



Interplay of Covid-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) in rural Zimbabwe:

Urging the Government of Zimbabwe and its Civic Society partners to sustain social accountability in addressing CEFM during acute and recovery phases of COVID-19.

By Tariro Youth Development Trust (TYDT), supported by the Canadian Embassy (Zimbabwe)

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Introduction

The contagious Covid-19 is a multidimensional phenomenon and an existential crisis in 2021.¹ The pandemic has far-reaching and long-term effects on the adolescent girls who are exposed to Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM).² Globally, well-founded evidence revealed that, 1 in 5 girls are married under the age of 18 years.³ In the Zimbabwean context, about 34% of girls are married before the age of 18 years whilst 5% is married before the 15th birthday.⁴ Major causes for CEFM are wide-ranging, however, projections stated that, numbers are intensifying because of the surging Covid-19 pandemic⁵.

At the core of the growing statistical figures are alarming fears on the possible gross subversion of girl child's rights, welfare and security. Their Vulnerability is worse when exposed to heightened risks of CEFM which may lead to unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions and maternal complications, including obstetric fistulas (vaginal and anal ruptures). CEFM also exposes girls to all other forms of violence against girls (VAG) and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) – including HIV and AIDS, and are at risk of chronic anaemia and obesity.⁶

This brief analyses the projections of Covid-19 on CEFM in Zimbabwe's countryside. Ideally, though rural areas are not the 'hot spots' of Covid-19, they are equally exposed to direct and indirect multi-layered impacts of the pandemic. Statistics extracted from the Zimbabwe Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2019) showed the following:

1. 5% of girls are married before 15 (Urban: 2% vs. Rural: 21%)
2. 34% married before 18 (Urban 8% vs. Rural 44%).⁷

¹ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/world-bank-response-covid-19-protect-and-investpeople?CID+WBW+AL+BlogNotification+EN+EXT>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/26/france-children-left-limbo-despite-covid-19>.

³ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/>

⁴ https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/2536/file/Zimbabwe%202019%20MICS%20Survey%20Findings%20Report-31012020_English.pdf (accessed September 2020).

⁵ <https://www.wilpf.org.uk/covid-19-impact-series-zimbabwe/>

⁶ Girls Not Brides (2018). Child Marriage and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.

⁷ https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/2536/file/Zimbabwe%202019%20MICS%20Survey%20Findings%20Report-31012020_English.pdf (accessed September 2020).

Statistical expressions indicate that, CEFM are rampant in the rural areas compared to growth points, towns and metropolitan cities. Practices of CEFM is a common harmful social practice which used in coping and adapting to rapid onset disasters like droughts and Covid-19 alike.⁸

The shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic on CEFM in rural Zimbabwe

Anecdotal data on the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 and in compliance with WHO standards triggered the Zimbabwean government to abruptly respond with stringent measures. Unfortunately, the government's fast-paced responses during the crisis were concerned on containing its spreading through total lockdown - which closed businesses and restricted non-essential movement. Though the efforts were good health security for all, they however, violated other critical human rights particularly girls' and women's rights.⁹ Increased poverty, and food insecurities drove some vulnerable families to cope by sending their girls into CEFM.

The human rights watchdogs lamented the government's blind eye on critical issues like CEFM during the Covid-19 outbreak.¹⁰ Growing fears are that, girl's rights and reproductive health in remote and marginalized rural areas will continue going uncontrolled.¹¹ To make matters worse, the girls in CEFM are subjected to intensifying incidences of sexual violence, yet with limited or no avenues for receiving help.¹²

The government implemented Covid-19 management model failed to make context specific vulnerability assessments on vulnerable girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Needless to say, the government overlooked the girl's SRHR in CEFM amongst the disconnected rural poor. As a result, the designed and implemented model to control the fast spreading pandemic proved to have dire consequences on girl's welfare and rights in the rural areas.¹³ A blind eye to this issue is disproportionately affecting their dreams, vision and potential than other social categories.

More so, government is reluctant to protect the girl's rights during the Covid-19 despite its registered blueprint interest. For example, the government of Zimbabwe committed itself to the Human rights, Agenda 2030's SGDs, a part to the Maputo Protocol, among others. On the Maputo Protocol, the continental policy instructs all member states to inclusively safeguard women and girls' rights before, during and after disasters. However, the 'one size fit all' approach by the government is not following the agreements, neither is it honouring the rights of girls and CEFM during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Covid-19 and data on CEFM during Covid-19

In Zimbabwe and other Lower Income Countries (LICs), CEFM is a common institutionalised cultural practice in poor rural communities.¹⁴ Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 outbreak, many cases happening

⁸ CEFM are indirectly influenced by Covid-19 impacts.

⁹ <https://zdhr.uz.ac.zw/xmlui/handle/123456789/1735>.

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19-and-childrens-rights-0>

¹¹ CARE, COVID-19's gender implications examined in policy brief from CARE, 2020.

¹² <https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/building-back-resilience-rural-women-after-covid-19>.

¹³ https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/world-bank-response-covid-19-protect-and-investpeople?CID+WBW_AL_BlogNotification_EN_EXT

¹⁴ https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/covid-19-will-hit-poor-hardest-heres-what-we-can-do-about-it?CID=WBW_AL_BlogNotification_EN_EXT.

are not reported due to restricted travelling measures. Absence of research and reported records is feared to influence accelerated CEFM cases. The limited capacity for further research and monitoring is living a grey area on the Covid-19 and CEFM.¹⁵

Albeit the ensuing challenges, projections pointed out the possible accelerated trends of CEFM. The inferences to this assertion are based on existing sociocultural parameters and Covid-19 which are juxtaposed with other observed historical trends of reacting to disasters. For instance, the school closures and stay-at-home induced by the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa have opened floodgates for child marriages.¹⁶ Staying at home has fast-tracked CEFM and resulted in a lot of school drop-outs. Likewise, inferences in Zimbabwe foretell doubled or trebled CEFM outbreak due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

CEFM nexus girls' rights

Globally, it is estimated that 1.5 billion children in 188 countries are out of school due to Covid-19 induced closures.¹⁷ The numbers are expected to exponentially double due to the evolving trends of the novel pandemic. The noticeable and growing fears are that, this wave is going to turn lives and rights of women and girls in rural areas upside down.¹⁸ Consequently, these incidents are creating deep-seated impacts on the rights, welfare and security of girls in disadvantaged families and communities. The tragedies and deprivation are grossly impacting on the set targets by the Agenda 2030's SDGs. The most affected areas are the girl's (i) education, (ii) human rights, and (iii) Gender inequality.¹⁹

(i) Education

The Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent closure of schools during the 'lockdown' is negatively affecting school going girls in rural Zimbabwe. School closure in observance of Covid-19 safety regulations is influencing poor households, families and communities to embrace CEFM as a coping strategy.²⁰ Furthermore, girls who used to depend on schools for food are exposed to severe hunger and undernourishment at home - most households are food insecure due to perennial droughts caused by climate change, *inter alia*.²¹ In responding to dire food insecurity, some employ marrying-off under aged girls for survival.

Marrying-off school going girls is condemned and considered perilous on girls' future and as well as national development.²² At national levels, these cultural practices are projected to cost LICs trillions of dollars by the year 2030.²³ The money is lost through the non-returning investments made in education and

¹⁵ https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/tracing-covid-19s-impact-households-across-world?CID=WBW_AL_BlogNotification_EN_EXT

¹⁶ Fraser, E., "Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls," 2020, DFID.

¹⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/who-we-are/news/coronavirus-covid19>.

¹⁸ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/march-21-2020-end-week-update-focus-covid-19>.

¹⁹ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/List-of-useful-resources-child-marriage-humanitarian-crises1.pdf?>

²⁰ <https://www.wilpf.org.uk/covid-19-impact-series-zimbabwe/>

²¹ McLeod, C., Barr, H. and Rall, K. (2018). Does climate change increase the risk of child marriage? A look at what we know— and what we don't—with lessons from Bangladesh and Mozambique. Columbia journal of gender and law.

²² <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/908481507403754670/Annual-Report-2017-WBG.pdf>

²³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>

the health care provisions for young girls who are not yet due for safe child delivery. On another note, dropping out of school will grossly cost many nations the needed human capital which guarantee the potential of economic, human rights and human development.

(ii) Human rights

Girl's rights are global issue which is considered as a binding moral and legal contract in humanity.²⁴ The human rights watchdogs and active Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) lamented that the 'lockdown' is negatively impacting on girl's rights in rural areas.²⁵ Through the CEFM, girls in rural areas are losing the following rights;

- (1) The right to education – losing education hamper their vision, dreams and potential unlike their male counterparts or other girls who are not trapped into CEFM.
- (2) Right to SRHR – getting married at tender age negatively affect their access and freedom to consent to sex, enjoy and exercise safer sex, *inter alia*.
- (3) Children's rights – in CEFM girls lose their rights to protection, security and autonomy like other children elsewhere.

Apart from experiencing infringed rights, girls will also experience other unavoidable sufferings in CEFM. The Girls Not Brides and UN Women noted the following dangers awaiting girls in CEFM;

- (i) Risk of falling into increased sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) because of their culturally assigned domestic roles.
- (ii) Losing access to critical services and amenities like information, social protection and safety.
- (iii) Loss of health security since they become mothers before being biologically and psychologically fit for them to be well and delivering healthy babies.

(iii) Gender equality

During the Covid-19 outbreak, CEFM are anticipated to intensify gender imbalances between girls and boys – this will carry over to adulthood. Girls in poor rural households are the worst victims to experience gender inequalities from the tender age. Growing religious and strong cultural inclinations are perpetuating gender insensitive beliefs and practices which consider girls as men's resources. The conversion/transformation of girls into disposable assets during disasters greatly disadvantage them compared to boys. Gender insensitive practices like CEFM will continue to drown girls – up to adulthood – in serious deprivation, marginality and rejection.

Conclusion

CEFM is on the increase due to Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown in Zimbabwe's countryside. CEFM is also accelerated by the already existing perennial challenges such as acute food insecurities, cultural inclinations and insensitive religious beliefs. Coping and adapting to multiplying challenges during the pandemic is devastatingly infringing girls' rights to education, health, SRHR, autonomy and dignity. Unfortunately, the potential of getting help from the government is far-fetched due to the absence of political goodwill. As a result, girls from poor households in rural areas will continue to be victims of CEFM during the evolving trends of Covid-19.

²⁴ https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/september-21-2020-covid-19-response-new-research-human-capital-and-looking-ahead_ourannual?CID=WBW_AL_BlogNotification_ENEXT.

²⁵ <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/9/e003760>

Recommendations

1. The government should recognize CEFM as a critical gender issue in its COVID-19 response and recovery plans, policies and strategies – not just an afterthought. Therefore, COVID-19 responses should be grounded on gender and social inclusion analysis so that the policies and strategies do not reproduce or perpetuate harmful gender norms and social practices, including CEFM.
2. CSOs should be given conducive environment and legal frameworks so that they operate in safeguarding the rights of the adolescent girls during the time of crisis.
3. The Government and its Civic Society partners should prioritize economic support to the low-income rural communities to build their resilience to shocks and stresses caused by COVID-19. This will help vulnerable families to meet their social basic necessities without resorting to CEFM as a coping mechanism.
4. The government should support distance education in remote or rural areas, including Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), and support girls in rural areas and those living with disabilities to remove barriers in accessing online education. When schools safely reopen, girls – including ‘child brides’ – should be supported to return and continue learning.
5. Access to SRHR should be recognized as essential in COVID-19 response plans, and remove barriers to access. This can be done through, for example, mobile/remote SRHR service provision and village level community resource centres, among others.
6. The government should enforce laws against CEFM, as stated in the constitution, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children in Africa (ACRWCA) and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, among others.
7. The government, donors and active CSOs should finance and conduct researches on the dynamic impacts of known and unknown disasters on CEFM. Through this way, they must develop, in a participatory and inclusive manner, a framework that addresses CEFM in emergency settings and/or mainstream CEFM in existing Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery (DRRR) policies and strategies.
8. Instead of solely focusing on mitigating CEFM, the government and CSOs should provide care and support to child brides. Child brides are the most vulnerable to Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), health, economic and social challenges. They have different needs to those who are unmarried and include access to informal and formal education and access to health care services, including emergency obstetric care, antenatal, child birth and postnatal care.

Tariro Youth Development Trust is a youth-led organization that advances the rights of young people and gender equality in Zimbabwe.

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