

Socio –Cultural Norms and Their Influence on the Practice of Child Marriage. A Case of Rushinga District (Zimbabwe).

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ABSTRACT : The aim of the study was to explore how socio –cultural norms influence the practice of child marriage. A clear understanding of the problem of child marriage is essential to understand the proliferation of the practice in Rushinga District that stands at 50 percent. The theory used to explore the practice is the Social Norms Theory by Bicchaerri (2006). The premise of the theory looks closely at social cultural factors and how they influence the practice of child marriage thus, the practice is embedded in the social structures in the families and communities. For instance, the desirable age of marriage and conformity to practice of child marriage is rooted in community values and social expectations. The study used qualitative case study approach and the advantage is that the empirical inquiry of a phenomenon is done within its real-life context. Of critical importance to this study is that the case study method is particularly suitable for answering questions that start with how, who and why with regard to prevalence of child marriages in communities. The study reveals that child marriage practice is embedded in the social interactions and how communities deal with issues such as poverty. For instance, marriage entails bride price payment which becomes a livelihood option for a family in dire straits. Consequently, child brides' lives are entangled in abusive relationships embedded in the norms surrounding masculinity in families. The panaceas identified in the study end the practice of child marriage include the provision of educational opportunities for girls as well as advocacy and dialoguing with opinion leaders.

KEY TERMS: *child marriage, norms, initiation ceremony.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Much interest has grown over the years on the issues pertaining child marriage as evidenced by a number of studies (for example, Clark, 2004; Nour, 2004; UNICEF, 2013). According to UNICEF (2007) “more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 years were married before their 18th birthday”. In addition, the Health Demographic Survey (2010) posits that “31 percent of the girls in Zimbabwe were married before they reached the age of 18 years and about 15 percent of these girls were married before they reached 15 years”.

In the Zimbabwean context, The Women Parliamentary report in Zimbabwe (2016) identified child marriage as one of the perverse and endemic problems affecting Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the Zimbabwe Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey report (2014) indicates that child marriages cases by province are as follows; Mashonaland Central 50 percent, Mashonaland West 42 percent, Masvingo 39 percent, and Mashonaland East 36 percent, Midlands 31 percent, Manicaland 30 percent, Matabeleland North 27 percent, Harare 19 percent, Matabeleland South 18 percent and Bulawayo 10 percent. Such prevalence has generated interest to undertake further research on the proliferation of child marriage and in particular, Rushinga District with a record of 60 percent incidences of child marriage cases.

In the case of Zimbabwe, literature to date tends to focus on generic causes and educational outcomes of child marriage with little attention to the social and cultural factors triggering the proliferation of the practice. Previous studies, for example, point out that child marriage has been a result of deficiencies in the laws and enforcement, and extreme poverty (Hanzi, 2006; Sibanda, 2011; Nyamadzawo, 2015). A careful analysis of literature reveals that little attention and recognition has been given to understand the social and cultural factors in Rushinga District despite the highest prevalence of 60 percent as indicated by the Women Parliamentary report (2016). National Committee on Traditional Practices in Ethiopia (NCTPE) (1997) notes that studies on child marriage available make an oversight to incorporate the family system, community and traditional practices in exploring the proliferation of child marriage. A clear understanding of the problem of child marriage is essential to bridge the knowledge gap on the proliferation of the practice of child marriage in Rushinga District. The study is unique as it explores the social and cultural context of communities in dealing with the problem of child marriage. It questions how social and cultural practices fuel the practice and subsequently, it

adds another dimension towards the interpretation of the causes and mitigation of the practice of child marriage. Thus, the overall objective of the study is to critically explore the embedded social and cultural norms underpinning the practice of child marriage.

To address the overall objective of the study, the following questions are to be addressed:

1. What is the nature and contest of social norms that promote or discourage marrying off girls in Rushinga District?
2. What is the attitude of the community towards child marriage in Rushinga District?
3. What sorts of interventions, if any, exist or have existed or can be employed to deal with the practice of child marriage?

II. CONCISE LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive analysis of socio-cultural practices such as sexual dalliance, lobola payment, appeasement of spirits, and pledging of girls give a clearer picture of their influence on the practice of child marriage that commoditises and objectifies the girl child. This justifies the argument for the need to understand socio-cultural impetus towards the practice of child marriage. Indeed, social - cultural norm practices are simply a mirror image of factors that are attributed to influence the practice of child marriage, and many of the factors draw a greater deal from socio-cultural influences (NCTPE, 1997). It is imperative to highlight that there has been general and little appreciation of the influence of socio-cultural influence on child marriage, both at global and local context, and yet, they are the casus belli on the practice in many communities. Research has tended to segment the causes without much focus on analysing how socio-cultural factors permeate through a number of factors attributed to the proliferation of child marriage. (Azizi & Meloney, 1985; Chowdhury, 2004).

Marrying off children under the age of 18 years is determined by circumstances that prevail in the family and the community. In Bangladesh, as an example, they have a proverb that says a girl is brought up in family and when the time comes, the girl is handed over in marriage to another family (Azizi & Meloney, 1985). Thus, a girl has no permanent place in her maiden home and subsequently she is expected to be married off and start her own family. The age at which she can be married off can be determined by the suitors to come to ask for her hand in marriage. This makes the girls vulnerable to the practice of child marriage as they are expected to fulfil the family and societal expectations. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, traditional practices such as *chiramu* (sexual dalliance) a practice whereby the husband of a sister or aunt has privileges to play sexual games with young sister or niece causes girls below the age of 18 years sometimes lead girls to be impregnated resulting in child marriage. According to Bulla (2014), for example, in the Shona and Ndebele context, in Zimbabwe, the cultures accommodate the practice of sexual 'games' whereby girls are exposed to sexual socialisation by elderly men through the custom of *chiramu*. This practice involves fondling of a girl's buttocks and breasts without necessarily engaging in sexual intercourse. Such flirtation may lead to pregnancy and when it happens, the perpetrator is forced to marry the impregnated girl.

Coontz (2005) points out that girls are attached to an economic value tag that makes them vulnerable as they become objects of exchange. Girls are attached more value when they are married off at a tender age and they can fetch more rewards for the family in terms of lobola. Thus, girls play productive and reproductive role in the family and the society. Consequently, because of expected gifts, rewards and family loyalty girls often find themselves coerced into marriage below the age of 18 years (Posner & Rasmusen, 1999; UNICEF, 2011). Hence, through the social norms that prevail in the communities that practice child marriage, girls are married off below the age of 18 years because girls are regarded as commodities worth for exchange. Consequently, the preparedness of a girl for marriage is vindicated by the initiation ceremonies that act as litmus paper to establish if the girl is old enough to get married. As an example, Shoko (2006) points out that in Waremba tribe (Zimbabwe), girls are initiated through the *komba* initiation ceremony. When a girl starts to menstruate, normally at the age of 12 years, they are enlisted in an initiation school. At the school, girls are taught how to manage a home; taking care of the husband; children, and sexuality lessons. When the girls have undergone the training, they are declared ready for marriage and a rite of passage ceremony held whereby the girls are paraded for all to see at such ceremony, this is whereby the girls are exposed to the men who will compete on their own coerce the young girl below the age of 18 years into married.

Norms in society have a cultural face that shapes the way people interact in society. Culture entails "habits and values of society that endows human beings with additional extension anatomical apparatus, with protective armour of defences and safeguards and with mobility and speed" (Malinoski, 1931:08). Consequently, such practices are passed on from generation to generation and they shape the behaviours of people in the community. Such norms influence how people value practices that include marriage. It is worth noting that norms provide cumulative a bedrock to support patterns and behaviours in the community that result

in the sustainability of the practices (Darlington, 2001). Child marriage as a traditional practice is self-sustaining because communities condone the practice based on the rewards that come along with the practice (UNICEF, 2015).

Wadesango, et al (2011) further argue that other traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) that involves partial removal of the sensitive genital organs such as the clitoris and excision of labia minora provides a conducive opportunity for child abuse to take place leading to child marriage. UNICEF (2009) further points out that FGM ceremony marks a transitional stage from childhood into adulthood for a girl. Thus, girls are made susceptible to marriage and such initiation rites open flood gates that makes the girls assume adult roles and are coerced into marriage due to societal expectations and pressures. Children Dignity Forum (2008) reports that in Mwanza and Nira regions in Tanzania, at puberty stage usually at the age between 9 and 12 years, the girls undergo FGM ceremony. When a girl undergoes this ceremony, she is regarded as an adult and consequently, she is expected to marry and starts her own family regardless of the fact that she will be under the age of 18 years.

According to Islam (2001) cultural beliefs on sorcery and witchcraft provide a push to marry off girls below the age of 18 years. In a case study of Bangladesh villages, people are frightened by sorcery that uses magic to resurrect evil spirits to harm others. Villagers consult *pir-fakir* (saints) and *jin-sadhak* (devotees of a supernatural being) for spiritual guidance (Islam, 2001; Chowdhury, 2014). Thus, when a man proposes to a girl and the girl or the family refuses to ascend to the proposal, there is a belief among the people that the man might evoke witchcraft that might render the girl unmarriageable in the future. Hence, this forces the family of the girl to marry off their daughter fearing bad omen to happen to the girl later in life.

Wadesango, et al (2011) argue that cultural beliefs and practices hold the community together and are reproduced over time. Practices such as virginity testing have been blamed for sexual abuse of girls and families bargain higher bride price when the girl is a virgin. Moffett (2006) maintains that the practice is done to control the sexuality of girls. It is perpetrated by family structures that place men as heads of household and advocate for the subordination of women through cultural and tribal rituals. Virginity testing is carried in the community by elderly women. In a case study, Chief Makoni in Zimbabwe spearheaded the practice in his jurisdiction where five thousand girls went through the process at Osborne Dam in 2002 and in 2004; four thousand girls went through the same process. This attracted the attention of other chiefs, whereby in 2005; some traditional leaders in Zimbabwe intensified the call for communities to practise virginity testing (Herald, 2005). Similarly, the practice of *ukuhlolwakwezintombi* (virginity testing) in South Africa is practiced in the Zulu communities (Scorgie, 2002). Subsequently, the practice provides an atmosphere that makes the girls vulnerable because in the eyes of the community, these girls will have matured and ready start families.

In Zimbabwe, traditional practices such as *kuzvarira* (pledging of girls into marriage of a girl) whereby a girl child is married off even before birth is one example (Chinyoka, 2011; Matsika, 2013; Guvamombe, 2016). This practice is prevalent where economic problems exist and the child is given away once the family feels that she is capable to perform her duties as a wife especially at puberty stage. Hanzi (2006) identifies another practice called *kuripangozi* (appeasing avenging spirit). The ritual is done to compensate for the death of person who might have been murdered by a family member. In most cases, the belief is that if a wife is not given as compensation, the family and clan might end up experiencing a spell of misfortunes and deaths as the spirit of the aggrieved victim will come to avenge until a girl is pledged. In a milestone research, Inter Press Service (2018) claims that in Honde valley in Zimbabwe, five girls were forced out of school and became wives in 1999 as compensation for the murder of man called Kapesa. The five girls were hand over at the ages between 7 and 15 years to Kapesa family. In a similar incident, Zimbabwe Daily (2017) reported a story that a girl aged 4 years from Hambari family, was pledged to Nyakuriwa family in Sahumani village in Manicaland province. This incident occurred after countless deaths in one Hambari family and it was alleged that it was because of avenging spirits. It is important to understand that the traditional practice of appeasing avenging spirits result in young girl as early as 6 years been pledged to the family of a murdered person and become a wife of the male member of the that family. This suggests that such traditions have fuelled the practice of child marriage and in most cases, some of the transactions are done secretly and family members are sworn to secrecy in fear of unforeseen consequences.

Theoretical framework

The study adopts the social norms theory by Bicchaerri (2006), to examine the patterns of social interactions in the communities that creates conducive atmosphere for the practice of child marriage. The term social norm depicts behaviours and attitudes displayed in the community in relation to the practice of child marriage. Bicchierrri advances that social norms are constructed from the desires and beliefs of individuals in a

reference group. It is through the process of interactions that individuals internalise the social norms that are within their communities.

According to Bicchieri (2006) social norms develop in close knot groups and are internalised cognitively. At the same time, in smaller groups, individual members monitor the behaviour of each other in relation to practices that happen within their society. Consequently, the practice is held in default mode and it can persist over generations and generations and can become a normative behaviour. Deviance from a particular norm is met with sanctions and ostracism from the mainstream society (Sherif, 1936). Subsequently, norm compliance is maintained through sanctions and individual members are expected to make a cost benefit analysis because deviance is met with consequences that are sometimes dire. The checks and balances that are imposed means that people are expected to follow what is regarded as normal within the society, in Ethiopia, as an example, some communities dictates that once a girl loses her virginity or has a child out of wedlock, regardless of age, she is regarded as an adult or woman. Therefore, it forces families to marry off daughters as a means to control and deter girls falling pregnant out of wedlock as well as promoting strengthening families ties (Nguyen & Wodon, 2012).

Mackie, et al (2012) place importance on the role of social norms to sustain and maintain certain behaviours and practices in a community. Such conformity is instilled through social expectations based on the belief that one has over what others do and their expectations (reference groups). Reference groups have a far reaching impact on an individual and their expectations, override individual opinions about certain phenomenon such as child marriage. As an example, among the Waremba people in Zimbabwe, the *Komba* initiation ceremony that denotes the rite of passage is highly rated such that girls are expected to partake as early as 11 years (Shoko, 2012). Such ceremonies mark the transition of girls from childhood into adulthood. Graduates from the intuition schools are regarded as ready for marriage despite the fact that they are below the age of 18 years.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, the researcher used qualitative design approach and instruments to explore the phenomenon of child marriage. The approach provided the researcher with the opportunity to understand people in their natural environment. The use of case study and adoption of semi- structured interviews generated data on the lived experiences of the people about their perceptions, and attitudes about the practice of child marriage using the social – cultural lens. The framework for data collection allowed an interactive contact between the researcher and participants to explore the practice of child marriage through the eyes of the research participants (Snape & Spencer, 2005; Bryman, 2011). Thus, the use of case study provided the researcher with the chance to make an analysis of data and interpretation on the influence of socio-cultural factors towards the practice of child marriage.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The scope of the study was to establish the influence of socio-cultural factors in the proliferation of the practice of child marriage. The discussion centred on the influence of these factors in the practice of marriage off girls below the age of 18 years. Results from the discussion are outlined in the discussion that ensues.

Cultural practices: sexual dalliance and pledging of girls

One of the social cultural impetus in the practice of child marriage lies in the traditional practices and cultural beliefs. People in the community who believe in such practices as *chiramu* (sexual dalliance with sister's husband), *kuzvarira* (betrothal of child before age) or *kuripa ngozi* (pledging of girls to appease avenging spirits) fuel this practice.

Some responses are noted below:

“The other challenge is that the system like chiramu is prevalent and under this act of flirting with young sister of wife result in pregnancies and it promotes Levite marriage, after the death of an aunt or sister.” (Female, 35 years, NGO Officer).

“The other factor that I has seen in our community is the practice of kuzvarira (betrothal of child before age) where parents can betroth their daughter when she is still very young, when she starts to grow and develop around 10 years, the family of the man can claim her leading her to become a wife. In our area we also have churches that are coercing children into marriage, for example, the apostolic sect; children are getting married as early as 12 years.” (Female, 30 years, Teacher).

With regards to participants' responses above, it can be argued that socio-cultural practices in the community create conducive atmosphere that promotes the practice of child marriage. Such views are corroborated in literature review. According to Bulla (2014), African traditional cultures accommodate the practice such as sexual 'games' whereby girls are exposed to sexual socialisation by elderly men through the custom of *chiramu* (sexual dalliance). This practice involves fondling of a girl's buttocks, breasts and private parts without necessarily engaging in sexual intercourse. Such flirtation may lead to sexual intercourse that eventually causes pregnancy and when it happens, the perpetrator is left with no option except to marry the girl.

Low prioritisation and valuing of Girls' education

One social and cultural factor that promotes child marriage is the low prioritisation and valuing of Girls' education. In Rushinga District, the value attached to education and especially for girls', is low. Such a scenario triggers loss of significant role models in the community to motivate girls to remain in school. Consequently, most girls and families do not place any value in education and for the girls; in particular, marriage becomes an alternative as they will be motivated to start their own families. Such response is crucial as it corroborates with literature review whereby lack of critical role models in communities has been attributed to the practice of child marriage.

One participant said,

"I got married because I was impregnated by this man when I was 15 years. I had no option except to elope to him despite the fact that he has a wife. What caused me to be in a relationship with this man was that I come from a very poor family. My parents were not able to fend for us and sending us to school as the total number of my siblings is 9. We had very little at home and this man promised to look after me since I was always in and out of school because my parents were failing to pay for my schooling. It was now an embarrassment to be asked to go home every day due to non-payment of school fees." (Female, 21 years, married off as child).

It can be noted that due to social belief that may exist in the community on the value attached to girls' education, families may choose to remove their girls from school thereby causing the girls to be redundant at home and eventually marry off as an escape route from idleness at home as well as an opportunity to start own family.

Religious Practices

At the same time, the influence of religion precipitates the proliferation of child marriage. This stems from the traditions within some religious sects. During the interviews, participants highlighted religion is a key factor that causes the practice of child marriage. Religion carries a social face and participants during the semi structured interviews highlighted that some sects are permissive to the practice of child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

One participant notes:

"Religion takes a centre stage especially among the apostolic sects; a man can claim a girl from the church. They use various tricks such as saying the girl has been found to be promiscuous, hence, the person who is accused to have defiled the girl is supposed to take her as a wife." (Male, 45 years, NGO Staff member.)

The influence of traditions within the sects reflects the social face on the practice of child marriage as communities become accustomed to the marriage of children below the age of 18 years. As an example, girls between the ages of 12 and 16 years are considered mature and ready for marriage in the apostolic sects (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Stigma, family honour and vulnerabilities

The influences of culture and belief systems are manifested through the family institution. This is a result of societal believes on the issues centred on stigma, honour and vulnerabilities. Persistence and survival of the practice of child marriage emanates from the family system whereby families try to maintain some ties through marriages. Marriage of child becomes permissible in order to maintain family relations.

One participant said,

"Some people are aware of bad practice of child marriage. They will be trying to protect the man who will have impregnated the girl; they conceal the case, because they will be avoiding court cases. This is done to maintain social relationship. Once you make the man arrested, the problem will still remain with family of the girl to look after the baby." (Number 11, female, 40 years, Teacher).

One may comment that the practice of child marriage becomes a communal norm in that people in a community through their reference networks see nothing wrong in the marriage of girls below the age of 18 years. Subsequently, lack of the proper community reporting mechanisms makes the whole process receptive. Families are incentivised to marry off their daughters below the age of 18 years because the intention is to maintain family honour. As such, loss of virginity before marriage is viewed as an act of shame and humiliation. Such views generated during data collection can be corroborated in literature review. In Iran, as an example, marriage of girls is regarded in high esteem because it is a fulfilment of societal expectations and it is a form of identity (Montazeri, et al, 2016). In addition, marriage is given high priority because the provision of dowry and any proposal to marry off a daughter is received with both hands without questioning.

Traditional leaders' role in the practice of child marriage

In line with the socio-cultural norms, traditional leaders who are the gate keepers of the traditions and practices in the community play a significant role in maintaining and survival of the practice of child marriage. Their influence can be enforced through deliberate supporting the practice and sometimes administering of selective justice pertaining to the practice of child marriage. The practice of child marriage is happening in communities of Rushinga District and yet traditional leaders are aware of the practice but to them, it is a normal practice as long as the case is not brought before their traditional courts. Where there is an altercation between the family and man who would have impregnated a girl and is refusing responsibility that is when the case is solved at the court. The man is fined and forced to pay damages.

Participants said that,

"If a man impregnates a girl and refuses responsibility, this is when the case comes to light and the culprit is brought for trial. Normally, the culprit is forced to pay damages in form of cattle. As long as the girl is saying she was not raped the case can be solved at chief's court."(Male, 52 years, Village Head).

"As long as the issue is not reported as a police case or rape, the case can be resolved quietly among the families. If a boy and a girl decide to get married after a pregnancy, there is no problem. In most cases, the family of the girl is afraid that if it reports about the issue, the boy will dump their daughter who is pregnant."(Female, 44 years, village head).

It can be observed that traditional leaders being custodians of the community and gatekeepers, they sometimes deliberately pay a blind eye to the practice of child marriage in the community. For most of traditional leaders, they take the practice as a normal and in line with the way of life of the people in their jurisdiction (Wesley, Perkins & Allan, 2005). Consequently, violation of children's rights may be treated as normative in the community. Some chiefs view marriage as a cultural undertaking and it can happen at any point in life as long as the issue is not brought to their courts and in most cases, the perpetrator is asked to pay fine or to marry the girl in case of pregnancies. High level tolerance of the practice by traditional leaders is an indication of the contradiction in the legal system in Zimbabwe. According to Musiiwa (2016) traditional leaders rely more on Customary Marriage Act that does not stipulate the age of marriage and hence, in most cases because of the need to uphold culture, the traditional chiefs align themselves to Customary Marriage Act, thereby sanctioning the marriage of girls below the age of 18 years.

Intervention strategies to deal with the practice of child marriage

Discussion with community members yielded a number of possible solutions to the problem of child marriage. The proposed intervention strategies zeroed on the family, community and national level to address the socio-cultural factors that create conducive environment in the proliferation of child marriage.

Promotion of girls' education

One of the panaceas to curb the practice of child marriage is the provision of education and opportunities for girls. Such education should be inclusive of guiding and counselling sessions that teaches life skills lessons as well as reproductive health issues to curb incidences of girls falling pregnant while at school and below the age of 18 years.

One participant said,

"My advice is that girls should go to school. Where we live, we have cases of girls who are getting married at a tender age. So, in my case, I counsel my child using the examples of those who married earlier."(Male, 35 years, ordinary member of the community).

It can be commented that an educational policy that encourage girls to stay in school and those who drop out of school because of pregnancies should be accommodated back in the school system after giving birth. Such

policies will encourage girls to continue to be in school instead of becoming child brides when they fall pregnant at a tender age. One such policy that needs to be effectively monitored and implemented in Zimbabwe is P35 Circular that encourages schools to absorb back in class any girl who would have fallen pregnant to return and continue with her education after giving birth (Education Act, 25.4 Amendment 2020).

Provision of better livelihoods for the communities

One other panacea that came out of the discussions during data collection is the provision of better livelihoods for families and communities. To curb the practice of domination and exploitation of girls who married off as children.

One participant said:

So government should come up with a programme to pay school fees for girls whose parents are not able to provide for them. I also say, government should give people hand-outs of food so that poor households can have access to food.” (Female, 32 years, ordinary member of the community).

Concerning the same matter, another participant added on by saying:

“I think I need to mention that the government should stop the so called panning in all set ups because these are our hot spot areas in terms of child marriage. For example, along the Mazoe River, the gold panners entice young girls with money. When girls meet with these panners, because of their poor background, they fall for them, engaging in sexual escapades that may lead to early pregnancies.” (Male, 45 years, NGO officer).

Participants’ views on the provision of better livelihoods provides a clear testimony on the level of vulnerabilities of girls in Rushinga District. This is compounded by poor backgrounds and it is imperative for the government and NGOs operating in the area to support the communities with income generating projects that reduces high levels of vulnerabilities of the girls as well as help families to be self-sustainable thereby curbing the proliferation of the practice of child marriage.

Harmonisation of laws that prohibit the practice of child marriage

Discussions with participants in Rushinga District identified another strategy to deal with problem of child marriage. Participants cited that intervention has to do with harmonisation of laws that meant to prohibit the marriage of girls below the age of 18 years. As it stands, some of the laws contradicts the Constitution of Zimbabwe that outlawed the practice of child marriage in 2013. Such laws include the Customary marriage Act and the Children’s Act.

One participant notes:

“There is a contradiction in the laws of Zimbabwe, recently it was announced that the Constitution outlaws any marriage of anyone below the age of 18 years and yet the customary law is silent on age limit. Worse still, our parliamentarians are doing nothing during their sitting to harmonise the laws.” (Male, 49 years, teacher).

In this regard it can be commented that laws in Zimbabwe should be harmonised along the lines of the constitution. For instance, the customary marriage Act is silent on the age limit to marry while the Children’s Act stipulates that person can be regarded as a child up to the age 16 years and can consent to sexual intimacy at 16 years. Conversely, the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 which is supreme law states that anyone below the age of 18 years is a child and should not get married (Nyamadzawo, 2015; Plan International, 2015; Musiwa, 2018).

Advocacy and empowerment of girls

One emerging remedy to curb the proliferation of child marriage in Rushinga District is to spearhead advocacy activities for the rights of girls as well as empowerment of the girls. Advocacy should target the community at large and in particular dialogue should involve traditional leaders who are the gatekeepers of the traditions in the community. Successively, advocacy through involvement of opinion leaders will ensure that there is prevention, reporting and prosecution of offences that has to do with child marriage.

One participant said,

“There is need to have dialogue meetings with various groups such as traditional leaders, churches and ordinary members in the community. Our entry point is traditional leadership such as chiefs; you will see that if a chief says no to something in the community, that thing cannot be done. Hence, there is need for these meetings to promote awareness because learning is a process; it cannot happen in a fortnight.

Someone can justify self, one may say that my grandmother was married at 14 years and she bore many children but she never contracted any disease like cervical cancer. Dialogue meetings will yield positive results to deal with myths.”(Male, 55 years, teacher).

In this light it can be argued that advocacy and empowerment of the girls through life skills training at school and community level will ensure that community members become aware of the dangers associated with the practice of child marriage. According to Bulla (2014) awareness campaigns are essential to curb the practice of child marriage and the violation of children’s rights. One example, is that of Mberengwa District, where Save the Children (NGO) is training community members at ward level and district level on the rights of children. Consequently, the organisation is educating traditional leaders and ordinary members in the community about children’s rights through the provision of Education Information and Communication (IEC) material targeting harmful traditional practices such as appeasement of spirits and sexual dalliance that lead to the practice of child marriage.

V. CONCLUSION

The primary focus of the study was to examine the influence of socio-cultural factors in the spreading of the practice of child marriage. The views that were generated from the study corroborated with literature review and validation of the theoretical framework on how socio- cultural factors influence the practice of child marriage. Responses from the semi structured interviews justified the claim that socio cultural factors such as pledging of girls, sexual dalliance and appeasement of spirits are key drivers of the practice of child marriage. In addition, the culture of lobola payment has made the practice spiral as some parents get lobola from marrying off daughters as a way of generating a livelihood.

In order to curb the practice of child marriage it is important for the government of Zimbabwe to harmonise the laws such as the Customary Marriage Act, Children Act in line with the constitution so that the inherent contradictions can be ratified. Accordingly, advocacy at family and community level should target harmful traditional practices that fuel the practice of child marriage. At the same time education for girls should be taken seriously and laws such as the Education Act should be enforced to keep the girls in school to escape the noose of child marriage.

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