OUR VOICES, OUR FUTURE

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

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WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION

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ABOUT THIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 13-year-old collects firewood at her home in Zimbabwe.
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This study in Zimbabwe is the result of a collaboration between Plan International Zimbabwe, Dr. Abel Blessing Matsika, and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). It was made possible through the generous contributions of Plan International Netherlands and the Government of Canada. It is part of a multi-country research series under Plan International's Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings Initiative, a phased approached to delivering evidence-based programming to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings.

Disclaimer: Use of photos in this report is only meant to represent children and girls in Zimbabwe. It is not intended to indicate experience of subjects with child marriage.

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[1].
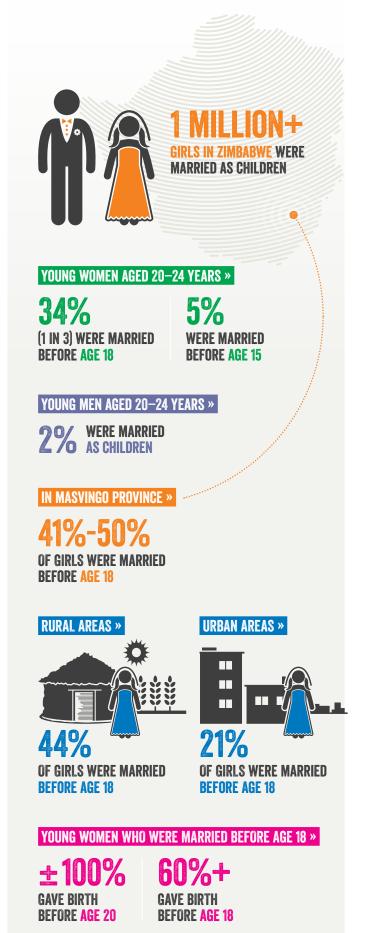
Read the full research report here.

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.

BACKGROUND

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. Child marriage rates in Zimbabwe have in fact slightly worsened over the last 25 years [2]. Adolescent boys in Zimbabwe also marry before they are 18 years old; 2 percent of young men aged 20–24 years reported being married as children [2]. The child marriage rate in Masvingo Province, where the study was conducted, ranges between 41 and 50 percent[2]. 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.

As a form of gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage is underpinned by gender inequality [3,4]. 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 [5]. Further, a growing body of literature shows that food insecurity can be both a driver and a consequence of child marriage [1,6–11]gender-based violence (GBV. 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[12]. The worsening impacts of climate change make Chiredzi District, the location of the study, one of the most chronically food insecure districts in the country [13]. Rural food insecurity prevalence for the district is estimated at 57 percent during the peak 2021 lean season from February to March/April [14].

The aim of the study was to understand the drivers of child marriage and the existing supports and resources available to adolescents living in food insecure communities in Chiredzi District that help them live healthy lives free of violence.

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

METHODS

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, key informant interviews (KIIs), and participant-led storytelling. Data was collected from January to April 2021. 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 to help contextualize the research questions, methods, and study parameters. KIIs were conducted to provide insights on the needs and priorities of adolescents, child marriage practices, and barriers and facilitators to accessing existing services and programming in the study sites.

SenseMaker® is a mixed-method research and analysis tool that provides an opportunity for participants, to record short, open-ended stories about their lived experiences and interpret or give meaning to their own story. SenseMaker was used to understand the needs and priorities of adolescent girls, the drivers of child marriage, and the adaptive capacities of adolescents, their families, and communities to care for and protect adolescent girls. The SenseMaker tool was co-designed with adolescent girls and adult community members. Facilitated co-analysis exercises were held with the research team and stakeholders to further uncover the key themes and to identify emergent questions for community and adolescent community participatory analysis workshops.

Given that unequal gender norms and power dynamics underpin child marriage, study data were analysed using an adapted Social Norms Framework. The adapted framework was used to understand how programming can disrupt risk and drivers of child marriage. It also explores how the existing resources and assets of adolescent girls, their families, and broader support systems support healthy trajectories for adolescent girls across the socio-ecological model, including social and structural factors inherent to humanitarian settings.

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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FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

A total of 1,685 people participated in data collection. Including a total of 17 KIIs conducted with 22 individuals (12 female, 10 male) working in Zimbabwe and Chiredzi across diverse positions and types of organisations. Overall, 1,668 adult and adolescent community members participated in SenseMaker data collection across four provinces. Sixty six percent of the sample were female, 43 percent of participants were 10 to 19 years. 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. In addition, 69 girls were mothers. When comparing urban and peri-urban locations, the numbers show a higher instance of married participants in peri-urban areas across all age ranges.

Findings indicate that the key concerns of adolescent girls act as both drivers and consequences of child marriage in Chiredzi. The lived experiences of adolescents in Chiredzi is 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.

KEY CONCERNS FACING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

The study found that the key concerns facing adolescents include child marriage, **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 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. All data indicate that child marriage manifests in different types of relationships and marriage customs at the community level in Chiredzi. Co-habitation, when no customary processes, such as the payment of lobola (bride price), or legal registration occur to solemnise the marriage, was the most common marriage relationship type. Data also 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. 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.

Poverty and unmet basic needs: Across methods, poverty and unmet basic needs, 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. 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. Some SenseMaker stories and a few KIs 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.

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 demonstrate that lack of food was a key concern in the lives of adolescents and more broadly within the community. A multiple-choice question looked at possible indicators of deprivation and struggle. "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 we see that not having enough food is still the experience most commonly encountered in stories among those listed.

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. 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.

Adolescent pregnancy and unmet ASRH 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. SenseMaker participants did not explicitly cite lack of ASRHR information and services, however, adolescent pregnancy was a dominant theme. Abortion was also cited in stories yet access to comprehensive safe abortion care appeared to be limited for adolescent girls. Despite the dominant themes of sexual violence and adolescent pregnancy in stories, contraception, including emergency contraceptive pills, and clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence services were never mentioned.

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.

15-year old girl out of school, Zimbabwe
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Sexual violence 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 reported that adolescent girls living with disabilities, particularly cognitive disabilities,[1] face heightened sexual violence risks. Some KIs and SenseMaker stories illuminated that sexual violence against girls is sometimes perpetrated by relatives. Moreover, the data suggest 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. Two KIs revealed that adolescent boys in Chiredzi also face sexual violence, although to a lesser extent than girls.

Sexual exploitation in the context of selling or exchanging sex were other forms of sexual violence against adolescents revealed in the data. For example, 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.

Lack of peer support: emerged as at theme in SenseMaker data. 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. 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 stories, friends are occasionally mentioned when people are sharing their friends' stories, but friendship as a support seems to be much rarer.

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1. 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.

CONCERNS OF MARRIED 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 abuse from in-laws, school dropout, and adverse health and wellbeing outcomes**.

Cyclical poverty: 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 care-giving 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. Data indicate 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 show 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. Abandonment emerged as a dominant trend in SenseMaker stories. 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.

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.

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. KII 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.

Adverse health and wellbeing outcomes: Data across methods 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. 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 noted as a theme in the stories collected.

A 19-year-old takes her baby to the health centre for a check-up in Zimbabwe.
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DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

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

❶ 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 the Urban and Peri-Urban wards in Chiredzi. While trends are the same, there is a stronger emphasis on poverty as a driver in Urban, compared to Peri-Urban, communities.

❷ 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. 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.

❸ Male Dominance over adolescent 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. 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.

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. Some community member participants 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.

A 16-year-old Zimbabwean girl lights a fire while her grandmother watches.
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DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

❹ 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 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. Findings also 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. Data from across methods also suggest that sexual violence drives child marriages in Chiredzi, particularly when it results in pregnancy.

❺ Adolescent pregnancy

Data from across methods demonstrate 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. This suggests that adolescents need access to 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.

❻ Misconceptions about marriage

Participants across all 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. Data indicate 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 desirable and safer than remaining in household poverty or being alone in the case of child-headed households. 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.

❼ Harmful Cultural Practices

Findings suggest that cultural practices, such as *Khomba* (initiation event), *lobola* (bride price), and musengabere (the practice of abducting girls to force marriage) 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. Findings also suggest that 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. Finally, study data indicating that abduction persists in Chiredzi is not as comprehensive, yet, initiatives addressing GBV in Chiredzi should ensure that *musengabere* (abduction practices) are abolished, given the severity of the practice.

ADDITIONAL CHILD MARRIAGE RISKS

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. 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.

Internet, phones, and social media

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. For example, during participatory community analysis adults speculated that the availability of free internet hotspots without adult supervision has resulted in adolescents accessing pornographic material instead of educational material as intended. Adults also shared that parents purchase internet bundles for their children to access e-learning materials, yet 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.

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 increasing poverty and food insecurity; further undermining girls' education; violence against children within the home; lack of safe spaces for adolescents; and weakened protective structures. In response to increased economic hardship and food insecurity due to COVID-19 lockdown measures, data indicate that some households- both parents and adolescent girls- turned to child marriage to alleviate this struggle. Data suggest that COVID-19 worsened girls' barriers to accessing education through lack of ability to pay for school fees, or due to adolescent pregnancy. KIs indicated that government lockdowns increased adolescent girls' risk of violence at home, mainly perpetrated by fathers. 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, mainly due to school closures. Finally, 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. 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.

ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT, CARE AND PROTECTION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Findings indicate that potential exists to leverage existing 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; ASRHR programming; adolescent programming; programmes targeted at increasing trust and understanding between parents and adolescents; and national legislative and policy frameworks that protect adolescent girls. However, the data point to serious gaps in this ecosystem of support for most girls, namely the 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. To address key drivers of child marriage, the ecosystem of support must be strengthened, including the adaptive capacities within adolescent girls, their families, and the communities that care for and protect girls.

Women tend to their garden in Zimbabwe's Chiredzi District.
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RECOMMENDATIONS

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, 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.

PROGRAMMING RECOMMENDATIONS

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[15]. 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 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 in the existing ecosystem of support for adolescent girls 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.

DETAILED PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS ON ADDRESSING CHILD MARRIAGE CAN BE FOUND IN THE FULL REPORT ORGANISED INTO THE FOLLOWING SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL DOMAINS:

1. **Strengthen the Existing Capacities** of Adolescent Girls, their Families, and Communities, including, Coordinated, Multi-Sector Humanitarian-Development and Government Actions

2. **Strengthen Institutional Structures** of Support for Adolescents Through the Following Actions.

3. **Strengthen the Socio-Economic Approaches** to Dismantle Patriarchal Systems that Perpetuate Harmful Gender Norms

Girl attending school, Zimbabwe .
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POLICY AND ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDINGS INDICATE THAT CHILD MARRIAGE IS A PERSISTENT PRACTICE IN CHIREDZI, 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:

1. **Community should be supported 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 stigmatization of already married girls.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. **ASRHR laws and policies should be strengthened** to ensure adolescents' ASRHR needs are met.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

SEVERAL AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED BY THIS STUDY. INCLUDING RESEARCH ON:

1. Whether and to what extent **social media, internet, and mobile phone use** elevate adolescent girls' risk of child marriage.

2. The lived experiences of adolescent **boys and male youth**, including barriers and facilitators to accessing and utilising services.

3. **Evaluations** of child marriage programmes to build an evidence base on what works to end child marriage and respond to the needs of married girls in crises.

4. Sustainable solutions for pregnant and married girls to continue their **education**.

5. Whether adolescent girl **safe space interventions and peer interventions** are effective approaches to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings.

6. 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.

7. Causal pathways between **food access, food use, food availability, malnutrition, and child marriage**.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the evidence base indicating that existing drivers of child marriage are exacerbated in crisis-affected contexts, specifically food-insecure communities.

The study goes further by seeking to understand 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 eight key drivers of child marriage in Chiredzi, which manifested differently in Urban compared to Peri-Urban areas:

1. poverty and unmet basic needs, including food;
2. lack of access to education, school dropout, and lack of alternative opportunities for girls;
3. male dominance over adolescent girls' decision-making and sexuality;
4. adolescent pregnancy;
5. 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.

A schoolgirl entering her school in Zimbabwe.
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About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

About the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)

The 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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Dr. Matsika is a Zimbabwe-based independent qualitative research consultant. He specialises in child protection, gender-based violence, and HIV, as well as social work education and training. He advocates for a collaborative approach to tackling contemporary social problems affecting children in Zimbabwe and has co-authored several research papers and book chapters on child protection issues, including child marriage.

About the Cynefin Company

The Cynefin Company (formerly known as Cognitive Edge) is an action research and development hub working at the limits of applied complexity science. We are an interdisciplinary team working with a distributed network of practitioners across the world. The Cynefin Company was founded in 2005 by Dave Snowden. We believe in praxis and focus on building methods, tools, and capability that apply the wisdom from Complex Adaptive Systems theory and other scientific disciplines in social systems.