

# The interlink between child marriage and human security: A case study of Burma Valley in Zimbabwe

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.13.01.2023.p13308

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.13.01.2023.p13308>

Paper Received Date: 18th November 2022

Paper Acceptance Date: 27<sup>th</sup> December 2022

Paper Publication Date: 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023

**Abstract-** The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underlines the importance of eliminating all harmful practices which include child marriage under SDG 5, which emphasizes gender equality and women and girl empowerment. Child marriage is a major threat to human security especially to young girls in developing countries. It ranks high as a Sexual Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and harmful practice. The research provides a guided vision and direction to policymakers in governments, universities and academia, migration practitioners, development agencies and communities to influence appropriate policy action to end the problem of child marriages. The research used the case study approach to investigate the interlink between child marriages and human security in the area of Burma Valley, Manicaland, Zimbabwe. A sample of 60 respondents consisting of key informants such as traditional leadership, Ministry of primary and secondary education, sports and culture, Ministry of health and child care and the Zimbabwe Republic Police participated in the research. The key findings of the research are that child marriages are mainly driven by proximity to the Mozambique border, agency of the girl child, high illiteracy levels, poor and mixed accommodation. The study assesses the current responses and policies to tackle the challenges of child marriage in Zimbabwe and makes recommendations of appropriate policy actions to end the problem of child marriage and protecting the vulnerable population of girls in Zimbabwe. The study recommends the strengthening of the voice, agency and decision making of girls, improved birth and marriage registration, criminalizing child labour, improved migration and border control, establishment of more schools in affected communities and the mainstreaming of gender in development programmes.

**Index Terms-** Human security, agency, child marriage, key drivers, gender, policy

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) (2019) report, child marriage is a human rights violation. Despite efforts to end it, the practice is rife. Globally, one in every five girls is married, or in union, before reaching age 18. In the less developed and economically poor countries, the number doubles. 40 per cent of girls are married before age 18, and 12 per cent of girls are married before age 15. Child marriage is a threat

to human security as it adversely affects girls' lives and health. It limits their future prospects and violates their rights to basic needs such as education and health. Girls pressed into child marriage face a higher risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth. These complications are the leading cause of death among older adolescent girls.

Together with 193 United Nations (UN) member states, Zimbabwe is on the path to implementing measures to achieve gender equality, quality education, women's empowerment and the realization of human rights for its citizens by the year 2030. Citizens include vulnerable and at-risk communities such as the disabled, internally displaced persons (IDPs), Persons of Concern (POCs) and children. However, one practice that impedes the country's objective to achieving gender equality and human rights is that of child marriages. Section 81 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment No 20) of 2013 defines a child as anyone below the age of 18 years. In Africa, thirty-two countries have set the minimum age of consent to marriage at eighteen for both girls and boys (African Union (AU), 2013). Other countries such as Algeria, Libya and Rwanda have risen the age of consent to marriage to 19, 20 and 21 years, respectively. However, a universally acceptable definition of child marriage is any formal or informal union in which a girl or boy under the age of 18 lives with a partner in a marriage setting (UNICEF, 2005).

Child marriage violates children's human rights and especially places the girl child at the risk of gender-based violence, social exclusion and ill-health. This is the case of girls in Burma Valley, where girls are far more exposed to child marriages than in other districts in Manicaland Province. In addition, it denies girls the opportunity to participate in decision-making and to contribute to their communities whilst keeping them locked in a cycle of feminized poverty. The impact of child marriages is intergenerational. Girls, which are married off at an early age and their offspring, are cut off from completing their education thus limiting their future economic life outcomes, capacity realization, development and empowerment opportunities that could lift them and their societies out of poverty. Hence, there is an urgent need to implement a multi-stakeholder response to address the problem of child marriages.

From a rights-based perspective, child marriage has received international recognition since 1924, within the context of violations against the rights of the child. From then on, the rights of the girl child, her protection and promotion has set the agenda of human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Youth Charter and the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa, all which Zimbabwe concedes to. At the national level, Zimbabwe has pledged to protect these rights by abolishing child marriages through the Marriages Bill of 2019, the Children's Act, Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Domestic Violence Act and the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act. Yet, in the midst of these legislative frameworks, studies show worrisome trends that child marriages are on the increase in the country.

In 2014, at least 22 million girls out of the total world population of 1.1 billion girls below the age of eighteen were already married (UNICEF, 2014). Whilst studies suggest that child marriages in developed countries such as the United States of America are prevalent, the problem is more pronounced in developing countries (UNICEF, 2012). Hassan (2014) corroborates with this finding by adding that at least 20-25% of the 14 million girls who were married before the age of eighteen were from developing countries. Of this population, 56% of girls in South Sudan and 6% of girls in South Africa were married as child brides (UNICEF, 2017).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underlines the importance of eliminating all harmful practices which include child marriage under SDG 5, which emphasizes gender equality and women and girl empowerment. This research seeks to provide a guided vision and direction to policymakers in governments, universities and academia, migration practitioners, Development Agencies and communities to influence appropriate policy action to end the problem of child marriages in Manicaland Province. The document articulates the causes and key drivers of child marriages, current responses and policies and recommendations of appropriate policy actions to end the problem of child marriage and protecting the vulnerable population of girls in Zimbabwe.

## II. OVERVIEW OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN MANICALAND PROVINCE

In Zimbabwe, at least one in every four women aged between 15 to 19 years is married (MICS, 2014). Taking the case of Manicaland province in Zimbabwe, campaigns, policies and strategies have been implemented by several stakeholders such as the government and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) to deal with child marriages but the problem has continued to escalate. From 2005 to 2006, Manicaland province experienced a rise in early child marriages from 12.1% up to 16.5% as compared to Bulawayo 5.3% and Harare 11.5% (ZDHS, 2007). The percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18, was 47% in Manicaland province as compared to Bulawayo province with 11% (MICS, 2014). These figures increased even more sharply between 2016-2018, where Manicaland rose from 22.9% to 30% as compared to Bulawayo and Harare where child marriages increased from 9.6% to 10% and 14.7% to 19% respectively (UNFPA, 2018). In Zimbabwe, at least one in every

four women aged between 15 to 19 years is married (MICS, 2014). Taking the case of Manicaland province in Zimbabwe, campaigns, policies and strategies have been implemented by several stakeholders such as the government and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) to deal with child marriages but the problem has continued to escalate. From 2005 to 2006, Manicaland province experienced a rise in early child marriages from 12.1% up to 16.5% as compared to Bulawayo 5.3% and Harare 11.5% (ZDHS, 2007). The percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married before the age of 18, was 47% in Manicaland province as compared to Bulawayo province with 11% (MICS, 2014). These figures increased even more sharply between 2016-2018, where Manicaland rose from 22.9% to 30% as compared to Bulawayo and Harare where child marriages increased from 9.6% to 10% and 14.7% to 19% respectively (UNFPA, 2018).

## III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

### A. Problem Statement

The comparison and analysis of the trend and dynamics of child marriage in Zimbabwe shows that child marriage is widespread in Manicaland province. These disturbing figures call for an investigation into the factors that influence the increase of child marriages in Manicaland province despite the interventions that have been put in place by several stakeholders. The research examines how policies can be designed and modeled to address this issue and ensure human security for young girls. In examining the problem of child marriages in the province, the paper considers that child marriages do not occur in isolation. Therefore, efforts to address this problem should consider the multiplicities and complex interactions of the key drivers that influence communities to succumb to this harmful practice.

### B. Objectives and research questions

The overall goal of the paper is to contribute towards the protection, promotion and enforcement of human rights for vulnerable groups including young girls.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the underlying causes and key drivers of child marriages in Manicaland Province.
2. Explore the current responses to address the problem of child marriages in the province.
3. Critically review the policies aimed at addressing child marriages in Zimbabwe.
4. Recommend appropriate policy action to address the problem of child marriages in Zimbabwe and contribute towards human security.

The research answers the following questions:

1. What are the underlying causes and key drivers of child marriages in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe?
2. What are the current responses to addressing the problem of child marriages in the Province?
3. What are the existing gaps and opportunities in the policies aimed at addressing child marriages in Zimbabwe?

4. What recommendations for appropriate policy action can be made to address the problem of child marriages in Zimbabwe?

#### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

##### 1.5. Contextualizing the problem of child marriages in Manicaland Province

Several scholars have put forward reasons for the continued rise in child marriages across Africa, in Zimbabwe and in Manicaland province in particular.

###### 1.5.1. Religion, culture and the girl child

Zimbabwe is one of the countries which have a number of forced child marriages out of either religious or traditional practices or families 'selling off' their children for material benefits. Despite the heavy criticism from human rights organizations, children's organizations and the government, child marriages still continue.

Available research evidence on the drivers of child marriages indicate that a range of social and economic factors sustain this practice. In African societies, child marriages are often performed to fulfill cultural obligations (Heinonen, 2002). In Zimbabwe; a child can be pledged for marriage even before they are born. This custom is commonly referred to as '*Kuzvarira*'. This custom is usually followed in conflict resolution between two families. Other African historians and culturists have also documented how Zimbabwean societies have perpetuated some African traditional practices such as '*Kuripa ngozi*' (appeasing the spirits of a dead person by paying of a young virgin girl to the deceased person's family) (Banda, 2014, Shoko and Chiwara, 2015). '*Chiramu*' is also another cultural practice that perpetuates child marriages in Zimbabwe. This practice allows a husband to marry his wife's younger sister regardless of her age.

Hallfors et al. (2011) also point out the correlation between orphanhood and African indigenous religious practices (such as apostolic churches) as key drivers of child marriages in Manicaland Province. In their study, they found that young, orphaned and rural apostolic girls were at least four times more likely to marry as adolescents as compared to girls who follow Protestant churches. In areas such as Burma Valley there has been a prevalent trend of young women being married to older men within the church (Machingura, 2011). Such practices have led to the rise of the phenomenon of child marriages. In some circles these practices have been viewed as a violation of the rights of the girl child. In the sense that the practices disenfranchise the girl child the right to choose their preferred partners. In most cases these forced marriages also portray how the patriarchal society has undermined the rights of the girl child, firstly, by marrying them off whilst still below the Legal age of consent and by denying them the right to negotiate for access to sexual and reproductive health services and information.

In Burma valley, it is common practice to get children married off for religious and cultural purposes. In fact, in 2011, a senator from Manicaland Province, Chief Chiduku, supported by another chief, Tsungirirai Muzerengwa who was also a senator for Buhera, publicly announced at a Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting, that there was nothing wrong with child marriages (Newsday, 2011). Both chiefs are members of the African Apostolic Church, which has a huge following in Manicaland province. In the endeavor to end child marriages, several issues arising from statements such as these should be examined such as; The role of chiefs as custodians of law vs. their role as gatekeepers of tradition and religion; Whether child marriages should be accepted as part of the societal fabric regardless of the known negative health, social and economic impacts on the girl child; How traditional and religious leaders can be engaged and empowered as change agents to change their attitudes and those of their communities on the rights of the girl child and the negative impacts of child marriages; Lastly, the incongruous relationship between culture/religion and the law and if there are ways that can be explored to harmonize these.

###### 1.5.2. Poverty and household vulnerability

Others scholars as Sibanda (2011) and Mavhunga and Bondai (2015), identify poverty and household vulnerability as factors that have led to a rise in child marriages. They argue that child marriages in Zimbabwe reveal a case of feminization of poverty. In most cases, it is the rural girl child that has been most affected in comparison to the boy child when it comes to family decisions on who should drop out of school. This trend is still very common in religious communities such as Burma Valley. Hence, the affected girl child ends up being idle and at times vulnerable to being married off (by their parents) to the elderly men especially in Vapostori sect. At the macro level, child marriage contributes to continuing the intergenerational cycle of poverty, which further marginalizes women and the girl child.

###### 1.5.3. Panner culture, diamonds and child marriages

Muchadenyika (2015) and Chimonyo et al. (2011) draw on discovery of diamonds and how it influenced the rise of child marriages in Marange. In 2006, alluvial diamonds were discovered in the Marange area some 100km from the city of Mutare (Muchadenyika, 2015). With this discovery, thousands of artisanal miners from across the borders and beyond, thronged the mines in search of the precious stone. Referred to as "Panner culture" by Chimonyo et al. (2011), the way of life of the Marange people changed and was replaced by new social ideologies as the villagers interacted with the illegal diamond miners on a day to day basis. The spending behaviors of the panners could not be overlooked as there was sudden rise in shopping, drinking and prostitution at the local bars. It is in these scenarios that young teenage girls particularly from areas such as Marange shopping centre, Mukwada and Bambazonke intentionally dropped out of school in pursuance of marriage and prostitution as it was a rich source of income (Muchadenyika, 2015).

###### 1.5.4. HIV/AIDS and child marriages

That the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been heavily felt in most rural communities in Zimbabwe is beyond doubt. Through interaction

with officials from NGOs working in Manicaland it came to the attention of the study that most families in Mutare rural were child headed. As a result of the death toll emanating from HIV/AIDS, most surviving children became vulnerable to child marriage as a way of fending for their siblings. This trend was also witnessed in rural communities such as in Burma Valley.

Child brides also are at far greater risk of contracting HIV than their counterparts who marry later. Often they are married to older, more sexually experienced men with whom it is difficult to negotiate safe sexual behaviors, especially when under pressure to bear children. A study conducted in Kenya and Zambia in 2004 finds that married girls aged 15-19 were 75 percent more likely to contract HIV than sexually active, unmarried girls of the same age. Similar figures have been found in 29 countries across Africa and Latin America (Girlsnotbrides, 2019)

Further advancing, this line of argument, past literature has emerged articulating the rise of child marriage in Mutare rural to orphan hood (Gregson et al., 2005, Hallfors et al., 2013 and Luseno et al., 2015). These scholars hold that child marriage amongst orphaned teenage girls could be attributed to poor household situations and constrained access to education. Hallfors et al. (2013) argue that orphan hood in Zimbabwe is accountable for the vulnerabilities to early sexual debuts and child marriage amongst orphan girls aged 15 to 17. They also state that child marriage is exacerbated by the fact that orphan teenage girls were likely to take place 4 times more amongst Johanne Marange apostolic sect followers than other religious beliefs.

## 1.6 Child marriage as a threat to human security

The consequences of child marriage on the human security of girl children are many. The impact is negative on the social, economic and health of the girl child. Human security is a concept anchored on people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people and all communities (UN Human Security Handbook, 2016). Human security is defined as the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential (UN Human Security Handbook, 2016). Therefore, there is a strong linkage between human security, human rights and human development. Child marriage brings several threats to the human security and human rights of girl children whose potential and future is violated.

### 1.6.1 Increased maternal and child risks

The consequences of child marriage are devastating and often determine a person's future. Girls who marry young are at a higher risk of dying during childbirth, having their child die early. Girls who marry and give birth before their bodies are fully developed and ready for child birth. These girls are more at risk of death or terrible injury and illness in childbirth. In 2007, UNICEF reported that a girl under the age of 15 is five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than a woman in her 20s. The maternal

risks extend to the infants born of the child mothers as well. When a mother is under age, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60 percent greater than that of a baby born to a mother older than 19. In addition to death, young girls face tremendous health risks in childbirth, including a serious condition known as obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tear during childbirth. It causes urine and feces to leak from her, and without surgery, the condition lasts the rest of the girl's life. Fistula patients are commonly poor women, ages 15 to 20, many of whom were child brides (UNICEF, 2007). Child marriage poses a huge threat to the maternal health of both the young mother and the baby.

### 1.6.2 Greater exposure to domestic and sexual violence

Girls who are married early are more likely to be abused sexually, physically and emotionally. An ICRW study in India shows that girls who married before age 18 reported experiencing physical violence twice as often, and sexual violence three times as often as girls who married at a later age. According to the International Council of Research On Women (2005) women **with low levels of education and married adolescents between the ages of 15-19 years old are at a higher risk of domestic violence than older and more educated women.** Globally, girls who marry before age 18 are 50 percent more likely to face physical or sexual violence from a partner throughout the course of their life. Child marriages usually involve much older and physically stronger men who abuse the much younger girls. In patriarchal societies where the rights of women are barely recognized, there is a threat multiplication for girls in child marriages. The child mothers are not able to negotiate for safe sex, protect themselves from gender based violence and other social and economic threats.

### 1.6.3 Deprivation of childhood and a future

Early marriage deprives girls of their childhood. They are deprived the opportunities to play, to learn and to enjoy their youth. The girls are burdened with domestic responsibility, motherhood and sexual relations rather than playing with friends, dreaming about a career or choosing an education they want. Young married girls move away from their parents' home to live with their husband and his family, where they have no friends, no support, and little say in their own lives or in household matters (Flake, 2005). Research shows that young married girls often are isolated and powerless. They are unable to negotiate or obtain support for issues in their own interest. And they're frequently exposed to violence and threats of abandonment and divorce

According to the ICRW (2004) outside the family, the doors to schooling are usually closed to young married girls in most countries. They have little chance to prosper later in jobs or as entrepreneurs hence their economic opportunities are slim. Due to limited economic and education opportunities, child brides also end up raising daughters who face the same challenges as their mothers.

## 1.7 Child marriage and sustainable development goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the plan to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all citizens of the world. They address the global challenges faced by humanity,

including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice. There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals that are all interconnected. In order to leave no one behind and to ensure that the SDGs are achieved, 2030 has been set as the target year (United Nations, 2019)

The threats of child marriage continue to hound the success of the Sustainable Development Goals. According to UNICEF (2016) Child marriage is a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It exists in every region around the world, from Africa to Asia, the Middle East to Latin America, and in some communities in Europe and North America. If there is no reduction in child marriage, the global number of women married as children will reach 1.2 billion by 2050. Zimbabwe has a perennial problem of child marriage that is driven by religious and cultural practices. For Zimbabwe to achieve SDG number 5 of Gender Equality it has to put in place policies and practices to end child marriage.

Child marriage perpetuates poverty, inequality and insecurity and is an obstacle to global development. A lack of attention to child marriage undermined the achievement of many of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015). Since then, the international community has learned a lot. For the first time, target 5.3 aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage”. This is an important tool to drive action, hold governments to account for their commitments to girls, and track progress on ending child marriage globally.

## V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research Methodology

The research used qualitative approaches to investigate child marriages and the stakeholders associated with the policy issues of child marriage. The research targeted Burma valley in Mutare rural where child marriages are prevalent. Purposive and snowball methods were used to identify the respondents as the research aimed to obtain first-hand information from girl children, parents and community members encroached in the web of child marriage. The research targeted key informants such as traditional leadership, Ministry of primary and secondary education, sports and culture, Ministry of health and child care and the Zimbabwe Republic Police.

### 2.2. Sampling Procedure and Targeting

According to O’Leary (2017), a research population is defined as the total number of individuals who share the same characteristics that the researcher is interested in gaining insight on. Denscombe (1999) suggests that, in order to be carefully selected for a qualitative study, a sample must be of an adequate size. For this reason, the study used a sample of 60 respondents drawn from Burma valley in Manicaland province, Zimbabwe. The sample included 20 girl children in marriages, 20 representatives of government departments working in the area, 10 religious and traditional leaders and 10 members from the community. Sampling allows researchers to make conclusions about a larger population from a smaller one (Berg and Lune, 2012). Convenience and purposive sampling was used to target

people for the research. This enabled the researchers to access children in child marriages and key informants who could assist with information on child marriages. Child marriage is a sensitive issue due to cultural and religious setups in communities where the marriages take place. Hence, purposive sampling was an effective tool to identify the respondents. The snowball method was used to identify key informants for traditional and church leaders. Key policy and decision makers from government departments working with children were purposively sampled.

### 2.3. Data Collection Methods

**Interviews:** Purposive sampling strategy was used to identify the key informants. Selection of key informants was based on gender, involvement in child marriage, leadership position, age and knowledge of the research area. Unstructured interviews were adopted and used given the sensitive nature of child marriage which is usually secretive and defended by offenders and accomplices. The interviews were carried out with children in marriages, parents and guardians of girls in child marriage. Respondents from the Ministry of health and child care, Ministry of primary and secondary education, Zimbabwe Police and NGOs were targeted for interviews as key informants. These were specifically chosen due to their direct work with girl children.

**Focus group discussions:** Focus group discussions are frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposively selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Nyumba et al., 2018). Two focus group discussions were used to collect data on child marriage. One group was comprised of child brides; the other was composed of school teachers and parents of girls in child marriages.

**Secondary Data Sources:** To give some detailed and comprehensive developments around child marriages, key policies and legislative frameworks were reviewed. These included the Marriage Bill of 2019, The Children’s Act, The Codification and Reform Act and the National Gender Policy.

### 2.4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

The research used a gender analytical lens and human rights based approach to collect from the research. A policy analysis approach was employed to ensure that policy issues were adequately analyzed religious leaders and community members was qualitatively summarized into tables. Data analysis is the process of sorting, categorizing according to themes and analyzing data (Laws et al., 201). Interviews were manually transcribed, objectives and questions. This data was saved onto a Microsoft word document for analysis using the gender analytical lenses records were handwritten, this data was manually coded using the themes of the study through a Microsoft Excel worksheet. From this worksheet, a graph was produced to show the trends in child marriage in Burma valley. The researchers also translated all interviews conducted in the Shona language into English.

### 2.5. Research Ethics

Saunders and Lewis (2012) define relation to the rights of those who become the subject of one’s work. The goal research is to uphold the ‘Do No Harm’ principle and ensuring that no one suffers from any adverse consequences resulting from research activities. As such ethical and confidentiality issues were observed during the course of the research stud process, the study ensured that all respondents participated of their own free will .This was done by seeking consent before the interviews as well as permission to take down notes or Health and Child Care, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe Police and NGOs were targeted for interviews as key informants. These were specifically chosen due to their direct work with girl children.

VI. FINDINGS

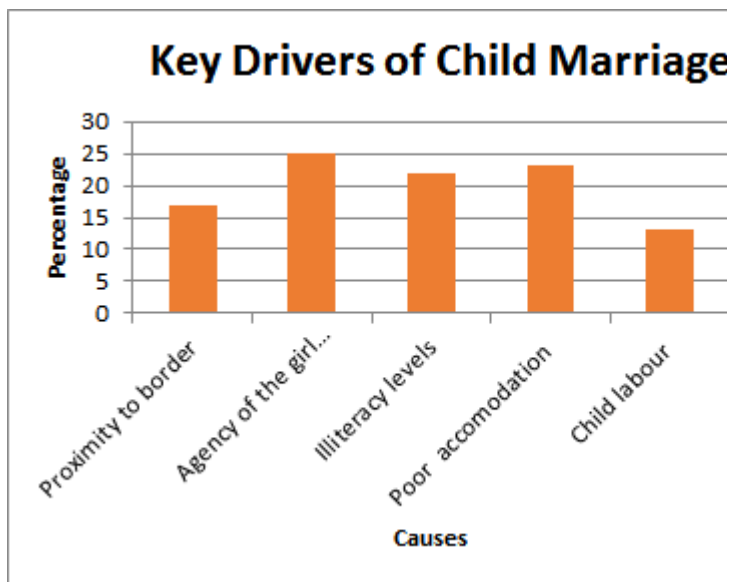
3.1. Key Drivers of Child Marriages in Manicaland Province

Child brides, nurses, teachers and traditional and religious leaders were interviewed in Burma valley. The respondents indicated proximity to the Mozambican border, poor accommodation, child labor, illiteracy and the girl child’s agency as the major causes of child marriages.

Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of responses on the key drivers of child marriages in Burma Valley.

Fig 3.1. Key drivers of child marriages in Burma Valley

N= 60



Data provided in Figure 3.1 above indicates the key drivers of child marriages in Burma Valley. According to the respondents, agency of the girl child (25%), poor accommodation (23%), illiteracy levels (22%), proximity to the border (17%) and child labor (13%) are the main causes of child marriages in Burma valley. Agency of the girl child (25%) was ranked by the

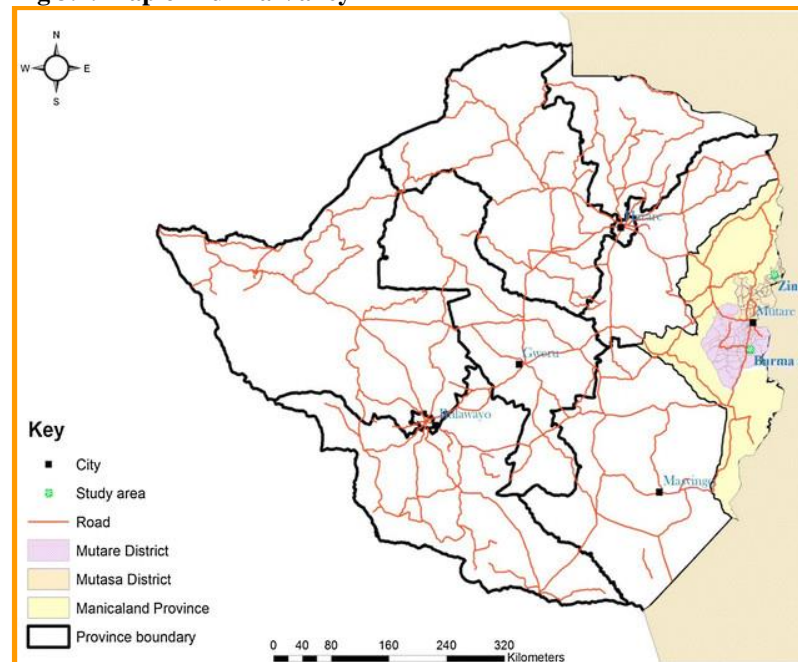
respondents as the main cause, whilst child labor was regarded as the lowest cause of child marriages. According to the respondents, the girl child’s agency to get married is a key driver of child marriages in Burma valley. The respondents indicated that girl children were willingly entering into child marriages because they felt that they were ready to do so. This may explain why policies and interventions that have been implemented are failing to address child marriages, because the young girls themselves do not see it as a problem.

Poor accommodation (23%) is ranked as the second major cause of child marriage. Fourteen respondents indicated that many families living in the farming compounds shared their bedrooms with their children, resulting in the loss of intimate privacy for the parents. Consequently, this resulted in the girl child experimenting with men in the farms resulting in child marriages. According to the traditional leaders, children always try to emulate and experiment what they see from their parents. Pointing to illiteracy levels (22%) as another cause of child marriages, some key informants explained that the lack of education facilities in Burma valley contributed to child marriages. There is only one secondary school in Burma valley, Mazonwe Secondary school. To make matters worse, this school is farther away from other villages in Burma valley, making it difficult for girls to walk to the school. In addition, many parents were failing to pay school fees due to economic hardships, often opting to send the boy child .As a result, the girls were forced to become idle hence opting to get married to escape poverty.

3.2. Porous borders, migrant workers and the girl child

Burma Valley is located at least 10 km from the nearest border towns of Mozambique that is, Magaka, Mabvita and Agroculla.

Fig 3.2. Map of Burma Valley



(Source: Sande et al., 2015)

Findings from the in depth interviews with the child brides and key informant interviews suggests that child marriages in Burma Valley can be attributed to the cross cultural exchanges between migrant male workers who work at farms such as Matanuska, Creek Valley Farm and Valley Coffee Plantations and the girl children. According to UNICEF (2006), young girls often marry migrant workers with the hope of improving their economic status.

8 out of the 20 child brides (40%) shared that they were married to Mozambican nationals who were employed as farm laborers in Burma valley.

One respondent explained that the migrant workers were mostly favored as choice husbands by young girls because they were perceived to be richer and generous than locals who were perceived as unwilling to spend,

*If we see that you are from Mozambique, with a potbelly, every girl will come to your house, even if they know that you are dating another girl from the village. A pot belly means that you have money...they take better care of girls than local men who are poor and don't want to work.*

A key informant from Mazonwe Secondary School corroborates this study's findings by adding that migrant workers from villages across the border mostly marry young girl children in Burma Valley because it is part of their culture. He explains that in Mozambique it is common for a man to marry a child,

*If you cross the border, you will find young girls as little as 13 married with two children, it is not a taboo, it is part of their culture...when they come here they bring this same culture, they do not value the girl's education but they want to marry our children.*

Child marriages linked to migration present a complex relationship between the countries involved in terms of issues of border security, legality of the migrants working status, the policies and laws governing child marriages, prosecution and jurisdiction in the event that the perpetrator returns to his home country.

### **3.3. Innocent young girls or active young women: negotiating with agency, gender and child marriage.**

The term agency is understood as the capacity for an individual to determine and act (Messer-Davidow, 1998). Giddens (1984) adds that agency is an inherent quality which comes from within an individual. Therefore, he defines agency as an individual's capacity to act and their power to carry out these actions. It is the power to act and the power to monitor others actions. From a feminist perspective, Davies (1991) defines agency as a subjectively constituted through the discourses that an individual is positioned in. Butler (1990) explains further that agency is a characteristic of a performative agent. The ability to act makes the individual a performative agent. By performing or exercising agency, the individual is then located in either gender binaries, as a proper woman or as a proper man. Gender is therefore a construct of an individual's ability to act/perform in a certain acceptable way.

Contrary to studies which portray the girl child as a victim of social, cultural and economic factors (Mavhunga and Bonda, 2015; Banda, 2014, Chivora, 2015; Machingura, 2011), this paper found that the girl child in Burma Valley exercises her agency in deciding to get married early.

One of the participants of a focus group discussion held at Mazonwe clinic spoke of how getting married was her own choice and how she felt she had come of age,

*"I felt that I was ready for marriage. My parents even supported my decision"* (child bride, aged 17).

Similarly, another child bride explained how getting married fulfilled her desire to become a proper woman,

*"For you to be called a complete woman you have to be married, that is why I decided to get married"* (child bride, aged 16).

The respondents indicated that marrying late was accompanied by stigma. Being unmarried was viewed negatively by the child brides and believed to be linked to witchcraft. As a result, there remained great cultural and social pressure to ensure a girl did not lose her opportunity for marriage by waiting too long. *"I did not want to wait too long, you know women have an expiry date...i am still enjoying my marriage"* (child bride, aged 19)

The peer system is a key socializing agent which sanitizes child marriages,

*"Seven of my friends were married early... they were between 14 and 17, all of them were gone so I felt left out. I just decided that I was now ready for marriage"* (child bride, aged 17)

A fourth respondent also explained that she was in her second marriage; she had made the decision to get married in both instances,

*"I had come of age; I really wanted to get married. Even when my first husband left me, I quickly got married to the next man, I could not live alone"* (child bride, aged 16)

From the above stories, the child brides do not present themselves as defenseless children. Rather, they present themselves as agents who are capable of making a deliberate choice. Drawing on Butler's (1990) definition of agency, they show capacity to make decisions, which is where agency is located. Despite knowledge of the dangers of child marriages, the respondents felt that it was the right thing to do.

At the same time the child brides convey a strong sense of autonomy in the way they reflect, judge, choose and act (Giddens, 1992). This capacity for self-reflection opens up a number of courses of action and makes the girl child agents in their own lives. The narratives indicate that the young girls' actions were dependent on the world around them and that their agency can only be understood within their contexts.

The social construction of gender in the Shona society associates a "proper woman" as wife and child bearer whilst a 'proper man' is a husband and breadwinner of the family. Scott (1986) conceptualizes gender as a socially constructed concept which is constitutive of the social relations between males and females

(1986). Scott postulates that gender is constructed through cultural symbols that define what it means to be a proper woman in society. For example, in Burma Valley, a woman is expected to be 'pure', innocent and wife material. Scott also considers the role of subjective identity in the construction of gender. Subjective identity which is the intimate sense of self is created through gendered power relations. The subjective identity is reinforced by the compliments one obtains and how one seeks to obtain approval from others. This is evidenced by the respondent who explained that she decided to get married because her friends had all been married. Her decisions were based on the desire to gain approval from her peers. Yet again, subjective identity is not only about social relations of power, but is also about the gendered notions prevalent in the way people live.

As shown by the above discussion, there is an intricate relationship between agency, gender and the girl child's decision to get married. Gender roles influence how the girl child exercises her agency to get married early. For the child brides, marriage is the ultimate goal and the acceptable way of being a proper woman. This also shapes their decisions and agency towards early child marriage.

The above findings may explain why policies and interventions that have been put in place are failing to address the problem of child marriages in Manicaland Province. Advocacy and policies are targeted at the 'male' perpetrator by enforcing laws that enable prosecution and protection of the rights of the girl child. By so doing, these policies assume what they think are the needs of young girls and how they should be protected, thus, ignoring the voices of agency of the young girls. In fact, a key informant from FACT explained that they had implemented a "Second Chance Program" in Burma Valley to support the girl child with school fees. 26 young girls had been supported with school fees and uniforms between 2018 and 2019. The girls were enrolled at Mazonwe Secondary School. However, only 3 girls have remained in the programme, the rest have returned to their marriages.

### **3.4. Inadequate education infrastructure and illiteracy levels as drivers of child marriages**

Data gleaned from the fieldwork revealed that 65% (13 out of 20) of the child brides had dropped out of school at grade 7. In Burma Valley, there is only one secondary school, which was established in 2004, 24 years after the independence of Zimbabwe. In addition, there are 5 primary schools, Kaswa, Mazonwe, Valhalla Matanuska, Creek Valley and Makura. Child marriages in Burma valley can be attributed to low literacy levels and inadequate education infrastructure.

A key informant from Mazonwe Secondary school added that, *There is only one secondary school. Imagine, since 1980, only one secondary school was established in 2004. This school is supposed to cater for all children in Burma valley. It is sad, particularly for the girl child because some parents have to choose who to send to school, between the boy and the girl child and she often loses out ... they resort to being married because nothing motivates them to come to school after all. There are villages further away; those children have to walk long distances to come here.*

Upon independence, in 1980, education was declared basic human right. To fulfill this right, education was declared free and

compulsory (SACMEQ, 2010). Since then, the Zimbabwean government has adopted various economic blueprints namely the infamous Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) amongst others. Notably, such economic programmes have brought numerous challenges such as impoverishment to most rural households. For instance the cutbacks in education and health sectors under the ESAP period were heavily felt in most rural communities, particularly in sectors such as health and education.

Such challenges have heavily impacted on rural development, employment creation, access to health care and access to primary and secondary education (Mlambo, 2013). Furthermore, the economic meltdown which was experienced in Zimbabwe as from the new millennium in (2000) onwards saw numerous households experiencing high poverty levels. As a result, most teenagers (mostly the girl child) were forced to drop out of school. This phenomenon has been prevalent in most rural communities in Zimbabwe. That is in spite of the fact that the government and donor agencies also introduced a poverty alleviation strategy, the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), to cushion the underprivileged rural school dropouts (Mutasa 2015:156)

What the Burma valley case study reveals is the feminisation of poverty. In most cases the rural girl child has been most affected in comparison to the boy child when it comes to family decisions on who should drop out of school (Mavhunga and Bondai, 2015). Hence, the affected girl child ends up being idle and at times opting to get married as an exit plan.

### **3.6. Child labor, orphan hood and child marriage**

In order to understand why there is a rising trend in child marriages, it is important to examine the role of child labor and orphan hood in transforming the representation of the child as a minor in need of protection from economic and sexual exploitation (Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013) to the girl child's assumption of the breadwinner status at an early age. The assumption of this role in itself, as the study finds, expedites the transition of the girl child from the role of 'child' to that of wife, motherhood and caregiver which are associated with the breadwinner status.

5 of the respondents explained that they met their husbands whilst they were employed as farm laborers.

*"I am working as a coffee picker at the farm; this is where I met my first husband"* (child bride, aged 17).

Another elaborated that:

*"I have been working at Matanuska for the past two years, we work together... we met at the compound"* (child bride, aged 18)

That the scourge of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been felt in most rural areas in most rural areas in Zimbabwe is beyond doubt. Through interaction with representatives from NGO's working in Manicaland, it came to the attention of this study that most families in Mutare rural are child headed. As a result of the death of parents, most surviving children are vulnerable to child labor and child marriage as a way of fending for their siblings. This trend is also witnessed in rural communities such as Burma Valley.

*"Both my parents died of AIDS, which is what my grandmother told me. She was too old to take care of me so I left to work so I could take care of her and myself"* (child bride, aged 18).

Another child bride aged 17 added that,



*“My mother passed away when I was in grade 6, then my father died the following year when I had just begun grade 7, I had to drop out of school and look for work at the farm”.*

Further supporting this line of argument, Gregson et al. (2005) found that there is a correlation between orphan hood, child labor and child marriage. These scholars hold that child marriage amongst orphaned girls could be attributed to poor household situations and constrained access to education. Hallfors et al. (2013) argue that orphan hood in Zimbabwe is accountable for the vulnerabilities to child marriage amongst orphan girls aged 15 to 17.

However, the study notes that the fact that the child brides were already mothers and wives at the time of their employment, this masked off the ‘child’ title thus denying them protection from child labor and sexual exploitation. In the Shona custom, once a girl becomes a wife or mother she is no longer considered as a child, she would have come of age. To be called a wife is associated with prestige and honor (Kambarami, 2006) and so does being called a breadwinner (Mutekwe and Modiba, 2013). This similar to the findings of the Women’s Refugee Commission (2013) which found that young girls got married for honor and prestige. Wifeness and motherhood thus become important markers of adulthood.

To corroborate the nexus between child labor and child marriage, a key informant from Mazonwe Secondary school highlights that “child labor is very common in Burma Valley, it is not called child labor per se, but probably, work for school fees, it does not end there, this is where the young girls mix with other older men and become influenced into sexual behaviours that often result in child marriage” (Teacher, Mazonwe Secondary School).

### **3.7. Shared accommodation facilities, a catalyst for child marriages**

Most farm laborers live with their families in the farm compounds. These farm compounds are usually composed of one bedroom and a small kitchen. Designed during the colonial period when Zimbabwe was still under British rule, these compounds referred to as staff quarters were meant to cater for single male laborers who only made use of the bedroom and small kitchen (Rutherford, 2001). Those who were married had left their families in the rural areas where they visited only once per year. However, with the advent of independence, meant that male laborers could now live with their families in the staff quarters as the white farmers’ feared eviction or victimization. The fact that male laborers brought their families was also an advantage to the farmer in terms of cheap labor and easy accessibility of this labor. Some farmer even built schools at the farms to keep this labor in one place. Some of the children also worked at the farms in return for ‘free education’.

There were unanticipated costs of large families living in the small staff quarters. For example, a family of six would all sleep in the single bedroom, some children under the bed and other on the sides. This resulted in loss of intimate privacy for the parents, with some parents opting “...to do the deed whilst the children slept” (Nurse, Mazonwe Clinic).

As a result, some of the children decide to experiment even when playing games called ‘mahumbwe’ in vernacular where children

would mimic the sexual activities of the parents, one being the father and the other the mother (Key Informant, Simukai).

In a related point, a teacher from Creek Valley Primary school also made a similar comment by highlighting that,

*“When the children hear their parents having sex, they become inquisitive, you see a girl rushing to get married because she also wants to enjoy what her mother and father enjoy during the night, cohabiting with children in the compounds has resulted in a loss of morals”*

A child bride shared that some child brides were victims of sexual abuse by their fathers as a result of living in these shared compounds

*“Sometimes as girls, we are abused by our fathers in the compounds, when he sees that you are now blooming and have breasts, they wait until your mother leaves the house and pretends to ask you to bring water for him. That is where he catches you and sleeps with you in that compound. Sometimes you think it’s better to run away and get married to escape the abuse”*

This narrative indicates that young girls are often the victims of sexual abuse resulting from poor living conditions, hence use child marriage as an escape route from this abuse. Policies and interventions aimed at addressing child marriages should therefore seek to address poor living conditions as a key driver of child marriages to protect the rights of the girl child in farming communities.

## **VII. POLICY ENVIRONMENT**

In an effort to address child marriage and other issues affecting children and adolescents, several policies and programmes have been initiated in Zimbabwe. These policies are meant to ensure that the rights of children and adolescents are protected. If the laws are adequately implemented the human security for girls in Zimbabwe can be enhanced.

### **The Children’s Act (Chapter 5:06) of 2002**

The Children’s Act was enacted to make provision for the protection, welfare and supervision of children and juveniles. Under this Act, the government has established two key institutions, that is,

- In part I A, the Child Welfare Council which seeks to promote and encourage the coordination of the activities of organisations aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of children.
- In part II, establishment of Children’s Courts. Formerly known as the juvenile court, the Children’s court specifically deals with matters relating to children such as sexual abuse of minors, ill treatment of children, children detained for immoral purposes, custody and guardianship.
- Part III section 7, prevention of neglect, mistreatment and exploitation of children and young people. This includes allowing or exposing the child to maltreatment, neglect or exploitation resulting in unnecessary suffering, injury or detriment of the child’s health or morals.

### **The criminal law and codification reform act**

Section 64 protects children from unlawful sexual conduct such as rape and sexual intercourse with a young person. The criminal law and codification reform act defines a young person as a girl or boy below the age of sixteen in section 61. Therefore, section 70 adds further that it is a criminal offence to have consensual sexual intercourse with a young person.

### **Domestic Violence Act**

The Parliament of Zimbabwe has enacted the domestic violence act to protect and provide justice for victims of domestic violence. Domestic violence is defined as any behaviour which results in the death or the direct infliction of physical, sexual or mental injury to the complainant. The Domestic Violence Act includes cultural, religious or any practices that discriminate or degrade the value of women such as child marriage in part 3(1) (IV).

### **Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013**

Children in Zimbabwe enjoy constitutional protection as evidenced by a number of sections specifically devoted to the protection of children's rights particularly protection from child marriages.

- Section 19 holds the state accountable for the protection of children's rights through the adoption of policies and measures that are in the best interest of the child.
- Section 26 clearly states that marriage should only take place with free and full consent of both spouses and that no child shall be pledged into marriage.
- Reinforcing section 26, section 78 elaborates that any person above the age of eighteen has the right to enter into a marriage union and also states that no one should be forced to marry against their will. Thus the minimum age of consent to marriage is 18.
- By so doing, section 81 defines a child as a boy or girl under the age of 18. A child has the right to be treated equally and fairly before the law. In addition, every child has the right to be protected from economic and sexual exploitation, child labor, abuse, neglect and maltreatment.
- Section 56 emphasises on gender equality and nondiscrimination. It states that each person, whether male or female has the right to equal treatment, regardless of age or gender, thus, promoting the rights and socio-economic life chances of female children in a free and equal environment.

### **National gender policy (2017)**

The Ministry of Gender, Women's Affairs and Development formulated a second gender policy in 2017 to address the shortcomings of the first gender policy implemented in 2004. This policy is in line with the African Union Agenda 2063, which seeks to achieve gender equality in all spheres of human life by eradicating gender discrimination in the social, political, cultural and economic spheres of women's lives. It is also in line with the SADC Gender and Development Protocol which Zimbabwe ratified in 2009. Additionally, the National Gender Policy is anchored on the Sustainable Development Goals particularly goal

5 which identifies gender equality as the cornerstone for achieving sustainable and equitable development to the country. The main thrust of this policy is on achieving gender justice, equality, integration, inclusiveness and shared responsibility for the sustainable development of Zimbabwe.

The policy is divided into 10 key thematic areas which include gender based violence, Gender and Economic Empowerment; Gender and Health and Gender, Culture and Region. The gender policy highlights that at least 51, 3% of girls below the age of 19 have been forced into sexual relationships. This percentage also includes girls forced into child marriages which constitutes gender based violence as articulated in the domestic violence act part 3(1). Zimbabwe recognises that gender based violence, in particular violence against women and children remains an obstacle to women and girls' participation in key decision-making and their ability to contribute to the development of the communities and country at large. Therefore efforts to address this problem include;

- Establishment of the Zimbabwe Women's Parliamentary Caucus in 2001 with the objectives of advocating for the rights of women and children, gender equality, facilitating the effective implementation of the national gender policy, the sexual offenses act and the domestic violence act.
- The national gender policy complements efforts of the judicial services commission to provide judicial services and medical support to child survivors of sexual violence and abuse through the revised Protocol on the Multi-sectoral Management of Sexual Violence of 2012.

### **Marriages bill of 2019**

The Marriages bill was implemented in 2019 to repeal the previous marriage acts, the Marriages Act (Chapter 5:11) and the Customary Marriages Act (Chapter 5:04) which were in disharmony with the provisions of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. With respect to child marriages;

- Section 1 (2), the new Marriages Bill states that a child is any person under the age of eighteen in line with section 81(1) of the Constitution.
- Section 3(1) states that no person below the age of eighteen may enter into a marriage contract or civil partnership, whether registered or unregistered customary law.
- More pertinently, section 3(2) explicitly prohibits child marriages. The new Marriages Bill is reinforced by additional legislative instruments which outlaw child marriages. These include the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) and the Domestic Violence Act (Chapter 5:16).

### **Children's amended bill (2017)**

Following the inconsistencies between the Children's Act of 2002 and the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013, the Children's Amended Bill was enacted in 2017 to amend several definitions in the Children's Act. These amendments have extended room for

the protection, promotion and fulfillment of the rights of the girl child in terms of section 81 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe;

- In Section 2AA (1) the amended bill explicitly states that the state is accountable for any matters concerning the child in Zimbabwe.
- Amendment of Section 2 (a) of the children's act which established a child welfare council, to child welfare and rights council.
- Whereas , the Children's Act in Part 1 section 2 had defined a child as any person under sixteen, the Children's Amended Bill under section 2 (a) defines a child as any person under the age of eighteen years.
- Section 2 (b), further specifies that children in need of care include children who are married, are pregnant or have been sexually abused. Whereas, the previous Children's Act was limited to children who had been abandoned, orphaned or whose parents were unfit to exercise care over them and habitual truants or children who cannot be controlled by their parents or guardians.
- The amended bill, under section 2 A part 2 (g) also recognises that every child has responsibilities towards his/her family, community and the state and that these responsibilities are commensurate with their age and ability.
- Section 7 was also amended to include child marriages and cultural practices that are contrary to the interests and rights of the child as acts that constitute maltreatment or neglect of the child.

### **Challenges remaining in policy and law harmonization and implementation**

- Whilst the Children's Act, the national gender policy, the constitution, marriages bill and the Criminal Law and Codification Reform Act have set principles for the protection and promotion of the rights of the child against child marriage, challenges still remain in implementation. Implementation has been obstructed by cultural and religious beliefs, societal norms and values and issues of agency of the girl child .A case in point are the Apostolic Faith's practice of child marriages which lie in parallel with the laws and policies of the country. Difficulties have also been encountered in implementing policies against child marriages amidst the agency of the girl child .During the interviews conducted with the child brides, the paper found that not all child marriages are forced or attributed to religious and cultural practices. Young girls also exercise their agency to get married at an early age for love and affection.
- Whilst the Marriage bill of 2019 and the constitution of Zimbabwe agree that a child is any person under the age of eighteen , the legal age of consent to sexual intercourse still remains at sixteen as stipulated in the Criminal Law, Codification and Reform Act section 61 (1). This inconsistency provides a challenge in ending child marriages in the country as children between the ages of sixteen and eighteen can legally engage in sexual

activities without adequate sexual and reproductive health and rights information. The dire results being unwanted pregnancies which may lead to child marriages. As argued by Khan (2003:9), the contradictions between the Zimbabwean laws and policies increase the rise of child marriages as they create a gap of vulnerability by leaving no solid law to protect children's rights.

- There are inconsistencies within the criminal law and codification and reform act which bring to question if there is partial consent or full consent and which of the two attracts a heavier penalty. In terms of section 64(1), a person who engages in sexual intercourse or other sexual conduct with a young person under the age of twelve shall be guilty of rape or aggravated indecent assault or indecent assault.

A person accused of engaging in sexual intercourse, anal sexual intercourse or other sexual conduct with a young person of or under the age of twelve years shall be charged with rape, aggravated indecent assault or indecent assault, as the case may be, and not with sexual intercourse or performing an indecent act with a young person, or sodomy.

On the other hand , section 64(2) states that a person who has any sexual conduct with a young person above the age of twelve but below the age of fourteen shall be charged with rape unless there is proof that the young person gave consent to the sexual conduct,

A person accused of engaging in sexual intercourse, anal sexual intercourse or other sexual conduct with a young person above the age of twelve years but of or below the age of fourteen years shall be charged with rape, aggravated indecent assault or indecent assault, as the case may be, and not with sexual intercourse or performing an indecent act with a young person or sodomy, unless there is evidence that the young person

(a) was capable of giving consent to the sexual intercourse, anal sexual intercourse or other sexual conduct; and

(b) Gave his or her consent thereto.

Yet section 61(1) defines a young person as a girl or boy under the age of sixteen in section 61(1). Hence the legal age of consent is sixteen.

Such inconsistencies in one act create confusion on the definition of the legal age of consent. Secondly, it brings to question if certain ages, that is below twelve warrant more protection than those between the ages of twelve and fourteen, what of those between fourteen and sixteen? Are they able to consent to marriage and sexual intercourse?

### **I. RECOMMENDATIONS: POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Call to action: advocate for policies and actions the girl child, through;

- The enforcement of legislation that sets the minimum age of consent to sex at eighteen
- Strengthening the voice, agency and decision-making capacity of the girl child. The fact that the girl child is an agent capable of making change can be an agent of change.
- Gender mainstreaming in child protection policies and girls are different. These empower the girl child to become catalysts for

meaningful and lasting change and addressing the problem of child marriages in their communities.

- The provision of migration data needs to be collected. This data should identification and analysis of the vulnerabilities and capacities of migrant men and young girls in the host communities. By interventions aimed at addressing child marriages. This of how the exchange of gender changes the way of life of the girl
- Building the capacity of organizations that work with migrant communities to empower them on the implications of child marriages and its prevention through awareness and advocacy.
- Strengthening of birth and marriage registration systems and the demand for proof of age whether under customary or legal marriage channels.
- Call for legislation that criminalizes child labor to protect the girl child from sexual and economic exploitation.
- Establishment of more schools in Burma valley to ensure access to quality education for girls up to secondary school level

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Several studies on child marriage in Manicaland province have articulated the problem to religion, culture, and poverty and panner culture. However, the Burma valley case presents new dimensions to the key drivers of child migration linked to the proximity to the border, poor accommodation facilities, child labour and illiteracy contribute to the rise in marriage is a violation of the rights of the child and it undermines the country's efforts to achieve sustainable development by the year 2030. Child marriage is a major threat to the human security of young girls across Zimbabwe.

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