

OUR VOICES, OUR FUTURE

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



WOMEN'S
REFUGEE
COMMISSION



THE CYNEFIN CO

Adolescent girls living in food-insecure communities are highly vulnerable to child marriage because of intersecting issues, namely poverty and unmet basic needs including food; limited education and lack of employment opportunities; male dominance over adolescent girls' sexuality and decision-making; violence against girls; adolescent pregnancy; girls' perceptions about marriage; and harmful cultural practices.

Married girls face cyclical poverty and various forms of violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse from in-laws, as well as limited income-generating opportunities, school dropout, and negative health and wellbeing outcomes.

This study identified key concerns of adolescents, key drivers of child marriage, and strategies to strengthen the capacities within and surrounding adolescent girls.

Child marriage in Zimbabwe's Chiredzi District is shaped by patriarchal power dynamics and harmful gender norms that perpetuate gender and socioeconomic inequality and discriminatory practices that limit adolescent girls' agency to make their own life decisions. Child marriages are forced by girls' parents as well as being initiated by girls themselves. Girls initiate their own marriages due to lack of alternative opportunities available to overcome lack of education, household economic insecurity and unmet basic needs such as food, and violence.

Despite the adversities adolescent girls face, this research illustrates that they have potential to drive change in their communities when they have a support system that cares for and protects them.

Photo at top: A 16-year-old girl collects firewood at her home in Zimbabwe.
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BACKGROUND

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS »

±5.3 MILLION PEOPLE IN ZIMBABWE ARE FOOD INSECURE AS A RESULT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND PROTRACTED ECONOMIC INSTABILITY AND THE RESULTING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS



±49% OF THE POPULATION LIVE IN EXTREME POVERTY [1]



CHILD MARRIAGE »

1 MILLION+ GIRLS IN ZIMBABWE WERE MARRIED AS CHILDREN

ALTHOUGH CHILD MARRIAGE IS PROHIBITED BY ZIMBABWE'S CONSTITUTION, THIS LAW IS NOT ENFORCED [2]



YOUNG WOMEN AGED 20-24 YEARS »

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

5% WERE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 15

YOUNG WOMEN WHO WERE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18 »

± 100% GAVE BIRTH BEFORE AGE 20

60%+ GAVE BIRTH BEFORE AGE 18



IN MASVINGO PROVINCE »

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

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

In 2020–2022, Plan International Zimbabwe and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), in partnership with Abel Matsika and the Cynefin Company, conducted a research study to understand the drivers and consequences of child marriage in Chiredzi and identify community-grounded solutions. Adolescent girls and adult community members were involved in designing the research tools and collecting and analyzing data, as well as identifying recommendations to tackle child marriage.

DATA COLLECTION »



1,690

PEOPLE PARTICIPATED IN DATA COLLECTION

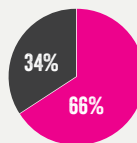
INCLUDING

17 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS) WITH 22 INDIVIDUALS



1,668 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

PARTICIPATED IN STORY-TELLING AND GROUP ACTIVITIES



66% WERE FEMALE



43% WERE ADOLESCENTS AGED 10-19 YEARS

- 43 GIRLS AND 5 BOYS WERE MARRIED
- 16 GIRLS WERE DIVORCED
- ONE GIRL WAS ENGAGED
- 19 ADOLESCENTS PREFERRED NOT TO DISCLOSE THEIR MARTIAL STATUS

AMONG THE ADULT MARRIED SAMPLE »

56% WERE MARRIED BETWEEN AGES 10-19 YEARS OLD



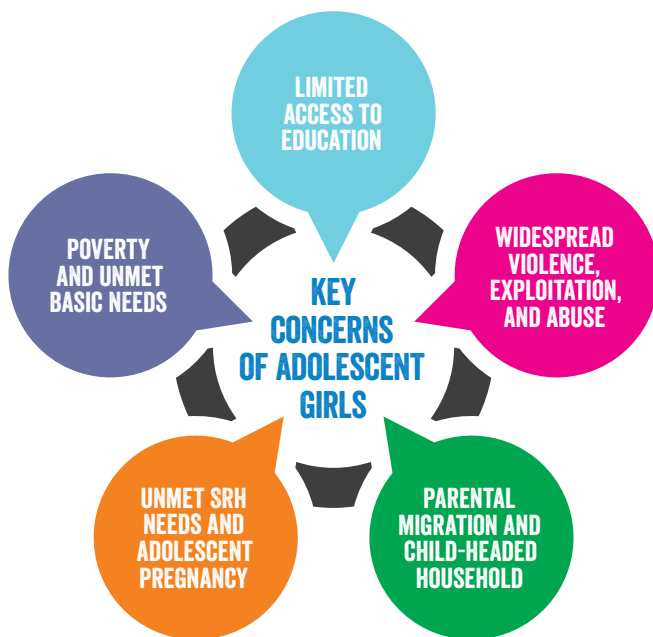
A 14-year-old girl does the washing up at her home.

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FINDINGS

Research findings are in line with the global evidence, which highlights that the **root cause of child marriage is gender inequality**. Gender inequality restricts opportunities for girls and women and marginalises them in all aspects of their lives as compared to boys and men. For example, girls are expected not to express their sexuality; if and when they do, they may be labelled by the community as deviant. Sometimes, parents and other stakeholders then propose (and force) child marriage to preserve family honour and social status.

The key concerns of adolescent girls may act as both drivers and risks of child marriage in Chiredzi:



Key drivers of child marriage in Chiredzi

- 01** poverty and unmet basic needs, including access to food;
- 02** the low value placed on girls' education
- 03** male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality;
- 04** violence against girls;
- 05** adolescent pregnancy;
- 06** girls' perceptions about marriage;
- 07** harmful cultural practices (e.g., abduction, bride price payments, initiation practices).

📌 COVID-19 containment measures, such as school closures and reduced household income, exacerbated girls' risk of entering into child marriages.



A 12-year old girl participating in an accelerated learning programme to catch up on education after COVID-19 lockdown.
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Linkages between food insecurity and child marriage

Food insecurity acts as both a driver and consequence of child marriage. Poverty and food insecurity (or limited access to food) are interconnected issues driving child marriage. While adolescent girls may seek relationships with men, including marriage, to escape food-insecure homes, parents may force their daughters to marry to relieve the economic burden of “another mouth to feed.” Climate disasters and pandemic containment measures were found to exacerbate food insecurity. Adolescent girls living in child-headed households as a result of parents leaving in search of work, are at higher risk of sexual exploitation in the context of selling sex, or engaging in relationships including marriage to meet their basic needs, including food.

Consequences of child marriage for girls

Married girls often face cyclical poverty and various forms of violence and abuse from husbands and in-laws. Moreover, findings show a broad range of violence perpetrated by husbands, including sexual and psychological violence, IPV, and the denial of resources and opportunities (such as education and food), and that girls often lack the support they need to find safety.

Communities response to child marriage

Some adolescent girls, their families, and communities have remained resilient despite these challenges. Some reasons for this include adolescent girls' resourcefulness and survival skills; supportive family members, including parents and aunts; support from youth networks and peer interventions; community leaders and chiefs advocating to prevent child marriage and functioning community-based child protection mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO CHILD MARRIAGE

Humanitarian and development programming in food-insecure areas such as Chiredzi must be gender transformative, community led and coordinated. It must be complemented by interventions to strengthen and fill the gaps in the existing resources and support available for adolescent girls to mitigate the drivers and consequences of child marriage. This requires humanitarian practitioners, feminist organisations, civil society, and national entities to work together to dismantle the systems that harm and infringe upon girls' rights, such as child marriage.

Shoring up essential services to protect and respond to girls' needs

- **Strengthen and expand child protection and gender-based violence (GBV) services** and essential SRHR services; improve coordination and monitoring across existing formal and community-based child protection and GBV structures; and invest in value clarification and attitudes training for frontline providers.
- **Nutrition and food, security, and livelihoods actors should better coordinate and integrate their programming with other sectors** to ensure that child marriage risks associated with food insecurity and household poverty are lessened and prevention actions are strengthened.

Strengthen the support system for adolescent girls

Implement **coordinated and durable services and programs** that reach married and pregnant adolescent girls, adolescent caregivers, and adolescents living in child-headed households, namely:

- Advance gender equity in the household and community by engaging not only parents, but also boys and young men, including brothers, to **promote positive masculinities and equitable power dynamics**.
- Increase adolescent **girls' access to safe spaces**.
- Implement **life skills sessions for married and unmarried adolescents**.
- Improve and expand **intergenerational dialogues** and workshops.
- Strengthen **youth economic empowerment efforts and livelihoods opportunities**.

- Engage chiefs and **traditional and community leaders as champions** to amplify the positive aspects of existing traditions.
- Increase **adolescent-friendly SRHR programming** such as comprehensive sexuality education, access to contraceptives, including emergency contraception and comprehensive abortion care, for both married and unmarried adolescents.

Investing in longer-term solutions

- **Strengthen 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. Such approaches may include investing in livelihoods trainings for women and building girls' and women's financial literacy and business management skills, so they are more financially independent.
- Coordinate with government actors to ensure that **preparedness plans for the lean season** integrate and prioritise child marriage prevention, response, and mitigation.

Accountability that is community led

- Provide opportunities to **communities 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 and do not cause further harm or stigmatisation of already married girls.

READ THE FULL REPORT AND AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY [HERE](#) FOR MORE DETAILS ON THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.

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References: 1. World Food Programme (WFP). *Zimbabwe Country Brief*, 2022; 2. UNICEF. *Child Marriage Country Profile: Zimbabwe*. 2022:1–4.