



# Canada

## **Tariro Youth Development Trust's intervention in reducing child marriages amongst vulnerable girls during acute and recovering phases of COVID-19 in Zaka District.**

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### **Executive summary**

Child marriage, commonly referred to as child, early and forced marriage or union (CEFM/CEFMU), is a traditional practice common in Zaka district and Zimbabwe at large. This practice is used by poor resourced girls and their households as a safety net in responding to idiosyncratic and systemic disasters. The unexpected strike by the novel and dreaded COVID-19 pandemic increased moral panic and fear on the possible doubling of CEFM cases. The fears were increased following the government's disregarding of CEFM as an 'essential' component in the fast-paced 'total and partial national lockdown' on COVID-19 pandemic reactionary strategies. The only hope and potential of interventions on ending CEFM was left in the hands of the civil society. Therefore, this study evaluated the contribution of [Tariro Youth Development Trust](#) (TYDT), funded by the Canadian Embassy through Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), in reducing CEFM amongst the vulnerable girls during the acute and recovery phases of COVID-19 in Zaka district. In gathering data, a qualitative paradigm was used where, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant observations were operationalized. The study discovered that, the state didn't consider CEFM as an 'essential' human security issue. As a reaction to cover for this anomaly, TYDT's triple tier intervention of livelihoods interventions (poultry production and ISALs), behaviour change approach (BCA) and advocacy were of paramount importance in empowerment of the vulnerable girls to reduce resorting to CEFM as a survival strategy. The interventions are anticipated to deliver long term benefits in reducing the aftermath of COVID-19 and CEFM. Lastly, the study recommends the need for partnerships between the state and civil society in disaster risk management (DRM) strategies, policy and national strategic planning in reducing CEFM practice in the future.

Key words: COVID-19, CEFM/U, disasters, vulnerability.

## 1.0 Introduction

Child marriage is an ancient practice which is feared that, it will evolve beyond 21<sup>st</sup> century if drastic measures to end the vice are not taken in low income countries (LICs). According to the Girls Not Brides (GNB, 2020), child marriage which is transitionally referred to as Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) or Child, Early and Forced Marriage & Unions (CEFMU) is astronomically increasing in LICs due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the UNFPA (2020), also buttressed the same sentiments by expressing that this disaster in combination with poverty are anticipated to push an additional 13 million children into CEFM.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, research has proved that, the intensity of CEFM is also amplified by the complex interplay of the ‘known and unknown’ disasters which hit hard societies with rigid, erosive cultural and religious inclinations.<sup>3</sup>

CEFM causes undesirable and complex problems with foreseeable violent short and long term risks and hazards to young girls, pubescent and those already in marriage.<sup>4</sup> The risks and hazards transcend a wide spectrum of the girl child’s health security, gender equality, socioeconomic potentials and human rights. Rapid attempts to reduce CEFM cases in design and practice are ongoing amongst governments, development practitioners, civil society and other concerned stakeholders. Unfortunately, the efforts are facing gradual slowdown and backsliding trends due to complex factors – emergence of unknown disasters, lack of resources, lack of political will, strong cultural and religious affiliation and none reporting of cases, *inter alia*.

Based on this background, this paper explores the contribution of Tariro Youth Development Trust<sup>5</sup> (TYDT)’s CEFM interventions, to reduce CEFM during acute and recovery phases of COVID-19, funded by the Canadian Embassy through the Canada Fund for Local Initiative (CFLI). Firstly, the paper examines the prevalence of CEFMU in Zaka district before and during the time of COVID-19. Herein, it tracks down the impact of these factors’ uncharacteristic influence on the surging of CEFMU during COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Secondly, the paper identifies and interrogates the various interventions which are being implemented by TYDT in reducing CEFM cases. The following three interventions are to be examined:

- (a) Livelihood support – Exploring the livelihood strategy/ies being implemented to empower girls in the selected wards of the district. Also, it discusses how the projects are being managed at the same time revealing some possible challenges encountered as well as strategies of circumventing them.

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<sup>1</sup> Girls Not Brides. COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriages: An Agenda for Action. (2020). (Accessed 04 May 2021: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/covid-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage-an-agenda-for-action/>)

<sup>2</sup> UNFPA. 2020. Ending Child Marriages in the Philippines. (Accessed May 04, 2021: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNFPA\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Child\\_Marriage\\_%282020-01-24%29.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNFPA_Policy_Brief_Child_Marriage_%282020-01-24%29.pdf))

<sup>3</sup> Natalia Kanem (2019) The battle for sexual and reproductive health and rights for all, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 27:1, 323-325.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch (2020). COVID-19 and Children’s Rights. (Accessed, 04 May, 2021: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19-and-childrens-rights>).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.tydt.org>

- (b) Behavioural Change Approach (BCA) – By reflecting on practical and informative activities which are undertaken in influencing behaviour change amongst all people in relation to CEFM.
- (c) Advocacy – Exploring various engagement processes which are underway in advocating for policies on girl child’s rights and health wellbeing on CEFM during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Thirdly, the paper identifies the dangers and experiences of girls in CEFM. On this note, all the harmful effects are going to be discussed in the rights-based (RBA) context. Specifically, girls’ rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are to be examined in the context of SDGs and other domestic, regional and other international legal instruments. Fourth and lastly, the paper round-up by discussing community-based suggestions on ways of reducing CEFM practice in Zaka district during COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards.

## 2.0 Understanding CEFM/U

Child marriage in the modern legal discourses is understood as a marital union which is undertaken with people below the age of 18 years – in most cases girls are the victims of CEFMU and usually married by older people.<sup>6</sup> Ideally, 18 years is a common benchmark which determines a person’s minority and majority status.<sup>7</sup> CEFMU cannot be defined using a unidirectional conceptualization. Its complex nature in both form and processes makes it to be explained in wide and encompassing approaches. In the current child marriage/s discourses, the form and processes were coalesced into Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) and in some cases it’s referred to as Child, Early and Forced Union (CEFMU).<sup>8</sup> The crosscutting coding embraced a harmonizing terminology which include all diverse practices and processes which leads to voluntary and involuntary child marriages.

CEFM is a harmful social practice which has been in existence since time immemorial around the world particularly in LICs. The habitual CEFM practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is devastatingly denting efforts on girls’ enjoyment of total human rights.<sup>9</sup> The worst victims of CEFM are the young girls and women who are/were married through these processes. CEFM practice is considered a harmful practice in the RBA domain. Pushing under aged girls into early marriages signal gross rights deprivation, grievous physiological harm and disruptive psychological disorders.<sup>10</sup> Clinical

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<sup>6</sup> Thornton, C. P., & Veenema, T. G. (2015). Children seeking refuge: A review of the escalating humanitarian crisis of child sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS in Latin America. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, 26, 432–442. doi:10.1016/j.jana.2015.01.002

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2021. It’s Not Normal” Sexual Exploitation, Harassment and Abuse in Secondary Schools in Senegal <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/10/18/its-not-normal/sexual-exploitation-harassment-and-abuse-secondary-schools-senegal#bba72f> (accessed March 2021).

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF. Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world. (<https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage> (accessed March 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Girls Not Brides. 2020. COVID-19 and ADOLESCENT GIRLS: Ensuring the U.S. Government’s Response Prioritizes the Needs of Needs of Child Brides and Girls at Risk of Child Marriage. (<https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GNBUSA-COVID-19-Policy-Brief> -Accessed May, 2021)

<sup>10</sup>Natalia Kanem (2019). The battle for sexual and reproductive health and rights for all, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 27:1, 323-325.

psychologists and medical practitioners discovered that, majority of girls or women married before reaching maturity age of 18 years usually suffer from serious cognitive deficits up to their old ages. In summation, the selected and listed below deprivations are considered as critical in CEFM domain:

- (i) Denied right to education – most girls who are pushed into CEFMU are denied their opportunity to access basic education. Such deprivation thwarts their potential to engage in better modern economic fortunes in the future when compared to other girls' counterparts who have continued with their education.
- (ii) Denied right to access SRHR – such deprivation is multi-dimensional and perilous to the general welfare of the girl child in CEFMU. They are exposed to high risks of external and internal sexual genitalia damage, unplanned pregnancies, unsafe abortions and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS.
- (iii) Denied children's rights and those of all other women – CEFM deprives girls the chance to enjoy rights to be protected as children, enjoying freedoms and choices and welfare. Like other women, their sexual engagement should be based on safeguarded consent, voluntary choices into motherhood and given the balanced platform to accessing SRHR information and to make informed preferences.

In responding to the increasing incidences of CEFM in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, governments, policy makers, planners and development practitioners are putting long standing efforts in reducing surging incidences of this practice. Practically, the supra-national institutions – UNICEF, UNHR and other gender based institutions like the [Girls Not Brides](#) (GNB) and the Canadian Embassy through Canada Fund for Local Initiative (CFLI), – and other local institutions are engaged in rigorous interventions targeting to end CEFM.

To date, the interventions which have been implemented are mainly pinned on empowerment of the vulnerable communities so that they do not turn to marrying-off under aged girls as the alternative coping strategy to disasters and poverty. Anecdotal evidence has thus showed that CEFMU can be reduced if practitioners integrate diverse empowerment approaches and the vulnerable people's available assets and capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the integration of intervention approaches is rated as the seedbed for bolstering empowerment trajectories designed for reducing incidences of CEFM. In lieu of this, a study by Girls Centre (2017) reflected that the integration of empowerment approaches have yielded positive results in South East Asia.<sup>12</sup> The projects and their outcomes dovetailed all the socioeconomic problems which have been directly and indirectly influencing the CEFM practice. Albeit empowerment interventions being praised, there is a strong need to carefully document and evaluate their contribution in both short term and long term intervals.

### **3.0 Normative trends of CEFM in Zaka district and Zimbabwe**

Like elsewhere, CEFM is a common social practice in the Zimbabwean context. In Zaka district, statistical estimations highlighted that approximately 23.4% of the girls in that area are married

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<sup>11</sup> Kalamar, M. A. SusanLee-Rife M. Hindin M. J. 2016. Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage among Young People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Published and Gray Literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Elsevier.

<sup>12</sup> Chae, S. Ngo T. D. 2017. The Global State of Evidence on Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage. GIRL Center Research Brief No. 1 ([https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY\\_GIRLCenterResearchBrief\\_01.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY_GIRLCenterResearchBrief_01.pdf). Accessed May, 2021).

before reaching 18 years (MICS).<sup>13</sup> With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, increased depression and anxiety gripped human rights practitioners and other concerned stakeholders in anticipation that the CEFM cases could drastically multiply. The bases for this anticipation was fuelled by high degrees of poverty which are deeply entrenched in people of Zaka district's socioeconomic livelihoods. For example, more than 69.6% of the people in the rural parts of the district live below poverty datum line (PICES, 2017).<sup>14</sup> Due to vulnerability to poverty and other intermittent disasters, marrying-off girls has been a fast-paced habitual practice of coping and adapting in Zaka and Zimbabwe at large.

At national level, practices of CEFM are common but vary from place to place due to different cultural beliefs, poverty levels and different stages of development.<sup>15</sup> For example, CEFM case are prevalent in rural areas as compared to better developed metropolitan centres, towns and growth points. The MICS (2019) statistics showed that approximately 40% of 20-24 women in rural Zimbabwe were married before reaching the age of 18 years compared to 19% of urban women. Albeit advances in industrial growth, technology and education in urban centres of Zimbabwe, cases of CEFM are not correspondingly diminishing as anticipated in the countryside. A research by the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS, 2019) showed that 34% of girls in Zimbabwe got into marriage before reaching 18 years of age whilst 5% do so before reaching 15 years. (ibid). These statistics shows a negatively skewed trend when compared to 2% of boys who got married before reaching 18 years. The direct implications are that severe poverty in remote and undeveloped rural areas increases girls' vulnerability to CEFM.

In observing the adversities associated with the consequences of CEFM, the Zimbabwean government in partnership with other regional and international stakeholders are making numerous strides towards ending the practice.<sup>16</sup> Critical amongst the blue print efforts is the Gender Policy which officially recognize the need for sceptical attention on men and women issues so as to avoid treating them as a homogenous group.<sup>17</sup> In the context of rights-based-approach (RBA), the government fully acknowledged and accepted to act as the 'principal duty bearer' in safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of the girl child. The government and its functionaries are obliged to guarantee citizens (herein referred to rights holders) their rights through various strategies such as policy making, strategic planning, sponsoring and monitoring *inter alia*. On this issue, human rights activists, pressure groups and civil society are urging the government through goodwill to create a conducive environment for all stakeholders which will work as a springboard for reducing CEFM.

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<sup>13</sup> Zimbabwe Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019  
[https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/2536/file/Zimbabwe%202019%20MICS%20Survey%20Findings%20Report-31012020\\_English.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/2536/file/Zimbabwe%202019%20MICS%20Survey%20Findings%20Report-31012020_English.pdf) (accessed September 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Alwang, J. R. 2017. Child Poverty in Zimbabwe: An Analysis Using the Poverty Income Consumption Expenditures (PICES). (<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/101991?show=full>. Accessed, May 2021).

<sup>15</sup> The Zimbabwean, Give us books not husbands,[website], 2014, <http://www.thezimbabwean.co/2014/08/give-us-books-not-husbands/> (accessed January 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Government of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Voluntary National Review (VNR) of SDGs For the High-Level Political Forum, 2017, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/15866Zimbabwe.pdf> (accessed January 2020).

<sup>17</sup> UNDP Zimbabwe, New National Gender Policy is Launched, [website], 2017, <http://www.zw.undp.org/content/zimbabwe/en/home/presscenter/articles/2017/07/06/milestone-as-new-national-gender-policy-is-launched0.html> (accessed January 2020).

Practically, the Zimbabwean government has made some notable moves of reducing and protecting girls from CEFMU. To date, apart from the 2013 Constitution, it has ratified and participated in various regional and international agreements, acts and laws which calls for the protection of girls from child marriages. The following are the selected efforts that have been made so far;

1. Zimbabwe's commitment on Agenda 2030's SDGs – the government committed itself in ending CEFM as articulated by Target 5.3 of SDG Goal 5. Being a party to the SDGs, the government promised to ensure vibrant partnerships (SDGs Goal 17) with other 'moral duty bearers' in ending CEFMU – including all committed non-state actors.
2. Adoption of Constitutional Court ruling in law – In 2016, the Zimbabwean Constitutional Court outlawed marriage/s for children under the age of 18 years. The court ruling was guided by the word 'child' which practically refers to all people under the age of 18 years. As a result, the government adopted the ruling and it is working to protect rights, interests and wellbeing of the girls from CEFM.
3. Signing a Human Rights Council (HRC) Joint statement on ending child marriage – in 2014, the Zimbabwean government participated and signed the joint statement made by the HRC which encouraged all member states to expedite programs and projects of ending all forms of CEFM.
4. Adopting the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriages in Africa – Zimbabwean government was amongst the parties that ratified the agreements made at the AU campaign. The adoption of the campaign agreements subsequently influenced it to develop a [National Action Plan and Communication Strategy on Ending Child Marriage](#). The strategic plan set targets and responsibilities on action to be taken as well as the opening of communication lines in all efforts of ending CEFM.
5. Ratifying the Convention on the Rights of a Child (1990) – in 1990, the government signed as a party which consider 18 years as the benchmark for one to become a major. Automatically, marriages or related unions before 18 years becomes illegal and lead to voidable marital contracts. Interestingly, the CRC's provisions simultaneously correspond with those of the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which accords women power for free and full consent to marriage.<sup>18</sup> In accordance with these ratified conventions, the state embraced the duty to make sure that all women get into marriages through their choice not by duress or default.

Albeit all the good and promising efforts by the government against CEFM, positive results are still yet to be realised in Zimbabwe. The success of the state's efforts in fighting CEFMU in many contexts are based on support and cooperation from 'moral duty bearers'.<sup>19</sup> The moral duty bearers are praised for filling the void and ineptness of the state through injection of funding, technology, human capital and expertise. The moral duty bearers are classified into three categories which are presented in Table 1 below.

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<sup>18</sup> UN CEDAW, Sixth periodic report submitted by Zimbabwe under article 18 of the Convention, CEDAW/C/ZWE/6, 2019, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fZWE%2f6&Lang=en](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fZWE%2f6&Lang=en) (accessed January 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Ljungman, C. M. 2004. Applying a Rights-Based Approach to Development: Concepts and Principles, Conference Paper: The Winners and Losers from Rights-Based Approaches to Development. P. 6.

**Table 1 – Moral duty bearers**

Name	Description
Primary duty bearers	Parents, teachers, nurses and doctors alike – they should work with government in primary and secondary socialisation of children in fighting CEFM/U. Medical practitioners should also educate all people on health risks and hazards of child marriage.
Secondary duty bearers	Institutions and organisations with power and influence over primary duty bearers – community organisations, hospitals, clinics, and schools <i>inter alia</i> . These organisations should cooperate with parents and take the role to educate and disseminated information on children’s rights and dangers of child marriage.
Tertiary duty bearers	NGOs and Donors among others – these are institutions of higher influence and would help local communities with financial resources, education and confronting the government in cases of where it is acting or lack of transparency and accountability on CEFMU programs and projects.
External duty bearers	Countries, supra-international institutions – they include institutions such as United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, World Bank, World Trade Organisation <i>inter alia</i> . These institutions are critical in designing and programming CEFM reaction strategies, financing the programs and assisting both the governments and all other three moral duty bearers in ending CEFM.

Source: Ljungman, 2004.

The vibrant partnerships between the principal duty bearer (the government) and the moral duty bearers (non-state actors) is hailed as the *summum bonum* for fast tracked ending of CEFMU across the world. In balancing the possibilities, cooperation in interventions is considered the best option for achieving positive outcomes. At the core of interventions, locally or community led empowerment projects are considered as the best prescription.

#### **4.0 Youth empowerment and interventions against CEFM**

Youth empowerment have varied intervention processes aimed at boosting their constrained diverse livelihood options and capacities in attempts to reduce their vulnerability to CEFM.<sup>20</sup> Empowerment interventions are usually initiated, funded and facilitated by governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) – including both civil society organisations (CSOs) and community based organisations (CBOs). In the discourse of youth empowerment design and programming, the Girl Centre (2017) popularized three common empowerment interventions strategies which are suitable for implementation by both local and international institutions which are namely;<sup>21</sup>

1. Single intervention – Usually comprises of a single component or project offered to the beneficiaries. In most cases, these are targeted programs or projects which are earmarked

<sup>20</sup> Unnatibl. 2019. What is Youth Empowerment? and What is importance? (<https://medium.com/@unnatibl123/what-is-youth-empowerment-and-what-is-importance-ec3415b1c865> -accessed January 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Chae, S. Ngo T. D. 2017. The Global State of Evidence on Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage. GIRL Center Research Brief No. 1 ([https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY\\_GIRLCenterResearchBrief\\_01.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY_GIRLCenterResearchBrief_01.pdf). Accessed May, 2021).

to empower the embattled youth and their households or families in order to reduce chances of embracing CEFM as a coping strategy.

2. Single Intervention with multiple components – this means single interventions but offering diverse and sometimes complimentary empowering youth-led projects. In this instance, TYDT’s triple-tier interventions of poultry production, advocacy and Behaviour Change Approach (BCA) is a good representation of single intervention with multiple components.
3. Multiple component interventions – these include diverse players and wide ranging interventions strategies though they have the same anticipated outcomes.

In the interventions, there is injection of financial capital, technical expertise, ideas and reconciliatory timeous advice on management of various processes of the programs.<sup>22</sup> Under the empowerment process, the youth are consulted and engaged in inclusive participation hence making them to determine their destiny in the development projects. Inclusion and engagement needs to be underscored since they boost the levels of confidence which are brought about by the sense of belonging and ownership.<sup>23</sup> Ideally, adoption of youth-led empowerment initiatives is professionally appraised for reducing backsliding and foot dragging in program participation. Empowerment entails being accorded acceptable and sustainable capacity and autonomy of participating in locally meaningful projects/programs which improve their daily livelihoods. Indeed, voluntary participation of the youth yields more successful results because of the sense of inclusion which drive them to determine the pace, space and the direction of the projects.<sup>24</sup> Evidence based research has proved that, elsewhere, empowerment through youth-led projects has helped majority to withstand shocks and stresses triggered by both ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ disasters.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from reducing vulnerability to CEFM, empowerment interventions have other positive benefits to the youth’s livelihoods and rights. According to the United Nations, development intervention benchmarks and youth-led empowerment are plausible because they guarantee the following unmatched benefits;<sup>26</sup>

- (a) Crime reduction – the youth who are always not engaged in productive and empowering activities have propensity of participating in criminal activities. On the contrary, if they are actively engaged in productive activities, they would spend most of their time concentrating on their responsibilities and set targets.
- (b) Poverty reduction – vibrant empowerment programs reduces the youth’s vulnerability to poverty. The benefits from the projects allows them to access and afford livelihood

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<sup>22</sup> Ollura, J. J. (2017, June). Youth-led programs: Embracing Youth as Change Agents. Athens, OH: Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs at Ohio University. [https://mha.ohio.gov/Portals/0/assets/SchoolsAndCommunities/Educators/SSHS/2017/PPT-Youth-Led-Programs\\_Collura.pdf](https://mha.ohio.gov/Portals/0/assets/SchoolsAndCommunities/Educators/SSHS/2017/PPT-Youth-Led-Programs_Collura.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO. 2013. Youth Forum. 15 Action Projects receive the 8th UNESCO Youth Forum label. ([www.unesco.org/.../15-youth-led-action-projects](http://www.unesco.org/.../15-youth-led-action-projects) - accessed May 2021).

<sup>24</sup> UNNATI. 2020. Youth Empowerment Services ([www.unnatibl.org](http://www.unnatibl.org)- assessed January 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Youth Empowerment Solutions. 2021. YES for Healthy Relationships (<https://yes.sph.umich.edu/programs/yes-healthy-relationships/> - accessed January 2021).

<sup>26</sup> UNESCO. 2013. Youth Forum. 15 Action Projects receive the 8th UNESCO Youth Forum label. ([www.unesco.org/.../15-youth-led-action-projects](http://www.unesco.org/.../15-youth-led-action-projects) - accessed May 2021).

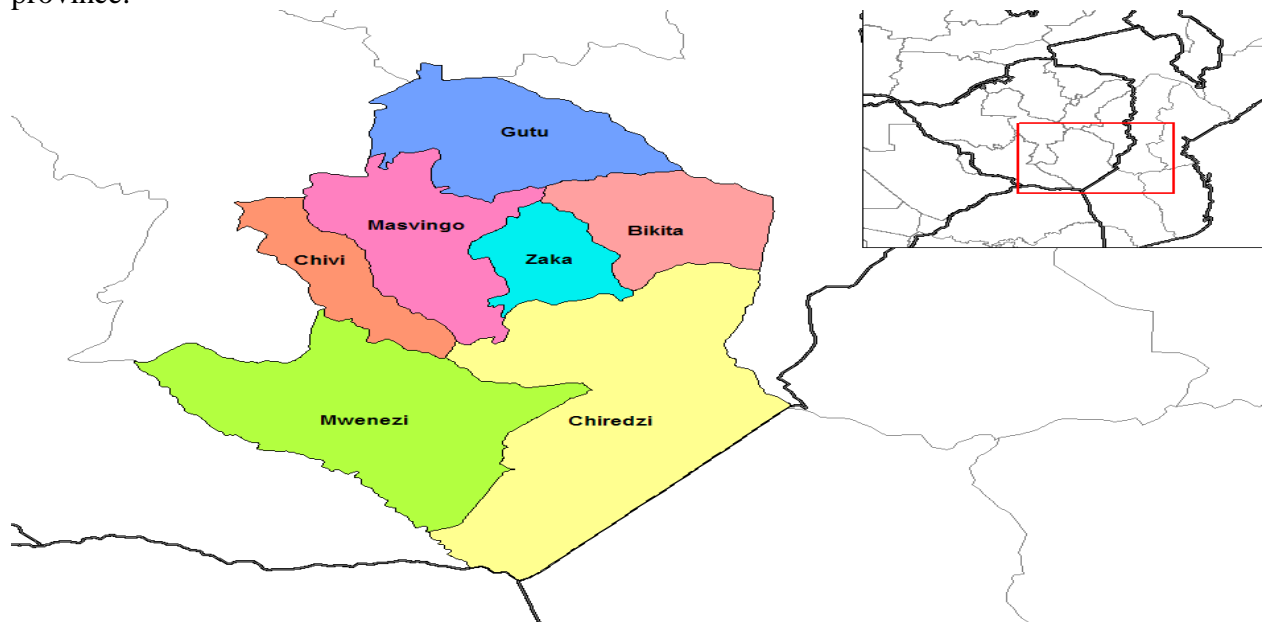
essentials hence improving their wellbeing. In other cases, this allows girls to pursue others options rather than seeing marriage as the solution to their suffering.

- (c) Better standard of living – the success of the projects accords them better living standards through accessing of all desired livelihood basics as well as giving them chance for autonomous choices and preferences. The livelihood chances would be enjoyed outside unions like marriages.
- (d) Good education standard – engaging in youth-led projects are paramount since they offer them ‘soft skills training’. Through the trainings, the youth are inducted into self-sustaining livelihood skills which will determine their organized future.

Therefore, full operationalization of youth-led interventions is regarded as the panacea of reducing CEFM amongst poor resourced households and families. Thus, broadening livelihood chances and choices are rated as breakthrough strategies of reducing harmful CEFM. Societies with increasing CEFM cases are symptomatic of underdevelopment and continued backwardness.

### 5.0 Study cite

Zaka is amongst the seven administrative districts found in Masvingo province. Figure 1 below shows the position of Zaka district in adjacent to other districts on the map of Masvingo as a province.



**Figure 1: Location of Zaka district in Masvingo Province. Source – Google map.**

According to Population Census (2012), 54.1 % is the child population drawn from 181 301 people living in Zaka district. The district is predominantly rural and the urban area constitutes 0.1%. Geographically, the other part of the district lies in agro-ecological region IV which receives less than 450 mm of rain per annum. As a result of domiciling in the rural areas, the main livelihood strategy there is based on rain-fed subsistent farming. The ensuing climate change and other agro-livelihoods threatening disasters are pushing majority into poverty as well as facing severe food insecurities. A study by PICES (2017) showed that 69.6% of population in the district live below the poverty datum line where majority live below \$0.50 per day. Resultantly, some households or families which are deeply entrenched in poverty opt for CEFM as a coping strategy.

## **6.0 Methodology**

This study is premised on a qualitative paradigm in collecting data in Zaka district. The selected wards are 8, 19 and 24 which are the three areas where TYDT implemented its CFLI-funded project. The study examines the interventions which are being employed by TYDT in youth empowerment, aimed at reducing vulnerability to CEFMU during the acute and recovering phases to COVID-19 pandemic. The interventions are evaluated on the pretext of their acceptability and the potential of long term benefits on reducing CEFMU in embattled rural areas. This paper rigorously interrogate projects through the assessment of the youth-led empowerment drives reflecting challenges and possible opportunities brought by the interventions.

In collection data, the following tools were utilized:

### **(i) Non-participant observation**

Non-participant observation was used in collection of data in the three wards. The non-participant observation involved visiting of poultry project cites, attending meetings conducted and other community empowerment and consultations, training and programming. Through the extensive field visits, more insightful observations were noted and they complimented data which was collected through other research tools. The available evidence is included in this paper through pictorial presentation.

### **(ii) Focus Group Discussion - Focused Interest Group Discussion**

Focus group discussions contributed immensely with data needed in this study. The numbers were maintained between 8 and 10 in order to reduce chances of COVID-19 pandemic infections between the participants and the researcher. The research process offered a diverse tracking contribution to the data gathered through observation and key informant interviews. Practically, six focus group discussions were conducted with ten participants in each group – girls who are situated in each cite of the ten poultry projects rolling in the respective wards. In each ward, two focus groups discussions were purposively selected based on variables such as accessibility and availability of beneficiaries during the time of the research.

On another point, three focus group discussions were conducted with community members who are also closely monitoring the projects as they support all the efforts to reduce incidences of CEFM in Zaka. On this account, a single group was purposively selected from each ward and this was done in order to obtain balanced responses and overview from all the wards. Each group of elders comprised of eight participants, with a well-balanced gender representation for balanced responses on the projects and CEFM practice. The participants provided invaluable information relating to positives and challenges of the interventions as well as other mechanisms of social re-engineering efforts of reducing CEFMU. The last focus group discussions comprised of 10 gender champions who discussed their roles and contribution in relation to CEFM policies, behaviour change and advocacy of girls and children's rights in Zaka.

### **(iii) Key informant interviews**

Key informant interviews were conducted with key people in the district. The key informants and their diversity provided top-notch insights regarding issues to do with TYDT's interventions and information about the state of CEFM before, during and the ongoing phases of COVID-19. Table 2 below shows the key informants who participated in the study.

**Table 2 – Key informants**

<b>Key informant</b>	<b>Contribution of the key informants</b>
TYDT director	The director provided information relating to the funding, program design, management and engagement with all other stakeholders inclusive of traditional chiefs, the youth, administrators, the local communities and the police. He cited the challenges, success and the longer vision of the interventions on the ground.
District Development Coordinator (DDC)	The DDC confirmed their administrative operations concerning TYDT's community engagement in dealing with CEFM during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
Zimbabwe Republic Police –Victim Friendly Unit (VFU)	The VFU reported some incidences of child marriage in the area, interpreting the law as well as their commitment in working with gender based rights practitioners and those directed at children's rights in relation to CEFMU.
Four chiefs and 4 headman	These traditional leaders were selected as the custodians of culture and have also jurisdiction over the legal issues in their respective areas. They provided invaluable data on the incidences of CEFM and their roles in mobilising their people in the whole processes of cultural and religious changes.
4 Gender champions (2 boys and 2 girls)	The selected gender champions offered critical information in relation to their roles in advocacy, sensitisation and behaviour change amongst the youth and the community in relation to CEFM and policy frameworks.

*Source: Author's compilation.*

## **7.0 Data presentation**

### **1. Prevalence of CEFM in Zaka district**

The study revealed that, CEFM is a common practice in most rural parts of Zaka district. The major causes of CEFM were noted as poverty, insecure livelihoods opportunities, and rigid cultural and religious inclinations in the district. Moreover, the ever deepening degrees of poverty caused by macro-economic challenges and other factors such as droughts and climate change were recorded as those factors influencing CEFM prior to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Through focus group discussions and key informant interviews, the following causes were highlighted as the major drivers of CEFMU.

- (a) Traditional marriage rituals – ancient practices such as, sororacy (chimutsamapfihwa - replacing a deceased wife with a young girl), paying avenging spirits (kuripa ngozi - using a girl in paying for the avenging spirit), and pre-planned marriage (kuzvarira - before the birth of the girl child) were cited as the major cultural drivers of child marriages in the area.
- (b) School dropping out – mostly poor resourced families opt to drop girls out of school ahead of boys. As a result, most school dropout girls are prone to embrace marriage as the viable option even at tender ages.
- (c) Lack of severe punishment to offenders – in most cases, men who marry or abuse under aged girls are not punished, and instead, they correct their wrongs through paying bride price to the

in-laws and by doing so, they silence the parents and guardians of the girls. In cases where there is no complainant, the marital unions become formal and recognized.

- (d) Religious - The Johanne Marange apostolic and other emerging churches were cited amongst the drivers of CEFM in Zaka. The gathered information showed that these practices are backed by the biblical teachings which says people should procreate and this stand as a spiritual instruction. According to their church doctrines, through spiritual guidance, young girls before 18 years can be directed into marriages with older members of their church. The most elderly men on the receiving end are the affluent who also took the young girls into polygamous marriages. Girls in these churches, accepts these institutionalised indoctrination of marriages as gifts for themselves and their parents. As these beliefs and practices are supported by all members including the parents they automatically induce volunteering from the girls as they consider it as permissive norm.
- (e) Poverty – this is a multidimensional factor influencing CEFM. The poor resourced parents usually opt to marry-off girls in order to cope up with droughts, other disasters and sometimes to meet other critical family desirables. In most cases, other vulnerable social clusters such as orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) end up opting for marriage as a haven which solve all problems affecting them.
- (f) Running away from abusive families – some girls ran away from abusive families and opt to start their own. Most of the abusive families are those with the polygamous unions. The abusive families may cause girls to drop out of school and increased deprivation and continuous physical, emotional and psychological punishments may drove majority into early and unplanned and involuntary marriages.

In addition to the three mentioned factors which fuels CEFM is the currently trending disaster of COVID-19 pandemic. However, though COVID-19 is not directly linked to CEFM, the impacts and the effects of ensuing phases of ‘total lockdown and partial lockdown’ are thus tremendously affecting livelihoods of majority of people. As a result, the worst affected are the poor resourced especially those living in hard to reach and precarious ecological zones in Zaka district. After suffering acute food insecurities and other deprivation, majority end up embracing CEFM as a survival strategy – in order to gain food, material goods as well as reducing the number of dependents in bigger households. Thus, the study discovered that COVID-19 amplified the already existing harmful social practice of CEFM.

In spite of these diverse challenges, COVID-19 is noted for causing an alarming increase to CEFM when compared to the noted trends before its emergence. As a result of the abrupt national ‘total lockdown’ and other fast-paced measures to prevent rapid infections, most of less economically resourced families were devastatingly affected by the sudden disconnection from the urban areas and other influential places. The disrupted linking connections affected the supply chains of goods and other socioeconomic livelihoods opportunities which used to keep vulnerable people surviving during difficult times. On another note, the restricted movements of the ‘non-essential’ groups including the civil society actors and other human rights groups allowed CEFMU to surge unchallenged. Moreover, the Zimbabwean police were preoccupied with containing COVID-19 pandemic as a national security threat whilst ignoring human security issues such as CEFM and girls’ SRHR during the COVID-19 outbreak.

As a result of the government’s abrupt response to COVID-19 pandemic attack, some vulnerable families resorted to the old custom of marrying-off girls in order to cope up with the adversities of the pandemic. Majority of respondents in the focus group discussions and key informant interviews

confirmed that CEFM helped the vulnerable families/households with monetary and non-monetary material benefits to cope up with food insecurity and poverty. Three key informants comprising of one chief, TYDT director and a VFU police officer confirmed the incidences and causes of CEFM in the area. Their expressions are in Box 1 below.

***Box 1 – Key informants on CEFM prevalence***

**Key informant one (chief)** - This area is prone to droughts which are rapidly increasing and as a result, most poor, polygamous and those from apostolic church like Johanne Marange survive by marrying-off their young girls. So, the parents are the first culprits who are followed by those that accept marrying young girls and so far if no reports and interventions are made, young girls will suffer in silence. Though the cases were moderate before, the emergence of this unknown COVID-19 pandemic worsened the cases and the girls are seriously affected.

**Key informant two (VFU police officer)** – CEFM is prevalent in this district due to many reasons but unfortunately, most people in this area consider it as a normal practice. As a result, most of these incidences are agreed between families and they go unreported hence making it difficult for us to identify and apprehend those going against the law of legal majority age of 18 years which do not permit girls to be legally married.

**TYDT director** – we applied for funds from the Canadian Embassy through Canada Fund for Local Initiative (CFLI), and after getting the funds, we implemented the our intervention informed by the community request which we received which was based on girls and CEFM. The community members and traditional leaders concurred that CEFM is a neglected aspect in the area but is seriously hounding girls’ SRHR and other rights in general. The intervention are strategies are going on well and we hope for long term benefits after completion of our intervention.

The study also revealed that the strategy of marrying-off the girls emerged to be the most popular alternative because of the available cultural inclinations. Inquiry during the focus group discussions revealed that some people are justifying their actions backed by culture as their basis of existence. Upon further inquiry, some expressed that they cannot totally ignore the wisdom and practices of the ancestors who have been doing this since time immemorial. The study also reflected that after these marital unions, those with affluence will give them food, cattle and money and other non-monetary benefits which are critical for the survival of the family. As noted, those who get girls as wives will also have good chances of multiplying their family generations. Though majority confirmed that these are bad practices, they also cited that vulnerability to disasters remain a threat for some to henceforth stop the CEFM as a survival strategy.

**2. The selection criteria on beneficiaries on TYDT intervention**

The selection of beneficiaries was a calculated move adopted by TYDT. The TYDT director as a key informant confirmed that TYDT embraced tripled-tracking strategies of selecting beneficiaries driven by a needs-based targeting approach. The strategies cited by the TYDT director which they utilized in selection of despondence are cited in Box 2 below.

## ***Box 2 – the selection processes of beneficiaries***

1. TYDT approached the Social Welfare department and were given a list of vulnerable OVCs in the selected wards in the district. Despite the list being comprehensive, TYDT further downscaled the focus and targeted those girls who were at risk of CEFM during the ongoing phases of COVID-19. In doing so, TYDT employed other selection strategies in getting to the direct target group.
2. *Community based detection approach* – on a second note, TYDT approached the community through the district administrative offices and traditional leadership in identifying the most vulnerable and possible beneficiaries – also including councillors, village heads, headmen and the general populace. The community-led selection and direct participation was critical as an encompassing process which reduced chances of biases, favouritism and marginalisation of the most deserving vulnerable girls and other respective households.
3. Secondly, TYDT utilized the '*Client Centred Approach*' where the trained TYDT staff assessed the selected beneficiaries using the Vulnerable Assessment Tool (VAT) at household levels. This tool was critical in complimenting other two selection strategies.

After having selected the beneficiaries, TYDT implemented three youth-led empowering strategies of reducing CEFM during COVID-19 and beyond. The study observed that three strategies were operationalized with the hope of improving the current status quo and that of the future for vulnerable girls and CEFM. Firstly, livelihood support was noted as the main activity of empowering girls to reduce chances of them or their families resorting to CEFM as a coping strategy to COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters.

### **(a) Livelihood support – Poultry production**

Through a rigorous selection exercise, 100 vulnerable girls were selected to participate in poultry production. The selected beneficiaries were categorized into 10 groups and each group comprising of 10 members. The selection of the groups was proportionally balanced in the three wards and the extra group was put in ward 19 which seemed to have more vulnerable girls than others. Through the funded project, TYDT acquired building materials for the construction of modern fowl-runs in all the three wards. The trained beneficiaries were also given 100 indigenous chickens (Sasso breed) and with the hope of selling eggs and corks as a way of boosting income and also acquiring of basic desirables such as sanitary products and paying school fees. Figure 2 below shows some of the pictures of the poultry projects which are undertaken in Zaka district.



*Figure 3: Poultry projects – Source- Fieldwork, 2021*

The study noted that participants in the poultry project were positive and enthusiastic with it as a viable livelihood option. Also, they confirmed that the longer vision of the project is to boost their capacity in engaging in bigger youth-led projects with high returns in the future. Also, the other future vision was to make sure that the projects reduces CEFM incidences during the CODVI-19 and other future unknown disasters. To date, positive results have been noted and they are presented below;

- (1) Low chicken mortality – information from all the 10 projects have recorded positive cases of chicken survival. During the time of research, all the projects reported an average of 2% cases of chicken mortality. Positive hopes were that if this trend continue, there is a likelihood of returning 100% profit out of this initiative.
- (2) No cases of theft – information obtained during the fieldwork revealed that there were no incidences of theft or vandalism of property in the poultry projects. The girls who participated in the focus group discussions expressed that the support they got from the community was the major cause for zero theft cases. They also expressed the fact that the community approval, traditional leadership support and ownership in projects has thus helped them in reducing threats as compared to other independent capital projects in the area.
- (3) The promise for the good market – the promise for the good and readily available market by TYDT instilled positive hope amongst the participants in the poultry project. Thus, the promise worked as a glim of hope hence adding to the positive views about the project. With this standing, girls in the poultry project anticipated this to enable them to double or treble the benefits as they prepare for standing alone in the near future

In spite of the positive future anticipation of the project, results from the fieldwork also showed some few challenges experienced by the girls. The major challenge cited in the study was the shortage of stock feed for the chicken. The director confirmed that the budgeted quantities were running out before the project become self-sustaining. Also, the participants expressed experiencing serious chicken feed shortages and there were growing fears that this may compromise quality – the healthy state of the chickens and also their laying capacity. However, the study noted TYDT trained girls on making home-made feed.

Secondly on livelihoods support, TYDT implemented the Internal Savings and Lending (ISALs) amongst 100 vulnerable girls. The selected participants were trained in book keeping and lending principles. The lending involved money investments which would help them in multiplying their capital. After the intensive training on investments, they were also given some books of accounts and cash boxes for the documentation and safe keeping of cash. The motive behind ISALs was to diversify their livelihood options through income generation. Figure 3 below shows engagement of girls in ISALs.



**Figure 3: Engaging girls in ISALS – Source- Fieldwork, 2021**

**(b) Behaviour change approach**

Field based research has shown great strides by TYDT as it embraces behaviour change approach in the whole intervention process of reducing CEFM during and after COVID-19. Upon inception and on its intervention outline, TYDT embraced the ‘test and treat approach’ on CEFM in general and on behaviour change in particular. Thus, it started by unearthing the major root causes of CEFM in Zaka district. After having identified major causes (poverty, culture, Apostolic religious denomination/sect – and the novel COVID-19 and others), behaviour change approach was pragmatically designed along the fault lines of these factors. The pragmatic approach on behaviour change was made easy through transformative social marketing events to transform gender and social norms that drive CEFMU. Under the social marketing events, the trained girls reached 10,471 people with CEFM awareness campaigns and messages. Figure 4 below shows the pictures of social marketing events to transform social norms that drive the CEFM practice in Zaka district.



**Figure 4: Social marketing events – Field work, 2021**

The behavioural change also included engagements of 4 Chiefs in Zaka district. These Chiefs were engaged to craft community-laws that criminalizes CEFM in Zaka district. They developed the by-laws and they are denouncing CEFM in their chiefdoms. However, there is need of follow-up and support them to conduct chiefs-led dialogues, urging community members about the laws. In addition, the Chiefs recommended that these types of engagements need to include religious leaders. They indicated that, besides the Johane Marange, there are other emerging churches which

are triggering the CEFM and girls' rights abuses. Figure 5 below shows pictures of engagement and training meetings which were conducted.



**Figure 5: Chief's engagement meeting. Source: Fieldwork, 2021**

Also on behaviour change, 'the test and treat approach' allowed TYDT to identify culture amongst grassroots based drivers of CEFM. Fortunately, TYDT's behavioural approach on culture and CEFM was accepted since it was strategy found in the core of the 'community request'. On this account, TYDT's CEFM approach did not take a top-down approach, instead, it was bottom-up in its design. Inclusion of community members, traditional leadership and the police helped them in the majority conscientizing processes about the law and human rights with less resistance. Therefore, it became an apparent factor for households, families and the community to condemn atavistic cultural practices which support CEFM in coping with disasters or as a standard practice. Through training and workshops and discussions of behaviour change agenda as an immense social re-engineering project was disseminated to all community members despite COVID-19 restrictions challenges – this was well received by parents, guardians, relatives and friends of vulnerable girls.

On another broad note, the behaviour change approach included a critical Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) strategy. On this note, 60 Peer Educators were virtually trained to conduct Peer Education Sessions, empowering girls to 'Speak Out' against CEFM and other traditions that violate their rights. Through this engagement and outreach, the Peer educators trained 3,482 girls and 1,020 boys aged 10-17, using the Peer Educator Model (PEM). The PEM helped much in conscientizing mostly the youth inclusive of boys on appropriate behaviours to engage towards the ending of CEFM as harmful practices as future husbands. The key informant interviews and focus group discussions, unanimously agreed that, PEM approach is critical since it brings all community members to understand and behave correspondingly on ending CEFM. The balancing of all sexes is hailed as a milestone in the dawning of the new era where CEFM and unjust practices to girls should end and with all their rights, needs and choices well safeguarded by all.

### **(c) Advocacy**

A third factor embraced by TYDT is advocacy for the increasing reduction of CEFM in Zaka district. Through this approach, TYDT trained 40 Gender Champions who are actively advocating

for policy on girls' rights, SRHR and CEFM. The composition of the Gender Champions comprised of, 25 girls and 15 boys. Boys were included to apply a Gender 'Aware' and 'Transformative' Approach and engaging them as agents of change. Due to relaxed COVID-19 lockdown, TDYT managed to conduct workshops which trained the champions on policy advocacy and budgetary issues relating to the ending of CEFM. Figure 6 shows some of the Gender Champions trained to demand CEFM social accountability.



*Figure 6: Some of the 40 trained gender champions. Source: Field work, 2021*

The training of Gender Champions succeeded well and it was an encompassing workshop with various stakeholders such as the District Development Coordinator (DDC), the police and traditional leadership. The TYDT director and other interviewed gender champions concurred that the thrust on policy interpretation and lobbying on community and other public and private institutions involved in girls' rights and SRHR. After the whole encompassing training, gender champions were moving around and engaging parents and other relevant stakeholders in pushing for policy of CEFM in Zimbabwe. In other cases, the gender champions were also educating girls in communities and schools about their rights in general and SRHR in particular. On this issue, the director of TYDT as a key informant further explained the following about advocacy. Box 3 below highlights the views of the key informant.

### ***Box 3 – TYDT director***

After trainings, we facilitated 3 youth engagements with the local key decision makers, holding them accountable to sustaining CEFM social accountability during and after COVID-19. We can also add that, besides the engagements, a policy brief<sup>27</sup> was also developed and disseminated to national key decision makers, other CSOs and donors.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.tydt.org/assets/files/TYDT-CEFMPolicyBrief2021.pdf>

### 3. The aftermath of CEFM on girls and their SRHR

As has been noted in the study, the aftermath of CEFM are always diverse and harmful. The outcomes are simultaneously perilous on girls' future economic potentials, social status, psychological conditions, as well as SRHR. The study revealed harmful outcomes which are experienced by child brides. Table 3 below shows the diverse impacts of CEFM on girls.

Factor	Outcomes
Economic fortunes	Dropping of school reduces girls' chances of finding better economic life opportunities compared to the educated. Also, being married as a poor resourced girl will lead her to continuous marital abuse even at later stages. In some cases at later stages, they will also offer their girls into early marriage hence leading to a vicious circle.
Social wellbeing	Child brides will inherit a poor social status and esteem in their communities. Such conditions terribly affect their confidence and welfare and they end up being marginalized in marriages and outside. Also, even their children will suffer the same outcomes due to their belonging to the lower social strata levels.
Psychological conditions	In most cases, it emerged that girls who are forced into CEFM develop some serious psychological problems as good parents in future. In some cases, the traumatic incidences (rape and domestic abuse at tender age) they experience give them serious mental health challenges for themselves and their children. As a result, some experience broken marriages and in extreme cases some commit suicide.
SRHR	CEFM devastatingly compromise the SRHR of many girls. As noted, many challenges are encountered, e.g. (i) exposure to STIs including HIV/AIDS as they marry older people than them (ii) rapturing of the vagina orifice and uterus due to body immaturity hence leading serious complications, (iv) high chances of girls' deaths and infant mortality – due poor health facilities as well as physically and emotionally prepared to do so (v), denied right to select a life partner and to consent engaging in safe and satisfying sex, and (vi) denied opportunities of accessing more explicit information about sexual reproduction and sexual rights.

*Source – author's compilation*

### 4. Community's suggestions on ways of reducing CEFM as well as ensuring the SRHR of girls

Findings from the study confirmed that majority of people in the three selected wards of Zaka are against the CEFM amongst pubescent girls. As presented earlier there is a unanimous agreement that poverty remains a major driver of CEFM, whilst the incidences are amplified by culture, religion and other disasters, which also include COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, with the general consensus on causes of CEFM, community members in the selected wards revealed diverse options which are needed to end CEFM in the area.

1. The traditional leadership – both the chiefs and village heads concurred that they should consider this issue as an urgent matter to be severely dealt with in traditional courts especially during disasters like COVID-19 pandemic. There was also an agreement that the laws in

traditional courts should be applied in direct connection with the codified laws and the Constitution of Zimbabwe. The community agreed to support their traditional leadership in reporting the cases and punishing those that practice CEFM in the future.

2. Some community members expressed that both the government and non-state actors – including CBOs like TYDT should scale-up their operations in increasing projects for girls, households and communities so that they avoid relying marrying-off girls as the breakthrough out of poverty and disasters. Furthermore, some community members also highlighted that more efforts needs to be cast on educating the girls so that they know their rights and duties as they grow. In education, they called for well-wishers to consider paying their schools fees and full tuition so that they become enlightened about their rights and other possible avenues of survival outside marriages. As has been noted in the study, most school drop-out girls usually end up considering early marriage as the last resort even in other circumstances where there is no coercion from parents or guardians.
3. The community also suggested that apostolic churches like Johanne Marange should also align their religious doctrines with the laws and constitution of the country so that they do not infringe rights of minors such as children and girls. Traditional leaders also expressed that the community members should collaborate in reporting and advising the apostolic members to comply in order to weed out CEFM.
4. The community also suggested that the government through the elected local authorities to prioritize development in their respective rural areas. They noted that development in terms of socioeconomic and politics would help majority think, act and behave well like those in urban areas where CEFM cases are very low. They also expressed that people in developed setups are better since they have wide range choices to make for survival during and even after the struck of disasters.

## **8.0 Discussions**

COVID-19 emerged to be an evolving disaster which posed multiple challenges to humanity world over since its outbreak in 2019. However, though swift actions were cautiously considered in the human security concerns, CEFM in Zimbabwe was never given a reckoning attention by the government in efforts to fight COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the Zimbabwean government gave priority to the nation's health security ahead of other considered 'soft security' issues like CEFM. And, as has been noted elsewhere, the peripheral considering of CEFM increased severe threats to human security, rights and girls' SRHR threats in Zaka. Thus, this void has opened floodgates for skyrocketing incidences of CEFM during COVID-19 outbreak and way into the recovering phases. The increased CEFM cases in Zaka did not come as a surprise, but they multiplied and added more cases into the already anticipated anecdotal data provided by CEFM and children's rights defenders such as the GNB, (2020) and UNPFA (2020)'.

The supra-international institutions' predictions were spot-on as they fall on the ground which was already troubled with other wide ranging disasters and drivers which fuel the escalation of CEFM cases. As commonly known, poor resourced economies are thus, known to consider CEFM as a safety net where they fall back on especially after the strike of disasters. Embracing of CEFM as a coping and adapting strategy fell on the fertile ground which is nourished by cultural and Christendom influenced apostolic denominations. As the case appear, CEFM under these conditions are never blamed nor vilified, instead, they are recognised as curtailed moral and religious practices of cultural and spiritual virtue. Albeit the acceptance of CEFM as a 'safety net' for troubled families in traditional and rural communities, this practice has faced blatant criticism from other sectors of the globalized societies. Thus, human rights defenders (inclusive of both

national, regional and international human rights pressure groups), regarded this practice as ‘erosive coping and adaptation’ (see, Chae & Ngo, 2017)<sup>28</sup>, with treacherous outcomes on socioeconomic, physiological wellbeing and potentials of disadvantaged girls in LICs.

Whilst hailing the ideological confrontation of human rights defenders against CEFM, direct institutional intervention is regarded as the best prescription for its consequential abolishment (Ljungman, 2004)<sup>29</sup>. Practically, the involvement of governments as the ‘principal duty bearers’ of safeguarding girls and children’s rights is of paramount importance in reducing the possible aggravated aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic on CEFM. Amongst other noted critical factors in the vulnerability discourse, are the sown seeds of future and unending gender inequalities between girls and boys in later life.

Reducing incidences of CEFM is not a unique phenomenon in the design principle of TDYT in Zaka. Long standing evidence has thus, shown that external institutional intervention is critical at all levels. As has been with TYDT, the single intervention with multiple components showed a monumental stride filled with some potentials of robust progress. However, analytics have suggested that all youth-led empowerment interventions needs to be well bolstered by vibrant partnerships and integration as stated by Goal 17 of the SGDs. Thus, exploiting such efforts is ideal for acceptable and sustainable empowerment interventions which may help more in reducing families and households to depend on CEFM as a safety net. Practically, inclusion of communities and the youth avoids what Scott (1984)<sup>30</sup> referred to as the ‘..daily forms of resistance epitomized by foot dragging, absenteeism, among others...’ Indeed, partnerships, integration and inclusion acts as the springboard for circumventing vulnerability to disasters and possibilities of depending on CEFM for recovering from disasters like COVID-19. The community’s enthusiasm as powered by the ‘test and treat’ approach boosted the moral, tenacity and installed the spirit of ownership. As has been the case with TDYT’s operations, the success stories of the triple-tier intervention was full of potentials and boom upon implementation and in the near future. The gains though subtle at the start, however, they were supported with hope of elevating education, knowledge and support to eradicate poverty whilst fostering empowerment as the antidote of Disaster and Risk Management (DRM).

Apart from institutional intervention, majority of the global and local players are also suggesting for CEFM policy frameworks formulation and practical implementation. Though there are many national, regional and international agreements and pacts which encourage girls’ rights and ending CEFM, a void is well noticed. In most cases like that of Zaka and Zimbabwe at large, the absence of downscaled and sector specific policies are leaving avenues for rigid cultural and religious practices to exist especially during the strike of disasters like COVID-19. In spite of the agreements and laws, poverty reduction should remain at the core of the DRM strategies which are fundamental in the gradual weeding out of CEFM without serous alterations to cultural and religious benchmarks.

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<sup>28</sup> Chae, S. Ngo T. D. 2017. The Global State of Evidence on Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage. GIRL Center Research Brief No. 1 ([https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY\\_GIRLCenterResearchBrief\\_01.pdf](https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY_GIRLCenterResearchBrief_01.pdf). Accessed May, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Ljungman, C. M. 2004. Applying a Rights-Based Approach to Development: Concepts and Principles, Conference Paper: The Winners and Losers from Rights-Based Approaches to Development. P. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, James C., 1984, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press

## 9.0 Conclusion

The study noted that the impacts and effects of COVID-19 pandemic on CEFM are unmatched and disastrous. The onslaught of unpredicted COVID-19 pandemic worsened the traditional CEFM which has been existing whilst being fuelled by other multiple causalities such as poverty, religion, displacements and climate change. The COVID-19 outburst exposed a lot of governance handicaps and serious policy and strategic planning limitations in Zimbabwe. The point driven here showed that the government lacked proper consultations and advice on critical issues which were supposed to be considered as 'essential' during the drafting and implementation of the fast-paced reactionary strategies to COVID-19 pandemic. This handicap showed exerted serious backlash on vulnerable and poor resourced girls' SRHR and other related welfare during the pandemic. The direct neglect on girls' SRHR welfare is symptomatic of a backsliding motion against all the commitments made on supporting gender equality as enshrined in the constitution, regional and international pacts and agreements. It was learnt that the government also needs to directly engage the civil society as its second eye covering the void created whilst it is battling with the Grand National health security matter. Against this background, it can therefore be recommended that, the government needs to create serious partnerships with other non-state actors because they fill the gaps in planning design of coping and adapting to disasters without neglecting other critical but ignored human security issues like SRHR.

## 10.0 Recommendations

- a) Develop, in a participatory and inclusive manner, a District Action Plan that is operational, holistic, coordinated and considers cultural tradition and religion specificities of the communities. This must encompass coordination of actions of multiple local actors – opinion leaders, humanitarian and development actors, Civil Society, law enforcement stakeholders, health workers, girls & boys, men & women, CEFM survivors and the communities at large.
- b) CSOs, donors and the Government should implement long-term, multicomponent interventions, tackling deeply entrenched gender and social norms, economic drivers and policy changes to address multidimensional drivers, root causes of CEFM. These programs must be informed by social inclusion analysis, ensuring that the marginalized, in hard to reach communities, the minority and people with disabilities (PWDs) are not left behind. Lastly, these programs should be monitored and evaluated rigorously, share promising practices, and coordinate efforts to achieve maximum scale and impact.
- c) Rather than focusing on delaying CEFM only, CSOs, Donors and the Government should provide care and support to CEFM survivors. CEFM survivors are vulnerable to all forms of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), health and social challenges. They have unique needs different to those who are unmarried, including informal and formal education, health care, economic empowerment and enhanced agency in their marital households *inter alia*. In addition, CEFM survivors are prone to maternal complications. Therefore, they need access to antenatal, child birth and postnatal care as well as obstetric care. It is also critical to raise awareness concerning the risk they and their children face during and after early pregnancies, so that they can prevent them.

- d) Donors should fund researches on incidences and dynamics of CEFM should be prioritised so as to inform evidence based reactionary strategies.
- e) The government should open platforms for engagement, partnerships and inclusions of CSOs and CBOs to planning and designing reactionary strategies to known and known disasters in order to avoid marginalisation of the disadvantaged.
- f) An enabling environment should be created for CSOs and CBOs and other human rights defenders to continuously monitor and engage in girls' SRHR issues during disasters.
- g) SRHR information kiosks and other dissemination should be availed in order to keep check and track on CEFM amongst vulnerable girls during disasters.
- h) The government should also extensively consult and put policies and national strategic planning at the forefront of fighting CEFM before, during and even after disasters.
- i) Support for girls in CEFM or those in risk of it should be provided during outbreak of devastating disasters like COVID-19.
- j) CSOs, donors and the government should promote community-led and youth-led empowerment initiatives so as to reduce incidences of CEFM as a coping and adapting strategy to disasters.
- k) There is also need for authorities to formulate functional policies and synchronize the legal laws and the customary laws in outlawing CEFM.
- l) Also, there should be some by-laws which empowers the custodians of customary law (traditional leadership) enforcers to decisively deal with those who participate in CEFM.