



## The plight of education and child, early and forced marriages and unions in rural Binga

**Andrew Pasipanodya**

Kuyenda Rural Youth Collective, Binga

Girls' plight in accessing basic education is exacerbated by the increasing rates of child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) in the rural communities of Binga. Child marriages are any formal or informal marriages and unions of children under 18 years of age. CEFMU is rooted in patriarchal tendencies and cultural practices that fuel gender inequality. At a socio-economic level, poverty is a significant driver of child marriages and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the cases have spiked. Another cause is ineffective legal protection laws that render strong provisions but weak implementation. The effects of CEFMU deprive the child brides from accessing their rights to education, health, safety, and participation. Girls are at risk of sexual and gender-based violence, complications during pregnancy and childbirth, and dropping out of school as it presents barriers to study and increasing illiteracy rates. The policies and frameworks stipulate that education is a fundamental human right. Zimbabwe is a signatory to instruments and formulated and adopted policies that promote equal access to education and denounce child unions. Still, the implementation process has been poor in rural areas.

Cultural practices rooted in patriarchal tendencies of male domination are core to child marriages in Binga. The BaTonga culture is rooted in self-respect, submissiveness, and respect for boys by girls at tender ages in the name of molding a socially acceptable future wife for someone. Through these stereotypes, girls are nurtured to become wives and often they do not develop a sense of self-value. The cultural practices entrenched in gender inequality increase the vulnerability of women and girls causing risks of domestic violence, psychological and sexual violence, and sexually transmitted infections. Women are child marriage accomplices in Binga because if a married woman is barren or falls sick, the younger sister regardless of age, is forced into the union to save her sister's marriage. Failure to do so, results in a divorce and the woman is stereotyped and labeled by society. Thus, marriage is more about adhering to and conforming to the cultural norms and values of their tribe where abuse and violence are inevitable. Customary laws and traditional values ignore the role of formal education to empower girls because of society's norm to perpetuate child marriages and unions without facing any accountability issues.



The ineffective child protection policies and weak institutions fail to deal with CEFMU perpetuating sexual and gender-based violence. The Constitution of Zimbabwe 2013, Chapter 2 Section 19 stipulates that children must have access to appropriate education and training and the state must take legislative measures to curb the risks that affect their wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. Children cannot give consent on issues of marriage and sex. In rural Binga, girls are married off at a young age because of the practice of customary law in Tonga culture called Kutuminwa. BaTonga communities allow a man to identify and pay a dowry for a juvenile as wife-to-be once she finishes secondary education. A mutual arrangement of marriage is made between the prospective husband's family and that of the girl child so that as she grows, everyone in the community knows she is someone's future wife. Statutory law states that no marriage is entered in without free and full consent and no child should be married under the age of 18 although parents and communities initiate premature unions of young girls for economic benefits<sup>2</sup>. Girls lack inspiration and mentorship to complete their education because their fate will be foretold. Thus, there should be the amendment of laws to align customary laws to the statutory laws and draw penalties for infringement of these laws. This will improve the attainment of tangible education outcomes as girls will stay in school.

Poverty is an agent of CEFMU in Binga. Hunger and starvation negatively impact the education of the girl child. Some parents in rural areas of Binga do not have the financial capacity to take their children to school. Girls are married off to assist the family's economic situation. UNICEF (2022) states that more girls drop out of school before they attain

an ordinary level of education due to poverty and teenage pregnancy which lead to early marriages<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, this is the dire situation in Binga. Parents prioritize boys' education and there is no adequate gender-sensitive infrastructure in schools. Plan International (2016), states that girls from the poorest 20% of households are four times more likely to end up in a union or early marriage before reaching the age of 18<sup>4</sup>. This validates that poverty drives CEFMU in Zimbabwe and poverty-stricken areas like the Binga rural areas. Access to education in rural Binga is hindered by poverty as parents lack income or funding to take their children to school.

The plight of education and child marriages in the rural areas of Binga is increasing despite efforts by the government and civil sectors to improve access and inclusive education. The provision of education financing for students in rural Binga is improving the attainment of education by girls reducing child marriages. The government program Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) provides funding assistance to orphans and vulnerable children. The program rolled out in Binga has been supporting students in schools Binga High School, Binga Primary School, Donga Primary School, Manjolo High School and Samende Primary. The provision of fees has lessened the burden on parents funding provided for their children. The impact is significant as some girls are staying in school avoiding the child marriages plight.

The growing synergies between the government and civil society organizations (CSO) in supporting girls' education are crucial to advancing tangible education outcomes for girls. The CSOs are playing a crucial role in keeping girls in school and eliminating

<sup>1</sup>Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013

<sup>2</sup>Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act, Chapter 2 Section 26

<sup>3</sup>UNICEF (2021) Zimbabwe Country Programme 2022-26

<sup>4</sup>Plan International (2016) Policy Brief: Ending Child Marriages in Zimbabwe: Gaps and Opportunities in Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

child marriages. There has been an increase in the demand for education as student-to-teacher ratios are very high. The CSOs are initiating the construction of learning infrastructure and the building of new schools. In 2018, Action Aid constructed new classrooms and revamped the infrastructure at Njobola Primary School and Sinamusanga Secondary School<sup>5</sup>. Akashinga Programme is investing in education by reconstructing schools and supporting students with funding and learning resources. Sizemba Secondary School classroom blocks and infrastructure were reconstructed and about 200 students were provided with scholarships, uniforms and stationery<sup>6</sup>. The Roman Catholic assisted in the construction of Katete Primary School in Ward 25 Binga. The construction of schools exposed the lack of qualified teachers in the district. The funding and newly constructed schools help in curbing early marriages as girls are being given opportunities to resume their education. However, the shortage of qualified teachers leaves children unmonitored and lacking mentorship and motivation to pursue tangible learning outcomes. The government should help in recruiting more qualified teachers in the satellite schools to improve education outcomes and help eliminate early child marriages as girls will stay in school.

The Campaign for Female Education piloted by CAMFED Zimbabwe provides financial assistance to girls for tuition fees stationery, sanitary wear, and uniforms<sup>7</sup>. Infrastructure development projects are seeing the construction of boarding schools in rural areas through the Zimbabwe Girls Secondary Education Project (ZGSE). The number of schools in the Binga district has increased and most girls are enrolling in school. As an objective, Binga district aims to achieve gender parity in secondary education ensuring girls' retention in and completion of secondary school. The Ministry of Education under the OPEC Fund for International Development constructed Kokoloza Primary Schools in Binga District and the enrolment of students increase from about 400 students to 619 students in 2021<sup>8</sup>. The increase in enrolment is crucial in retention of girls to schools improving their access to education and preventing the prevalence of CEFMU practices in Binga which impacts girls education.

## Recommendations

1. Institutionalize gender-responsive mechanisms in Binga District to support girls' rights.
2. Enhance access to education finance by increasing the Gross Domestic Product for the education sector and increasing the budget allocation of funds for education.
3. Establish skills development centers and pilot income-generating projects for youth and child brides to improve self-sustainability.
4. Community engagement and raising awareness on the effects of early child marriages in Binga.
5. Legal reforms should effectively implement laws that protect girls and child brides.

## Conclusion

The article underpins the importance of education in eliminating child early forced, marriages and unions and education in rural communities of Binga. Addressing child marriages and forced unions is crucial to understanding its enablers and takes a collective effort of all including the communities. The focus should be placed on educating the communities about the customary laws and rules that affect girls' development and support stereotypes and inequality placing girls at the mercy of boys. Inconsistent legal frameworks create obstacles in enforcing effective laws against child marriage. Thus, policies and frameworks are without implementation, affecting the delivery of justice and impeding the rights of children, particularly girls when they are forced into unions. Rural girls face challenges that affect their learning outcomes and lead to the plight of abuse, child early forced marriages, and unions risking their well-being. The legal reforms need to have an effective mechanism that puts to trial perpetrators of child marriages. More effort needs to be put into tackling child marriage issues. Access to quality and equitable education should be made accessible for girls and education financing mechanisms should be introduced to keep girls in school.

<sup>5</sup> Action Aid (2018)

<sup>6</sup> Foundation gives Binga a facelift (2023) <https://www.herald.co.zw/foundation-gives-binga-school-a-facelift/#:~:text=The%20Akashinga%20programme%20of%20the,for%20the%202023%20enrolled%20pupils.> [Accessed 7 March 2024]

<sup>7</sup> Muntanga W, Kapoka J.S (2021), Establishment of Satellite Schools is it a Blessing or it's a Curse. A Case of Binga District in Zimbabwe

<sup>8</sup> New state of the art school for Lusulu area, (2021) <https://www.chronicle.co.zw/new-state-of-the-art-school-for-lusulu-area/> [Accessed on 7 March 2024]