“Problematizing a ‘Norm ’: A Religio-Cultural Gender Analysis of Child Marriage in the Context of HIV and AIDS

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Abstract

Several studies have been carried out on the influence of the church on traditional marriage practices such as child marriage.² However, few have been able to address the problem of child marriage and its relation to HIV and AIDS from a religio-cultural gendered and ethical perspective. This oversight has to an extent affected the way in which the church has responded to the issue of child marriage. Thus the aim of this article is to bring into dialogue the relationship between child marriage and HIV and AIDS from a religio-cultural gendered and ethical perspective. Qualitative data collected from a study conducted in Zambia from the two towns of the Copperbelt province in the United Church of Zambia was used to arrive at the findings. The phrase ‘problematising a “norm” ’ as used in the title of this article is to highlight that while the practice is regarded as a “norm” in many parts of Zambia, careful and close analysis of the practice shows up the dangers of this practice in a context of HIV.

Introduction

Zambia has 73 different ethnic groups with different traditional practices associated with marriage. Historically, to be married at an adolescent or even at a younger age appeared to be the norm of society. Both the secular and the Christian traditions tended to normalize the marriage of girls at a tender age. In most African societies a girl’s marriageable age was determined by her attainment of puberty. Thus the biological regulatory of the body became the determinant factor for marriage. Girls who got married in their later years were an exception rather than the rule. In most parts of Zambia, as soon as a girl-child is born, the society into which she is born will perform certain rituals that will be focused

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towards preparing her for marriage.\textsuperscript{3} Although there seems to be a paradigm shift to the problem of child marriage in some of our societies today, the problem of child marriage is still prevalent and thus the need to address it as both a norm and a problem.

The objective of this article is to discuss the effects of child marriage in the context of HIV and AIDS. In the first part I provide an overview of my research methods. Thereafter I sketch a brief history of child marriage in Zambia taking into consideration the missionary response to child marriage in the United Church of Zambia (UCZ). The second part focuses on the current context of child marriage in Zambia and the factors influencing child marriage in the country. The third part concentrates on the church’s response to child marriage in the context of HIV and AIDS. In this section I will show the correlation between child marriage and HIV and AIDS. The article concludes with recommendations for how the church can better address the problem of child marriage.

**Methodology**

The information in this article was sourced from literature and primary sources from in-depth interviews and Contextual Bible Study. This empirical research was conducted in two towns of Kitwe and Mufulira in the Copperbelt province of Zambia among the members of the United Church of Zambia. Strydom states, the choice of the problem is directly linked to the particular field in which the inquiry is to be undertaken.\textsuperscript{4} In this case the problem of the church’s perception of child marriage has a strong bearing to the research site because first, traditionally the Copperbelt province is the birth place of the UCZ. Hence the formulation of most of the church’s policies including marriage policy emerged from this province.\textsuperscript{5} Second, the *Zambia Country Report* states that the Copperbelt province is among the provinces with the highest HIV and

\textsuperscript{3}Audrey I. Richards, CHISUNGU: A Girl’s Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia. London: Faber and Faber Limited, (1982), 41-43.


\textsuperscript{5}Peter Bolink, *Towards Church Union in Zambia: A Study of Missionary Co-operation and Church-union Efforts in Central Africa*. Franeker: T. Wever Publishers, (1967). The author also provides a full account of the formation of the UCZ.
AIDS prevalence in the country. Ilana Ron, Wenjuan Wang and Obiko Magvanjav suggest that the Copperbelt province is among the highest in heterosexual infections in Zambia. At the same time, Zambia’s HIV infection is generally influenced by heterosexual sex within marriages. Thus, this site was chosen not only because of its accessibility but its relevance to the problem of child marriage and its relation to HIV and AIDS within the United Church of Zambia.

The ‘interactional’ focus and a focus on people’s experiences made interviews an attractive option for my data collection as it is also in line with the theory that was used in this study which is feminist cultural hermeneutics. A cornerstone of feminist theology, as many scholars have argued, is experience. Therefore, in order to gain access to the girl’s experiences, the use of in-depth interviews proved to be a necessary tool for the study. The sample of this study included 12 girls involved in child marriage, the age group of these girls ranged from 16-19 years (at the time of the interview), even though many of them were married at a much younger age. The purposive and snowball sampling were used as a way of identifying these girls. Discourse analysis proved to be an effective tool in an attempt to understand the silences surrounding issues related to sexuality in African cultures. In this study, some of the girls used proverbs, myths and idioms that were mostly expressed in the form of discourse. As a way of retrieving indigenous knowledge, these discourses that emerged consciously or unconsciously from the participants were treated as a rich form of data that sometimes can be withheld by the participants. As Henning et al. argue:

One way of addressing the problem of discourse is to see the interviewee as someone who does not just give out information but as one who also accounts for information. This means that while she is formulating each and every response she accounts for her position in


society and specifically her position and experience with regard to the research topic.  

This was proved by the way in which some of the girls cautiously provided the information during the interviews by selectively providing that which they could, but at the same time withholding some of the information. Most of the girls avoided questions related to their sexuality in fear of breaking the taboo of silence on sex matters. In some cases the girls tended to provide what I call ‘blurred answers’ disguised ‘with false positives’. As Chitando has argued, sexuality, gender, and poverty in Africa are shrouded in secrecy. It is this secret approach to sex that made the participants to be careful of the kind of answers that they provided to the point that they did not just give out information but accounted for their responses on behalf of the society.

Apart from interviews, Contextual Bible Studies were conducted with 16 men and women composing of ordinary members and church leaders of the UCZ. Nadar defines Contextual Bible Studies as “an interactive study of particular texts in the Bible which brings the perspectives of both the context of the reader and the context of the Bible into dialogue, for the purpose of transformation,” For Nadar, the main focus of Contextual Bible Study is transformation and change. In this study, I opted to use Nadar’s approach to Contextual Bible Study since the main aim is to discuss ways in which there can be transformation and change on the church’s perception to child marriage in the context of HIV and AIDS, using an African feminist approach. Second, the Bible is close to the lives of many Africans as is noted in most of the writing of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Therefore, using the Bible in this study was significant in that the people were using their readily

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13 In most of her studies, Dube has written on the need for women scholars to read the Bible with “ordinary” people especially in the context of HIV and AIDS. Much of this information can be found in Musa W. Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible: Selected Essays*. Scranton: University of Scranton Press, (2008).
available resource to address problems affecting their communities. An emphasis though should be added that Contextual Bible Studies challenges uncritical readings of the Bible that is dominant in most African communities.\(^{14}\) It also allows for a critical reading of the Bible from a particular perspective.\(^{15}\) In order to provide a better analysis of the text, a feminist biblical hermeneutics coupled with a contextual reading of the Bible provided this platform.

The qualitative data collected in this study was analysed using both thematic and discourse analysis. In this article, I adopted feminist cultural hermeneutics as developed by Oduyoye\(^{16}\) and Kanyoro\(^{17}\) as my theoretical framework. This framework provides ‘logic for intervening’ in that it provides a perspective by which traditional marriage practices and the responses of the church can be analysed using a gendered framework. According to Kanyoro feminist cultural hermeneutics is an analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people’s understanding of reality at a particular time and location.\(^{18}\) Phiri and Nadar view feminist cultural hermeneutics as a tool through which both the biblical practices of the culture and the varied cultures extant within Africa are interrogated.\(^{19}\) Kanyoro argues that feminist cultural hermeneutics is a tool which enables women’s voices to be heard and that unless women’s voices are heard, their oppression will continue through power imbalances.\(^{20}\) Further, Phiri and Nadar uphold feminist


\(^{20}\) Kanyoro, Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: 57.
cultural hermeneutics for its current engagement with HIV and AIDS research within the Circle and its commitment to what they call “grassroots” women living in faith communities.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, feminist cultural hermeneutics is also valuable as a tool for examining the Bible from a cultural perspective and for scrutinizing the multi-cultural layers embedded in biblical narratives.\textsuperscript{22}

**Brief Historical Background of Child Marriage**

Nour defines child marriage as a marriage of a child who is below the age of 18.\textsuperscript{23} In most African societies, a girl’s marriageable age was (and still is in some societies) fixed at puberty. This means that society determines the marriageable age for girls on the grounds of the girl's reaching puberty. The link between marriage and puberty indicates that the institution of marriage is associated with reproduction.\textsuperscript{24} In Zambia, like in many other parts of Africa, historically, marriage was arranged by the parents or the guardians of the boy even though in some cases the couple-to-be also had an opportunity to give consent. The boys were married when they were considered old enough to take on family responsibilities. In some instances, the young girls were engaged at a tender age (for some even before they were born) to men who were older than them. Child marriage took on different forms, within different ethnic groups in Zambia.\textsuperscript{25}

According to Coldham, in 1917 Britain enacted the marriage ordinances in the then Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) based on the British colonial African standards. Under these conditions, Africans could marry under customary law but the option of entering into a statutory monogamous marriage was closed to them. Even though African Christian marriages could be celebrated in church, such a blessing had no legal consequences.\textsuperscript{26} This meant that customary laws determined the way

\textsuperscript{21} Phiri and Nadar, “What is in a Name?” 6.
\textsuperscript{25}For more information see Richards, *CHISUNGU: A Girl’s Initiation Ceremony*.
the marriage regulations could be carried out. Coldham further observes that in 1963, marriage ordinances in Zambia were amended. This means that, Africans were now allowed to participate in the statutory marriages governed by the English law, which meant confining to the rules and regulations of the state.27 From the discussions by Coldham, it is evident that the practice of child marriage was in existence in Zambia even before the arrival of the missionaries. Therefore, it can also be argued that the missionaries who formed the UCZ adopted a teaching which normalized a practice which was already in existence.28

“No Girl Leaves School Unmarried”: A Missionary Response to Child Marriage in UCZ

An example of the missionaries’ response to the marriage of girls which is also related to the UCZ mission work in Zambia was that of Mable Shaw Boarding school of the London Missionary Society (LMS) of 1912-1940.29 LMS is one of the missions that merged with other missions to form the UCZ. According to Morrow, African men from the LMS seminaries demanded for women’s education. This demand came initially at least from the educated male youth trainees who were attached to the mission.30

Allen observes that the LMS did not seek to offer the indigenous student a liberal education but rather the main interest was in basic literacy skills.31 Their main reason for asking for girls to be trained was for the men to find wives out of these trained girls. By 1912, the concept of boarding houses for girls under a white female missionary was being mooted. Missionaries advocated a boarding house which would bring

29 Mable Shaw boarding school was one of the most prestigious and well recognised education centres of the LMS in Northern Rhodesia between 1920-1930. Under Mable Shaw as the Principal (1915-40), the school gained an international recognition. See Sean Morrow, “‘No Girl Leaves School Unmarried’: Mable Shaw and the Education of Girls at Mbereshi Northern Rhodesia 1915-40,” The International Journal of African Historical Studies Vol. 19 No 4 (1986): 601-35.
Siwila girls under constant Christian influence and train them for Christian marriage.32

Some of the activities that these girls were involved in at the school included: extra-curricular instruction in hygiene, nursing, and ‘native’ cooking, sewing, and child-care. This was done in order to make the students ‘fit to be the wives of Christian men’. Therefore, the main focus for the girls to be in that school was to be prepared for marriage apart from the little formal education they received. This can be argued on grounds that one of the intentions for the missionaries in Africa was to develop Christian families. Girls from about nine years old would be cared for until marriage.33 A close look at Morrow’s discussions shows that the intention of introducing girls’ boarding schools to prepare girls for marriage may also have been a response of the missionaries to the already existing child marriage practice in the community. The approach used by Mable Shaw reflects a patriarchal view of a girl child as it did not give these girls a chance to make choices whether they wanted to get married or not.

Another important factor to consider is the issue of the elite men and trainee ministers from the Copperbelt province demanding for the girls who would be fit to be the wives of Christian men. Parpart confirms this statement saying, most of the wives of the better educated men in the Copperbelt province were often products of the Mable Shaw boarding school.34 Again, the problem of patriarchy emerges in this case although this time it is coupled with religio-cultural values. Mable Shaw’s idea of preparing girls for marriage without providing some form of education that would equip them for professional jobs is a clear example of a missionary attitude towards women as housewives.35 Looking at the role that the missionaries played in these girls’ lives, it then becomes prudent to investigate how this kind of approach to child marriage affected the way the practice is addressed in Zambia today.

35 Mable Shaw herself is quoted by Morrow to emphasise that these girls needed a basic understanding of the roles of a good housewife by acquiring the required skills. These included cooking, knitting, hygiene, and many other duties as required by the family. For more, see: Morrow, “No Girl Leaves School Unmarried”, 611.
Child Marriage in the Current Context of Zambia

A Country Report on Human Rights Watch asserts that child marriage is still common in Zambia even in the urban areas where the law is supposed to be stricter than in the rural areas. My field research also confirms that this is indeed still practised, as I was able to have access to at least 12 girls who were involved in child marriages. Further, this claim that child marriage is still common in Zambia is supported by the Population Council Child Marriage Briefing report which states that:

Child marriage is widespread in Zambia, even though the legal age of marriage is 21 for both males and females. Customary law and practice discriminate against girls and women with respect to inheritance, property and divorce rights. Domestic violence is a serious problem with over half of the married girls reporting ever experiencing physical violence.  

Literature from Zambia has shown that, both the civil society and the Zambian government have expressed concern on early marriage. Kapambwe in one of the country’s newspapers states that:

Chief Zombe of Mpulungu punished 14 parents who had withdrawn their children from school to force them into early marriage. Child marriage is rampant in Zambia where girls as young as 10-17 years were unceremoniously married to elderly men of 30-40 years for the benefit of the parents. Chief Zombe managed to take back the girls to school under the strict supervision of the teachers and called on the government to urgently intervene in the matter as child marriage retards the development of education in the country.

The problem of parents forcing their girl children into marriage was also confirmed by my field research. The girls interviewed in this study indicated dissatisfaction that either their fathers or uncles played pivotal roles in influencing their marriages. Furthermore, some of the responses to my study indicated that the girls’ marriages were arranged by

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parents, women from the church\(^{39}\) and out of personal choice to the men they were in relationship with. The girls also stated that some of their husbands were church members within their congregations.

When asked on the age difference between their husbands and the girls themselves, all the girls could not disclose the actual age difference. Instead they gave estimates which were also not clear. Despite the lack of providing the actual age difference, all of them were able to confess that their husbands were older than themselves by as much as 12 years.\(^{40}\) The girls also confirmed that some of these men were either divorced or widowed. Asked on the way in which they got married, some girls said that they eloped, while others were married in a traditional way as preferred by the parents. None of them got blessings from the church despite being church members of the UCZ. Most of the girls entered their marriages soon after completion of primary education or they had to stop school earlier or later than primary education level. None of the girls had finished their high school education. The highest standard of education attained in the group was grade ten.

**Factors Influencing Child Marriage**

My interviews with the girls in my study indicated that, there were multiple factors which contributed to the practice of child marriage. Some of the reasons that they mentioned are discussed below:

**Financial Constraints**

When I saw that my parents were really suffering to get my young sisters and brothers back to school plus too much hunger at home I just said in my heart, *apa tebeta lesa tapa fuka ichushi* (meaning that you don’t need to see smoke to know that this is God’s blessing). After much thought I told my mother that I will agree to marry this

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\(^{39}\) If you grew up in the UCZ you will be exposed to women who are mainly middle class and are involved in the marriages of the young couples in the church. Most of them play the role of matron and pre-marital counsellor. Once a young person has found a partner to marry, it is this group of women that the mother will contact for guidance.

\(^{40}\) Culturally, in most of the Zambian ethnic groups, age disclosure is not encouraged especially when a person has to discuss the age of someone older than themselves. This is one of the reasons why these girls could not give a specific age of their partners.
man, maybe he can help my family to come out of all these problems as long as I look after him well.41

This statement was made by one of the girls who was married at fourteen years. This story shows the link between gender oppression and poverty. In this case a mother negotiates with her daughter to enter into a marriage relationship so as to save the rest of the family from poverty. This is what I would call a marriage of convenience, where marriage ceases to be a mutual relationship between two people but rather becomes a source of financial support for the other. To say that this kind of marriage could be God’s intended way to bless the family demeans the image of God to a patriarchal God who uses women as objects of financial liberty in their families. Looking at the problem of poverty, Nour points out that poverty plays a significant role in perpetuating child marriage in Africa.42 Balat and Porto also argue that Zambia is one of the countries in the world with high poverty levels.43 Additionally, a report by UNICEF has also shown that parents encourage their children to marry while they are still young in the hope that marriage will benefit them socially and financially.44 In the context of HIV and AIDS, the Ministry of Health – Zambia reports that there is a synergetic relationship between poverty, and HIV and AIDS.45 Poverty can bring HIV and AIDS, and HIV and AIDS can promote poverty, which also leads to child marriage.

In Zambia, the demand for financial security is also reflected in the way most of the parents behave towards the payment of lobola46 for their girls. In an article from The Post newspaper Chakwe cites Siame who

41 Interviews with a 17-year old girl in Mwaiseni UCZ Kitwe, 9th July 2007. Interviewed by Lilian Siwila
42 Nour, “Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa.”
44 UNICEF, Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional practice, 1.
45 Ministry of Health, “Zambia Demographic Health Survey (DHS) Education Survey”, (2002). http://www.zamstats.gov.zm/nada/ddibrowser/?id=47 (accessed 27/10/2008). This was the first and only survey so far in the country that was designed to provide information on the education of children aged 6-14 years, with a focus on the factors influencing household decisions about the education of the children by the parents.
46 This is a term used in most of the Zambian ethic groups to define the sources paid to the bride’s family after the marriage negotiations. The sources may include cows, hoes, spears, clothing, money, chickens and goats.
Siwila argues that out of desire for financial stability some parents have given out their daughters in exchange for *lobola*. In an *Independent* newspaper article by Peta, a mother confessed to the media of having married off her two daughters aged 11 and 14 years respectively for an amount of K600,000.00 each (equivalent to US$77 as at time of writing) in order to raise money for food and school fees for the other remaining siblings.

**Prevention of Pre-marital Pregnancy and HIV and AIDS**

Besides financial constraints, another reason that is provided for child marriage is protection from HIV and pre-marital pregnancy. The girls who were interviewed in this study stated that traditionally it was a taboo for a girl to have a child outside marriage, even though these taboos are no longer as strict as they were before. The girls stated that both the church and society teach them to abstain from sex outside marriage, and if possible preserve their virginity. As a result of such teachings, the girls stated that if one is pregnant before marriage, it is better to marry than to bring shame on the family. The other point the girls raised on pre-marital sex is that the practice can lead to promiscuity which later leads to HIV infection. Therefore, instead of being infected with HIV, these girls stated that once one feels the desire to start having pre-marital sex, it is better to get married. Asked whether the girls would use condoms to prevent themselves from pre-marital pregnancy and HIV infection, the girls stated that condoms were not recommended for young people who are not yet married as they promote promiscuity.

The need to protect oneself from HIV infection which was mentioned by the girls is also confirmed in a study by Nour who argues that protection from HIV and AIDS is another reason for child marriage. The understanding of these girls and their parents is that sex within marriage is safer than sex outside marriage. A 2005 United Nations Family Planning Association (UNFPA) report also confirms that parents seek to marry their children off in order to protect them from HIV and men too often seek younger women as wives as a way of avoiding HIV infection.

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49 Nour, “Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa”.
The UNFPA report further points out that while parents may consider early marriage as a strategy to safeguard their daughters from HIV infection, the result has often been the opposite.\footnote{UNFPA, “Marriage Fact sheet: State of World Population,” (2005). \url{http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm} (accessed 20/11/2008).}

**Desire for independence**

Some reports and my field research results indicate that the girls themselves have been socialized to desire ‘independence’. Chanda records a story of Maria in the *Times of Zambia* saying:

> Most of my age mates have married and some have children which I greatly admire. They have their homes and are taking care of their husbands. Their parents have enough food because their in-laws help them cultivate the fields.\footnote{Sheila Chanda, “Early Marriage Affecting Girls’ Education,” *The Times of Zambia* (August 11th 2007), 4. \url{http://www.times.co.zm} (accessed 4/11/2007).}

The story of Maria, represents many Zambian girls,\footnote{While early marriage occurs frequently in Zambia, this is not a problem that is unique to Zambia. The United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) 2005, report states that many countries of the world have declared 18 years as the legal age for marriage and yet in these same countries young women have been married as early as 10 years. The report further shows that Zambia is among the few countries that opted for the age of marriage to be 21 for both boys and girls.} who have been socialized to idealize child marriage. Even I felt this way when I was growing up as marrying early seemed to be ‘a societal norm’. While this ‘desire for independence’ may seem to come from the girls themselves, often the girls are also forced by negative circumstances surrounding their lives as is indicated in the following story shared by one of my research participants.

> After the death of my parents, I thought that marriage would be a better option. My aunt always saw me as an extra burden and fought hard to find a man to marry me. Since he was a Christian and old enough to be my father I agreed to this proposal so that I could come out of my aunt’s abuse, even though I was afraid of having sex with him since I was a virgin. However I was happy again because my aunt arranged bana chimbusa\footnote{This is a group of women who teach the roles of a good housewife to girls intending to get married. The presence of these women as married counsellors has remained as an on-going tension between the Marriage Guidance Committee of the church and the parents of the girls who intend to get married.} to teach me how to handle a man. When I
went into the marriage it was hell...mmm having sex was very painful. I used to cry every night but he didn't care. I couldn't tell my aunt because I was told even before marriage that I will have to be strong sexually. The women had told me that it was good for our marriage if I went in as a virgin because it meant that my husband would not go for other girls. They also told me that I should be courageous – *Mwanakashi ta chepa* (a woman is never too young for a man). A tight woman is a pleasure to her husband. We had two children within a space of three years and then trouble began. He started beating me and calling me all sorts of names. He often told me that I was too childish and that I could not be compared to his late wife. He always threatened to divorce and constantly reminded me that I was an orphan so I needed him as my family.54

From this story, we can also conclude there is a social moral decay that denies the orphans a sense of belonging to a family structure. The traditional teaching on marriage has also played a role in influencing child marriage.

In addition to the factors stated above, responses from Contextual Bible Studies also indicated first the correlation between child marriage and the redeeming of a man’s sexuality and masculinity. The Contextual Bible Study was based on 1 Kings 1:1-4.

The participants argued that even though the intentions found in this text may differ from what is happening today, most men are still led by beliefs that a younger bride will help energise their sexual drive. Most of the participants argued that the young virgin Abishag was organised for the king in order to help energise his sexual drive because the king was too old to remain sexually active. The phrase which the participants used to describe how they understood the role of Abishag was *keeping the king warm*. In this discussion the men related how most of the men prefer young girls to *keep them warm* through tight vaginas and their energetic movements. This enhances their sexuality and their sense of manhood. The women understood this phrase to mean that the king needed to be *kept warm* because he was losing his *sexual vibe* and therefore he needed a young girl to revive him. The women identified that this is also the case with many men even today, hence the common practice of child marriage. What I can conclude from the discussions

54 Interviews with a girl from Jordan UCZ, Date 4th July 2007. At the time of interviews, this girl was three months old in the new marriage. The girl said her new marriage was better than the previous marriage despite the fact that her husband was still older than her by a big margin. Interviewed by Lilian Siwila.
which emerged during the course of the Contextual Bible Studies is that masculinity and sexuality have also been contributing factors to child marriage.

Second was the way the Bible is used to justify the practice of child marriage using stories such as 1Kings 1:1-4 and the book of Esther. The third factor which was identified in the Bible Study is the setting of the constitution in Zambia. Zambia has a dual system namely, the customary law and the statutory law. Most of the customary marriages are controlled by the local courts. Coldham states that the local courts are the successor of the native courts which the British set up in Zambia to administer impartiality just like in other British colonies in Africa. These were re-named after independence as local courts. They were later integrated into the judiciary system of the country because it was recognized that the local courts had a very important role to play in the administration of justice especially in the rural areas. Since most of the customary courts do not have the stipulated age limit of marriage, young girls fall prey to these marriages once they reach puberty. Thus women are highly disadvantaged under these customary laws.

Having established the factors which contribute to the practice of child marriage in the current context, it becomes evident that indeed there is a link between child marriage and HIV, thereby establishing that child marriages are a threat especially when practiced in the context of HIV.

**The Church’s Response to Child Marriage in the Context of HIV and AIDS**

A study by Mukuka and Slonim-Nevo has found out that in Zambia, the church claims that HIV and AIDS is a moral issue and the best way to prevent it is to promote fidelity in marriage. Hence, theologians researching in the area of HIV, most notably, those who belong to the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle), have

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55 One woman in the Bible Study related an incident in a kitchen party celebration where a lady preaching from the book of Esther encouraged young ladies to marry older men so that they can live like ‘Queens’. In most church settings in Zambia, elderly women use this opportunity to teach the girls who are getting married some Zambian traditional and biblical principles of marriage.


challenged the Church in Africa to critically examine the institution of marriage in the context of HIV and AIDS.\(^{58}\) Chitando argues that, in the wake of HIV and AIDS, we see that African cultures are heavily implicated in the HIV and AIDS pandemic especially with regard to women. This has come as a challenge for African churches to re-think their defensive attitudes towards African cultures, as it is no longer possible to adopt an uncritical attitude towards African cultures in the face of the pandemic.\(^{59}\) According to the responses from my field research, the church’s response to child marriage was seen to be ambiguous. Although the UCZ is responding to child marriage when disciplining these girls, from a gendered perspective, the church’s response was seen to be inappropriate because instead of dealing with the cause of child marriage and its harmful effects on girl children, the church was seen as focusing on the symptoms, which is imposing punishment on the girls and sometimes leaving out the men involved with these girls. The Church viewed child marriage from a narrowly moral perspective, by punishing only the girl child. However these girls also justified the practice through desperation from an economic and practical perspective – “I know Jesus understands why I did what I did.” Therefore while the girls know that they are outside the church’s approval, they are also aware that they are not outside God’s grace.

**Correlation between HIV and Child Marriage**

Even though I’m scared of AIDS I know God was with me in that marriage because I never forgot my faith. I used to pray to God to help me and protect me from this disease when this man started sleeping out.\(^{60}\)

The girl who relates this story above is the same person who related how she was being sexually abused by her older husband whom she married to escape the hardships of living as an orphan with an abusive aunt. The abuse that she endured as a child bride and her fear of contracting HIV due to her age and to the fact that her husband was


\(^{60}\) Interviews with a girl from Jordan UCZ, Date 4\(^{th}\) July 2007 conducted by Lilian Siwila. This is the same girl whose story above talks about the abusive husband.
sleeping around clearly demonstrate the risks of HIV to which child marriage exposes young girls. The first risk is due to the fact that usually these older men (like the one in the story above), have already had sexual partners who have died. Given that Zambia has a high prevalence of AIDS-related deaths, there is a possibility that partners of the young girls’ husbands may have died from AIDS, thus exposing their new younger wives to the virus as well.

The second risk is caused by the bruising that young girls experience during the act of intercourse. This phenomenon is likely to be more pronounced in child marriage where girls, who in most cases are virgins, are married to men who are older than they are. The third risk that is evident from the above story is that young girls are not able to negotiate for safe sex because of the power dynamics which exist between an older man and a younger girl, the latter being called ‘childish’ as we have seen above.

Oke argues that while the above clearly indicates that child marriage puts girls at risk of HIV, in this study, most of the girls themselves were unable to make this link. For them, as long as they kept themselves away from promiscuity, they thought they were likely to remain protected from HIV infection. This point was substantiated by their belief that God would protect them from the virus if they remain faithful to God and to their marriage partners. These girls claimed that it would be unfair of God to punish them for a sin they did not commit.

One of the girls commented:

Awe ba aunt chiku pulungu fye bwino teti amalwele akukonke, nga fyaisa ninshi lesa asuminisha otherwise kupepa fye nokuchetakela muli Lesa pakuti ale kuchingilila translated as … No aunt (meaning me as the researcher) as long as you look after yourself well this sickness cannot come on you. If it comes then God has allowed it otherwise you just need to pray and have faith in God to protect you.

A small percentage of the group of the girls interviewed was fortunately able to see the correlation between HIV infection and men’s unfaithfulness in marriage. What these girls asserted was that if a man is unfaithful then he can bring the virus into the marriage and if he is faithful then the marriage is safe. The argument from these girls was that sex in their marriages was determined by the man. Their lack of


62 Interview with a girl from Mindolo UCZ 3rd July 2007 Interviewed by Lilian Siwila.
power to negotiate for safe sex made them fully dependent on their husbands’ safety from HIV infection. Asked if they speak to their spouses about being faithful, the girls claimed that they try to talk to their spouses about the danger of HIV and AIDS even though their husbands would always opt for what is best for themselves and not the wives.63

Asked whether they could use condoms to protect themselves, most of the girls did not approve of the condoms either for HIV protection or procreation as condom use in marriage was seen to bring mistrust between the partners. One girl commented:

It’s not good for a married woman to use condoms unless both of you agree and have been advised by the doctor. Besides, most of our men do not like condoms or family planning pills because they think you do not want to be pregnant and you are cheating on them.64

Besides the evidence presented by the girls in the field research findings, other studies have also shown that child marriage is a contributing factor to the spread of HIV. For example, the Population Council report states that in Kenya and Zambia, HIV prevalence was 48-68 percent higher among married girls than single girls of the same age. The report also confirmed that child marriage puts the girls who are married at increased risk of HIV infection compared to unmarried sexually active girls. This is because married girls have sex more often and in most cases unprotected sex with men who are older than them and their lack of power to negotiate safe sex with these men who may be HIV positive, places them at increased risk.65

A further response by Laga et al state, the conditions of girls’ sexual lives in these marriages place them at a danger of contracting HIV and developing AIDS. The risk of HIV acquisition increases even further during the act of sex in which vaginal or cervical trauma occurs, a

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64 Interview with a girl from Mwaiseni UCZ Kitwe, date 6th July 2007, Interviewed by Lilian Siwila.


phenomenon more likely when virgin girls are having sex with older men, as discussed above. I wish to highlight that through field research and through various literature cited in this study, I have shown that there is indeed a direct link between child marriage and HIV. Child marriages expose young girls to a greater risk of contracting the virus.

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that child marriage as a practice has been eschewed by the UCZ in many ways. In today’s society, child marriage carries socio-economic, political, religio-cultural dimensions that cannot be seen outside of the role of gender. In Zambia most of the literature on child marriage has been on the agenda of many non-governmental organizations and the press, as we have seen. Despite all this, evidence from studies conducted and my field research has shown that the UCZ has not been able to fully engage itself in the discussion of child marriage. The findings of my research show that there is interconnectedness in the way factors that influence child marriage present themselves to each other in their performance thus creating a vicious circle. For example, my research showed that most of the parents who marry their children early are under pressure of poverty, culture, fear of pre-marital pregnancy, HIV infection and eventually illiteracy, and ignorance of the state laws. Therefore, the UCZ intervention will require a holistic approach which will allow the church to develop a theology with “a newspaper in one hand and a bible in the other hand.”

The other issue emerged from my research is the continued belief that marriage is a final destiny for the girls. According to Oduyoye, idealization of marriage results in early marriage that deprives women of education and training for economic skills as they are passed directly from the authority of the father to that of the husband. The girl then has no opportunity to face the challenges that demand decision-making and

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she becomes dependent on others for direction.\textsuperscript{68} In response to these factors, it is imperative to show that child marriage is an unjust and unlawful practice that needs to be discouraged by the church. Sanctioning such a practice will only further the abuse of women in the church. One way in which this can be done is to revise the UCZ constitution on the section on marriage in order to allocate a clause that will protect these girls.

\textbf{Bibliography}


