira* (or eloping):

“There was a boy aged 16 and a girl that was aged 15. These two were in a relationship and ended up getting married. The boy impregnated [kumitiswa] the girl and then the [paternal] aunt of the girl accompanied the girl to the boy’s place to get married.”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 13–14 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREDCI PERI-URBAN

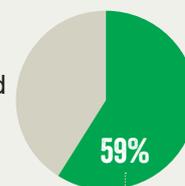
To a lesser extent, *musengabere*<sup>3</sup> – a Shona practice of forced abduction of girls to force marriage through sexual violence – was another type of marriage custom referenced by a few KIs and in some stories relayed by SenseMaker participants. According to the data, once a girl has been taken to a boy/man’s home, he sends his paternal aunt to inform the girl’s family about his intentions to marry. After he sends *lobola* (bride price) to her family, she is considered his wife.



### DATA REVEALED GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICES.

Specifically, adolescent girls were described as being more likely to marry before reaching 18 years, compared to adolescent boys. Stories usually depicted adolescent girls marrying boys and men who were older than them.

In the overall SenseMaker dataset, **59 percent of the participants** who responded to the question of marriage age (n=522 participants) were **married as adolescents**.



This percentage is higher for women (n=476) who make up **91 percent** of participants who self-reported marrying as an adolescent, compared to **9 percent for men** (n=46). Among the 48 participants aged 19 and under who were married or cohabiting at the time of data capture, 43 (90 percent) were adolescent girls. Further, a (few) KIs explained that adolescent girls are more at risk of child marriage compared to adolescent boys.

3. Musengabere is a Shona term used to describe a form of forced marriage where a boy or young man abducts a girl or woman and takes her to his homestead to force marriage often by sexual violence. Musengabere is practised in some Shona communities and can also happen within intimate relationships.



A member of the Chiredzi Women's group.  
© Plan International

The age gaps cited in stories ranges from peers to 50 years senior. The age gap seemed to exacerbate the gendered power inequities between adolescent girls and their husbands, such as educational attainment, employment status, and livelihood skills, among others. A young married woman shared her story about marrying an older man:

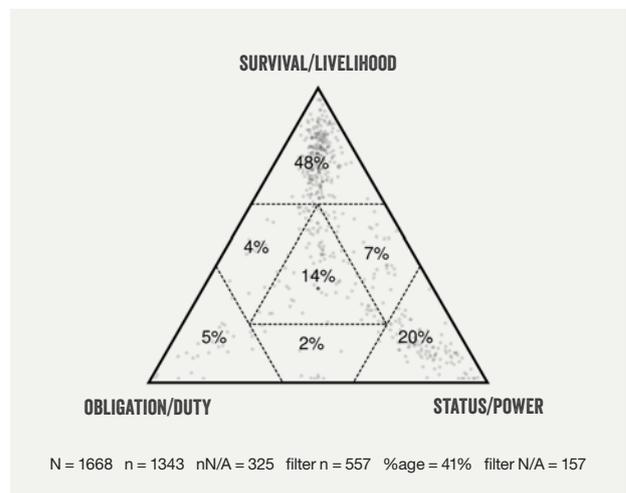
“ I was impregnated [kumitiswa] when I was 17 years old by a guy that was 28 years old. He then married me. He had finished school and had a job. After I gave birth, he started treating me badly. At the time we got married, I was 17 years old and I had no skill or knowledge that I could use to generate income. During our relationship, I believed him and thought that he really loved me. He later dumped me when I was 18 and had a child. ”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23–25 YEARS,  
MARRIED, CHIREDDI URBAN

## Poverty and unmet basic needs

Across methods, poverty and unmet basic needs, including lack of access to food, emerged as an overarching determinant of adolescent girls' key concerns. Unmet basic needs and poverty were identified in participatory community analysis and Sensemaker as major drivers of marriage. As Figure 4 shows in the top of the triangle, survival is the primary driver in most (48%) of the stories shared by adolescents. KIIs highlighted the lack of access to menstrual products due to the inability to pay for these products; “period poverty” was a key issue facing adolescent girls. Period poverty is a pervasive problem intricately linked to poverty at household level. (See “Drivers of child marriage” on page 33.)

**FIGURE 4** WHAT DROVE PEOPLE'S ACTIONS IN YOUR STORY? (N=557 ADOLESCENTS)



Some SenseMaker stories and a few KIIs illustrated how poverty can elevate adolescent girls' risk of sexual violence and exploitation. In most scenarios, sexual violence was described as perpetrated by older, wealthier men. The following story illustrates how the intersection of economic inequality, peer influence, and gender inequality can increase adolescent girls' risk of sexual violence perpetrated by men.

“ Let me talk of sexual exploitation ... you will find out that Chiredzi district is a district that is afflicted by poverty mostly and you'll then find those girls existing in such environment in which they are living in abject poverty and they become vulnerable because some rich guys, some rich old people might want to then sexually exploit those girls because they are vulnerable, they are poor. They can be attracted by their money. ”

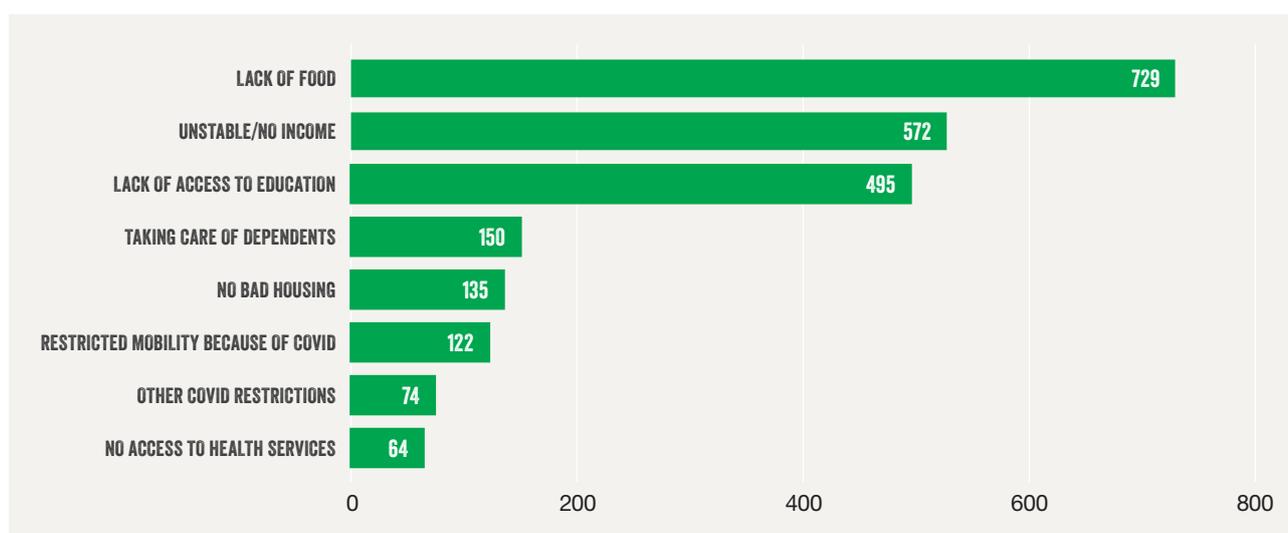
KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

## Food insecurity

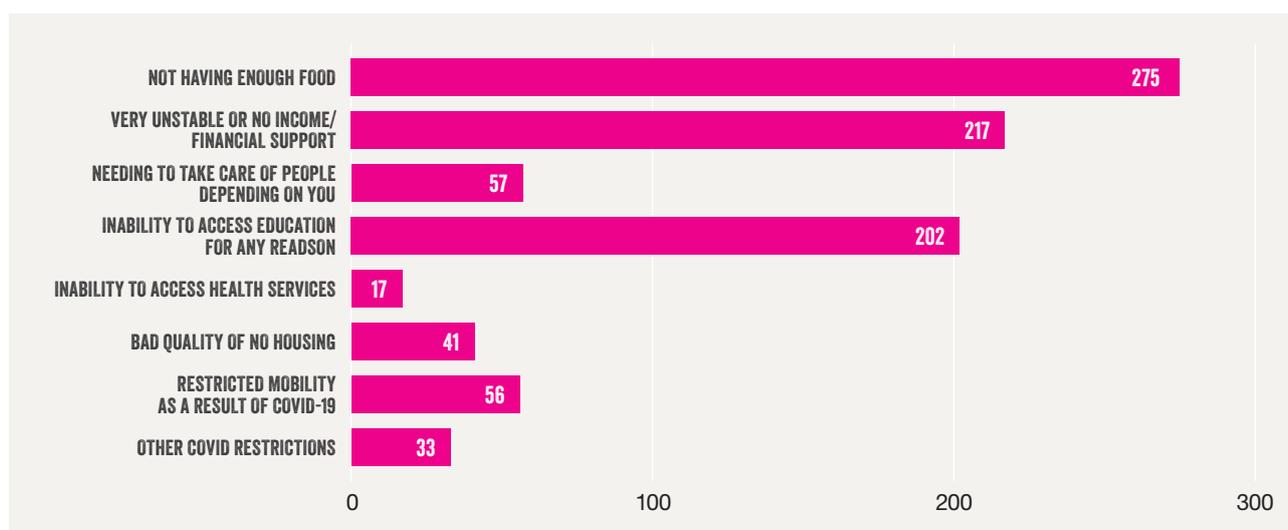
KII data mostly raised issues of food insecurity only indirectly in relation to consequences of poverty, such as adolescent girls being forced into sexual exploitation in the context of selling or exchanging sex to “put food on the table”. However, SenseMaker data clearly demonstrates that lack of food was a key concern in the lives of adolescents and more broadly within the community. A multiple-choice question

(see Figure 5) looked at possible indicators of deprivation and struggle. Respondents were given the option of selecting multiple responses. “Lack of food” took precedence (n=729), followed by financial hardship (n=572) and lack of access to education (n=495). When looking specifically at adolescents (Figure 6) we see that not having enough food is still the experience most commonly encountered in stories among those listed.

**FIGURE 5 AT THE TIME OF THE STORY, DID THE PERSON IN THE STORY EXPERIENCE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING? (N=1,249 ADOLESCENT AND ADULTS)**



**FIGURE 6 AT THE TIME OF THE STORY, DID THE PERSON IN THE STORY EXPERIENCE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING? (N=506 ADOLESCENTS)**



At the same time, SenseMaker stories illustrate how lack of food might be connected to child marriage, as lack of food is often listed as one of the elements that might drive a young person, specifically an adolescent girl, to marry or enter into exploitative relationships in order to meet her basic needs. This is heightened among child-headed households, where parents have migrated in search for work (See [“Drivers of child marriage”](#) on page 33).

## Limited access to education

Data across methods highlighted that lack of access to education was a key concern facing adolescents in Chiredzi. The most prominent barrier to education was the affordability of school fees:

“What I see where adolescents need urgent attention is the issue of school fees ... you ask them what grade they are in and do they go to school, they will say they don't go to school because of lack of fees.”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

“I am 15 years old. I failed to go to school because my parents could not afford to send me to school so I just stay at home. They do not work, but I would really love to go to school.”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15–17 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN

However, data indicate that education barriers are complex and extend past economic barriers. The intersection between education, gender inequity, and child marriage is prominent throughout the data. KIs explain that adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of school, and do so at earlier ages compared to boys, because parents value girls' education less than that of their male siblings due to social norms. Out-of-school girls are then potentially more at risk of entering or being forced into child marriage, experiencing sexual violence, and early pregnancy, compared to boys. The following KI explains:

“... most of the girls are either dropping out of school, or they're at risk of dropping [out] because of such religious or cultural practices. And then on the economic side, it is actually the girl child [who is most affected by] drought, and economic meltdown and all those issues that are happening in the country, you see that the ... [girl] drops out, or she's at risk ... , it is not the boy child who gets pregnant. It is the girl child. And obviously pregnant to who? They might be pregnant to their own peers, boys of their own age. But in most cases, they become pregnant to older boys. So, when this happens, they drop out of school and they become mothers. Sometimes they're not even married to those boys or older men that impregnate them.”

KI, INGO STAFF

## Adolescent pregnancy and unmet ASRHR needs

Data illuminate adolescent girls' unmet need for ASRHR information and services. Lack of ASRH programmes was commonly cited by KIs related to high rates of adolescent pregnancy as well as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV among adolescents. One KI inferred that adolescent pregnancy is more common in urban areas given overcrowding in the home and being exposed to sexual activity that encourages adolescents to be sexually active:

“Yes, overcrowding the house where people stay in a one room, father, mother, four or five children. Those children are exposed to what they see their guardians doing and they want to experiment it outside. As compared to the rural setup you'll find that there are three or four roomed houses in a rural setup.”

KI, INGO STAFF

SenseMaker participants did not explicitly cite lack of ASRHR information and services, however, adolescent pregnancy was a dominant theme. While adolescent pregnancy emerged as a dominant driver of child marriage, in some stories adolescent pregnancy did not result in marriage because the father denied responsibility for the pregnancy. Abortion was also cited in stories yet access to comprehensive safe abortion care was limited for adolescent girls. Despite the dominant themes of sexual violence and adolescent pregnancy in stories, contraception, including emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs), and clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence (CMR-IPV) services were never mentioned.

## Parental migration and child-headed households

Parental migration and child-headed households were two interconnected themes that resonated strongly as a key concern of adolescents across all data. In most instances child-headed households were a result of parents migrating to South Africa for work for extended periods, as opposed to the death of parents. Adults and adolescent girls who participated in participatory community analysis discussed how parents' migration to South Africa deprived adolescents of supervision and guidance, facilitating child marriages. In most stories about parental migration, child-headed households were associated with sexual violence and exploitation against adolescent girls. For example:

“ In this street, where I stay, there are parents that went to look for work in South Africa. They left behind two children, one that is in grade 4 [10 years old] and the other one that is in grade 7 [13 years old]. When they got to South Africa, they would send groceries to their children. Things then got hard in South Africa and they stopped sending groceries. Their daughter was then approached by a man from this community. The guy offered the children food and books for school. In exchange he demanded that the girl that was in grade 7 sleeps with him. The man then slept with the child up until she got pregnant. He denied the pregnancy and ran away. The girl now lives on her own in poverty. It is a sad story. ”

YOUNG WOMAN, 23–25 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN

### Sexual violence, including sexual exploitation of adolescents

Sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, against adolescents, particularly girls, was a dominant concern raised by participants across methods. Child abuse, including emotional abuse, was often discussed together with sexual violence.

Seven KIs across national and regional level reported that adolescent girls living with disabilities, particularly cognitive disabilities,<sup>4</sup> face heightened sexual violence risks. However, when asked whether sexual violence and unplanned pregnancies among girls living with disabilities lead to child marriage, and whether adolescent girls with disabilities experience heightened risks of child marriage, KIs unanimously responded “no”. This is exemplified by a quote from one interview:

“ Because they [men/boys] take advantage of their disability, because some of them [girls] have a mental [disability], some is physical, so, those are usually abused ... And also, the major crisis again is with our law, because these children, because of mental status, cannot testify in the law of courts. So, the men who abuse them, take advantage of that. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

Some KIs and SenseMaker stories illuminated that sexual violence against girls is sometimes perpetrated by relatives. Moreover, the data suggests that the home environment for many adolescent girls living in Chiredzi was often unsafe due to sexual violence as well as other forms of violence, such as economic and emotional abuse. The following story highlights the severity of sexual violence against girls in Chiredzi, including that perpetrated by immediate family members in their own home. **Please be advised that the following story includes unsettling accounts of rape perpetrated by a father against his daughter.**

“ I have a story of a girl that was raped by her father when she was doing her grade 3. She was between the ages of 7 and 8. She was raped while her mother had gone away [redacted] ... The father threatened the girl by telling her that he would stab her with a knife should she ever reveal the abuse to anyone. He gave her some snacks. He then threatened her with the knife and proceeded to rape her thrice. Her teachers were the first to notice something unusual in her step. The mother then returned [redacted] but she did not notice anything. Her neighbours then advised her to check her daughter as they had also noticed something unusual in the way she was walking. The mother then proceeded to check her daughter and realised that her daughter had been sexually abused. She then came to me ... We then went to make a police report. After that, myself and a police officer we took the girl for a medical check-up and it was revealed that she had bruises. Childline assisted the child and gave her money to buy the medication for the bruises. The father was arrested and he is now in jail. ”

ADULT WOMAN, 40–49 YEARS,  
WIDOWED, CHIREZDI

Two KIs revealed that adolescent boys in Chiredzi also face sexual violence, although to a lesser extent than girls. It was mentioned how sexual violence among adolescent boys is likely to go unreported even more so than girls, and that adolescent boys who work in other people’s homesteads as herd boys or in the fields may face sexual violence from the women of the house.

4. The SenseMaker tool collected data from participants to assess ability status. Difficulty with seeing was the most commonly reported disability, with n=246, 15 percent of participants experiencing at least some difficulties, even when wearing glasses. The next most frequent was difficulty in walking or climbing steps. Both those difficulties were a lot more frequent for the 50+ age group, suggesting they might be age-related.



*Muddy fields following flash floods in Zimbabwe.*  
© Plan International

“The boy child is now being also sexually abused. Because ... the way they are working as herd boys, the father of the house is in South Africa. Most of the time they are staying with the mother of the house and the mother of the house is taking advantage of those young boys and then sexually abuse them. If they try to, the issues only came out usually when they are not paid their monthly wages. Because the mothers of the house will take advantage of those boys and then provide the sexual satisfaction for the young boy, then deny him the monthly wage, that's where those issues would then come out. So, the boy child is also now at a disadvantage.”

**KI, NGO STAFF**

Sexual exploitation in the context of selling or exchanging sex were other forms of sexual violence against adolescents revealed in the data. Four KIs noted sex work and sexual exploitation as a key concern facing adolescent girls, with some informants suggesting that adolescent girls in Chiredzi Urban were more at risk of sexual exploitation due to being recruited for prostitution or even child trafficking, especially girls who migrate from the rural areas.

“And they [adolescents who migrate from rural areas to Chiredzi Urban] are recruited ... to be engaged in sexual activities, for example prostitution. And, we have also identified child trafficking ... Why? Because of the proximity between Chiredzi and South Africa where children probably are deceived to go to South Africa. Probably they would have been offered better living conditions and a better standard of living.”

**KI, NGO STAFF**

Sexual exploitation in the context of sex work among adolescent girls and young women was a theme that also emerged from SenseMaker stories, highlighting gaps in the ecosystem of support for adolescent girls. In some cases, sex work leads to child marriage, while in others, sex work becomes a necessity for married girls as a means to ensure their own survival and that of their children:

“I want to share my story. Years have gone by since the time I got married. When I got married however I was a young child, 13 years old. My husband was older. Being a child, I was naïve and ignorant. I was abused, my husband would not buy food, sometimes he would be gone for days. As a child I would just stay put and hope he would come back, and he would change his ways until a time when I realised that my living arrangement was not ideal. Right now, as we speak, I do not even know his whereabouts. I left my husband after having two children, my first child was born in 2016 and the last one in 2018 which is the year when I left. When I had my first child, I was only 16 years old. My husband did not even look for us after I left. My parents had encouraged me to leave. Since I left, I cannot say that my life has changed for the better, but my marriage made me realise that getting married at a very young age is not a good thing, it does not help in any way. If one gets married at a young age there are a lot of regrets, and I wish I had stayed in school like my peers. Right now, I am at my parents' home with no source of income, when the going gets tough sometimes I sell sex like what the others do around here just get enough to get by. Right now, I am in my twenties.”

**YOUNG WOMAN, 23–25 YEARS,  
DIVORCED, CHIREDDI URBAN**

## Lack of peer support

Lack of peer support emerged as an element in SenseMaker data, including during participatory community analysis of SenseMaker stories. Among participatory community analysis participants, peer relationships were often seen as negative and potentially problematic influences rather than sources of help or comfort to adolescent girls. In response to the SenseMaker question “Do you remember a moment where you stopped being a child, and became an adult?”, a male participant responded:

“Around 2017 [at 14 to 15 years old] when I had peer pressure from friends about girls that’s when I started to do the girls thing, proposing and doing adult stuff, that’s when I started feeling that difference from being a boy.”

ADOLESCENT BOY, 18–19 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN

Friends being a source of negative influence also show up in SenseMaker stories mainly in relation to their role in influencing, or pressuring adolescent girls to engage in relationships with men. Some of these relationships are depicted as resulting in child marriage; all stories reveal elements of unequal power dynamics that result in exploitation of the adolescent girl. In the following

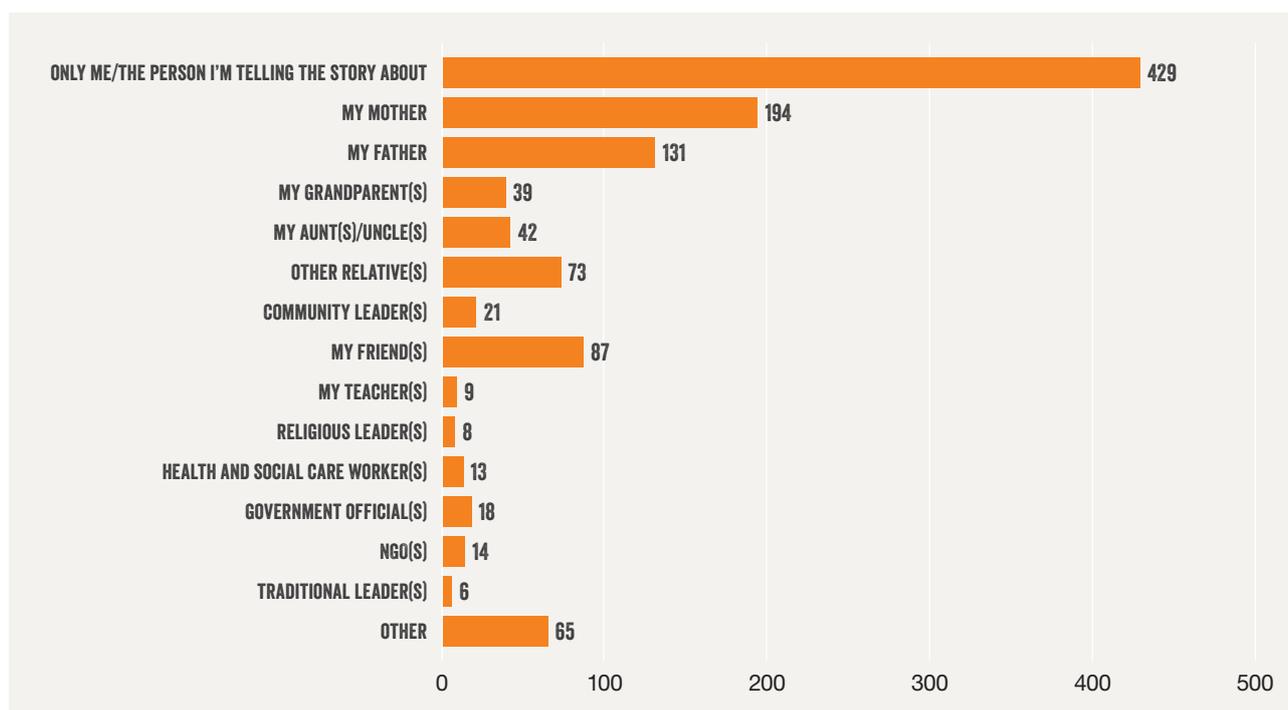
story, an adolescent girl in need of school fees and school supplies is described as being influenced by her female peers to marry with the expectation that her husband will provide for her needs:

“There is a girl that is a double orphan [her mother and father are deceased]. She was staying on her own and had no one to help her with school supplies. A friend of hers, that was once married, then helped her get married. She is currently pregnant and has no one to help her from the abuse she is facing.”

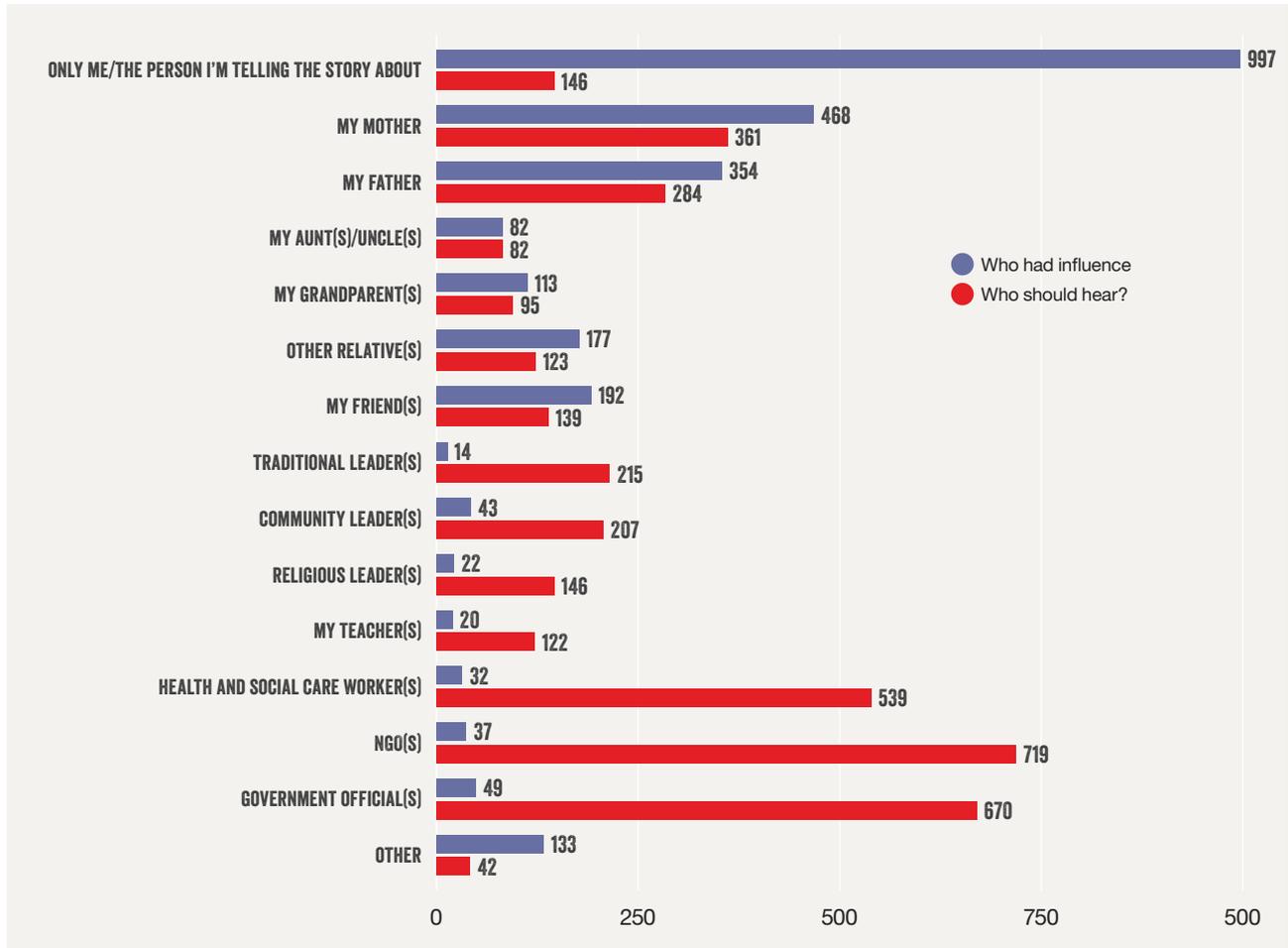
ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15–17 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN

In the stories, friends are occasionally mentioned when people are sharing their friends’ stories, but friendship as a support seems to be much rarer. As the responses to the question of “who had influence” on the participant’s story and “who should hear” their story show, the influence (interpreted as either good or bad) of friends is much less prevalent than that of family (see figure 7). This is also true when we isolate the stories specifically from adolescents up to 19 years, as figure 8 (on the next page) shows below. Overall, the influence of friends was especially felt in around 12 percent of stories. Further research is needed to understand the positive role of peer support.

**FIGURE 7 WHO HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE OVER ANY DECISIONS MADE IN YOUR STORY? (N=714 ADULT AND ADOLESCENTS)**



**FIGURE 8 WHO HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE OVER ANY DECISIONS MADE IN YOUR STORY? VS WHO SHOULD HEAR ABOUT YOUR STORY? (N=1,668 ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS)**



A young girl and her grandmother at their home in rural Zimbabwe .  
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A 13-year-old, washes dishes at her home in Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

## KEY CONCERNS OF MARRIED ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Study findings indicate that child marriage has devastating consequences for married girls that negatively affect their development trajectories. These consequences are brought about through cyclical poverty, various forms of violence including intimate partner violence (IPV) and emotional abuse, school dropout, and adverse health and wellbeing outcomes.

### Cyclical poverty

As noted above, poverty is a key driver of child marriage, and findings illustrate that married girls often face heightened economic hardship. Data suggest that married adolescent girls are less likely than unmarried girls to attend school due to economic hardship **as well as** home and caregiving responsibilities. Because married girls are likely to have limited educational attainment, and therefore may have limited skills or knowledge to generate income, they are unlikely to pursue formal labour opportunities to earn a living for themselves or their family. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty within families. As illustrated in the subsections below, data indicates that some married girls experience sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, in the context of selling or exchanging sex (for goods, food, or money) to provide for themselves and their children due to a lack of alternative formal labour opportunities.

### Intimate partner violence

The data shows a high incidence of IPV against adolescent girls by husbands. Several stories suggest that many of the husbands were forced by the girl's parents to marry their daughter, and so IPV may be a result of the husband's attitude towards the marriage. Some adolescent boys and men reluctantly get married; some deny responsibility, while others are described as escaping to South Africa. While KIs mention IPV in terms of physical and emotional violence (i.e.,

abandonment, infidelity), SenseMaker stories illuminate a broader range of types of violence perpetrated by husbands including sexual and psychological violence, and the denial of resources and opportunities. For example, the following story demonstrates how some married adolescent girls face economic and emotional violence or psychological aggression from their husbands:

“What happened is that this particular man was once married but the wife left. That is when he impregnated [kumitiswa] this 15-year-old girl. This girl is always stressed. The husband does not give his wife money even to buy food with. He spends his time chasing after other girls in the streets. Some weeks ago, the parents of the girl came intending to pursue [the] arrest of the man but the man insisted that their daughter was telling lies so the parents left her with him. They always fight, the husband takes money to get drunk [when he is] meant to buy food.”

ADOLESCENT BOY, 15–17 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN

Abandonment emerged as a dominant trend in SenseMaker stories, coupled with descriptions from community analysis workshops of family neglect. In SenseMaker stories about newly married girls, the husband often leaves her, usually in the context of denying responsibility for her pregnancy and fleeing to South Africa. A young divorced woman shares her story of abandonment:

“I dated the father of this child. He impregnated me [kumitiswa] in the second month of our relationship. I asked if he had a wife and he said no. He told me that he wanted to marry me and introduced me to his relatives. He also told me that he wanted to build a place for us to stay and I agreed. He then went to South Africa and returned. By that time my pregnancy was due. I looked for him everywhere, I tried calling him but his phone was unreachable. I asked for his whereabouts from his relatives and they said they hadn't seen him from the time he returned from South Africa. They claimed they did not know where he was. I am yet to meet up with the father of this child.”

YOUNG WOMAN, 20–22 YEARS,  
DIVORCED, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN

## Abuse from in-laws

SenseMaker stories indicate that married adolescent girls can be subjected to GBV and other abuses from their wider family unit, particularly their in-laws. According to KIs and SenseMaker participants' descriptions of married life, married adolescent girls usually live with their husband's family rather than as a separate household. Many stories documented the abuses that took place as a result of the power imbalance between the wife and her new relatives, often related to the mother-in-law. The following story indicates the emotional and economic abuse faced by some married adolescents from their husband's family:

“ I was impregnated [kumitiswa] when I was 13 years old. After I was impregnated I eloped to my boyfriend's place but the living conditions were deplorable. My husband's relatives would look down upon me because of my age. I then informed my parents of the deplorable conditions and they came and took me from my husband's place. I would get along very well with my husband but his relatives were a menace. After I returned with my parents, my husband followed after me and asked me to return with him. I agreed and now we live together. The only problem are his relatives; they are always telling him what to do. His mother always tells him that she is the one that is supposed to be handling his finances not me. She always says it is him who is supposed to give her money and not me. We go through a lot in marriages. ”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
MARRIED, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN)

## School dropout as both a precursor and consequence of child marriage

Study data suggests that school dropout is both a precursor and consequence of child marriage. A few KIs discussed how adolescent girls drop out of school after they are married. KI data suggests that married adolescent boys are more likely to continue their education after marriage compared to adolescent girls, due to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities. Additional information about school dropout can be found in the [“Drivers of child marriage”](#) section.



A 19-year-old takes her baby to the health centre for a check-up in Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

## Adverse health and wellbeing outcomes

SenseMaker and KI data and stories illustrate the detrimental effects of child marriage on adolescent girls' overall health and wellbeing resulting from abandonment, violence, and lack of support from family, friends, and community. A common theme across data is that adolescent girls are forced from their parental homes and/or those of their husbands, and therefore often lack the support they need to find safety. Data indicate that girls, particularly married girls, are ostracised and lack a sense of belonging, which seems to lead to adverse mental health and psychosocial outcomes. A few stories centred on acute cases of psychological illness where married girls both attempt and commit suicide. An adult female community member shared a story about a married girl who committed suicide after she was chased away from her parental home and her husband's family home:

“ She was impregnated [kumitiswa] while she [was] still in school. She was then chased away from home and told to go to the person responsible. The boy's parents then sent her away, saying their son was still in school. The girl was stressed and she ended up throwing herself in a well and she died. ”

ADULT WOMAN, 50+ YEARS,  
MARRIED, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN

Another woman shared a story about a young married mother who was contemplating suicide after being abused by both her husband and her parents:

“ I grew up with a certain girl that was in an abusive marriage. She was married to a guy that was older than her. The guy was 63 years old. Sometimes when she would go to fetch water in [the] river, she would encounter crocodiles and return home without water. Her husband would not listen to this and demand that she fetches water or she won't eat dinner. One day as she was working in the fields, she just left the basket that she had and went to her parents' place. When she got there, her parents physically assaulted her and left her with bruises. She then ran away from her parents' place and went and found work but the parents followed her and brought her home. She stayed with her parents for a while then she went back to her husband's place. As she was there, she went to the fields with her son. She fell asleep while she was there. A flood came but then she was able to wake up in time and hide behind a tree. She then told me that she wanted to commit suicide by throwing herself into the river of which I told her not to. I told her not to because if her parents were to hear of this they would be disappointed and her death would be in vain. She then told me of how much she had been abused and how she was finding life to be difficult. She later passed on. ”

**ADULT WOMAN, 50+ YEARS,  
MARRIED, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN**

Stories shared in SenseMaker also illustrated how the combination of child marriage with the lack of SRH services can affect health, while complications in childbirth were often noted as a theme in the stories collected. For example, in the following story, an adolescent girl contracts HIV from her husband:

“ A 15-year-old young lady got pregnant because the boy was rich and [she] decided to elope with the boy. The boy was HIV positive, and he didn't tell his young wife. She got sick and found out she was positive. She was sent away and decided to get married somewhere else sometime later. ”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
COHABITING, CHIREZDI**

## DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN CHIREZDI

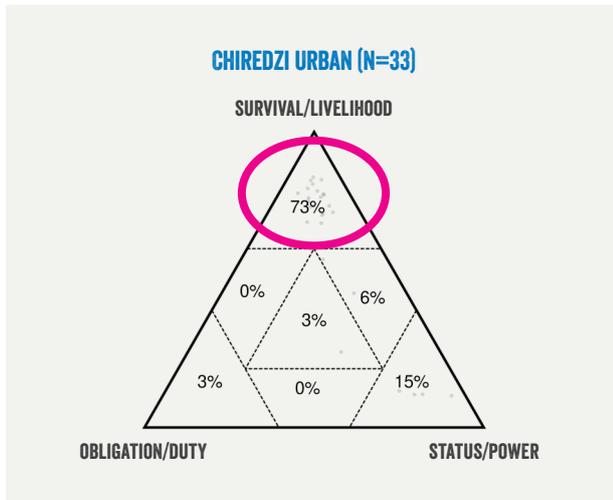
Study findings illustrate how patriarchal power dynamics and harmful gender norms are perpetuating gender and socio-economic inequality and discriminatory practices such as child marriage. Girls and women suffer the most from these entrenched practices. Although the root cause of child marriage remained consistent, different drivers were more evident depending on if the ward was Urban or Peri-Urban. Data reveal that key drivers of child marriage in Chiredzi intersect across individual, social, institutional, and resource domains. **Key drivers include poverty and lack of basic needs including access to food; low value placed on girls' education, their lack of access to it, school dropout, and lack of alternative opportunities for girls; male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality; sexual violence against adolescent girls; adolescent pregnancy; girls' misconceptions about marriage; and harmful cultural practices (i.e., abduction, lobola payments, initiation ceremony).** Further, the internet and social media emerged as a potential risk of child marriage. Data collected a year into the global pandemic, also indicate that COVID-19 exacerbated the existing drivers of child marriage which suggest that girls became more at risk of child marriage during the pandemic.

### Poverty, unmet basic needs, and lack of income-generating opportunities

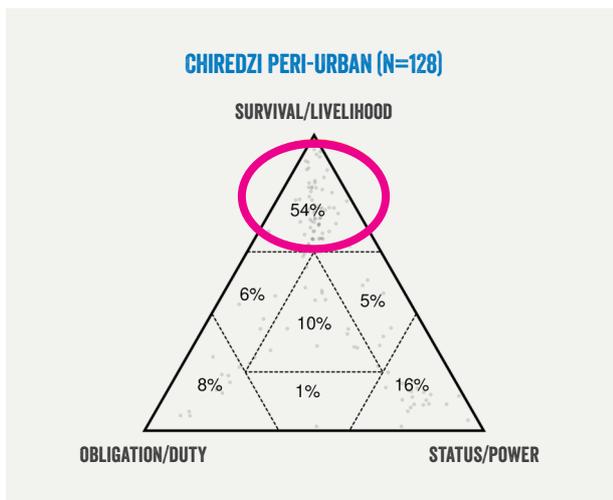
Poverty was identified by all methods as a pervasive driver of child marriage. Poverty pushes parents to migrate for work; motivates families to marry off their daughters in anticipation of *lobola*; and forces adolescent girls to seek out exploitative relationships or marriage as a way out of poverty. The widespread economic hardship and lack of livelihoods limit alternatives for adolescent girls since often a family will cut back by deprioritising costs related to the girl's education. Moreover, some data suggest that families view child marriage as a chance to reduce the economic burden of caregiving for their daughter, and believe it offers better opportunities for girls.

Notably, SenseMaker data did not reveal stark differences in key drivers of child marriage between Urban and Peri-Urban wards in Chiredzi. While trends are the same, there is a stronger emphasis on poverty as a driver in Urban (Figure 9A on the next page), compared to Peri-Urban (Figure 9B on the next page) communities.

**FIGURE 9A** WHAT DROVE PEOPLE'S ACTION IN YOUR STORY? FILTERED BY OLDER WOMEN AGED 20+ WHO MARRIED AT 15-17 YEARS, CHIREZDI URBAN



**FIGURE 9B** WHAT DROVE PEOPLE'S ACTION IN YOUR STORY? FILTERED BY OLDER WOMEN AGED 20+ WHO MARRIED AT 15-17 YEARS, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN



Adolescent girls may also enter into relationships with wealthier (and, usually older) men not only to meet basic needs, such as school fees and supplies, food, and menstrual products, but also for luxury items that provide higher status, such as clothes, phones, and hairstyles.

Data indicate that due to age, sex, socio-economic and other differences between the adolescent girl and her partner, inherent imbalances in power dynamics in these relationships elevate girls' risk of intimate partner violence including sexual violence and exploitation which may result in pregnancy, STIs, and child marriage. A KI explains how the lack of income-generating opportunities leads to child marriage or sexual exploitation in the context of selling sex:

“ Well, as I just said, 24 years [as an appropriate age to be married] is ok, but you find that that cannot be possible [in Chiredzi]. The environment has been moulded in such a way that people are not given an opportunity to choose. The problem now is people they have no choice but to get married or to go into sex work or do something else that will bring food on the table. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

**Lobola**

*Lobola*, or bride price, especially paid in cattle, is a traditional wedding custom among southern African peoples. KIs and SenseMaker stories depict *lobola* as a driver of child marriage; however, study findings indicate that the cultural tradition of *lobola* is complex. This data illustrate that some parents encourage, allow, and also force their children to marry so that they receive *lobola*. Some male participants in the Peri-Urban adult participatory community analysis group voiced that some mothers are “greedy” and discourage their daughters from dating boys of their age because they are poor and push them to look for someone better (i.e., rich) (*tsvaga ari nane*). They shared that some parents are motivated by financial or material gain from their daughters' relationships: *kuda zvinhu* (a term used to describe an attitude that motivates transactional behaviour). The following stories highlight parents' possible desire to marry off their daughters to receive *lobola*:

“ It happens, that children are forced into marriage because the parents want money. They would want money that is paid dowry. Sometimes children are chased away from their homes by their parents and told to go and get married because they want money. It is something that happens in our community. ”

ADULT WOMEN, 30-39 YEARS, MARRIED, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN

“ Some parents are greedy to the extent that they encourage their children to marry at a young age so they can spend the bride price. It happens quite a lot here. ”

ADULT WOMEN, 30-39 YEARS, MARRIED, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN

However, one KI reported that boys/men pay as little as 20 South African Rand (ZAR), or approximately 1US\$ as *lobola* – an amount seemingly too little for the girl’s parents to derive any financial benefit out of the marriage. As such, *lobola* may be less of an economic driver than a symbol of tradition or commodification of the girl child.<sup>5</sup> Further, data suggest that in these cases, married adolescent girls and her children are more vulnerable to being neglected and abandoned by her husband since the proper formalization of the marriage never took place.

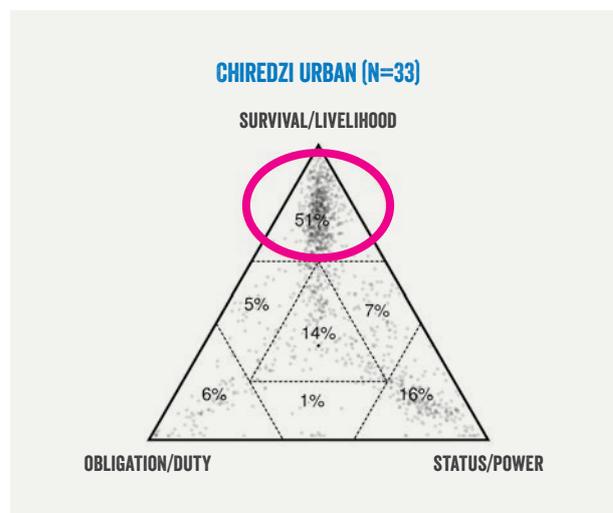
### Food insecurity

Findings show that food insecurity is inherently associated with poverty in the home and the inability of families to meet the basic needs of their children in Chiredzi. The study found that access to food, exacerbated by COVID-19, is a key driver of child marriage in Chiredzi. One KI explains the factors that influence parents in food-insecure households to marry off their daughters:

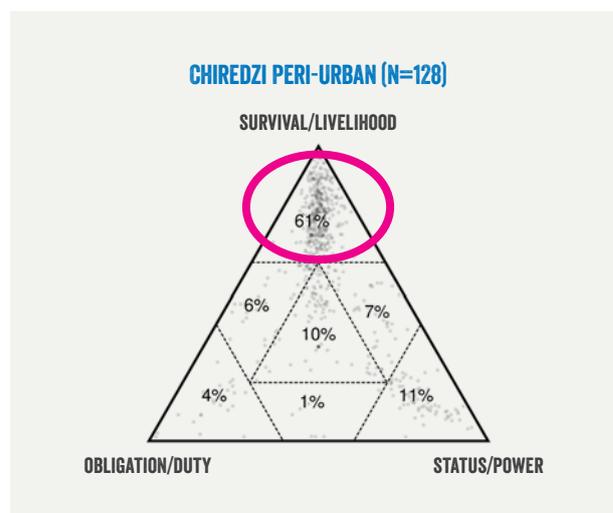
“We are coming from a drought period, during the onset of the lockdown in March 2020, where we saw a lot of child protection violations due to the drought situation that we had in the country. COVID-19 has further exacerbated those kinds of risks, because then the household income that was there, could not be preserved, leading to so many families then selling their productive assets so that they could survive. The drought also impacted child protection, especially child marriage, where families in a situation of food insecurity ... start pushing out girls to get married as a means of trying to ease the economic burden by lessening the number of people to feed in the household. Marrying off girls is an easy option and the family in turn gets *lobola*, which makes child marriage an opportunity for them to get a bit richer while also lessening the number of people to feed in the household.”

KI, NGO STAFF

**FIGURE 10A** WHAT DROVE PEOPLE’S ACTION IN YOUR STORY? (OVERALL, N=1,343 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)



**FIGURE 10B** WHAT DROVE PEOPLE’S ACTION IN YOUR STORY – FILTERED BY STORIES WHERE FOOD INSECURITY WAS EXPERIENCED? (N=643 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)



Figures 10A and 10B show that survival and securing livelihoods are considered a major driver of action in stories. The Figure 10B has been filtered by the stories where food insecurity was experienced. Survival and livelihoods is perceived, unsurprisingly, as even stronger in stories where food is scarce, shown at 61 percent (Figure 10B) compared to 51 percent (Figure 10A).

5. Consultations with Plan International staff explained that if the girl left home to go to her boyfriend/husband’s homestead because she has discovered that she is pregnant (to pre-empt her being chased away from home) or has eloped, the man responsible will send a family member with a small sum of money such as ZAR 20 (USD 1.26) to leave at the girl’s family homestead to announce that she is now married and with her husband’s family. This is meant to reassure the family of her whereabouts and to prevent the girl’s family from reporting their daughter as missing to the police. The small sum of money is a declaration or confession that they have taken the girl into their family without first paying the bride price as per custom. Over time, the husband’s family is supposed to make a formal dowry payment which ranges between R15,000 and R25,000, or US\$500 and US\$1,000. However, if the husband’s family hasn’t paid the dowry, someone may say that the girl was married for R20, because that is the only money that the girl’s family would have received. In recent times with rising poverty, many families fail to make dowry commitments.



A sign marks the women's garden plot in Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

While KI data suggest that parents might force their daughters to marry in contexts of food insecurity to relieve the economic burden on the family, SenseMaker data also show that adolescent girls could seek relationships with men, including through child marriage, to escape food insecurity in their parental homes:

“The child that I have on my back is mine, I was impregnated [kumitiswa] when I was 16 years old. I don't know where the father is. He stays in Harare. I was impregnated and we never had a relationship with the father. The child is now two years old. The reason why most young girls are impregnated is that their parents fail to provide them with basic things such as food. Being in a relationship gives girls the chance to get some things they would ordinarily get and because of these they end up getting impregnated.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
SINGLE, WITH CHILDREN, CHIREDDI URBAN**

“Sometimes the family will be facing food shortages that even the father sleeps on an empty stomach, in fact the whole family will be hungry because the family will be poverty-stricken. It's not that the family will be withholding food from their child deliberately; on the other hand, the child may perceive it the other way and opt to get married as a solution out of poverty and abuse.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
SINGLE, WITH CHILDREN, CHIREDDI URBAN**

Adolescent girls' motivation to marry to meet their basic needs, including food, is likely to be cultivated by the broader socio-cultural norms and expectations for girls to fulfil their gender roles, which according to study data, include moving out of the parental home to marry, bear children, and assume household responsibilities.

## The low value placed on girls' education, their lack of access to it, school dropout, and lack of alternative opportunities for girls

As described in the section above, adolescent girls face heightened barriers to accessing education compared to their male peers due to gender and economic inequality. Data suggest that adolescent girls who are out of school are more likely to become pregnant (if they aren't already) and marry as children. KII data indicate that many of the girls who drop out of school end up getting married due to the lack of alternative opportunities to marriage other than economic hardship and violence in the home. The only type of economic opportunity that girls were cited to engage in was as domestic workers; however, this type of work was also associated with sexual exploitation among girls, and a pathway to child marriage:

“The moment one drops out of school, has nothing to do at home and the next thing is for her to get married. First, she will be asked to go and work as a domestic worker, then from working as a domestic worker, likely to be taken advantage by the older men, then child pregnancy, then child marriage.”

KI, NGO CHIREDZI

Adolescent girls in the peri-urban community participatory group expressed a lack of purpose in their lives after completing “a certain level” of education, which corroborates KII data that indicate few economic opportunities for community members, particularly girls, exist in Chiredzi, which leads youth to devalue education as means to uplift themselves and their families from poverty by entering the workforce. Adolescent girl participants also discussed adolescent girls being expelled from school for becoming pregnant, which contradicts Zimbabwe's amended Education Act, which allows pregnant girls to attend school.

## Male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality

Although findings across methods indicate that some adolescent girls may initiate their own marriages by eloping, findings show that in general adolescent girls have limited decision-making power to choose when and whom they marry, especially when their behaviour – actual or perceived – deviates from socially derived gender norms about behaviour and expectations for girls. Data show that fathers and, to a lesser extent,

brothers, play a particularly influential role in girls' marriages. In several SenseMaker stories, girls were chased away from home by their fathers and in some of the stories the fathers' actions were based on information received from the girls' brothers. The following story represents this trend:

“A former classmate of mine that was born in 2006, she was sent to the grinding mill. On her way there her boyfriend followed her and they met up. The girl's brothers saw them together and reported this to their father. When the father heard of this, he immediately chased away the girl from his homestead. She then followed after her boyfriend and now they are married. The father said he never wants to see the girl at his homestead again.”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 13–14 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREDZI PERI-URBAN

Data suggest that fathers sometimes force their daughters to marry to uphold socio-cultural norms that prohibit “deviant” behaviours associated with family shame such as girls engaging in sex or intimate relationships, or being seen in the company of a boy or young man, or becoming pregnant before marriage. A participant explained that: “A wise father chases away the adolescent girl to prevent further problems in the future. What is the point of waiting for her to get pregnant?” (Adult man, participatory community analysis, Chiredzi Peri-Urban)

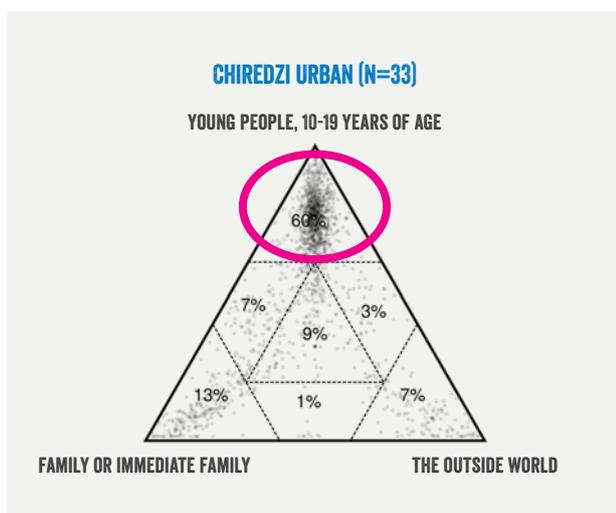


A girl attending a lesson at school following the COVID-19 lockdowns in Zimbabwe  
© Plan International

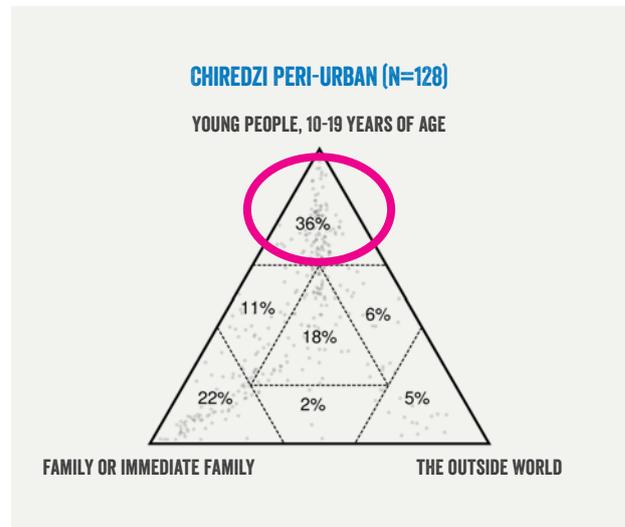
SenseMaker data shed more light on fathers' influence in child marriage decisions. Figure 12 (on the right) shows a subset of stories where the respondent via another question, answered that the father had most influence over decisions in the story. When compared with the total unfiltered number of stories (Figure 11 shown for comparison below), the percentage of stories interpreted as influenced exclusively by family or immediate community increases from 13 percent to 22 percent, and the percentage of stories influenced by young people nearly halves, from 60 percent to 36 percent. These trends suggest that the direct involvement of fathers in child marriage decision-making dominates the influence over adolescents.

During the Urban adult participatory community analysis discussions, participants argued about the extent to which mothers increased adolescent girls' risk of child marriage. Most participants agreed that mothers tend to remain silent when adolescent girls are being chased away from home. Some participants shared that mothers are potentially opposed to their daughter marrying, but may fear being abused or being chased away from home themselves. Other participants argued that mothers remain silent because they are "complicit" in the adolescent girls' relationships; they might be aware of the relationship and in some instances the child may have been using the mother's mobile phone to communicate with the boyfriend. Some male participants indicated that some mothers vocalise their support for their daughters' relationships which may cause the father to feel emasculated: "*Munomubvunza zvevakomana wake ndimi munoda kumuroora here / You are quizzing her about her relationships as if you want to marry her yourself*" (Adult man, Chiredzi Peri-Urban, adult participatory analysis).

**FIGURE 11 WHAT HAPPENED IN MY STORY WAS INFLUENCED BY ... (N=1,630 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)**



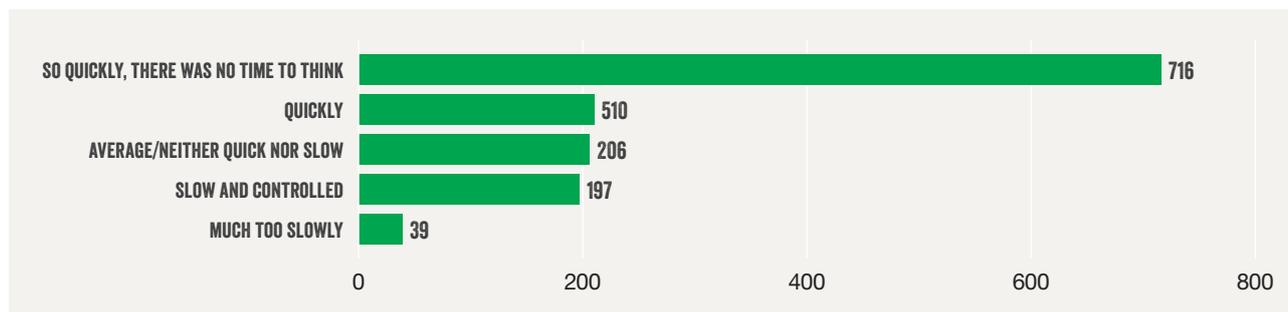
**FIGURE 12 WHAT HAPPENED IN MY STORY WAS INFLUENCED BY ... FILTERED BY STORIES WHERE FATHERS HAD MOST INFLUENCE OVER DECISIONS (N=351 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)**



SenseMaker data suggest that the events surrounding child marriage are experienced as occurring very quickly, and therefore, girls may not have time to process the events that lead to marriage, nor the opportunity to influence their parents' decision or actions. In response to the multiple-choice question "How quickly did things happen in your story?", almost three-quarters of participants (74 percent) responded that things happened "So quickly there was no time to think" (n=716; 43 percent) and "Quickly" (n=510; 31 percent) (see Figure 13 on page 39). The haste with which marriages occur is also evident within the narrative stories. A married adolescent girl among the 43 percent of participants who responded that things (in their story) happened so quickly there was no time to think, shared the following story:

“ There was a girl and a boy that were in a relationship for a week. After that they then eloped and started staying together. Currently they have a 6 months old baby. The girl was impregnated [kumitiswa] when she was 16 but she is now 17. The boy is 21 years old. ”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15-17, MARRIED, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN**

**FIGURE 13 HOW QUICKLY DID THINGS HAPPEN IN YOUR STORY? (N=1,668 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)**

As discussed, some stories illustrate adolescent girls' decision to initiate their own marriages. However, given that many of these events unfold in contexts where people have "no time to think", it is plausible that girls enter into self-initiated marriages without meaningful control or deliberate intention of their actions, including fully anticipating the consequences.

In the context of this sense of urgency, pressure, and haste with which events happen, girls' decision to engage in a relationship was often equated with the decision to marry. However, some stories about child marriage suggest that marriage was not always girls' intention or desire when they entered into a relationship. The following story illustrates how girls perceive marriage as the only option after they are chased out of their parental home:

“The reason why some of these girls are getting married while they are young is that, they are seen with their boyfriends by their brothers and then chased away from home because of that. The girls then have no option than to go to their boyfriend's place and get married because they would have been chased away from home. The girls would be opposed to the idea of getting married but because they have nowhere to stay, they are then forced to get married before they reach the acceptable age for marriage.”

**ADULT WOMAN, 23–25,  
DIVORCED, CHIREZDI PERI-URBAN**



Community awareness raising event in Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

Many girls in Zimbabwe face impossible decisions to survive that puts them at risk of exploitation in the context of selling or exchanging sex.  
© Plan International

## Sexual violence against children, including child abuse, sexual assault, and abduction

The study findings showed how various forms of sexual violence against children and adolescents, such as sexual exploitation and abduction, drive child marriages in Chiredzi.

### Child abuse in the home

Child abuse was identified as a driver of child marriages in some of the Sensemaker stories and by a few KIs. This included sexual, physical, economic (in terms of resource deprivation: lack of school fees and other basic needs), and emotional violence in the home perpetrated by guardians, relatives, or biological parents, mentioned as a reason why adolescent girls seek out marriage as an escape. In the following story, an adolescent girl explains how some girls perceive a lack of food in the home as parents intentionally depriving them of food, and therefore as a form of child abuse, which in turn drives girls to marry:

“The other thing that might be a cause for them to get married before they are ready is abuse at home. A child would be exposed to abuse at home and such that even if food is not lacking they see marriage as a way out of the abuse. She can elope to someone who is even poorer, who does not care about her and living in poverty. Sometimes the family will be facing food shortages that even the father sleeps on an empty stomach, in fact the whole family will be hungry because the family will be poverty-stricken. It's not that the family will be withholding food from their child deliberately, on the other hand the child may perceive it the other way and opt to get married as a solution out of poverty and abuse.”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19,  
SINGLE, CHIREDDI URBAN

### Forced child marriage to the perpetrator of sexual violence

Findings show that adolescent girls become trapped into marriage as a result of experiencing sexual violence. In many cases, according to the data, the perpetrator of the sexual violence is the girl's boyfriend, who is often older than the girl. Inequitable power dynamics – regarding age, socio-economic status, physical strength – often characterise the relationships between adolescent girls and their male partners. These dynamics are compounded by gender inequality and a lack of awareness of SRHR, and leave the girls vulnerable to sexual assault – as this story illustrates:

“In Zimbabwe, one of the ways that young women are married is that ... you have a relationship with your boyfriend, usually a boyfriend who is older, maybe it's a person who goes to work and you're in school, ... or even if you've just completed your education, you've got your boyfriend, he invites you over to his house. A lot of young women or a lot of marriages have happened in this manner. So the boyfriend invites the girl to their place and ... they just think 'oh, I'm going to spend time with my boyfriend', and before she realises it the guy rapes the girl, locks them up in the house for 2 - 3 days. And then that's how they get married. And the next thing is, 'Oh, well you know my wife, there is nowhere you can go'. ... the girl's parents already know, because it's almost it's a traditional practice as well, they know that if a girl doesn't come back home, she's married. And sometimes such men are already known by, ... an aunt or sister, or whatever. So, for girls it becomes difficult to come back home and say, 'Oh, I was raped by my boyfriend'. Even if the boyfriend really raped you, and they locked you up in their room. A lot of girls do not know that someone should not force themselves on you, or should not force you to get married, but also at home [the parents are] now saying 'no, you're married, where were you all this time go back to where you came from'.”

### KI, NGO STAFF

The story shows how the girl's parents play a role in this. They are likely to consider their daughter as married or force her to marry if she stays at her boyfriend's home or returns home late. The boyfriend also may force a marriage by detaining the girl at his home in the knowledge that her parents will not take her back once she has stayed away too long.

Data from across methods also suggest that sexual violence drives child marriages in Chiredzi, particularly when it results in pregnancy. The following story suggests that drugs and alcohol may be a contributor to sexual violence being perpetrated by men:

“The reason behind people getting married at a tender age is because young girls get overexcited during the festive season [Christmas and New Year]. One gets drunk and then drugged resulting in them getting raped. The victim cannot excuse herself because she was drugged. The child seeks help from the parents, but they just tell her to move in with the responsible person. They tell her that is how marriage starts.”

**ADOLESCENT BOY, 18–19,  
SINGLE, CHIREDDI URBAN**

Notably, in the story here, the adolescent boy assigns responsibility for being drugged, raped, and the resulting marriage to the adolescent girl who was depicted as “getting overexcited” (i.e., drinking too much).

### ***Musengabere*: the practice of men abducting girls and women to force marriage**

The Shona cultural practice of abduction, *musengabere*, whereby a boy or a man takes a girl to his home and sexually assaults her, thereby formalizing the marriage, was referenced in stories and by a few KIs. The following story explains the practice from the perspective of an older woman:

“She is not someone that I am related to, but we stay in the same area. She was married while [she] was between the ages of 10–19. She was taken, got married and she now has a child. She was married through a tradition where the boy abducts the girl and forces her into marriage. This happened because she was in relationship with the guy. She did not want to get married but the guy forced her and took her to his house. The guy would lock her in his house, fearing that she might escape and return to her parents’ place. She however managed to escape and came back home. I am informed that she got married again. I am not sure if she is serious with the marriage or she is just

playing around. She is my neighbour. She is yet to return from this marriage. We have not heard anything from her.”

**ADULT WOMAN, 50+,  
WIDOWED, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN**

It is unclear from this story whether this abduction occurred in the present day, or when the storyteller was an adolescent herself. Other stories described the practices as happening to young girls who were in relationships with the men who abducted them. Conversely, a few KIs believed that the practice is obsolete suggesting that it is an old practice that perhaps only occurs in a few rural areas.

### **Adolescent pregnancy**

As discussed in previous sections, data from across methods demonstrates that pregnancy is considered a basis for marriage, with many girls entering into marriage because of an unplanned pregnancy (i.e., *kumitiswa*), irrespective of age or other factors. The moment a girl becomes pregnant she faces societal pressure to elope, or she is forced to marry the would-be father. She is likely to experience being shunned from her parental home and left with no alternative except moving in with the person responsible for the pregnancy. One KI captures this theme:

“When we look at the issue of child marriage, you find that most girls who have been forced to get into child marriage, some of them have fallen pregnant without having access to contraceptives to protect themselves from getting pregnant, and traditionally girls are forced to marry the minute that they fall pregnant.”

**KI, NGO STAFF**

The quote also highlights the adolescent girls’ unmet need for ASRHR information, services, and programming, particularly access to contraceptives to prevent pregnancy.

### **Girls’ misconceptions about marriage**

Participants across all data collection methods explained that young girls aspire to have a better life and often misconceive marriage as a solution out of the cycle of household poverty and food insecurity where needs are unmet and where she may be exposed to or experiencing violence in the home. Findings suggest that the wider community believes that adolescent girls invest hope in marriage to provide a pathway to reach their

life aspirations. According to the data, for many adolescent girls, these aspirations reflect gender roles ascribed to women, including becoming a wife, being “taken care of” by their husband, and raising children. As noted above (see [poverty](#) and [education](#) sections), data indicates that adolescent girls lack alternative opportunities, such as secondary or higher education and professional careers, so they are forced to choose between limited options where becoming a wife may appear more empowering and safer than remaining in household poverty or being alone in the case of child-headed households. As revealed in the quote from a male participant, girls are likely to be economically dependent on their husbands.

“Girls in ward 4 [Chiredzi Urban] do not even think about getting a job, the norm is that men should work and provide for their families. It does affect what they do later in life, because for them sometimes they just think that ‘I am a girl and at the end of the day I will get married’. They may then not concentrate much on their education because the end-goal is marriage. They tell themselves that at the end of the day, ‘I’ll still get married, I will become a mother, I will stay with my husband who should then take care of me’. Hence the high number of men who migrate to neighbouring South Africa in search of jobs. If a man is not employed and spends most of his time at home, the community will laugh at them saying that he was henpecked [given a concoction of ingredients to be made docile].”

**ADULT MAN, MARRIED,  
CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN, ADULT PARTICIPATORY ANALYSIS**

Data illustrate that adolescent girls’ views about livelihoods and future employment are influenced by gender norms that a woman’s role is in the home doing “feminine” chores. KIs from Chiredzi explained that the norms are reinforced both at home and at school where girls are assigned to sweep the classrooms while boys do more stereotypical masculine activities. At home, girls are assigned care roles including child care of younger siblings while the boys are not. Data suggest that gender-based allocation of chores influences and creates an enabling environment for girls to pursue marriage at a young age in their quest to fulfil socially constructed expectations of normative gender roles.

### Adolescent girls’ perception of *Joni Jonis*: a pathway to “a better life”

Findings indicate that due to socio-economic inequality and lack of alternative opportunities in Chiredzi, adolescent girls aspire to marry boys and men who work in South Africa because they are perceived as more financially stable and a possible route out of Chiredzi for the girls. A few KIs shared that boys and young men who migrate to South Africa, commonly referred to as *Joni Jonis*,<sup>6</sup> usually come back to Zimbabwe during public holidays, particularly Christmas. The *Joni Jonis* look very attractive to girls in Chiredzi who face poverty and economic deprivation, as these boys and men arrive with money, groceries, clothes, mobile phones, cars, and other status symbols. A KI explains:

“They [communities in Chiredzi] view marriage as an asset, so it’s an aspiration for girls to get married and also for boys it’s also an aspiration to get married ... even for the adult men. It’s something which they value quite well and it’s also an aspiration to get with someone who crosses the border ... and he comes after a year at Christmas, and he brings stuff for the home or for them when they get back. That’s how I see it here.”

**KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

However, data also suggest that marriage does not always result from relationships with *Joni Jonis*. According to the same KIs, because adolescent girls are attracted by the possibility of money, groceries, and the prospect of moving to South Africa as a wife, this exposes them to being sexually exploited. Data showed how adolescent girls often fall pregnant and are subsequently abandoned when the boys and young men return to South Africa at the end of the holidays.

Some participants in the Peri-Urban adult participatory analysis discussions reported that girls are motivated to get married to men who have been in South Africa for prolonged periods of time. In such scenarios, the girl will not meet the man prior to marriage; they are shown a picture of each other, then arrangements are made for the adolescent girl to travel to South Africa to meet the man and get married. KIs explained that a man intending to find a partner for marriage might engage a member of the community to identify and introduce him to a girl in the community in exchange for money or other material gains.

6. A nickname derived from the name Johannesburg where the boys and young men are generally assumed to be based.



A 14-year old girl at her home, Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

### Khomba: initiation practices

Findings from all data sources indicate that initiation practices known as *Khomba* are practised among the Shangaan community, and are seen to contribute to child marriages in Chiredzi.

According to KIs and SenseMaker stories, *Khomba* is a Shangaani traditional practice whereby adolescent boys and girls who have entered puberty, marked by the onset of menstruation for girls, travel to sex-segregated undisclosed locations in remote areas to learn from same-sex adult community members about their expected gendered roles as adult women and men. The following story provides additional detail about *Khomba* and how the practice is perceived as elevating girls' risk of child marriage; it is told by a non-Shangaan identifying man:

“ The initiation process is the one that causes all these problems. When these children return from the mountain, the only thing that will be on their mind is marriage. It is part of the Shangaan culture for everyone to be initiated ... I have a daughter of mine and I am opposed to the idea of her getting initiated. She is now older. I know that if she is to get initiated, she will come back and get married early. The initiation teaches girls how to handle men in marriages. They are taught by older women on how to handle a man. We cannot blame the children when it is the parents that take them to be initiated. Girls are coerced into being initiated. When they get there, they are taught different things about sex using a tree. They end up getting married. This is a bad thing. ”

ADULT MAN, 30–39,  
MARRIED, CHIREDDZI PERI-URBAN

Although *Khomba* was discussed by participants as a practice that occurs in remote, rural areas, KIs also described it as practised by Shangaani people in urban areas who travel to rural areas to participate. One KI mentioned that community leaders are paid by community members for their role in overseeing *Khomba*, and therefore, community leaders have an economic incentive to perpetuate and safeguard the practice. KIs also discussed the importance of engaging community leaders in ending child marriage given their influential role in *Khomba*.

“ Although there are others who are initiated at the age of 16 or 17, the younger ones are immediately plucked out because they are the freshest. The older ones are not as fresh as the young ones, so they tend to get suitors later than the younger ones of ages 13 and 14. So the tendency is that the youngest ones are forced into marriage at that age, that's when they tend to drop out from ... Grade 7 [age 13] or Form 1 [age 14]. They are no longer in the school environment and then the ones that will be left behind might survive but because the community has its own expectations around girls' initiation that as soon as you're initiated you must get married. If you fail to get married, then there must be something wrong with you and you are discriminated against and shamed for not being married soon after the initiation. The older ones (15–20 years) are desperately looking for suitors because of the social pressure and this is when they become vulnerable to sexual exploitation. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

However, in the participatory community analysis sessions, community members debated the causal link between initiation and child marriage. While some participants across groups mentioned initiation as facilitating child marriages in Chiredzi, others rejected this. Adult Peri-Urban community member participants argued that adolescents “are being mischievous” and are initiating their own marriages. In the Peri-Urban adolescent group, an adolescent girl asked the facilitator: “If initiation is indeed the cause of child marriages, why then is it that in other places of the country where they don’t have initiation, they are experiencing child marriages?” KIs confirmed that initiation is kept secret within communities; and data shows that initiation is important to communities, as explained by the KI below.

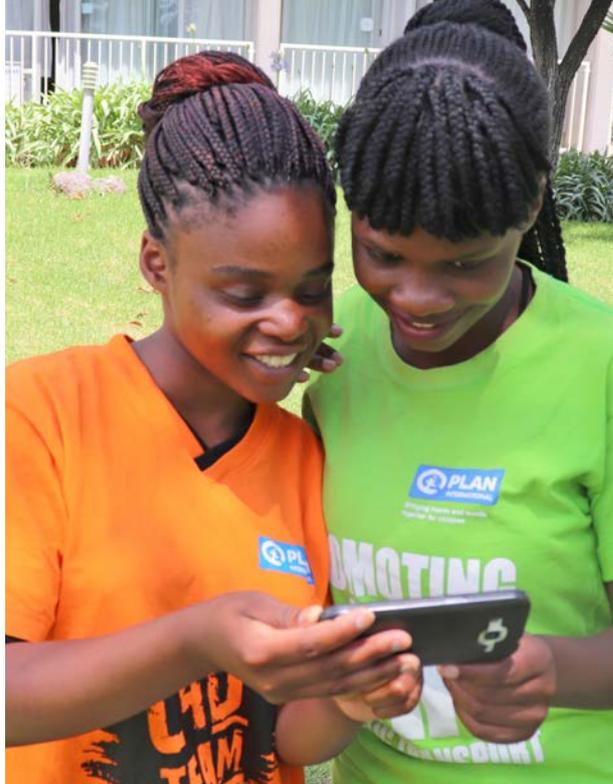
“When the new girl initiate graduates come back home, they’re celebrated more than any achievement any girl can attain in their life. More than even attaining a university degree. A cow is slaughtered, and celebrations go on as if there is a wedding. So, to them, having a child marrying soon after that graduation from initiation is the highest honour that a child can be given in the community. So, families actually want their children to go to these camps when they are young so that they can be honoured by the community. So, child marriage is not perceived as a problem, because *Khomba* has been part of their culture for ages.”

#### KI, NGO STAFF

The above quote suggests that *Khomba* plays an important role in community members’ perception that child marriage is a culturally accepted norm, given that child marriage is inexorably linked to *Khomba*. It is therefore possible that community members were deflecting the influence of initiation on child marriage practices as a means to protect the practice

### Internet, mobile phones, and social media

The internet and social media emerged as a potential risk that heightens girls’ likelihood of marrying; however, it remains unclear whether there is a direct pathway from adolescent girls’ access to the internet and social media use, to child marriage. A widowed woman expressed how technology has led to child marriage among this generation of young people by facilitating interactions between adolescent boys and girls that previously were considered taboo:



Girls learn mobile skills through a Plan project, Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

“It is ‘white men’s’ culture. Back then, during our times, we would never interact with boys. We were cultured never to interact with boys. That is the reason why these young people are getting married early.”

#### ADULT WOMEN, 50+ YEARS, WIDOWED, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN

At the same time, adolescent girls from Chiredzi Urban who participated in the analysis discussions listed “modernisation and technology” as “strong” drivers of child marriage. Social media and mobile phones are implicated in stories as a means of directly connecting young people and of enabling parents to survey and control their daughters’ relationships, as the following story shows:

“In our community there is a girl that got married at the age of 17. She was given a cell phone by her mother. One day as the mother was going through her phone she saw messages between her daughter and her boyfriend. She was then sent on an errand to a place called [redacted] but she came back late. The mother asked her where she was coming from and she responded that she was coming from [redacted]. The mother then sent her packing and told her to return where she was coming from. That is how she got married.”

#### ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15–17, SINGLE, CHIREDDI URBAN

The internet and social media use were identified by a few KIs and by adult co-analysis groups as increasing girls' risk of child marriage, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when adolescents' use of the internet rapidly increased as a result of e-learning, and remote-based services and communications. A government KI explains that due to e-learning during COVID-19, *"most children own phones. And due to lack of monitoring, at times they end up communicating and planning for intimacy or any other related activities that lead to child marriages"*. Relatedly, participants in the urban adult participatory community analysis group speculated that the availability of free internet hotspots without adult supervision in Chiredzi urban has resulted in

adolescents accessing pornographic material instead of educational material as intended. Participants in both the Urban and Peri-Urban adult participatory community analysis groups shared that parents purchase internet bundles for their children to access e-learning materials, yet the children use the internet to view pornographic materials; however, it is unclear what the community considers as pornographic material. These discussions suggest that adults perceive adolescents as abusing the internet to access "immoral material" and unacceptable social interactions while unmarried; adolescent girls who participated in participatory community analysis portrayed the internet and social media as essential tools to access educational material.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Study findings were collected just over a year after the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures began. They suggest that COVID-19 exacerbated existing drivers of child marriage, including increasing poverty and food insecurity; girls' education further undermined; violence against children within the home; lack of safe spaces for adolescents; and weakened protective structures. While KII data suggest that COVID-19 increased child marriage cases in Chiredzi, the study did not collect child marriage prevalence, nor was it designed to do so. KIs discussed that COVID-19 negatively impacted both boys and girls; however, girls were disproportionately impacted given the existing unequal power dynamics and gender norms:



Adolescent girl who returned to school after the COVID-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe.

© Plan International

“In as much as both [girls and boys] have been affected, but to a large extent, you find that girls have been highly burdened by the impact [of] COVID-19. When we look at the issue of child marriage, you find that most girls who have been forced into child marriage, some of them have fallen pregnant without having access to contraceptives to prevent themselves from getting pregnant, and traditionally girls are forced to marry the minute that they fall pregnant. And you find that issues to do with food insecurity within the household, families are now attempting to push out girls to get married as a means of trying to ease the economic burden and welfare of these girls in the household. And then you find there's an issue of increased shared burden on women and girls. You look at issues to do with care work, waking up to do all the house chores which burdens the child. So, some of these girls are either forced to leave the home because of the pressure or the experience that they are going through in the households, which probably caused them to be driven out of their home and get married. In as much as we can talk of other effects in which boys has been affected but still girls have experienced greater negative impacts of COVID-19.”

KI, NGO STAFF

## Increasing poverty and food insecurity

According to a KI working for a national NGO, the majority of people in the study area earn a living in the informal sector, thus the lockdowns imposed because of the pandemic disrupted most households' income source. For those employed in the formal sector, many people lost their jobs as companies could not generate adequate income due to reduced operations. A KI observed that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues around household economy decisions and adversely impacted girls:

“For a start if money is a problem at home, conflict and GBV tend to increase, and issues of saying the girl must get married start because they are just here doing nothing except eating. All these things start coming out unlike before maybe because the girl used to do piece jobs [temporary informal work, such as weeding a field in exchange for money, clothes, or grain] and bring money home but they have stopped because of COVID-19.”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

In response to increased economic hardship and instability, some households turn to child marriage to alleviate this struggle (see stories under [“Food Insecurity”](#) section).

The loss of income induced by the pandemic impacted girls through household decision-making processes that do not prioritise the girls' needs and welfare. Child marriages forced by parents is a result of this de-prioritisation of girls, whereby school fees are saved for sons and not daughters. Data suggests that COVID-19 exacerbated levels of poverty and this has worsened vulnerabilities, particularly for girls, in other ways: for instance, girls' inability to negotiate for contraceptive use with partners, sexual exploitation of girls in the context of selling sex, adolescents' involvement in child labour, and illicit work as shown in the KI narratives and SenseMaker story below.

“There has been an increase in poverty, there's an increase in vulnerabilities for women and girls. A lot of money is with men and a lot of these men when they have money, they do not want to negotiate for protected sex, and because girls have no money they cannot negotiate for protected sex. So there has been an increase in early

pregnancies, there's been an increase in child marriages because they are just rushing and eloping to their boyfriends.”

KI, NGO STAFF

“The issue is that if a child brings money at home, they won't be asked where the money is from because of the economic situation. That is where we are going. It is being seen as normal but there are undertones of coping mechanisms adopted which might be dangerous to the development in the long run.”

KI, NGO STAFF

“The girl was 18 years old. She got pregnant out of wedlock because during the lockdown period she had no money, so she decided to sell her body just to make ends meet; however, she got pregnant and ended up going to live in her rural home.”

ADOLESCENT BOY, 18–19,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI URBAN

KI data indicate that both parents and adolescent girls may have perceived child marriage as a way to ameliorate food insecurity for the first time during COVID-19 due to financial concerns engendered by the containment measures. A KI explains:

“People's livelihoods were disturbed a lot. So, some of the families encouraged their girl children [to marry] and the children themselves have seen that there is a lot of hunger at home and [they think] 'it is better [that] I accept this man's proposal and be married so that I can be helped as he looks like he has money'.”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

Data also indicate that food insecurity experienced during COVID-19 may be associated with increases in violence against children in the home. One KI explained how COVID-19 school closures exacerbated household food insecurity, which led to violence against children and other child protection concerns. The KI explained that children are provided with at least one meal at school, so when schools were closed during lockdown, household food insecurity and tensions spiked: “... A child was beaten by the father because he ate the father's food. The father made the child sit on a hot plate.” (KI, NGO staff)

## Girls' education further undermined

KI data suggest that COVID-19 worsened girls' barriers to accessing education. As noted previously, girls being out of school is closely related to child marriage, both as a cause and a consequence. When asked about the long-term consequences of COVID-19, the most common response from KIs was that the pandemic affected girls' school retention which in turn negatively impacts adolescent girls' lives. One KI shared that parents were more likely to support boys to stay in school compared to girls.

In SenseMaker stories that explicitly mention COVID-19, pregnancy is a particularly strong theme and is often associated with the disruption of education caused by lockdowns. As noted in the introduction, education, being stuck at home, COVID-19 lockdowns, and pregnancy are often closely linked in SenseMaker stories. They illustrate how the themes, which also resonate with other study data, are closely interrelated:

“There is girl whom we used to go to school with, her name was [redacted] she was in form 2 [age 15] but she was more interested in boys than school. When the lockdown was introduced she would sleep at [redacted name of boyfriend]. Her parents gave up on her and they chased her away from home, that is when she went to her boyfriend's house and the boy's parents chased her away, saying they could not live with her without coming to an agreement with her parents. Her parents refused to see reason yet she was already pregnant and could not go back to school. Lockdown is responsible for the mishaps that fell on young girls; most got pregnant during that time. The girl who was pregnant was a brilliant student although she was interested in pursuing men.”

**ADOLESCENT BOY, 15–17,  
MARITAL STATUS NOT PROVIDED, CHIREZDI URBAN**

When asked to explain any anticipated long-term impacts of COVID-19, two KIs underscored how COVID-19 would deepen gender inequality due to complex and overlapping vulnerabilities to school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, and child marriage:

“The gender inequality index is going to be affected, because we are losing quite a number of girls that are taken out of school, although they're not supposed to drop out [when pregnant] because you've got a framework that corrects that. We've got some provision that's available, children should continue coming to school even though they are pregnant, but it happens implementation is not there ... We are going to have a gap between boys and girls that is going to widen a lot because of that. Because all the boys are coming back to school, but quite a number of girls are not coming back to school ... there are losses on the way, losses due to teenage pregnancy, losses due to child marriages.”

**KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

## Violence against children within the home

KII data illuminate the extent to which COVID-19 may have amplified violence against children in Chiredzi. A few KIs cited this violence as a negative consequence of COVID-19. KIs specified that violence was mainly perpetrated by adolescents' fathers. KIs indicated that government lockdowns increased adolescent girls' risk of violence in Urban and Peri-Urban areas. They explained that lockdowns confined potential perpetrators within the home, particularly in urban areas where there are a lot of families living in a very limited space; therefore, adolescent girls sought marriage as a solution to escape the violence. A KI explained:

“The lockdown itself has also locked people ... at home, and they are not use to staying at home with parents, with guardians, with fathers and mothers who are now locked [in] who used to spend more time in bars and churches and the like. So, they are locked in the home then they are exposed to lots and lots of other forms of abuse which are now also fuelled again, then the child marriages because of that kind of abuse. So, there are many girls who are getting married as a solution to the abuse they are experiencing at home.”

**KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

## Lack of safe spaces for adolescents

KIs based in Chiredzi noted that the prolonged lockdowns resulted in the closure of schools that significantly reduced the availability of safe spaces for adolescents. KIs and SenseMaker stories indicate that there is a prevailing sense that adolescent pregnancies and child marriages have increased during COVID-19 due to lack of safe spaces for adolescents and unsupervised “idle time” because parents were preoccupied with seeking economic opportunities. There was also an indication that too much free time led to drug and substance abuse which in turn led to an increase in risky sexual behaviour and sexual violence.

“Schools are closed and you know, with adolescents it’s idle time. Most of them, usually, they tend to look for other sources of entertainment or things that can keep them busy. So, we’ve just been observing that cases of early child sexual relations are now on the increase and we are seeing the evidence of teenage pregnancies as a result of the lockdown and these are girls that are supposed to be going back to school.”

KI, NGO STAFF

“I know two stories about early marriages. The first one involves my mother’s young sister. She got married during the first national lockdown. She was in form 3 [age for grade 14-15] at the time. During school days she had limited freedom to be roaming about, now with lockdown she was not occupied most of the time, that is how she got pregnant and ended up getting married. Then the other girl got married at 12. The boyfriend took her with him to South Africa.”

ADOLESCENT BOY, 18–19 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN

## Weakened protective structures

KIs explained that COVID-19 weakened existing child protection structures in Chiredzi; therefore, adolescent girls lacked support to mitigate some of the risks that they were facing. They were unable to seek help since community child care workers (CCWs) and child protection committees (CPCs) were disrupted because of curtailed movements. A KI described how the child protection system was inadequate during the pandemic:

“The child protection system took time to adjust to the emergency situation and a lot happened, adolescent girls fell pregnant and they did not have anyone to talk to. Yes, we have Childline whom they can phone, but Childline is sometimes also overwhelmed. So, the support structures and networks required to support children have been inadequate during this pandemic especially in marginalised communities.”

KI, NGO, CHIREDDI

Notably, CCWs and CPCs were not mentioned in the SenseMaker stories and only 32 stories mentioned health and social care workers as having a significant influence on what happened in participants’ stories. However, SenseMaker data did show that approximately one-third of participants (539 participants, including 234 adolescent participants) would like health and social care workers to hear about their stories; this indicates a gap in health and social services to respond to the needs of adolescents.

KIs shared that restrictions on freedom of movement combined with school closures, lack of safe spaces, and disrupted, overburdened social support systems, meant that adolescent girls faced a heightened risk of various forms of violence and abuse including child marriage:

“Children didn’t have the usual support system to encourage them. It’s very difficult to stay in school and to complete school without lots of support from family and friends or even your peers at school and the teachers. So, the children relaxed, many got married and some crossed the borders to go look for work. A lot of unwanted pregnancies happened because of this. The usual support systems, just being in school with other children and getting encouragement with other children helps a lot. Being close to the teachers, getting the career guidance and the teachers also continually assisting with psychosocial support. There are G & C [Guidance and Counselling] teams<sup>7</sup> at school and our school-based child protection committees but that whole system broke down during the lockdowns.”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

7. Guidance and counselling teams are responsible for implementing curricula to build adolescents’ life skills, including providing SRH information.

## EXISTING ECO-SYSTEM FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

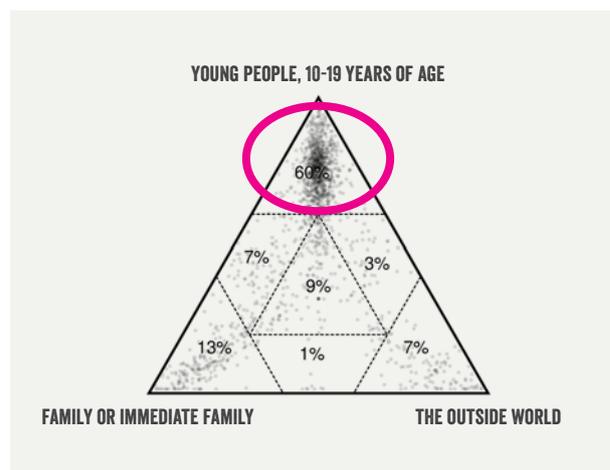
Study findings indicate that an eco-system of support, care, and protection exists for adolescent girls in Chiredzi, despite the critical concerns they face in terms of increased risk of child marriage and the ensuing severe consequences. The eco-system consists of adaptive capacities within girls, families, communities, and broader systems to support, care for, and protect adolescent girls. These may include individual factors, such as girls' agency, knowledge, and skills; resources (e.g., technology, financial capital); institutions (e.g., services, civil society); and policies and systems designed for adolescent girls. Findings indicate that potential exists to leverage those capacities to improve outcomes both for girls at risk of child marriage and girls who are already married or have ever married. **The study identified the following adaptive capacities and potential supports: adolescent girls' agency and survival skills; family members, including parents and tetes (paternal aunts); youth networks and peer interventions; community leaders and chiefs; child protection mechanisms; school and education services; ASRRH programming; adolescent programming; programmes targeted at increasing trust and understanding between parents and adolescents; and national legislative and policy frameworks that protect adolescent girls.**

### Adolescent girls' agency and survival skills

SenseMaker findings indicate that adolescent girls exercise their agency within limited available options in a context of chronic food insecurity, abandonment, violence, gender discrimination, and poverty worsened by COVID-19. Both the stories shared and participants' interpretations of those stories (see Figure 14) show that a significant role in influencing events is attributed to young people (seen in the 60 percent of stories placed at the top of the triangle). There is a tension between this attribution of influence and the stories themselves, which often describe limited choices and circumstances for adolescent girls. During participatory community analysis, this tension became clear in the theme of "misbehaving", which people across age and location groups brought up as a driver of child marriage, in addition (and sometimes in contradiction) to drivers like poverty, which the same people also strongly emphasised.

Indeed, some stories about child marriage depict adolescent girls as the ones choosing to marry. As discussed in earlier sections, these choices are made in contexts of limited alternative survival opportunities and within the constraints imposed by poverty, lack of school fees, or abandonment by parents.

**FIGURE 14** WHAT HAPPENED IN MY STORY WAS INFLUENCED BY ... (N=1,630 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)



“ I know a girl ... who got married to an older guy. The guy has a lot of money and that was the only thing that attracted her to this guy. ”

ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15-17,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN



A 16-year-old lights a fire while her grandmother watches.  
© Plan International

## Family: parents

Parents emerged across SenseMaker data as a potential source of advice, material and financial support, and a refuge for adolescents to return to from failed or abusive marriages or relationships. Childcare support for the children of adolescent single mothers emerged as a sub-theme in SenseMaker stories. In the following story, the mother of an adolescent girl takes care of her grandchild, so her daughter can return to school:

“In the compound where I live there is a girl who got pregnant last year during the lockdown period. At the time when lockdown was imposed she was in upper 6th form [last year of high school; age 17–18 years]. She got pregnant during the lockdown period, but she was not sure who the father of the baby was. None of the boys she thought were responsible accepted responsibility till her parents decided they would just take care of her and her child. Now she is back in school, she gave birth in May, her mother takes care of her grandchild while the young girl is in school.”

**ADOLESCENT BOY, 18–19,  
IN A RELATIONSHIP, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN**

Although the controlling and at times abusive role of fathers was previously discussed, some adolescent girls mentioned their fathers as sources of support. In the following story, a father offered to support his married daughter and grandchild after she experienced abuse from her husband:

“I was married after I made a mistake and got pregnant. After getting pregnant I eloped to the person that was responsible. When I got there his mother did not want me there. He also did not want me there, he claimed that our relationship never meant anything to him and it was a mistake that I got pregnant. I then told my father, who said he valued my life more and told [me] to come back home and he would take care of me and the baby.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19,  
DIVORCED, CHIREZI URBAN**



A 17-year-old with her mother at their home in Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

During the adult urban participatory community analysis, the discussion focused on stories of married, co-habiting, engaged, divorced, and widowed girls and girls with children regardless of married status. Adults recognised that the mostly punitive actions by parents against daughters in stories resonated with the lived experiences of families in Chiredzi, but also expressed the need for parents to provide support to their children even if they disagree with their “socially deviant” behaviours. One participant reflected: “While it is a bad thing for a child to be impregnated [*kumitiswa*], we as parents should find time for our kids and take care of them regardless of what they would have done.” When discussing things they would like to do differently, participants discussed actions such as: “talk to adolescents about marriage”; “have an open communication with children”; “participate in events like these [participatory analysis sessions] where such important issues are discussed”; “report any form of abuse to those responsible”; “talk to children about sexual and reproductive health issues”; and “learn more about this topic of child marriages.”<sup>8</sup>

Findings indicate that economic hardship clearly incentivises parents and caregivers to pursue marriage due to the *lobola* payment and/or the need to lessen the financial burden on the family, and sometimes relatives taking in children may seek the financial gains of marriage over continuing to care for their kin. Participants in participatory community analysis discussions explained that adolescents whose parent/s migrate to South Africa for work need support to prevent girls from entering into marriage. However, there were also warnings that this could inadvertently act as an incentive for parents to abandon their children, in the knowledge that financial support would be available. A suggested mitigation could be that children are housed in social protection until their parents return; however, the sustainability of such a model was not raised.

8. Enumerator notes

### Family: paternal aunts (*tete*)

According to KIs, SenseMaker data, and participatory community analysis discussions, an adolescent girl's paternal aunt (*tete*) is traditionally a critical source of information and guidance on health, intimate relationships, and marriage. Some SenseMaker adult and adolescent participants mentioned that aunts – not always specifically the *tete* – were a safe person whom they could go to for support beyond their parents. Sometimes adolescents relied on their aunts to help them in matters of marriage, eloping or pregnancy, or to intervene and influence parents for a desired outcome. In stories, aunts were not necessarily portrayed as being protective of girls from marriage, but rather as mediators between adolescent girls and their parents. The following story illustrates how adolescent girls may rely on their aunts' guidance and support when they fear violence or admonishment from their parents:

“It got dark before the girl had returned home and she got scared to go back home. She then went to her aunt who accompanied her to her boyfriend's house a day after. The boyfriend looks young but he is older.”

**ADOLESCENT BOY, 15–17 YEARS,  
SINGLE, CHIREZI PERI-URBAN**

In the participatory community analysis, the adults from the Peri-Urban group indicated that the girls should formalise their relationships by following the traditional practice of informing their aunt about it. In fact, the presence of the aunt and her role in the process was one of the recurring characteristics in the stories valued by participants as positive: “Marriage if done the proper way and proper channels is a good thing. The proper channel involves using the aunt and paying *lobola*” (enumerator notes, exemplified by the rural adults' group discussion).

According to a few KIs and SenseMaker stories, the traditional support role of the aunt has dwindled in recent years and the absence of aunts' guidance meant that girls had fewer allies, making adolescence more challenging to navigate. For example, the following KI explains how the lack of aunts' support may lead to girls dropping out of school:

“Back in the day girls used to tell their aunts when they start menstruating but with the nature of the families that's there nowadays, it's very rare for that connection with aunts. The role of the aunts has since been depleted. At the end of the day, children are now doing trial and error. Some go to school and it [menstruation] happens at school and they are laughed at and now the child no longer wants to go back to school. Despite the fact that that child was good in school, they may even drop out of school.”

**KI, NGO STAFF**

According to participatory community analysis discussions about the aunt's role in marriage decision-making, mistrust between mothers and aunts could contribute to fractures in aunts' support for adolescent girls. Female participants in the Peri-Urban adult co-analysis group acknowledged that traditionally people who were dating could meet at the girl's aunt's place, but nowadays mothers do not trust the aunts and prefer to play the aunt's role themselves to protect the best interests of their daughters. Indeed, aunts were sometimes mentioned as being abusive or manipulative in SenseMaker stories. For example, in the following story of a 15-year-old girl who endures abuse and manipulation by her aunt:

“It is a story about a child that was 15 years old. She was staying with her aunt because she had been dumped by her parents while she was still a child. As she was staying with the aunt she was subjected to abuse and maltreatment. She ended up getting married as a child. After she got married, the aunt followed her and told her to divorce her husband. The reason behind this was that the husband was rich and he could afford dowry so she [the aunt] wanted the husband to marry her biological child. The aunt was able to force her [the girl] to get divorced and this made her to be severely depressed.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19,  
MARRIED, CHIREZI URBAN**

Despite the complex relationship between adolescent girls and their aunts, potential exists to leverage them as points of support for adolescent girls, particularly as champions to delay marriage given their traditional role in arranging and guiding their niece's marriage proposals and customs.

## Youth networks and peer interventions

Six KIs mentioned how youth networks, youth centres, and peer interventions provided various forms of support services, resources, and protection to adolescents in Chiredzi. A range of institutions, such as NGOs, government ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Youth), and INGOs train youth to provide them with resources to lead programming for youth in the community. Most of the KIs mentioned training youth to educate their peers on topics such as SRH and child protection as an impactful approach. A KI from a government ministry explained how the ministry had partnered with Plan International to train adolescent champions on topics such as ASRH.

“With Plan we have what we call champions of child protection clubs. Where we have been training those peers in sexual reproductive health. Then we were also targeting survivors of sexual exploitation and early marriages with those trainings of sexual reproductive health, family planning, HIV prevention, STI prevention, training them even on economic empowerment. Then we have been also targeting the parents themselves. Because we were saying ... if we target the adolescent and we do not target the parent, obviously that child will be viewed as delinquent when he or she talks of her rights. So I think the model was good. What we simply have to do is to increase in terms of coverage.”

**KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

Another promising practice identified by the data was a youth network model comprised of adolescent boys and girls who are trained on the referral pathways and who help to identify children and adolescents in need of extra support. An NGO staff person shared that one youth network is also part of the community awareness campaigns on child protection and GBV, as well as using discussion-based sessions to identify adolescents' needs, for instance, regarding drug abuse. To note, the youth networks and peer interventions mentioned by KIs were externally created rather than initiated by children, adolescents, or youth themselves.

## Community: leaders and chiefs

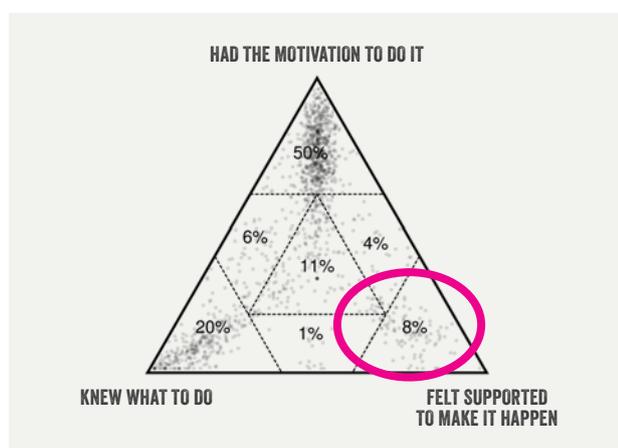
Data suggests that community leaders, such as ward councillors and chiefs, play an important role in protecting adolescent girls from abusive relationships and in mediating among adolescents and their family members. It is notable that in 26 percent of SenseMaker stories (n=438), trusted knowledge came from religious or civic leaders in the community, according to participants' selection to a multiple-choice question. An adolescent girl shares a story about how her ward's councillor influenced her father to allow her to return home after being forced out of the home of the man who she had an unplanned pregnancy with:

“I was in form 2 [age 15] when I was impregnated [kumitiswa] by a guy and my father chased me away from our homestead and told me to go and leave with the guy that had impregnated me. I then went to the place of the guy that had impregnated me, but they also chased me away. I then went to my aunt's place [redacted], but my father then threatened my aunt and told her that if she continued staying with me he would beat her or chase her away. I then went to the councillor's place. As I was staying there my father told the councillor that if he wanted to stay with me, that is okay but for him he did not want me back home. The councillor then pleaded with my father until he gave in, and I returned back home. After that I had learnt a valuable lesson and I chose to stay and take care of my baby. My baby is now two years old. He [the father of her unborn child] then told me that we had to find ways and go and see his aunt so that we can get married. I protested this idea and told him that I wasn't yet ready for this, but he then said ... we had to do it. At first we went to my sister's place ... I even asked her to go home and plead with my father to let me in back home. She then told me that my father had just left her place and he was very angry swearing that he would never let me back in ... We then left my sister's place and went to his aunt's place. The aunt then called the boy's parents telling them that we wanted to get married, but the parents objected to this idea because we were both under 18.”

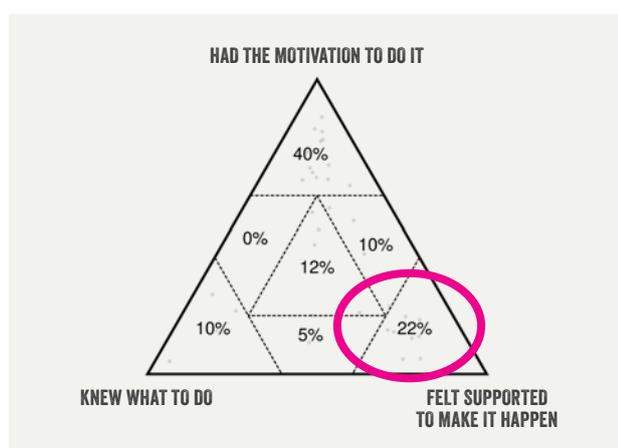
**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 15–17 YEARS,  
COHABITING, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN**

The way participants interpreted their stories using SenseMaker also suggests that the support of community leaders could be a meaningful and impactful factor in influencing marriage outcomes, as the figures below show. To the left, we see the overall pattern for stories in relation to the presence of motivation, knowledge, and support. To the right, we see only the stories where community leaders had the most influence. As seen in the right-hand corner of both triangles, the percentage of stories strongly associated with support increases from 8 percent overall (Figure 15) to 22 percent in stories where community leaders were influential (Figure 16).

**FIGURE 15** IN MY STORY, PEOPLE ... FILTERED BY STORIES WHERE COMMUNITY LEADERS HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE (N=14,688 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)



**FIGURE 16** IN MY STORY, PEOPLE ... FILTERED BY STORIES WHERE COMMUNITY LEADERS HAD THE MOST INFLUENCE (N=40 ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS)



KIs cited community leaders as perpetuating child marriages, particularly given their role in encouraging *Khomba* (initiation practices). However, a few KIs also cited successful initiatives that leveraged chiefs' traditional and cultural leadership in the community. In such initiatives, chiefs were engaged as champions and positive deviants in supporting child marriage prevention and response efforts by reclaiming cultural practices that traditionally condoned child marriage and making them part of the prevention strategy – for example, increasing the age at which children enrol for *Khomba* thereby respecting the traditions yet mitigating some of the adverse effects of early marriage for girls. A KI explains successful collaboration with village heads and male champions to tackle child marriages:

“ I remember there was a time in one of our programmes where we had to even work with communities to fetch children who had been married. It was through empowering and doing male championing, working with village heads within communities who were going to fight and rescue children who had been sent for marriage through confronting the parents. ”

KI, INGO STAFF

### Community: child protection mechanisms

A few KIs noted that existing community child protection structures, such as child protection committees and community child care workers, provide a strong system to protect, care for, and support adolescent girls. It was noted that child care workers are trained to provide child protection case management services and to work directly with ward-level child protection committees. The local government is following a strategy to build the capacity of village and ward-level child protection committees, so that they can work independently from the government to improve child protection outcomes. It was also noted that child protection committees are also present within the school system.

KIs also cited a range of community services to report child abuse, including the One Stop Centres for GBV survivors, and a Childline 116 toll-free number.

## Institutional resources

Findings indicate that various institutions exist that provide resources and systems that support, care for, and protect adolescent girls in Chiredzi. For example, a KI from a government agency explained the role of Victim Friendly Units (VFU)<sup>9</sup> and child protection committees in offering protection and response services to children at the community level:

“ We also have VFU where a child can report if she has been sexually abused and there is someone who is specialised to deal with young children. So issues to do with power dynamics are addressed nicely. We also have what I spoke about these child protection committees, to help the community to get involved in such a way that they can protect children because children cannot protect themselves. So they are collaborating as a community themselves and teaching each other in the process that they have to treat children nicely, this is allowed, and this is not allowed. So that those in the community that are too powerful are neutralised because they are working in a committee-sort of environment. ”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL



Adolescent girl in school, Zimbabwe.  
© Plan International

## Educational resources and supports

Resources to overcome barriers to accessing quality education were the most commonly cited resource available to adolescents in Chiredzi by KIs. Data from a KI suggested that schools are safe spaces for adolescents where they can access comprehensive sexuality education, psychosocial counselling, and other types of support. A KI from a government ministry explains collaboration efforts to promote education and health outcomes for adolescents in Chiredzi:

“ There’s a collaboration that you have in the ministry that I mentioned, that are comprehensive sexual education and the one for health. We also have health masters in the schools. We also have child protection committees in the schools. All those are mechanisms and structures that are in the schools to try and ensure that ... all these issues are closely linked. And then we have lots of organisations also to support us with programmes ... in a lot of those programmes, we collaborate with the community and the community structures to provide that service to our children. Also couples with career guidance which is also a learning area on its own in our schools as well. As all these other supporting factors like schools, training in our schools, because they all go hand in hand. So, all these things, they help to provide support for sexual and reproductive health education in our schools. ”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

As noted in the quote above, most of the services and programming are targeted to young people in school; however, some initiatives also target communities and out-of-school young people. Moreover, KIs noted that teachers are a positive influence on children and a source of support. One KI noted that children rely on their teachers as “someone to talk to”, and often disclose abuse at home. Another key informant emphasised the protective role of schools:

9. A VFU is a specialised police department trained to address child abuse, and other cases of GBV in the community.

“Once you send your child to school you know that they will be well looked after. They are protected because they escape some harsh situations from home, be it abuse and other issues that happen at home. During these COVID-19 times with schools closed there is a lot of harassment, some are being beaten up while others are being impregnated [kumitiswa].”

**KI, INGO STAFF**

The positive role of teachers is also in evidence in stories. When teachers appear in stories they are often in positions of mediator or having reacted to suspected abuse by reporting. This is exemplified in the story below where the teacher's intervention results in an opportunity for continuing education:

“I have a child who was impregnated [kumitiswa] at 17, while she was in form 3. She was impregnated by a married man. I was disappointed and asked her to drop out of school. Her teacher came to ask me to reconsider, I was adamant for a while then relented. She went back to school and was learning while pregnant. When she gave birth, she took two weeks off school. Now she is back in school. I babysit while she is at school. When she finishes for the day she comes home to take care of her baby and I leave for the market to sell my wares.”

**ADULT WOMAN, 30–39,  
DIVORCED, CHIREZI URBAN**

According to KI data, psychosocial counselling is provided to adolescents in schools and school-based programmes teach children where to report cases of child abuse:

“At school, what I know is that they teach them about hygiene and child abuse. They teach them that if you see such and such you can go and report. I am not sure if they teach about family planning.”

**KI, HEALTH SERVICE**

To note, the specific services delivered at school are mentioned by KIs but they are not mentioned in stories. However, KIs, stories, and participatory community analysis groups cited as positive INGOs and NGO programmes that provide

“education subsidies, uniforms, examination fees and school fees” and offer other resources, such as bicycles and stationery, to facilitate adolescents' access to education.

“And then in terms of support, we have noted that there are organisations, international organisations, the local organisations that are providing educational support, especially to girls who have vulnerabilities that are ranging from those that are coming furthest from their homesteads to their schools; there are programmes that are supporting them through bicycles, the books and the bicycle programmes and other programmes that are also supporting them through school fees ... And then there are organisations that are supporting even through stationery and uniforms or any other accessories that are necessary for a child to pursue their education in a dignified approach.”

**KI, NGO STAFF MEMBER**

KIs also noted that NGOs and INGOs also coordinate with CSOs and government ministries and community leaders including councillors to identify vulnerable programme beneficiaries. Plan International also appears in some stories in relation to cash transfers, as a provider of programmes that allow children to go to school, offer a source of training and enable reporting cases of child abuse or GBV. In the following story, an adolescent girl explains how she was able to return to school as a married adolescent pregnant girl thanks to an INGO paying her school fees:

“I want to share a story of what happened to me. I got married when I was 17, I was doing my form 3, but things did not work out well. As I was in form 3, my school fees were being paid for by CAMFED<sup>10</sup>, so I was able to return to school while I was pregnant. I continued learning while I was pregnant up until I gave birth last year in January. After giving birth I resumed my studies up until I wrote my form 4 exams and currently I am waiting for my results. Once my results come, if I passed, I will then continue to the next level of my education.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL, 18–19 YEARS,  
COHABITING, CHIREZI URBAN**

10. The Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED) supports girl's education as a strategy to poverty eradication.

## ASRHR services

According to KIs, ASRHR information and services are delivered at different levels and by different stakeholders in the community. With regard to ASRHR education, as above, KIs cited that age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education is part of the national curriculum for both primary and secondary school children. However, KIs also reported that SRHR education is more often delivered to adolescents (and adult community members) through NGOs and CSOs, and INGOs (e.g., Plan International, Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council) in collaboration with government ministries.

## Adolescent programming

Many services are targeted towards expanding access to education, ASRHR information and services to adolescents, yet adolescent programming was mostly focused on awareness raising without provision of follow-up services to meet the needs and challenges of adolescents and the wider community. The following quote illustrates how current adolescent programming in Chiredzi is focused on surface-level awareness raising and lacks adequate programme design, monitoring, and evaluation to assess intervention effectiveness:

“So the point of school programmes are mainly awareness programmes. There is that tendency to have awareness. Normally that’s what’s done. It’s just engagement with parents, youth, women about the problems that they face ... [the programmes] are not addressing the challenges.”

KI, NGO STAFF

On the other hand, KI data suggests that some adolescent programming is active that engages adolescents and other key decision makers with information and services other than educational support. For example, some adolescent girl programming focused on girls’ rights and the prevention of child marriage and sexual abuse by engaging key stakeholders at all levels, including girls, boys, men, women, religious and traditional leaders, service providers, and political leaders. Another adolescent programme focused on livelihoods training, such as an “income-generating project to discourage them [adolescents and youth] from border jumping to go into South Africa to find work” and “assisting

also the young women with some entrepreneurial skills that they can acquire. Some of them have even been sent to colleges to acquire skills to help themselves, to assist themselves economically” (KI, government official). However, adolescent-led programming appears to be limited in scope and reach as the needs outweigh the current capacity of programmes.

## Targeted actions to prevent and respond to child marriage

When asked whether child marriage programming exists in Chiredzi, only four KIs responded affirmatively. Two others noted that it was limited to “awareness raising and community awareness components”. There was no specific mention of case management services or social protection services for cases of child marriage. Others mentioned that programmes and services exist in Chiredzi to mitigate child marriage and that these complement awareness-raising activities, but they did not provide specific examples other than the national case management system. The national case management system addresses cases of child marriage and other forms of sexual violence in Chiredzi by coordinating with the legal system and medical service providers:

“Our role working with girls is to disseminate information. Engaging, empowerment programmes where we are undertaking human rights and ... education empowerment initiatives with communities. We are also taking on a role of case management, where we are handed cases around child marriages and cases to do with sexual abuse of girls in the communities where we provide assistance in counselling. We provide services around escorts to the courts and the medical service providers to our survivors. And we are also taking on a role of coordinating with other stakeholders that are also working around child marriages and other different components that present child rights violation or infringement of rights. So, we are also working with key stakeholders in the community in which we are in different coordinating structures that are aiming to respond and come up with interventions that respond to some of these issues.”

KI, NGO STAFF

## Intergenerational programmes targeted at increasing trust and understanding between parents and children

Three KIs discussed available programmes targeted at increasing trust and understanding between parents and children living in Chiredzi. One KI explained:

“We are trying our best to actually train peer education facilitators who will actually have sessions with children and parents so that we build a culture of understanding the life from the parent side and from the children. With that you will find that you actually weld a better culture.”

KI, NGO STAFF

Another KI noted a collaboration (currently on pause due to COVID-19 restrictions) with the Ministries of Health and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to implement separate and joint sessions with adults and adolescents to improve communication, trust, and understanding. Another KI described how his organisation implements a ‘positive parenting module’ that engages parents in dialogues to discuss issues such as SRH, child protection and child marriage in six structured sessions as well as intergenerational dialogues with parents and children to “try to challenge gender norms or social norms that militate against children’s rights.” (KI, NGO staff)

## National legislative and policy frameworks

When asked which national policies and legislation exist to support, protect, and care for adolescent girls’ positive development outcomes, KIs mentioned the following: Education Act Amendment, the National Action Plan and Communication Strategy Against Child Marriages, the Protocol on the Multi-Sectoral Management of Sexual Abuse and Violence in Zimbabwe, the Domestic Violence Act, African Charter, National Youth Policy, and Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework, among others. It was noted that the Education Amendment Act permits pregnant adolescent girls to continue and resume their education during pregnancy and following delivery.



*A 14-year-old Zimbabwean school girl isn't sure if her family will be able to afford next term's fees.*

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## BARRIERS TO REACHING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Study data shows that there are a range of barriers to reaching adolescent girls. The key barriers preventing adolescent girls from accessing and using existing services include parents' mistrust of their children and of the services; community social norms and service providers' attitudes; restricted mobility of adolescent girls; lack of institutional funding to improve reach; lack of coordination across institutions; and COVID-19 containment measures.

### Restricted mobility of adolescent girls

Nine KIs discussed restricted mobility as a barrier that adolescent girls face to receiving information and services. KIs discussed how unmarried adolescent girls are not able to move freely in their own community without consent from their parents, while married girls need consent from their husband and/or in-laws. One KI explained that parents, primarily fathers, forbid their daughters from accessing services sometimes based on misinformation or fear because they are worried *“that their daughters are being exposed to something that they will not sort of support”* (KI, NGO staff). Conversely, boys are free to leave the home unmonitored. Another KI explains how parents prevent their daughters from leaving the home, which leads girls to access filtered information:

“Normally a rural girl's main challenge is freedom. The freedom to attend meetings and to do as she pleases ... When it's the weekend and people are at home, a boy has the freedom to move around and go where he wants. And then nowadays in villages, there are people that go to the meetings, i.e. the mothers and fathers, girls are told to stay at home. So, these girls often get second-hand information.”

KI, NGO STAFF

Adult participants from the Peri-Urban participatory analysis group were particularly vocal about their disapproval of some adolescent programming. They saw the provision of contraception and access to SRH information for adolescents as a driver of marriage in itself. They shared that “the distribution of contraceptives should not be done in schools”; and “SRH information should only be availed to 18+ year olds”.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, adolescent girls in the participatory community analysis group said that they lack knowledge of contraceptives and that relying on husbands or boyfriends was a driver of marriage through unplanned and early pregnancy.

### Parents' mistrust of adolescents, and protection and SRHR services

Although KIs cited programmes aimed at building trust and communication between parents and children (cited above), mistrust and lack of communication between parents and their children was a common theme throughout the data. For example, SenseMaker stories illustrate that parents are quick to assume that their daughters engage in “socially deviant” behaviour and then force them into child marriage without discussing the situation with their daughter first and coming to a resolution that safeguards the adolescent's wellbeing. KIs shared that adults mistrust information provided by NGOs, INGOs, and the Ministry of Education, especially information around “taboo” subjects, such as SRHR, comprehensive sexuality education, and child marriage.

Further, in some instances, existing programming that is poorly implemented may itself agitate tensions between parents and their children. Adult participants from Peri-Urban wards in Chiredzi voiced that *“the line between child rights and parents' rights is not clearly defined and this has to [be] clarified”*, emphasising the need to engage parents in co-designing child rights and protection programming in Chiredzi to prevent unintended consequences. When discussing key barriers in reaching adolescents with information, a KI explained how child rights programming has discouraged parents and other family relatives from providing information to adolescents, and how lack of communication and mistrust between adolescents and adults may explain why some adolescents do not access existing programmes and services:

11. Facilitator notes, Chiredzi Peri-Urban adult group.



Two Zimbabwean primary schoolgirls walk arm in arm on school grounds.  
© Plan International

“The issue, the programming on child rights ... they [adolescents] don't want to get advice from people who are above them ... they get it from their friends ... [Also,] older people are scared to advise because they are told that they are abusing them [adolescents] and the like because of poor programming and [about child] rights.”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

### Community social norms and service provider attitudes

Seven KIs working in Chiredzi, including each of the KIs employed by government agencies, cited community ‘socio-cultural’ norms as a key barrier to reaching adolescent girls with information and services. They discussed that it is challenging to implement adolescent programming in Chiredzi due to community resistance around topics such as child marriage and sexual and reproductive health. For example:

“... some of these programmes [child marriage prevention] may then tend to be challenging existing structures or existing belief system and that attracts a lot of challenges in terms of the leadership within the communities allowing Childline to implement their services freely and comprehensively. And that's the main challenge that we face.”

KI, NGO STAFF

Accordingly, community leaders in particular can pose barriers to implementing adolescent programming when the programme is perceived as opposing the community's cultural beliefs. KI data also suggest that adolescents themselves have deeply entrenched social and gender norms that prevent them from utilising programmes and services around “socially deviant” topics. A KI explains:

“... because Chiredzi is more of traditional culture and they really value their traditions and their cultures to think that they help in shaping and forming the development and growth of an individual. So reaching adolescents who have been groomed in ... deep-rooted cultural perceptions, beliefs like that, you find that some of the content that we have ... the approach that we need might actually not be [sticking] specifically to what they are taught to believe growing up, it might actually be speaking something that is totally different, or maybe something that is daunting to a child and leaves them not wanting to try it. Breaking these enforced beliefs can be problematic in terms of reaching out to, to adolescent girls, in our programme.”

KI, NGO STAFF

KI data also suggest that because many service providers share the same gendered and social norms of the community, they also believe that adolescent girls should not be accessing information or services related to SRHR. Such attitudes further block adolescent girls from accessing available services, particularly on SRH:

“And then lastly, for the few that went to access the services, the attitude of the health personnel was not great, and this made the young people revolt from accessing the services available to them. When they arrived, they would be greeted by statements such as ‘You want medicine to treat an STI. At your age you are engaging in sex while you are not married.’ Some of the responses that come from health workers tend to turn away a few of the children who come to access the services.”

KI, NGO STAFF

## Lack of coordination across institutions

The data on effective collaboration was inconclusive with discrepancies between types of actors such as government, NGOs, or INGOs. There were examples of positive collaboration and failed collaboration, as well as mention of competition for limited resources which acted as a barrier to collaborating effectively. In general, the data point to a need for improved coordination across institutions to more strategically and intentionally engage community members, particularly caregivers and community leaders:

“ I think that there is more that needs to be done for us to make sure that we are all moving at the same wavelength, we are all moving with the same knowledge and information that is not leaving room to say we sent the child for marriage because we were not aware of the laws. So I think there is need to improve on family engagement and community engagement as well. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

## Lack of institutional funding

Lack of funding and limited resources for programming in Chiredzi was cited by all KIs either directly or indirectly as a barrier to reaching adolescent girls. For example, one mentioned “... issues to do with resources, where they cannot cover the whole district. They end up targeting just a few four or five wards and it ends there” (KI, government official). Three KIs working for NGOs cited lack of transportation for adolescents (and other community members) to access services, including SRH services, schools, and clinics, which are not located in rural areas. One KI discussed how lack of transportation and distance to services adversely affects adolescents living with disabilities:

“ ... some places are reachable easily; some places are not reachable easily. So, I’m looking at an adolescent girl who’s a wheelchair user who’s staying in a very mountainous place and needs to access services. So, you discover that support systems are not available for that specific adolescent child, then it means that ... he or she will not be able to access any, any of the services that are available for them. ”

KI, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL



*A baby receives medical care at a women and girls safe space, Zimbabwe.*

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KIs shared how lack of sustainable and sufficient funding prevents staff and volunteers from effectively reaching adolescent girls and communities. One KI explained:

“ Those who are volunteers who are supposed to assist them in their various areas, they need to be empowered with things like a tablet where they can actually download information and maybe even being provided with readymade information which they can just use and go around the community addressing issues and teaching others; because you cannot just be going around without current information otherwise it will be a waste of time. So you also need airtime, have the bundles to do that so that when you meet these people you have got something which people feel that it’s beneficial to listen to. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

Three KIs discussed how climate hazards exacerbate poor infrastructure and lack of funding for transportation. For example, seasonal flooding exacerbates physical barriers to rural communities; therefore “[a]ny programmes like awareness campaigns and things like that end up being done in urban centres. So the areas where we really want to reach out where the children cross the borders, we are not able to go there” (Ministry of Education). Another KI explained how climate change impedes adolescent girls’ access to services by physically preventing access and disrupting commodity supply chains:

“ ... you’ll see that a number of girls are not able to access this [services] because of the environmental impacts of the rain, but also because the clinics themselves are not able to be, we can’t provide for the clinic ... anymore because the roads are not accessible. So those are some of the challenges that we find. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

## COVID-19 lockdown measures

Data from KIs and SenseMaker stories clearly highlight how COVID-19 lockdown measures impeded adolescent girls' access to information and services. SenseMaker stories clearly illustrated that such measures restricted adolescent girls' access to health and social services and programmes, and particularly to education. KIs cited that health and social service programmes stopped due to COVID-19 and failed to shift to a remote-based service. For services that remained open, many adolescents did not access them, such as youth centres, for fear of transmitting COVID-19. For additional information, see [COVID-19 section](#).

## GAPS IN PROGRAMMING ACCESSIBLE TO ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Study findings shed light on key programming gaps that serve to protect, care for, and support adolescent girls in Chiredzi. Gaps include: adolescent safe spaces; gender transformative and community-based adolescent programming, including integrated child marriage programming; adolescent-friendly SRH services and ASRHR programming; MHPSS services; and child protection and GBV referral mechanisms. KI data suggest that programmes in Chiredzi are not tailored to the needs of adolescent girls in all their diversity, and are not accounting for age, sex, gender, schooling status, or marital status. Sensemaker data also revealed major gaps in services; in fact, no story mentioned specific services or organisations other than abortion services.

Only one KI working for an NGO mentioned that some organisations engage adolescent girls to co-design adolescent programming and train girls to implement the projects themselves. In general, most programmes respond to adolescents as one homogenous group:

“The approach has been generalised to respond [to] one group. In terms of it being responsive to respond to the needs of the adolescents, like I said yesterday, they need to have youth services for them to be effective because you can't have a one size fits all. They would have to come with services that are tailor-made to suit them to meet the needs of that group of people.”

KI, NGO STAFF

## Gaps: safe spaces for adolescents to interact

Although KIs cited the availability of youth centres as places where adolescent boys and girls can access information and services, SenseMaker stories illuminate the lack of safe spaces in the community for adolescent girls and mixed spaces for girls and boys to interact. The presence of abuse and violence in parents' and husbands' homes also indicate the lack of safe spaces in the community for adolescent girls. As discussed in previous sections, KI and SenseMaker data reveal that various forms of GBV against adolescent girls is common in both parents' and in-laws' homes. Stories and KIs explain how many adolescent girls choose to marry in order to escape abuse and violence perpetrated by their parents; however, once married, they may also face GBV from their husbands and in-laws. An adolescent boy shared a story about an adolescent girl who was forced out of both her parents' home and her husband's home, only to return to her parents' home and be deprived of food. **Please be advised that the following story is a tragic account of an adolescent girl that includes suicide:**

“The story I know is of a girl who met a guy and something happened along the way. The girl's parents told the girl to go to that boy's house to be his wife. She went to the boy's house, but the boy's mother could not accept the girl. She then went back home and her parents refused to give her food. The girl returned to the boy's house only to be told that the boyfriend had left for South Africa so she could not live there, the girl left and hanged herself.”

ADOLESCENT BOY, 13–14,  
SINGLE, CHIREDZI URBAN

Stories clearly illustrate that social norms in the community generally oppose any interactions between adolescent girls and boys in public and private spaces and that girls endure severe repercussions from deviating from these norms, including child marriage and violence in the home. In some situations therefore, the problem may stem less from a lack of safe spaces where adolescents can interact and more from the condemnation that any such interaction would attract. When adolescent girls are seen in community spaces or in a household with a male, even walking their route to school, there is potential that if her parents see this or hear about it, they will force her to marry that person. In the following story, the threat of a peer telling a girl's father that she was with her boyfriend, pushed her not to return home, and resulted in child marriage:

“ There is a former classmate of mine. She went to the grinding meal and met up with her boyfriend. Some other girl then saw her with the boyfriend and told her that they were going to tell her father. She then told her boyfriend that she was no longer going back to her place. That is how she got married. ”

ADOLESCENT GIRL,  
SINGLE, 15–17, CHIREDZI PERI-URBAN

### Gaps: gender transformative and community-based adolescent programming, including integrated child marriage programming

A theme among KI data suggests a strong lack of programming that effectively engages families and communities in behaviour change programming as a way to promote adolescent girl health and wellbeing. Further, the data showed how most programming is concentrated on a single level (one level of the socio-ecological model) and a single sector, and most programmes are not inclusive of marginalised sub-groups, such as out-of-school girls. As exemplified below, data suggest that a lack of behaviour change programming that would shift inequitable social and gender norms in the community that prohibit girls' access and utilisation of SRH services and drive child marriage practices:

“ ... there is a gap of what I'm seeing as behaviour change at community level, as most programmes are school-based. You find that most programmes that are community-based, mainly focusing on humanitarian and food security ... the community is largely patriarchal, and some of the patriarchal ways are quite entrenched in the way of their thinking and the way in which they conduct their behaviours in the attitude. So, if we want programmes that responds to adolescent sexual reproductive health to be effective, and carry the impact that we would want, we have to start at the behaviour that is, you know, presenting barriers for young people to come out and you know, enjoy the services that are there. So, we need to shift the norms. We need to shift the attitudes, the thinking around ... some of

these issues like child marriages, some of the issues on sexual health, some of these issues on some of the traditional practices that they conduct. Not that we are saying that they are bad but probably to delay the aged inception in which girls and boys are initiated into their Khomba culture instead of rushing for girls at 12, 13 to be initiated, maybe to delay until the girls reach 17 or 18. ”

KI, NGO STAFF

When asked whether any programmes exist that specifically aim to prevent and respond to child marriage in Chiredzi, one KI declared: *“There is nothing that's being done. It's being done here and there but there is no proper programme that we can say we can report ... there is nothing”* (KI, NGO staff).

### Gaps: adolescent-friendly SRH services and ASRHR programming

Although KIs discussed the various actors that deliver ASRH services at the school and community levels, KI and SenseMaker data suggest that gaps in adolescent- and youth-friendly SRH persist. As noted above, KIs mentioned health providers' attitudes and behaviours deter adolescent girls from accessing and utilising SRH services. A common theme in KIs' discussions about ASRH services in Chiredzi was that programming is not responsive to the needs and priorities of adolescents in all their diversity. One KI mentioned that the SRHR information delivered to adolescents at school is *“... not delivered in the kind of format that they would be interested in having. The school system has guidance and counselling, but sometimes the way it's delivered to them is not so appealing for them to listen to it”* (KI, NGO staff).

The dominant theme of adolescent pregnancy in SenseMaker stories is evidence that gaps in comprehensive sexuality education and ASRHR information and services exist in Chiredzi. As mentioned, pregnancy emerged as both a precursor and consequence of child marriage. Among 416 adolescent girls who participated in SenseMaker data collection, approximately 14 percent (n=58) reported that they had given birth at least once. A few stories mentioned adolescent girls seeking abortion services. An adolescent girl shared the experience of her friend who had an unplanned pregnancy and could not access safe abortion services:

*Girls experiencing GBV, including child marriage, need access to essential services such as CP and GBV case management.*  
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“There is friend of mine from when I was in grade 6 [age 11]. She had a boyfriend and he was doing his form 4 [age 17]. The girl was then impregnated [kumitiswa] by the boy. The girl was living in poverty, she was staying with her mother’s young sister and she opted to get a boyfriend as a way of getting out of poverty and that is how she was impregnated. When she realised that she was pregnant, she told the guy but the guy denied it. This continued for a while until the boy suggested to the girl that she should find someone to terminate the pregnancy. She looked around in the community and could not find anyone to terminate her pregnancy. When her mother’s young sister learned of the pregnancy, she then scolded the girl and told her to go to the person that was responsible for the pregnancy. At this point the boy realised that the issue was now serious and then he ran away and went to South Africa. The girl was left here and she was being given a hard time by her aunt. When the boy got to South Africa, the boy then accepted responsibility for the pregnancy and sent the girl transport money to follow him to South Africa. Up to now they are still together.”

**ADOLESCENT GIRL,  
18–19 YEARS, CHIREZDI URBAN**

Stories indicate that there is a high unmet need for contraceptives among adolescent girls in Chiredzi. In addition, data also demonstrates that girls might be sexually exploited in the context of selling sex and engaging in relationships with men who belong to higher socio-economic classes.

### Gaps: mental health and psychosocial support services

KII and SenseMaker data illustrate that adolescent girls lack access to psychosocial support services. Two KIIs stated that psychosocial support services are not available in Chiredzi, especially for pregnant girls:

“Last year in one of the provinces, we would hear these children who would have fallen pregnant, their mothers say okay, go away, go to your husband, some of them would then commit suicide. So, it’s also about not having a structure that is outside even of the family, to talk to when they have such challenges.”

**KI, NGO STAFF**

As discussed above, pregnant and married adolescent girls face heightened risks of abuse, neglect, and violence perpetrated by parents, husbands, and in-laws; however, unmarried girls also might seek marriage to escape violence in their parental home. Girls can face a cycle of abandonment and violence from their parents, husbands, and husband’s families, which at times leads to acute mental health outcomes, including suicide, exacerbated by a lack of MHPSS to address their needs.



Young people discussing about their income generating activities, Zimbabwe.  
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### Gaps: child protection and GBV referral mechanisms

Although KIs reported availability of child protection services, such as telephone helplines, community child protection committees, police, victim-friendly units (VFUs), and a coordinated case management system, among other services, KIs and SenseMaker data demonstrate major gaps and weaknesses in the child protection and GBV referral pathways and specialised care. KIs expressed that the reporting mechanisms are neither confidential nor adolescent-friendly and that adolescents may face harassment when they report cases of violence in clinics and hospitals. Further KI data suggested that many incidents fail to be reported at all because community members do not have the confidence that the justice system will hold the perpetrators accountable:

“So we have a lot of abuse incidents that are not reported. Like in the case of [name of adolescent girl] who said that she was abused by her father and gave birth to a child. That same child was also abused by the father as well. But she only said this as a grown up and they went to courts to report and there is a lot of corruption. So at the end of the day, people have no assurance that reporting helps, and the abusers are left unpunished.”

KI, NGO STAFF

KIs mentioned VFUs as sources of child protection support for adolescents in Chiredzi; police specifically were also mentioned in stories. A few instances of reporting or attempting to report child protection concerns or GBV, including child marriage, appear in stories, and these are always connected to the police. It is, of course, possible that a range of different official mechanisms are described as “the police” by the speaker. As the following story shows, these avenues are not always successful:

“There is a girl that got married in [redacted]. After getting married ... they would constantly have fights. One time when they were in South Africa, the husband beat her using an electric cable. They then returned home and the husband paid a fine to the parents for assaulting their daughter. She then returned with the husband but he assaulted her again. She then returned for good. She left her son with the husband and came back home with only two of her kids. We don't know if the child she left with him is doing well or if he is going to school. We tried reporting the case but then we were referred to another police station to make the report. We are still in the process of going to that police station and make the report.”

ADULT WOMAN, 50+,  
MARRIED, CHIREDDI PERI-URBAN



05

**DISCUSSION**

*A 12-year old girl participating in an accelerated learning programme to catch up on education after COVID-19 lockdown.*  
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A 14-year-old girl prepares grains for her family, Zimbabwe.  
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**This study identified key concerns of adolescents, key drivers of child marriage, and how to strengthen the capacities within and surrounding adolescent girls. It also highlighted the ecosystem of support with the potential to mitigate the risk of child marriage in Chiredzi.**

Findings indicate that the key concerns of adolescent girls – namely, poverty and unmet basic needs, limited access to education, unmet SRHR needs and adolescent pregnancy, parental migration and child-headed households, and widespread violence, exploitation and abuse – act as both drivers and consequences of child marriage in Chiredzi. The lived experiences of adolescents in Chiredzi seem to be partially shaped by their contexts of socio-economic inequality, gender inequality, socio-cultural norms and practices, and most recently by COVID-19 containment measures that hinder adolescent girls from navigating to and negotiating for resources. The setting of extreme and recurrent food insecurity further worsens pre-existing drivers while also adding complexities and nuances to the risks that adolescents – in particular girls – face, as a result of increased household economic hardship. Despite these multifaceted and uncertain circumstances, stakeholders and community members including adolescent girls who analysed the study data, identified concrete solutions to prevent child marriage and to meet the needs of married girls and those who have ever been married, in their communities.

This study contributes to an existing evidence base that demonstrates how food insecurity drives violence perpetrated against children and adolescents, especially girls, including child marriage (Glinski et al., 2015), and how COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing drivers of child marriage to increase further the risks that exist (World Vision, 2021b). Findings illustrate how gender norms in Chiredzi largely limit adolescent girls' and women's voices in decision-making, including deciding when and whom to marry, while also unfairly placing responsibility on girls for driving their own child marriage due to perceived deviant behaviour. Study data supports the global evidence that the drivers of child marriage are underpinned by patriarchal systems and gender discrimination that restrict opportunities for and marginalise girls and women as compared with boys (Plan International et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2020; Greene and Stiefvater, 2019). This study shows that girls (and women) are expected to moderate their behaviour and comply with the socio-cultural expectation of girls that limits their expression and sexuality. Breaches or non-compliance with expectations are considered deviant behaviour; therefore, parents and other decision makers respond by insisting on child marriage or forcing the girl to leave home, and then justify this action by blaming the girl for transgressing accepted norms. The trajectory from social deviation to marriage is seen as almost always automatic by girls' parents (Plan International et al., 2022). For example, parents seem to equate the decision to date or engage in a relationship of any kind with boys, with the decision to marry, whereas this is not always the intention for adolescent girls who enter into dating relationships.

Findings contribute to existing evidence that adolescent boys too are forced into marriage (Gastón, Misunas and Cappa, 2021); however, this study also demonstrated that adolescent boys may more easily divert pressures to marry compared to girls. Data and participatory community analysis illustrate that due to gender norms shaping power relationships within the family and society, adolescent boys may avoid being forced to marry by denying responsibility of the girl's pregnancy, and/or by fleeing to South Africa. By comparison, adolescent girls lack the physical ability or opportunity to exercise these options. The data also indicates that this avoidance by boys is not always successful, although leaving the family or country can also take place after the marriage.

Findings corroborate existing evidence indicating that some adolescent girls (and boys) are asserting more agency and are choosing to marry under 18 years of age (Leigh et al., 2020). However, notions of power in relation to individual autonomy may be interrogated given the findings of the complex social relations underpinning perceptions of social norms and unequal power relationships that discriminate against adolescent girls' wellbeing and their healthy transition into adulthood (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019). Given these factors, it would be worth investigating different perceptions of "informed consent" in relation to age and gender. Although some girls initiate their marriages for love, data shows that girls decide to marry because they perceive it as the only or best alternative to the challenges they face as unmarried adolescent girls who are seeking to meet essential needs, or as an unmarried pregnant adolescent girl facing social shame and stigma. A girl's choice to marry is often driven by perceptions that marriage will improve her situation by lessening the challenges she faces in meeting her basic needs and taking her own decisions. However, findings indicate that a girl's agency to decide is deeply enmeshed in the wider social, economic, and cultural context and that married life often brings different risks, such as sexual violence, IPV, school dropout, or poverty, resulting in adverse wellbeing and health outcomes in an already challenging context.

This study identified the following key drivers of child marriage among food-insecure communities in Chiredzi:

- 1 poverty and lack of basic needs including access to food;
- 2 low value placed on girls' education, their lack of access to it, school dropout, and lack of alternative opportunities for girls
- 3 male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality;
- 4 sexual violence against adolescent girls;
- 5 adolescent pregnancy;
- 6 girls' misconceptions about marriage; and
- 7 harmful cultural practices.

COVID-19 containment measures were found to exacerbate existing drivers and increase the risks of child marriage for girls. Further, data points to serious gaps in the existing ecosystem of support for adolescents, namely inadequate or no provision of the following: safe spaces for adolescents; adolescent-centred programming; gender transformative and community-based programming; targeted actions to prevent and respond to child marriage; adolescent-friendly SRH

services; mental health and psychosocial support services; and child abuse reporting mechanisms. In order to address key drivers of child marriage, the ecosystem of support for adolescents must be strengthened, including in this the adaptive capacities within adolescent girls, their families, and the communities that care for and protect girls. This study identified barriers to reaching adolescent girls, including mistrust and lack of communication between parents and children; community social and gender norms and service provider attitudes; restricted mobility for adolescent girls; lack of coordination across institutions; lack of institutional funding; and COVID-19 containment. These barriers must be mitigated to reach effectively adolescent girls and the people who influence them.

**Individual-level interventions are not sufficient to end child marriage given that barriers at the social, institutional, and resource levels hinder adolescent girls' options to realise their full autonomy or to be supported by their families and communities to make and act on their decisions.** Structural interventions are those that occur at the social, institutional, and resource levels to alter power relations between dominant and marginalised groups (Blankenship et al, 2006). To dismantle the drivers underpinning child marriage – gender inequality and socio-economic inequality – structural interventions are needed: at the social level (social and peer networks, family configuration, social capital and support, positive deviants); the institutional level (policies and laws, education system, government structures, healthcare system, economic policy, religious institutions); and the resource level (livelihoods, income level, meeting basic needs including food security). Multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches that disrupt and leverage opportunities in the individual, social, institutional, resource, and humanitarian domains of the adapted socio-ecological model may have the potential to transform deeply entrenched social and gender norms that hinder adolescent girls' potential to live happy, healthy lives free from violence and the threat of violence, and to participate fully in the economic, civic, education, and social realms of society.

Adolescent girls, adult community members, and institutional stakeholders in Chiredzi, identified the following priorities and some of the possible solutions to address child marriage. As noted above, these solutions should be complemented by economic and political interventions that aim to create an enabling socio-cultural, economic, and legal environment, so girls can exercise their full decision-making autonomy, including equal access to education, health, civic, and economic opportunities throughout their lives into adulthood.

## Food insecurity

While study findings indicate that poverty is a key driver of child marriage in Chiredzi, food insecurity (or limited access to food) was identified as a key risk factor of child marriage that was inextricably linked to poverty. Findings demonstrate how food insecurity interacts with other risks and drivers of child marriage that elevate adolescent girls' risks of child marriage. While adolescent girls may seek relationships with men, including marriage, to escape food-insecure homes, parents in such homes may force their daughters to marry to relieve the economic burden of "another mouth to feed". Findings show that climate hazards, such as droughts and flooding, and pandemic containment measures, exacerbate food insecurity. Data also indicate that adolescent girls, particularly those living in child-headed households, experience sexual exploitation in the context of selling sex to meet basic needs, including food, which places them at increased risk of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage often as a result of the pregnancy. This confluence of intersecting and reinforcing factors operates within a broader context of gender inequality that is perpetuated by patriarchal gender norms. These norms influence parents' decisions to force their daughters, rather than sons, to marry when facing food insecurity in the home and influence adolescent girls, rather than boys, to decide to seek marriages (which are mostly exploitative) in the hope that they will result in marrying a man to secure a financially and food-secure future.

Despite the clear need for food programming in Chiredzi, very few KIs mentioned food programming in the district, and no SenseMaker story mentioned existing food or nutrition services. Therefore, an urgent need exists to fill the gap in food (including nutrition) and livelihoods programming in Chiredzi, which should reach child-headed households, especially those without access to education. Food and livelihoods programming should consider unintended consequences of assistance programming. Loss of livelihoods and unmet basic needs cause tensions and stresses to develop in households as a result of the food scarcity, increasing the possibility for violence in the home, both against children or intimate partner violence (IPV) (GNB and ICWR, 2015; CP AOR, 2018; Pattugalan, 2014). Although for some families, food assistance programmes may help to ease some of the tensions at home, these may also create new risks for girls, as caregivers may either marry off their daughter to make the aid received go further with fewer people at home. Other studies have documented caregivers marrying off both their daughters and sons to achieve the same outcome (Plan International et al., 2022; Plan International and UNHCR, 2022; GNB and ICWR, 2015; CP AOR, 2018; Pattugalan, 2014). Further information should be gathered to assess the link between child marriage and the determinants of food insecurity, in particular food utilisation, stability, and malnutrition.



15-year old girl out of school, Zimbabwe  
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## Controlling adolescent girls' sexuality and decision-making

findings illustrate that due to gender norms about acceptable behaviours expected from adolescent girls, it is common for parents to force their daughter out of the parental home if they fail to comply to norms, leaving adolescent girls with limited options other than to live at the male partner's home. According to society's norms about co-habitation, adolescent girls living with male partners are considered to be married. Data indicate that parents may force their daughters to leave home when they learn that their daughters are pregnant, or have been seen in the company of male(s), or have been at a male's house. Given that men are the primary decision makers in the home and in society, fathers were frequently mentioned by participants as the parent who "chases away" their daughters and in effect force them into child marriage. Male siblings were also cited as reporting their sisters' socially deviant behaviour (e.g., being seen with a male). Community-led gender transformative programming to advance gender equity in the household and community should therefore engage not only parents, but also young men, including brothers, as champions and positive deviants. Male siblings could be engaged to act as sources of support for their sisters, rather than facilitators of child marriage. Data show that mothers have the potential to be protective assets against child marriage for their daughters; however, given the social and power dynamics, they are not always able to negotiate for better alternatives and support for their daughters in a patriarchal household. Therefore, programming targeted at mothers and adult women is needed to increase their skills and resources.

Some community member participants engaged in analysing study data recommended implementing intergenerational workshops and dialogues among parents and children to foster trust and understanding and to increase communication on issues facing adolescents. This recommendation is supported by data indicating that the ability to return home post-pregnancy or marriage has a potential to increase girls' wellbeing by widening the options available to them. However, data also show that some current child protection programming may be resulting in unintended consequences, including provoking parental resentment of their children by chiding them on how they discipline their children. Therefore, child rights organisations need to reflect on how their messages about child rights are being delivered and the potential backlash it could be creating.



A 14-year-old girl collects water at her home in Zimbabwe.  
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## Adolescent pregnancy

adolescent pregnancy was a dominant driver of child marriage in Chiredzi. This suggests that adolescents lack adolescent-friendly SRHR information and services to make evidence-informed decisions about how to protect themselves from pregnancy and STIs, including HIV, as well as knowledge about their reproductive health. Although KIs reported existing SRHR awareness campaigns, implementation of comprehensive sexuality education in schools, and other community-level ASRHR programming, data also indicates major gaps in ASRHR programming and adolescent-friendly SRH services. Adolescent girls face barriers in accessing and utilising the services that are available. Although abortion was a theme that emerged in SenseMaker stories, contraception was not, which highlights the urgent unmet need for contraception and other SRHR services for adolescents in Chiredzi.

## Violence against girls

the study documented various forms of GBV perpetrated against adolescent girls in Chiredzi that acted as both drivers and consequences of child marriage. While unmarried adolescent girls face physical and emotional abuse and neglect from their parents and caregivers, and sexual violence by males in the community or at home, married adolescent girls face physical, emotional, economic, and sexual violence by their husbands and their husband's family. Although data indicate that adolescent girls pursue marriage to escape the violence they endure at home, once married they may then face violence perpetrated by husbands and in-laws. Data also indicate that GBV is ubiquitous in the community, and that adolescent girls are blamed for the violence perpetrated against them due to patriarchal norms that dictate what is acceptable behaviour for girls. Violence in the home, both against children and IPV, is exacerbated by food scarcity, as explored above.

## Harmful cultural practices

findings suggest that cultural practices, such as *Khomba* (initiation event), *lobola* (bride price), and the practice of abduction increase girls' risk of child marriage. Data indicate that these practices are rooted in and perpetuate deeply entrenched gender norms that discriminate against girls, impede their access to opportunities, and violate their rights. Given that *Khomba* is highly valued by communities and they resist pressure to stop the practice, one strategy could be to increase the age of participation to 18 years. Any interventions should ensure a community-driven and gender transformative approach to protect the practice but ensuring that it does not reinforce power structures that limit women's and girls' participation in society, or put them at risk of abuse or exploitation. Chiefs, traditional and community leaders should be engaged as champions to amplify existing positive traditions, such as *aunts'* supportive role in adolescent girls' transition to adulthood and their guidance in teaching girls and boys about healthy relationships.

*Lobola* was traditionally used as a way to bring families together and to build trust and understanding between them (Parker, 2015). However, findings suggest that within a context of extreme economic hardship worsened by recurrent food insecurity that reduces household ability to meet basic needs, parents perceive child marriage as means to obtain *lobola* to increase household income and reduce expenditure of childcare. At the same time, other stories revealed how traditional *lobola* practices and payments may in fact not commonly be taking place, with often only the initial promise of marriage price (20 ZAR / US\$1.26) being made. In these cases, the wife is more vulnerable to being abandoned by her husband since the proper formalization of marriage did not take place. In both scenarios, there is a potential degradation of the cultural practice as it relates to marriage. The economic incentives to marry children could be mitigated by collaborating with community leaders, parents, local government authorities, and child protection committees to shift practices to align with the original *lobola* ideology intended to build trust and understanding between families, and supporting couples to begin their marriage, instead of forcing girls to marry for an economic gain to parents. Structural interventions should complement gender transformative approaches by working with caregivers to drive initiatives that address household economic insecurity and invest in local markets, economic strengthening and livelihoods interventions.

Although data indicating that abduction persists in Chiredzi is not as comprehensive, initiatives addressing GBV in Chiredzi should ensure that *musengabere* (abduction practices) are abolished, given the severity of the practice. Adolescent girls should be at the centre of such initiatives by indicating where in the community is safe and unsafe for adolescent girls to be and to identify barriers and facilitators to creating more safe places for them, and an improved sense of safety and wellbeing for adolescent girls in the community. Addressing this through dialogues with men and boys to unpack *musengabere*, its meaning and significance, may also help to limit the practice and protect girls.

## COVID-19

Although community member participants did not attribute marriage experiences directly to COVID-19, data indicate that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing drivers of child marriage, particularly limiting girls' access to school; increasing girls' risk of adolescent pregnancy due to not being in school; increase of violence at home; and an increase of sexual exploitation among children and adolescents due to accelerated poverty and food insecurity. KII data indicates that COVID-19 lockdown measures added to existing barriers to accessing safe and other social support structures and services. Adult participants suggested that school closures due to COVID-19 lockdown measures induced adolescent "idleness", which led to adolescent pregnancies and child marriages; therefore, education programming may be not only a pathway for employment, but also as a way of keeping adolescents busy and "out of trouble".

Findings also illuminate how COVID-19 deepened gender discrimination against girls in the home and in broader society perpetrated by parents (mainly fathers) who further limited girls' access to resources and opportunities. This was often done in order to prioritise male siblings in a context of elevated household economic insecurity. Findings suggest that COVID-19 will have long-term adverse impacts on adolescent girls' opportunities and potential to live healthy, happy, and fulfilling lives free of violence given that school dropout, adolescent pregnancies, and child marriages put a girl at risk of cyclical violence and poverty for herself and her future children. External intervention is needed to facilitate e-learning opportunities for adolescents, including in remote communities, so adolescents can continue their education.



06

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Women participating in cash transfer programming in food insecure areas of Zimbabwe.*  
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**Despite the adversities adolescent girls face, research findings illustrate they have potential to drive change in their communities when they have a support system that cares for and protects them. However, gaps and weaknesses in this support system exist that require external support from diverse actors, namely feminist organisations,<sup>12</sup> CSOs, NGOs, government agencies, and INGOs across the humanitarian–development continuum. Furthermore, humanitarian actors should better coordinate with national and longer-term external actors to reinforce efforts to create an enabling socio-economic and legal environment that dismantles the patriarchal system of unequal power relations that condones harmful gender norms against women and girls, such as child marriage.**



*A young woman participating in a livelihoods training project.*  
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Child marriage programming that is community-led and gender transformative builds on existing community strengths and provides an opportunity for girls and boys to participate in decision-making through community-driven, and therefore sustainable, solutions (see Plan International’s [Thematic Brief 1: Key Principles and Concepts When Addressing CEFMU](#) and [Getting It Right: A guidance note of gender-transformative programming and influencing](#)<sup>13</sup>). Given the recurrent and slow-onset nature of the crises affecting Chiredzi (climate change, food insecurity, and the economic downturn), a community-led approach would better ensure that services are tailored to meet the specific needs and realities of adolescent girls and address child marriage drivers that manifest differently in each community. Study findings clearly demonstrate that a deep contextual knowledge of and expertise in addressing the social norms and behaviours that drive child marriage are necessary to address the root cause—gender inequality.

**Therefore, humanitarian and development programming in food-insecure areas such as Chiredzi must be gender transformative and community-led to the fullest extent feasible and must be complemented by interventions to strengthen and fill the gaps to mitigate the drivers and consequences of child marriage.**

Zimbabwean and regional feminist organizations and those working to address gender equality are essential to guide and participate in child marriage prevention and response initiatives. However, given that humanitarian project funding cycles are short (often one year or less) and focus on lifesaving actions, interventions to address gender inequality and other key drivers of child marriage may not always be feasible. To mitigate this, the humanitarian community should strengthen its coordination with longer-term actors and advocacy partners for access to funding to address the recurrent consequences of cyclical food insecurity and the impacts of climate change.

12. Feminist organizations aim to advance gender equality and empower women and girls.

13. For more information, contact Plan International.

## PROGRAMME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHIREDDZI

### 01 STRENGTHEN THE EXISTING CAPACITIES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

- 1.1** All actors should **engage adolescents and youth, including at-risk or more marginalised adolescents, especially girls**, through formal and informal networks and groups to lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of adolescent initiatives to address child marriage, including how to tackle harmful practices such as *musengabere*.<sup>14,15</sup> Community (adolescent)-led programming should be gender transformative in order to advance gender equality and dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate child marriage.
- 1.2** Given **fathers' and male siblings'** dominant roles in decisions affecting girls' lives, including marriage, programming to advance gender equity in the household and community should engage not only parents, but also boys and young men, including brothers, as **champions and positive deviants**<sup>16</sup> of gender equity. Moreover, findings indicate that adolescent boys themselves are forced into marriage, mainly by girls' parents. Adolescent programmes such as child protection, ASRH, and education, should use tailored outreach strategies to engage parents, men, and adolescent boys with information and services that promote positive masculinities and equitable power dynamics.
- 1.3** Programming for **female caregivers and adult women** should focus on elevating female decision-making power to support, protect, and care for their daughters and other adolescent girls amidst gender inequity in the household.
- 1.4** Consider **increasing adolescent girls' access to safe spaces** in their communities, where they can safely interact, play, build their peer networks, learn, and access information and services that are tailored to their needs.<sup>17,18</sup>
- 1.5** Feminist CSOs, government ministries, and NGOs should improve and expand **intergenerational dialogues and workshops** that increase trust and understanding between adolescents and caregivers, including to increase communication on issues facing adolescents.
- 1.6** Humanitarian response actors and national actors should collaborate to strengthen **youth economic empowerment** efforts and livelihoods opportunities in Chiredzi to improve young people's access to food through context-tailored food security programming, education sessions on marketing, financial literacy, and business management.
- 1.7** Government agencies, feminist CSOs, and youth networks should engage **chiefs and traditional and community leaders as champions to amplify the positive aspects of existing traditions, for example:**
- **Rebuild the supportive role of *tetes*** (paternal aunts) in adolescents' transition to adulthood and guidance in positive relationships to advance gender equity.
  - **Redefine the *lobola* system** (customs of exchange between the bride and groom's families) to better align with the original sentiment of the exchange, which was to build trust and understanding between families.

14. Abduction of girls to force marriage through sexual violence.

15. See Plan International's [Adolescent Programming Toolkit](#) and [Adolescent Girls Consultations Toolkit](#)

16. Positive deviants is an approach to finding people within a community who share the values and practices but may have found a way around a problem, such as a father who encouraged his daughter in to education, or who took her back home from an abusive marriage, so that their experiences can be amplified and shared as examples of doing things differently, but still maintaining the values of community.

17. Given limited evidence on the effectiveness of adolescent safe spaces to mitigate gender-based violence, including child marriage, in humanitarian settings, additional research is needed prior to scale-up.

18. See Plan [International's Guidance on adolescent girls safe spaces](#) (forthcoming).

- 1.8** Youth and feminist organisations, together with child protection and GBV specialised service providers, should **co-develop a curriculum on the risk of “date rape” drugs** to mitigate risks of sexual violence, and on the importance of time-sensitive medical and psychosocial care for survivors. The curriculum should include targeted campaigns to address exploitation, violence, and abuse by men, with extra attention and focus on pre-holiday social gatherings.<sup>19</sup>
- 1.9** To mitigate potential **unintended consequences of child protection programming**, child rights organisations should **reflect on how their messages about child rights** are being delivered and the potential backlash they are creating. A non-stigmatising approach to child protection and child marriage programming is essential, especially given how entrenched socio-cultural and gender norms are in child marriage practices.
- Coordinated, multi-sector humanitarian-development and government actions**
- 1.10** **Nutrition and FSL actors should better coordinate and integrate their programming with other sectors**, especially CP, GBV, education, and SRHR, to ensure that child marriage risks associated to food insecurity and household poverty are lessened and prevention actions strengthened.
- 1.11** **Nutrition and FSL actors should review and adapt where necessary the standardized food security indicators** (e.g., reduced coping strategy index, access to food, household dietary diversity score, household hunger scale, hunger experience indicator, women dietary diversity score) to ensure that they reflect the lived experiences of adolescents and the risks they face related to child marriage and food insecurity.
- 1.12** **Health and nutrition actors should collaborate** to raise awareness of the danger of adolescent pregnancies, provide nutrition education to girls, boys, men, and women on equitable food needs, provide support for pregnant adolescents, strengthen maternal, infant, and young child nutrition programmes to include adolescent mothers, and link to health services such as ante-natal care, post-natal care, and the importance of child spacing. Such interventions should target both adolescent girls and boys.
- 1.13** Health, nutrition and food security, and livelihoods actors across the humanitarian and development continuum should **explore acceptable and efficient techniques to increase gender equitable household access to food** and enhance women’s independence and acceptance when it comes to healthy nutrition and food security.
- 1.14** Fill gaps in **programmes and services for married and pregnant adolescent girls, adolescent caregivers, and adolescents living in child-headed households**. For example, provide direct assistance and support services to facilitate married girls’ access to essential services such as CP and GBV services, including safe shelter, safe spaces, education, food security and livelihoods, and health care.
- 1.15** Given the high level of GBV against adolescent girls that often results in forcing marriage, as well as GBV within the marriage such as IPV, donors and governments should **increase funding to strengthen and expand CP, GBV and SRHR essential services**, such as increasing adolescents’ access to CMR-IPV; comprehensive abortion care, including access to medical abortion, by making an amendment to the Termination of Pregnancy Act (*see also Policy recommendation #5*); contraception, including emergency contraceptive pills; specialised case management services and psychosocial support for child and adolescent survivors of GBV, including for married girls. Services should target and be tailored to girls in all their diversity, including marginalised girls, such as those with disabilities, girls with diverse SOGIESC, out-of-school girls, and members of child-headed households.

19. See Plan International’s [Maybe we can talk about this next time we meet?: Stories about sex, relationships and consent](#).

1.16

Humanitarian, development, and governmental programming should consider **co-designing life skills sessions for married and unmarried adolescents** to counter the perceived idealism of marriage and familial violence associated with driving child marriage, as well as to combat the high risks that adolescent girls face of SGBV, including IPV, in marriages. Content should be gender transformative and unpack gendered roles and responsibilities.<sup>20</sup> Life skills sessions could be linked to specialised services that seek to strengthen and support young married couples to create healthy relationships and reduce the risks of abuse and neglect of married girls.<sup>21</sup>

1.17

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should fulfil its government mandate to **ensure adolescents receive comprehensive sexuality education**. CSE should be expanded to target out-of-school adolescents, married and pregnant adolescents, and their caregivers. Adolescents, families, ASRHR providers, youth networks, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, teachers, child protection committees, and school-based guidance counsellors should support the co-designing of activities and topics.<sup>22</sup>



Women wait to collect water, Zimbabwe.

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20. Knerr et al, 2013; Gardner, 2017; Koždoňová, 2020

21. See Plan International's *Parenting and Life Skills (PALS) programme model* (forthcoming 2022), the [Champions of Change for Gender Equality and Girls' Rights Programme](#), and [Getting It Right: A guidance note of gender-transformative programming and influencing](#).

22. See Plan International's [Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programme Standards, Conversations that Matter: Dialogues in sexual and reproductive health and rights, Maybe we can talk about this next time we meet?: Stories about sex, relationships and consent](#); and the *Parenting and Life Skills (PALS) programme model* - forthcoming 2022.

## 02 STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES OF SUPPORT FOR ADOLESCENTS THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS

- 2.1 District and national level CP and GBV actors should improve coordination and monitoring across existing formal and community-based child protection structures**, to ensure timely and quality access to specialised services, including CMR-IPV, emergency contraception, and comprehensive safe abortion care to the fullest extent of the law with focused attention around holiday periods and events.
- Government ministries should collaborate with CP actors to **enhance child protection committees in schools and at the community level to identify, deter, and respond to violence of all forms, including child marriage**, and especially against girls, and make timely referrals to health care providers and social workers.
  - Strengthen the link between institutional (e.g., Victim Friendly Units (VFU), police, CP hotlines, NGOs, government) and community structures (e.g., CP committees, social workers) that **respond to protection concerns across national and humanitarian sectors**.
  - **VFU staff should be trained on survivor-centred approaches** and caring for child and adolescent survivors of GBV, and should provide adolescent-friendly services, so adolescent girls and boys can report sexual violence and other forms of violence.
  - Launch **capacity-strengthening initiatives** to increase the knowledge and skills of **protection actors** to respond to specialised issues such as child marriage, IPV, caring for child and adolescent survivors of SGBV, and child abuse in food-insecure communities.
- CP actors, together with traditional and community leaders, should **establish alternative and emergency safe housing options for adolescent girls** who are forced out of their parental homes, other than co-habiting with their male partner.
- 2.2** Humanitarian and development actors should increase investment in government ministries to provide **value clarification and attitudes training (VCAT) for health providers** to improve their attitudes around adolescent sexuality, contraceptive use, caring for child and adolescent survivors of SGBV, and abortion care to mitigate adolescent barriers to existing SRHR and maternal health services.<sup>23</sup>
- 2.3** Humanitarian and development actors, especially FSL actors, should coordinate with government ministries to ensure that **preparedness plans for the lean season** and in case of climate change-related shocks (e.g., prolonged heat waves or flooding) or future pandemics are ready, and that they integrate and prioritise child marriage prevention and response. Minimum initial actions should include ensuring that a functioning CP and referral system is in place and can be quickly reinforced, and that health services and education can be adapted to reach the hardest-hit communities or shifted to remote service provision.<sup>24</sup>
- 2.4** Donors should invest in **increasing internet access to vulnerable households**, especially in rural communities, to facilitate remote e-learning opportunities and adolescent-friendly service access for adolescents. Internet scale-up should be implemented with a robust online safety orientation for caregivers and adolescents.<sup>25</sup>

23. See Plan International's Conversations that Matter: Dialogues in sexual and reproductive health and rights. Contact [srhr@plan-international.org](mailto:srhr@plan-international.org) for more information and access..

24. See Plan International's [Let's Go Digital for guidance on using digital technology to tackle child marriage and early pregnancy](#).

25. See Plan International's [Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy Guidance: safety on online platforms](#) and UNICEF's [Tips For Young People: staying safe online during the covid-19 pandemic](#) and [Tips for Parents and Caregivers: keeping children safe online during the covid-19 pandemic](#).

## 03 STRENGTHEN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC APPROACHES TO DISMANTLE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS THAT PERPETUATE HARMFUL GENDER NORMS

- 3.1** Donors, governments, feminist CSOs, and UN actors should invest long-term funding and human capital to implement **programming that dismantles patriarchal systems and structures**, promotes economic equality, and addresses gender discrimination.
- 3.2** Donors, governments and INGOs must increase funding and investment for **long-term child marriage prevention and response programming**, including for robust programme evaluations.
- 3.3** Explore **diversified income-generating opportunities in Chiredzi** to strengthen local economies, so parents are less pressured to migrate to South Africa in search of job opportunities. In addition to improving social safety nets, programmes should aim to improve households' capacity to generate income and support local farmers and local markets to withstand economic shocks and depression.
- 3.4** Structural feminist economic interventions and policies would promote gender and socio-economic equality by **investing in livelihoods trainings for women and building girls' and women's financial literacy** and business management skills, so they are more financially independent. **Economic interventions should promote gender equality**, such as increasing girls' and women's access to formal and informal education and learning opportunities and entry points to equitable workforce participation and compensation. Adolescents, particularly those out of school or those with children or in a caretaking role, should be targeted for such programmes.

## POLICY AND ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

**FINDINGS INDICATE THAT CHILD MARRIAGE IS A PERSISTENT PRACTICE IN CHIREZI, WITH BOTH PARENTS AND ADOLESCENTS INITIATING CHILD MARRIAGES. FINDINGS ALSO SUGGEST THAT THE EXISTING POLICY ENVIRONMENT LACKS EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION AND ENFORCEMENT. KEY POLICY AND ADVOCACY ACTIONS INCLUDE:**

- 01** Government authorities and CSOs should engage married girls, families, traditional leaders, and the broader community to lead the design, implementation, and **monitoring of accountability mechanisms to ensure that laws** aimed at protecting, supporting, and caring for adolescents are context specific and relevant to the needs and priorities of adolescents in all their diversity, including pregnant and married girls, as well as girls who are heads of households.
- 02** The Government of Zimbabwe, Plan International Zimbabwe, UN agencies, and donors should invest in and prioritise training, programmes, and flexible funding to women-led and feminist CSOs, youth organisations, and other humanitarian actors to **conduct strength-based training approaches to build the capacity of adolescents and communities to drive child marriage advocacy** and to enhance adolescent girls' and women's civil and advocacy skills, so that they can meaningfully contribute to the design and implementation of policies relevant to them.
- 03** Key government ministries, youth-led organisations, and CSOs should coordinate with feminist organisations to ensure **child marriage policy and advocacy drive equitable economic and social change**. Advocacy should be inclusive of married and out-of-school adolescents, as well as adolescents living in child-headed households and food-insecure regions.
- 04** Given the study's strong theme of adolescent and unplanned pregnancy and its intrinsic link with child marriage, **ASRHR laws and policies should be strengthened to ensure adolescents' ASRHR needs are met**. CSOs, UN actors, and youth organisations should collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Child Care to build on their efforts to support the expansion of current policies to bolster access to contraceptives, improve comprehensive safe abortion care, including post-abortion care for adolescents via an amendment to the Termination of Pregnancy Act, including relevant trainings for health providers. These should be complemented by supply-side policies that mitigate adolescents' barriers to service uptake, such as wider rollout of CSE programming for adolescents, transportation vouchers, free comprehensive abortion care services, including access to medical abortion, and adolescent-friendly services.

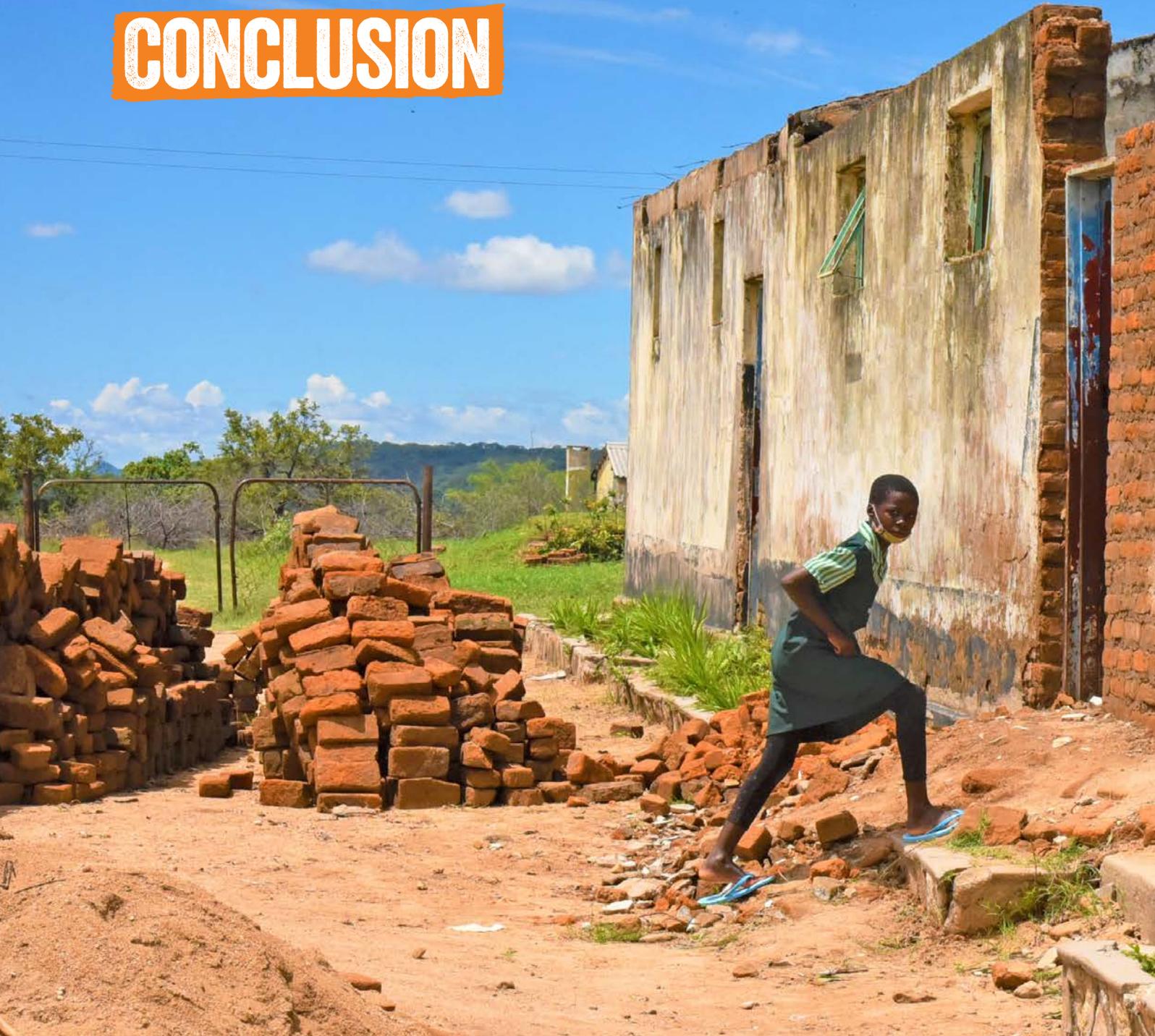
## RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

### THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH GAPS HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED:

- 01** Although social media, internet, and mobile phones were cited by adult community members and KIs as causing adolescent-initiated child marriages, these technological resources were not mentioned in adolescent participants' stories. Therefore, additional research is needed to determine **whether and to what extent social media, internet, and mobile phone use elevate adolescent girls' risk of child marriage.**
- 02** Additional **formative research is needed to better understand the lived experiences of adolescent boys and male youth**, including their child protection risks; SRHR, MHPSS, education, and livelihood needs; barriers and facilitators to services and available programming in their country of migration; and decision-making pathways to marriage. Formative research is also needed to understand the scope of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, among adolescent boys and male youth, including barriers and facilitators to accessing and utilising services, including CMR.
- 03** Researchers, communities, and feminist organisations should conduct **rigorous evaluations of community-led child marriage programmes to build an evidence base on what works** (and what does not) to end child marriage and respond to the needs of married girls in crises. Evaluations should be designed to assess which intervention components are effective, and evaluate longer-term impacts of the intervention on health, well-being, economic, and civic outcomes for girls and their families.
- 04** This study affirmed that school dropout is both a precursor and consequence of child marriage; however, there is a dearth of evidence on effective approaches to keeping married and pregnant adolescent girls in school in crisis settings. Therefore, **formative action research is needed to understand sustainable solutions for pregnant and married girls to continue their education.** Both demand and supply-side barriers and facilitators to both informal and formal education access should be explored, and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should be engaged to inform any amendments to or future implementation of the Education Act.
- 05** Findings illustrate that adolescents, particularly girls, lack safe spaces in the community to learn, interact, play, socialise, and build skills. Moreover, adolescent girls lack community spaces where they can interact safely with their male peers without the risk of being "chased" away from their home due to perceived socially "deviant" behaviours. Adolescent girl safe spaces and peer interventions may provide opportunities for girls (and boys) to interact safely; however, additional **research is needed to determine whether adolescent girl safe space interventions and peer interventions are effective approaches to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings.**
- 06** This study shows that *Khomba* persists in Shangaani communities and girls who participate in *Khomba* seem to be at higher risk for child marriage following participation. Given that data shows that *Khomba* is a highly respected practice among Shangaani communities, formative research should be conducted with community members and leaders **to understand the most efficient and culturally respectful strategies to augment Khomba practices, so positive facets of the practice can be identified and elevated, while harmful elements, such as those that perpetuate harmful gender norms and push girls into child marriages, are diminished.**
- 07** Although this study documented the association between food insecurity and child marriage, additional research is needed **to determine causal pathways between food access, food use, food availability, malnutrition, and child marriage.** Such research should also **investigate the healthy coping mechanisms during lean seasons that prevent child marriages in food insecure households.**

# 07

## CONCLUSION



*A schoolgirl entering her school in Zimbabwe.*  
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**This study contributes to a growing evidence base that suggests that existing drivers of child marriage are exacerbated in crisis-affected contexts, specifically food-insecure communities.**

The study goes further by documenting the needs and priorities of adolescent girls who are affected by food insecurity – a group whose views are rarely documented. It did so by working with adolescent girls and community members to amplify their voices to define adolescents' needs, priorities, and community-driven solutions that will prevent and respond to child marriage in Chiredzi.

Findings affirmed that gender and socio-economic inequality underpin child marriage practices in the district. It also discovered seven key drivers of child marriage in Chiredzi, which manifested differently in Urban compared to Peri-Urban areas:

- 1** poverty and lack of basic needs including access to food;
- 2** low value placed on girls' education, their lack of access to it, school dropout, and lack of alternative opportunities for girls;
- 3** male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality;
- 4** sexual violence against adolescent girls;
- 5** adolescent pregnancy;
- 6** girls' misconceptions about marriage; and
- 7** harmful cultural practices e.g., *lobola*, *Khomba*, *musengabere*.

The study also demonstrated that COVID-19 exacerbated drivers of child marriage. At the same time, findings indicate that an existing ecosystem of support persons, community resources, programming, services, and institutions has the potential to protect, care for, and support adolescent girls.

Therefore, investment should be allocated to support community (adolescent)-led gender transformative programming to prevent and respond to child marriages in Chiredzi, while external interventions should ensure that structural interventions fill the gaps in this system of support.



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A 16-year-old in front of her home in Zimbabwe.  
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**Cover photograph:** A 16-year-old girl collects firewood at her home in Zimbabwe. © Plan International

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