

An Exploration of School-Community Collaboration in Curbing Child Marriages Among Girls in Three Selected Primary Schools of Chama District of Zambia

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Abstract

This study sought to explore school-community collaboration in curbing child marriages among girls in three primary schools in Chama District of Muchinga Province of Zambia. A descriptive research design was used in this study. The study sample size included three head teachers, three chiefs, three Guidance and Counselling teachers, three religious leaders, three girls who were victims of child marriage, three parents to the victims of child marriage and seventeen grade seven girls making the total of thirty-five participants. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to sample the participants. Data was generated using interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis then it was analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis techniques based on emerging themes from the study. The study revealed that schools do not collaborate well with some members of the community in the fight against child marriage. The study further revealed that most of the challenges experienced by schools and communities in curbing child marriages were because of cultural practices, threats, family ties and misunderstanding of human rights. The study recommended need for the government to address these challenges so that collaboration is enhanced between schools and communities. The study further recommended that similar studies be conducted on a large scale for the purpose of establishing what prevails in other Districts.

Keywords: *collaboration, child marriage, curbing, communities, cultural practices*

Introduction

Child marriage also known as early marriage has been recognized as a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures and religions. Globally, nearly 1 in 3 girls are married before they turn 18 years and 1 in 7 are married before the age of 15 (UNICEF, 2016). Although child marriage affects both boys and girls, studies have shown that girls are the most vulnerable children to child marriage (Mkandawire, Simooya & Mudenda,



2019; UNICEF, 2019). It should be noted that child marriage cuts down the future and life of a child. Even in terms of gender aspect of economic development, girl's contribution and opportunities for realization of their potential are curtailed. Thus, defeating the declaration of Education for All. UNFPA (2012) projects that 151 million child marriages will take place in the period 2021- 2030. The elimination of child marriage is one of the targets for achieving United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number five, which focuses on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Koski, Strumpf, Kaufman, Frank and Heymann, 2018).

Undoubtedly, child marriage is a fundamental human rights violation and impacts all aspects of a girl's life (Svanemyr, Chandra-Mouli, Christiansen and Mbizvo, 2012). It traps girls, their families and community in a cycle of intergenerational poverty. Educational attainment is also gendered as most girls who enter marriage leave school (Nguyen and Wodon, 2015). The situation of dropping out of school perpetuates the cycle of illiteracy among girls and reduces their opportunity to gain skills that would enable them to start an income generating activity or start a job. In addition, child marriage prevents the girls from being productive members of their households and communities (Lloyd and Mensch, 2008). Apart from that, child marriage leads to early pregnancy that increases the risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth (Mkandawire, Simoya & Cheelo, 2019). It puts young mothers at a significantly higher risk of death when it comes to childbearing (Achary, Bhaharai, Poobalan and Chapman, 2010). The risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is 4 times higher in adolescent under sixteen years than for women in their early twenties (Svanemyr, et al, 2012). Hence, there was need for a serious attention to address the problem of child marriage through this study.

The global campaign, led by the consortium Girls Not Brides and the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, has put child marriage in Africa in the spotlight. Girls Not Brides estimated that 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriages in the world come from Africa and it has been estimated that in sub-Saharan Africa 39 per cent of girls are married before their 18th birthday, while 13 percent are married by their 15th birthday and it is most common in rural areas, among the poorest and most illiterate segments of the population. Zambia, for example, is currently ranked 16th among countries with the highest rate of early marriage in the world (World Vision Zambia, 2015). Save the Children (2018) reported that Zambian women marry earlier than men, 9% of

women are first married by age 15 as compared with less than 1% of men and by the age 18. Girls not brides which is a leading authority on child marriage issues in Africa estimates that if there is no reduction in child marriage rates globally, 1.2 billion girls will be child brides by 2050 (Girls Not Brides, 2016). According to data from the United Nations Population Fund (2017) child marriage is highest in Northern Province, Muchinga, and parts of the Copperbelt Provinces. Specifically, the districts of Isoka and Chama in Muchinga Province, and Masaiti, Mpongwe, and Lufwanyama in the Copper-belt Province are hotspots with the highest likelihood of child marriage, ranging from the probability of 0.158 to 0.170 (UNPF, 2017).

In recent years, the obstacles that child marriage poses to development and to the achievement of vision 2030 have been widely recognized, as a result various responses to the problem have been devised. In April 2013, the government of Zambia initiated a three-year national campaign to end child marriage, spearheaded by the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs. When it was initiated, the key objectives of Zambia's campaign were to empower traditional leaders to become champions and agents of change in their chiefdoms and to amend relevant laws and policies to ensure that girls are legally protected from child marriage. Apart from this, the campaign also sought to create strong partnerships between the Government and Civil society organization. Most programs that are done in curbing child marriage in most settings working with girls, those they live with and the legal system and policies that affect their lives. It is against this background that Zambia developed national initiatives aimed at ending child marriages. Among the initiatives is the Advocacy and Communication Strategy 2018-2021 that was developed to enhance implementation of the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriages in Zambia 2016 – 2021 (Ministry of Gender, 2018) which had a goal of reducing child marriage by 40% by 2021 (UNICEF Zambia, 2018). All these initiatives were supported by the existing legal frameworks on child marriages. For example, Chapter fifty (50) of the Laws of Zambia known as 'The Marriage Act', section seventeen (17), recommends that the legal marriage age where a marrying person does not need consent is twenty-one (21) years (Government of Zambia, 2007).

World Vision Zambia (2015) also sought to broaden collaboration with specific traditional leaders who are champions against child marriages and other issues that affect child well-being. It is important to note that child marriage is a cross-cutting issue that



needs different sectors to work together for the benefit of all. This implies that, communities are expected to work with government institutions and Non - Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the fight against child marriage. However, the kind of collaboration that exists between schools and communities in curbing child marriage is not known.

Despite the presence of laws and significant efforts that have been undertaken by the Zambian government and Non-Governmental Organizations towards ending child marriages, large numbers of girls have continued to get married in most rural areas of Zambia. The researchers were motivated to carry out this study in Chama District of Muchinga province in Zambia by having observed the persistence of child marriage despite the efforts made by the government to curb the scourge. This study therefore, explored the collaboration strategies that the school and the community had to put in place to curb the challenges of child marriages.

Framing and Literature

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model was applied in the study to explore how schools, families and communities work together in curbing child marriage. Epstein developed the model in 1987. It recognises that families, schools and communities are jointly influential and responsible for children's development. The model locates the child in the center of the interaction among the three mentioned contexts while the spheres carry out some of the tasks collaboratively in achieving their shared goals regarding the child. Furthermore, Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence theory hinges on parental involvement. It is believed that with collaboration among schools, families and communities, more girls are more likely to receive common information from various people about the importance of staying in school and the demerits of child marriage (Epstein and Sanders, 2002). Then, the information gained might help in the reduction of child marriage. The theory relates to the study in that, collaborative activities should be developed to engage, guide and motivate learners in preventing them from child marriage through school-community collaboration. Apart from that, the child, families and communities are the main stakeholders for ending child marriage, hence the need to collaborate with schools.

Causes of Child Marriages

Some parents think that marrying their young children off is the best way to protect them from pregnancy out of wedlock as well as from sexual abuse and prostitution (Phiri, Musonda and Daka, 2020). Equality Now (2014) argues that this belief is hard to overcome because the parents are genuinely looking out for their children's best interest. Overcoming this is a major challenge in the implementation of child marriage prevention programmes. Equality Now (2014) goes on to suggest that child marriage may be seen by families as a way of protecting young girls from premarital sex, pregnancy outside of marriage, rape and even prostitution. To them, by marrying a girl off early, the risk of uncertainty to her prospects or damage to a family's honor is significantly removed. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Phiri, Musonda, and Daka, (2020) denotes that, girls from the initiation ceremony known as "chinamwali" consider themselves as mature enough to have their own homes which becomes a challenge to convince them that they are not yet matured enough to go into marriage.

In as much as governments around the world have made deliberate efforts to eliminate and reduce cases of child marriage, not enough effort has been put into enforcing existing laws that protect children from marriage (Daka, Phiri, Chipindi and Nachimwenda, 2021). For instance, in Zambia, subject to the constitution a person who marries off a learner who is a child commits an offence and is liable upon conviction to imprisonment for the period of fifteen years and may be liable to imprisonment for life (Education Act, 2011) but does not exist in the Zambia Penal Code. Mulenga-Hagane (2021) argues that the absence of such offence in the penal code makes prosecution of cases of child marriage to have minimal legal effect. So far, several children have been married off but there is little or no evidence if this law has been applied to the victims.

In addition, a study by Msuya (2020) reported that child marriage has been clouded by legal uncertainty that causes ambiguity as to the status of two different and conflicting laws within the same statutory. Child marriage is seen as a rural phenomenon where often the customary law is followed, under which the age for marriage is after puberty while the opposite is for legal law (Sekelani, Mbozi and Daka, 2021). Multiple laws are applicable to family matters in many countries in Africa, where civil, religious and customary laws overlap and generally contradict one another. This also applies to Zambia. The law on marriage in Zambia is dual in nature, with a statutory law and a customary law (Ministry of



Gender, 2018). The statutory legal instrument stipulates 21 years as the minimum legal age of marriage. However, the law also allows marriage below the age of 16 with consent of the judge according to The Marriage Act, Section 17 (Government of the republic of Zambia - GRZ, 2007). Particularly in rural areas, most families prefer and apply customary law, under which a child is able to marry with parental consent after reaching puberty (Mkandawire and Daka, 2018). Hence, the customary law supersedes the statutory law. In agreement, Kamal, Hassan and Alam (2015) contends that customary law, culture and tradition often trump national policies and legislation and prevent existing education programmes from effectively retaining girls in school. Ministry of Gender (2018) argues that harmonizing customary and statutory laws in Zambia has been an ongoing process but has proven to be a complicated process.

Strategies on Mitigating Child Marriage

Various strategies on ending child marriage have been put in place and indeed by various organizations that are currently working on ending child marriage. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (2013) carried out a study and they came up with five strategies as solutions to end child marriage namely; empowering girls with information, skills and support network, educating parents and community members, providing incentives to girls and their families, enhancing girls' access to a high-quality education and encouraging supportive laws and policies. All the mentioned strategies require efforts of all stakeholders, and they may differ from the circumstances of one community to another.

The decision to marry girls early is generally in the hands of family and community leaders. Thus, Mann, Quigley and Fischer (2015) argue that local communities have an active role in addressing the norms that perpetuate the practice. They further state that community mobilization has been very effective in initiating behavior change and discouraging harmful practices. This approach aims at influencing community attitudes toward child marriage and increase local knowledge of the negative consequences of this harmful practice. Similarly, Mwanza (2019) observes that with the full commitment of governments, development practitioners, civil societies, communities, families and girls themselves, a world without child marriage can become a reality. Since community mobilization has been seen as an important strategy, the study at hand tried to combine



the efforts of both the school and community to end child marriage. Investing in girls' education is a critical strategy to end child marriage (Lemmon and ElHarake, 2014; Nsingi, 2016; Bomber, Daka and Mphande, 2020). Educating girls is not only a human rights obligation for countries that have ratified the Convention of the Rights of the Child, but also a smart investment. Often, marriage marks the end of schooling for young girls. Elyasu (2020) argued that girls are very difficult to handle in terms of their needs and aspirations than boys. Therefore, when their education is being supported, they might be kept in school to the highest level that will help in delaying their marriage up to the time they are physically and psychologically ready to marry.

Community leaders such as traditional and religious leaders are highly recognized in societies. For instance, traditional leaders and families are seen as the powerhouse of culture of the people who impact their traditions, beliefs and daily practices into the younger generation (Kafusha et al., 2021). They have the authority needed to reduce the acceptance of child marriages, which is also traditional practice and their voices are particularly important when it comes to conveying messages to the communities (Elyasu, 2020). On the other hand, religious leaders are respected people in communities. Therefore, their voices on issues is highly considered and they determine behaviours that are acceptable or not. This calls for collaboration among stakeholders in the community. Collaboration through a study done by Sibanda, Daka and Daka – Makowa among couples in doing church ministry showed that it leads to effectiveness. The same time of collaboration can be applied in communities in curbing child marriage.

Protective by-laws have been also identified as a local way of dealing with issues in various communities. By-laws are rules made by local authority and are applied only in communities where they were formed. Developing protective by-laws that prohibit child marriage and penalize men who engage in the practice is essential to eliminating child marriage (Elyasu, 2020). Steinhaus, Hinson, Rizzo, and Gregowski, (2019) also observed that traditional leaders build support to ending child early marriage by developing local laws in their various communities by revising rules which give consequences to men who perpetuate early marriages.

Methods

A qualitative study was adopted to explore the kind of collaboration that exists between schools and communities towards curbing child marriage in detail. A descriptive research design was used for this study as it involved the description and interpretation of the status of the phenomena under study in the form of conditions that exist, practices that prevail, opinions, attitudes and beliefs held. A qualitative research methodology was appropriate for the research because it allowed the research to be conducted in the participants natural environment, which ensured that high quality and factual data was collected.

With the view of exploring the kind of collaboration that exists between schools and communities, the researchers interacted with the participants as they shared their lived experiences regarding the subject relating to collaboration in curbing child marriages. Semi - structured interview guides, Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) and document analysis instruments were used to collect data. For the sampling procedure, purposive sampling was used to select the 3 head teachers, 3 Guidance and Counselling teachers, 3 religious leaders and the 3 chiefs. Random sampling was used to select 17 grade seven girls and snowball sampling was applied to select 3 victims of child marriage as well as their parents or guardians. The participants were sampled from 3 different chiefdoms of Chama District of Muchinga Province of Zambia. Data was analysed thematically. It involved scrutinising, examining, and drawing inferences. Thematic data analysis was used because the data collected was categorised and grouped according to the emerging themes in relation to the study questions. The data collection tools and the proposal were then presented to the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee for approval and an approval was issued.

Findings

The findings of the study on an exploration of school-community collaboration in curbing child marriages among girls in three primary schools in Chama District, Zambia were presented in line with research objectives. For the sake of logical presentation of the findings, themes were generated under each objective and verbatims were included in each theme.

Programmes offered in schools and communities to curb early marriages



This research considered ascertaining the kind of programmes implemented in the fight against child marriage in Chama district. Information from head teachers, Guidance and Counselling teachers, religious leaders and learners was cardinal to ascertain these programmes that were offered in schools.

Findings from the participants showed that, only two programmes were consistently offered to children namely; community sensitization and recreational activities and participants stated that these two programmes were offered in isolation. The schools did sensitization on their own and the communities did sensitization on their own. One head teacher agreed that there is lack of collaboration saying:

On that one, I would say we have not done much, it is only sensitization during assemblies and especially when closing times that's when we emphasise to say (imwe bana bakazi kusobela nabanalume iyayi) meaning girls should not be playing with boys.

Findings from the documents that were analysed were that some schools have paid less attention on the implementation of programmes aimed at reducing child marriage while others are putting their level best. Among the three schools that were sampled, one school had no documents to refer to concerning the programmes offered to learners the while the other two schools demonstrated that they have been conducting community sensitization and learners were kept busy by engaging them in recreational activities. This was verified by one Careers and Guidance teacher who postulated:

We usually hold games to ensure that the learners are kept busy. Then, the health personnel are involved when it comes to addressing cross cutting issues such as child marriage and reproductive health.

Challenges of Combating Child Marriages

The research considered establishing the challenges faced by schools in working together with the community towards prevention of child marriage. The study used interviews to collect data concerning challenges faced by schools and communities in combating child marriages among girls in primary schools of Chama district. Participants interviewed indicated divergent views of challenges in working together as schools and communities. The major challenges which came out were as follows:

(a) Threats from Parents



On the challenge of threats from parents, the findings revealed that most parents threaten teachers when advised not to allow the girl child to marry. This was evident from one female head teacher response who indicated that sometimes the school administration fear to approach the parents over child marriage because of the threats they receive as she lamented saying:

*The parents themselves are able to threaten us to say *ine mukacita nane vichi!* (What action can you make against me) that one is my child! You have no right over my child. I can marry off my child, so in this community we fear to advance. When parents are saying “*ni mwana wane uyu*” (this is my child). We just tell them that the law will take its own course.*

(b) Cultural Practices

Another challenge that came out is on cultural practices. The finding showed that the cultural practices done in the area have contributed to the increase in child marriage cases. One religious leader during interviews disclosed that the churches face a lot of challenges in addressing the issues of child marriage as a result of cultural practices as stated during the interview when asked to state the major contributing factor to child marriage. He added that:

Normally we face a lot of challenges because of cultural beliefs. Aaaaa, you find that in societies where we are living, people are being driven by what we call cultural beliefs where they believe that when the child reaches adolescent/puberty then such a one is capable of entering into marriage. So, contravening their cultural belief becomes a challenge.

(c) Family ties

One other revelation that came out of the interviews in the study was about family ties. The study revealed that most of the children get married to their fellow distant relatives. It was discovered in the study that this was done so that when they are taken to the Police, they come back and resolve the issue at clan or extended family level. So, in such a case family issue becomes a challenge to deal with the culprits. The study revealed that such case may lead to many cases remain unresolved. In affirming to this challenge, one religious leader said:



Cases of child marriage were not taken to the police because the community members were saying that they belong to the same clan. Thus, no need of involving the police.

(d) Desire for marriage among children

This study also uncovered the fact that these child marriages are joy to the children. It was revealed that children eye for marriages and when they become pregnant or approached for marriage, they force themselves into marriage and never listen to their parents or school administration. In line with one parent during interviews was cited saying:

Once you report them to school, they will tell you off to say why do you want to control my life when yourself, you are married. It is such response that make us parents withdraw from taking keen interest in the affairs of our children.

This was confirmed from the two of the victims of child marriage who disclosed that despite their parents requesting them to go back to school, they refused but forced themselves to enter into marriage.

(e) Lack of cooperation

The researchers discovered both schools and communities were facing some challenges in combating child marriages. The study further shows that at times there was lack of cooperation between schools and communities as some parents were unable to report the cases of child marriage to school. When probed further, one participant in counselling department during interviews explained that some parents lack interest for their children's education. The G&CT-3 stated that:

When you call the community members for sensitization meeting on girl child education, they would just say "aaaa, just leave them, they will get married when they want to get married.

Strategies to enhance school-community collaboration in curbing child marriages

This research considered coming up with comprehensive strategies that can be used to enhance collaboration between schools and communities towards the prevention of child marriage. During interviews with different participants, the study came up with some strategies which include:

(a) Formulation of by-laws



Participants revealed that the laws which are in existence have not helped so much in Chama District as those laws seem to have been imposed on people without engaging them. It was therefore proposed during the interviews that there is need that each area come up with by – laws which can be agreed upon by stakeholders after consultations. One way of doing this came from one participant a religious leader who had this to say:

Non-Governmental Organizations should come in and ensure that the communities themselves come up with by-laws that will guide them. That will be stiff but coming from them so that they will be able to know that it's them who came up with such laws. Then it can be very helpful in curbing early marriages.

(b) Enforcement of laws

On the other hand, some participants stated that the current laws just need to be enforced. The participants proposed the change in the reporting system by going straight to the police. This came from one head teacher who emphasized that the laws should be enforced with change in approach:

Like here, the threat that we have talked about, maybe the best thing is to take them directly to the police. Maybe, they may fear the police but not referring them to the teacher, sometimes not even the chief.

(c) Collaborative Community Sensitization

One other strategy of curbing child marriage in a collaborative way that came from this study is collaborative community sensitization. Most of the participants had called for continuity in sensitization but in a collaborative manner than in isolation the way it had been before. One religious leader participant stated that:

Communities can be actively involved in the mitigation of child marriages if they are well informed. If they are well informed and are fully engaged by the stakeholders. What I mean by fully engaged by stake holders is that once we tell them the impacts and the effects and early marriages, then we give them the platform to express themselves on what they have seen maybe the benefits themselves. Then, from their expression we may be able to tell what they need, for instance seminars or community-based activities.

(d) Supporting Girls' Education

The last but not the least suggestion as a measure to curb the child marriage challenge in Chama District as proposed by participants is supporting the education of the girls financially, materially and psychologically. The participants proposed that more organizations should come in to support girl child education as witnessed by India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA), which involve the retrieval of girls from marriages and supporting them in terms of acquiring education. This was supported by the sentiments from the Careers and Counselling Guidance teachers. One of them responded when asked about the measures saying:

Mmmmm, like that one which the government brought. It was sponsoring girls and most of them went to Chama South Boarding, IBSA. I think that one helped, Yah. Some of the people I knew who were in marriage were retrieved from marriages and went back to school. So, if we may have 2 or 3 of such organization, I'm sure the problem can end.

Discussion

The findings are discussed following the research objectives of the study. These were (i) to ascertain the programmes offered to girls in schools and communities aimed at curbing early marriages among girls in three selected primary schools of Chama district (ii) to establish the challenges faced by schools and communities in working together towards ending child marriages in three selected primary schools of Chama District and (iii) to propose strategies that would enhance school-community collaboration in mitigating child marriages in Chama District. These questions have been stated as themes alongside with other data generated themes.

Programmes done to curb child marriages

Community sensitization

The study found that community sensitization has been going on despite the negative altitudes from parents. Furthermore, the study revealed that schools work mostly with the chiefs and health personnel when it comes to community sensitization on issues pertaining to child marriages. This approach aims at influencing community attitudes toward child marriage and increase local knowledge of the negative consequences of this

harmful practice. The findings are in line with the lamentations by Malhotra, Warner, McConangle and Lee-Rife (2011) that community mobilization recognizes that the elimination of child marriage involves not only the parents and family members of girls, but also the communities in which they live. This is in conformity with the theory of the study used. Similarly, Mwanza (2019) observes that with the full commitment of governments, development practitioners, civil societies, communities, families and girls themselves, a world without child marriage can become a reality.

Challenges of Combating Child Marriages

(a) Cultural beliefs

The study found that, cultural belief was one of the challenges experienced in the fight against child marriage as people in societies get driven by cultural beliefs where they believe that when a child reaches puberty, she can enter marriage. Thus, contravening their cultural belief is a challenge. The findings are consistent with Equality Now (2014) who postulated that the belief is hard to overcome because the parents are genuinely looking out for their children's best interest. Overcoming this is a challenge in the implementation of child marriage prevention programmes. This was also in line with Mwanza and Mkandawire (2020) who in their study indicated that culture and tradition often trump national policies and legislation and prevent existing education programmes from effectively retaining girls in school. For instance, the practice of building separate houses for the girls has been maintained and when asked to change the practice, it was established that parents usually refuse by saying that one cannot work out in their villages (Kamal, Hassan, and Alam, 2015).

(b) Threats

The findings from this study further indicated that school administrators and the chiefs were at times threatened by parents whenever they wanted to deal with cases of child marriage in accordance with the law. Some parents were telling off the school administrators that the school had no right to talk about the affairs of their children. In such situations the schools were forced to refrain from talking about the affairs of certain children. The results show that school administrators were afraid of witchcraft to take the cases to the chief. If this continues, it will mean that the prevalence of child marriage would be recorded to have reduced and yet the numbers are still increasing in the district.



(c) Family Ties

It is a well-known fact that families have a strong bond that they could not let a relative to be prosecuted. Findings related to family ties showed that cases of child marriage were reported to the chief, but the chief did not take the cases to the police. It was indicated that usually, the chiefs fail to advance the cases because most of the culprits happen to be their relatives. Although, in 2013 the government of Zambia had initiated a three-year national campaign that was spearheaded by the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs to end child marriages, this study established that it would be imperative to assign other force institution to be handling these cases. Elyasu (2020) argued that traditional leaders are seen as powerhouse of culture of the people and have authority needed to reduce the acceptance of child marriages that is also a traditional practice and their voices are particularly important when it comes to conveying messages to the communities. Similarly, Maiden (2021) noted that in Malawi, chiefs are the most actors actively engaged with raising awareness about the dangers of child marriage, educating communities about the changes to marriage laws, even forcibly breaking marriages. To the contrary, the study found that although the chiefs have been identified as key actors to implement culturally embedded policy change, chiefs were only doing their best on conveying the message on the effects of child marriages and yet were failing to act against the culprits to the extent of referring them back to school or telling them to go and handle the case from their homes. From the results, it is observed that chiefs sometimes find themselves in a dilemma on how to handle cases that involve their relatives. Thus, not performing as expected by the government of Zambia.

The study further revealed that no punishment is taken against the culprits. It is important to note that although the Zambian government is passionate about child marriages in the country, by coming up with a law to say a person who marries off a learner who is a child commits an offence and is liable upon conviction to imprisonment for the period of fifteen years and may be liable to imprisonment for life (Education Act, 2011), the law is not included in the penal code and it is not implemented on the victims. No wonder the community has taken this law as a mere talk of the day because they witness children being married off and yet they do not see anybody being imprisoned which has led to the increase in cases of child marriage in Chama district. Mulenga-Hagane (2021) argues that the absence of such offence in the penal code makes prosecution of cases of



child marriage to have minimal legal effect. According to the participants, this was a challenge as stakeholders were expected to report the cases but once the report is taken, they were no action taken against the culprits and this had led to schools not reporting the cases to the chief assuming that nothing would be done to the culprits as the trend has been. This implies that, although the government of the republic of Zambia has made deliberate efforts to reduce and eliminate cases of child marriage, little effort is put into enforcing the existing laws that protect children from marriage. It could be that the chiefs are aware that the law on marriage has not been listed in our country's Penal Code. No wonder they are asking for effective measures to be put in place.

(d) Desire for marriage among children

Although the study conducted by Ministry of Gender (2018) found that decisions on marriages are made, based on potential positive outcomes and knowing about potential negative outcomes and decisions are influenced by the family and the community, the findings of this study has revealed that it is not always that parents influence their girls to get married but in some instances it is the girls themselves who have a deep desire for marriage and this has posed a challenge to convince them to stay in school. As can be noted from the results of this study, most of the girls had entered marriages without parental consent. Furthermore, these findings provide a clear indication that some children ignore the “voice” of teachers and parents to a large extent in decisions of marriage. This is related to the findings of Daka, Mwelwa, Chibamba, Mkandawire and Phiri (2020) who denotes that, girls from the initiation ceremony knows as “chinamwali” consider themselves as matured enough to have their own homes. This has negatively affected the efforts of curbing early marriages. In addition, among the three girls (victims of child marriage) who participated in the study, two confirmed that their parents were against their marriages while the other one said the mother was against, but the father insisted that she should join the man since she was already pregnant. With most children on social media, most children do not even listen to their teachers or parents and can use social media to interact on marital issues with friends without the parents knowing (Daka, Jacob, Kakupa and Mwelwa, 2017).

Apart from that, most of the participants talked about the issue of “vilimba” where children go to dance during the night. This is due to freedom that most children have. A study by Daka, Mwelwa, Tembo and Mulenga – Hagane showed that such freedom can



even lead to the spread of HIV as teenagers tend to have sex without protection. In addition, Sekelani, Mbozi and Daka (2021) and Daka (2017) further noted that lack of comprehensive sexuality education, the girl child is more affected as they lack social life skills to negotiate protective and safe sex. One of the chiefs emphasized that he had tried to talk to the owners of the bars so that they can reduce on operating up time, but they have failed to adhere. This practice has posed a great challenge to the fight against child marriage as a lot of the girls become pregnant from attending such activities and from there, they get married. Moreover, the results show that whoever attempts to approach the parents over marrying of a child, the relationship turns sour.

Strategies to enhance school-community collaboration in curbing child marriages

(a) Educating community members

As can be noted from the findings of the study, many participants from schools and churches were for the continuity on educating community members about child marriage so that people learn and do better. The study realizes the mobilization of community members so that once they receive common information from various people about the importance of staying in school and the demerits of child marriage it might help in the reduction of child marriage. It cannot be over emphasized that community members have a key role to play in the prevention of child marriages. Malhotra, Warner, McConangle and Lee-Rife (2011) supported this view by stressing that community mobilization recognizes that the elimination of child marriage involves not only the parents and family members of girls, but also the communities in which they live. The ICRW (2013) also argued that it might be impossible to implement programmes aimed at ending child marriage that is a significant social change without engaging community members. This means that communities are expected to be well informed about the issues surrounding child marriages for them to participate in the fight against child marriages.

(b) Implementation of laws

As can be noted from the findings of this study, the participants confirmed that, the law was not effective because nobody among them had ever witnessed one being prosecuted for marrying off a child but always witnessing young ones getting into married. Now as indicated earlier, the constitution of Zambia states that a person who marries off a learner who is a child commits an offence and is liable upon conviction to imprisonment for the

period of fifteen years and may be liable to imprisonment for life (Education Act, 2011). It is evident that, children have continued to enter marriages because they know that no action is taken against such practices. This is similar to findings from Chilonga and Daka (2021) from their study where they found that lack of implementation of laws has led to many pupils being sexually harassed leaving the perpetrators free. Thus, the community has nothing to fear about their practices. Most of the participants emphasized that if only the current laws can be implemented without fear or favouritism, ending child marriage can be a reality.

(c) Formation of by-laws

Furthermore, the study revealed that communities should come up with by-laws to guide their practices on child marriage. In support of this, Elyasu (2020) noted that developing by-laws that prohibit child marriage and penalize men who engage in the practice is essential to eliminating child marriages. Development of by-laws might work out because it may help to deal with child marriage cases at the grassroots level.

(d) Supporting girls' education

The study noted that more organization should come in and help in sponsoring girls' education as most of them enter early marriages due to lack of support from their parents or guardians. In support of this, Lemmon and ElHarake (2014) and Nsingi (2016) in their respective studies on ending child marriage established that investing in girls' education is a critical strategy to end child marriage. The study also revealed that girls require a lot of support in terms of their needs than boys. Supporting of girls will also lead to reduction of absenteeism as found in the study by Daka, Chilala, Hamatanga, Chirwa, Mumba, Kaoma and Chikopela, (2021). Therefore, when the government finds various means of supporting them, they might be kept in school to the highest level and that may help in delaying their marriage up to the time they are mature enough.

Conclusion

The study discovered that collaboration between schools and communities was minimal especially with some of the parents and the chiefs. Mostly health personnel consistently collaborated with schools followed by religious leaders. On the challenge encountered by schools and communities in mitigating child marriages, the study demonstrated that they



arouse due to cultural beliefs, family ties, hiding of information and threats from parents. The study further revealed that not all parents and chiefs understood the term “human rights” as a result they were allowing children to enter marriage purporting that it’s their right. The results clearly demonstrates that the fight against child marriage is not an easy feat but requires the efforts of different stakeholders due to so many challenges that hinders the progress. Therefore, the study makes the following recommendations for action and suggestions for further research:

- The government should continue empowering girls with skills in line with their area of interest so that they become responsible citizens who can contribute positively to national development.
- The Law enforcers in the Chama district should work to end the practice of allowing young girls to perform dances the whole night by some bar owners in villages.
- The government should give an assignment of reporting the cases of child marriages to every member of the community directly to the police and the reporters’ identity should not be availed to anybody. Apart from that, the one who gives the true report should be appreciated in one way.

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