
Religious Affiliation – Child Marriages Nexus in Zimbabwe: A Case of Marange

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Abstract:- *The study seeks to investigate the dynamics of religious affiliation and child marriages in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research approach was employed. The study was carried out in the Marange area, the home of one of the first African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe; the Johane Marange. Amongst other findings, the study revealed that in the Marange area, most child marriages are attributed to religious affiliation. The study recommends a review of laws related to child protection in Zimbabwe and a total condemnation of child marriages at all levels, amongst other policy prescriptions.*

Keywords: *Child Marriage, Johane Marange, Johane Masowe, Girl Child, Religion, religious affiliation, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

Girl child marriage is a major problem in Zimbabwe (Chenge & Maunganidze, 2017). Child marriage is defined as marriage of any younger person below eighteen years of age in line with the United Nations (1990) convention on the rights of children. Other terms used to refer the marriage include “early marriage” and “child brides” (Nour, 2006). On the other hand, religion has shaped man’s behaviour over time giving birth to the existence of norms and values in the society. Through religion people agree on particular values that define their beliefs and customs. Religion has shaped social activities and behaviour among people who attend to it such that some extremists have managed to sprout all due to religion in the 21st century. People join religious sects of their choice due to a number of preferences and beliefs and some are even forced or oriented by their parents and guardians in joining the affiliation. It is through this religious affiliation that people sometimes are subdued by the “evils” of the society and the current economic environments.

Karl Marx strongly argued that religion is the opium of the masses. Implying that religion is a deadly drug for the society such that when most people welcome religion in their way of life it changes them for the good or the worst as most of the times it approves or subject women to exploitation in both labour and sexual issues. The problem of child marriage is quite common among the members of the apostolic sect as a religious affiliation. Girl child marriages are common in Zimbabwe and according to ZimStats (2011), an estimate of 21% of children (mostly girls) are married before they have reached the age of eighteen. According to the Girl Child Network (2016), an estimate of 8000 girls have been forced into early marriages. It is rather ironical that religion has played massive influence in the perpetuation of “child marriages” in Zimbabwe. Early child marriage, in some cases maybe voluntary; but in most

cases, early child marriage is forced; therefore, it is the task of this research to unearth the nexus between religion or rather religious affiliations with child marriages in Zimbabwe.

However, the nexus between religion and early child marriages in Zimbabwe, and the impact of religion in influencing political outcome cannot be overlooked as these political outcomes are influenced by numbers. Religious groups like the Johane Masowe and Johane Marange have managed to create strong ties with the government such that the politicians or rather the law makers turn a blind eye to issues relating to religiously – induced early child marriage. The Apostolic sect in Zimbabwe is one of the largest religious groups with an estimated 33.9% (ZimStats, 2011) of the total Zimbabwe population, therefore showing that it is a very influential group in society with more than a third of the country's population. The research, whose approach is qualitative; looked specifically at the major apostolic groups; the Johane Marange and the Johane Masowe affiliates. The law makers are more concerned with the electorate than the welfare of children and the girl child to be more specific. It is the thrust of this research to intensively lay bare the nexus between religious affiliation and early child marriage in Zimbabwe.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite all the campaigns done in Zimbabwe through different platforms such as Girl Child Network, Gender Policies, Child Line, UNICEF and even the Constitution of Zimbabwe on girl child empowerment, child marriage is still on the increase in Zimbabwe (Gwesela, 2013; Mufandaedza, 2013; Mashangwa, 2015; Masinire, 2015). The study seeks to assess the foundation and nature of religious induced child marriages in Marange, Zimbabwe. Religion over the years has been on the rise especially the apostolic churches which are furthering the practise of early child marriage apart from the African tradition culture. Although the law has been put into place, less has been done on implementation as corruption and bad politics have hindered fulfillment of law enforcers' duty. Therefore, the major aim of this study is to assess the role played by religion or religious affiliations in increasing child marriages in Zimbabwe.

1.2 Objectives of the study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- i. To investigate the link between child marriages and religious affiliation
- ii. To assess the impact of child marriages in Zimbabwe
- iii. To identify the causes of early child marriages in Zimbabwe
- iv. To find out on ways of addressing religion – induced child marriages.

1.3 Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following objectives:

- i. How does religion link with early child marriages in Zimbabwe?
- ii. What is the impact of early child marriages on the girl child in Zimbabwe?
- iii. What causes child marriages in Zimbabwe?
- iv. What need to be done to address religion – induced child marriages?

1.4 Justification of the study

Most of the research for example Sibanda (2011), Mawere (2012), Chitando *et al* (2014), Dzimiri *et al* (2017), Chenge & Maunganidze (2017) and Sayi & Sibanda (2018), did little to link religion and early child marriages considering the rise of more influential religious groups in Zimbabwe but is rather biased towards attributing marriage to culture. It is due to this shortage that the study was conducted to fill the existing gaps in literature and offer opportunities for law makers and lobby groups. It is imperative to highlight the fact that early child marriages have been a mainstay in the African culture as the practice dates back to early age in the African community. This was done in a move to make women child bearers. In most cases when girls start to menstruate, it is a clear indication in the eyes of the community that they have matured to be women. Therefore, in light of this the research is laying bare the fact that, religion is fast emerging as the major driver for child marriages in Zimbabwe. There is need to craft legislature that will try to address this issue. Child marriages have brought untold suffering to both the girl child on individual and the women at national level. There is need to properly provide the legal framework to curb this religious-induced child marriages in Zimbabwe especially from the members of the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe.

1.5 Demarcations

The study was done around the Marange district in eastern Zimbabwe. This was carried out in view of the demography and the religious affiliation of the people residing in the area. The area is home to a religious sect

famously known as “Vapositori”. Quite a number of members of the religious sect were interviewed by the researchers, ranging from church leaders and the members. It is believed the leader of this sect originated from the area.

2. Literature Review

The constitution of Zimbabwe (20 of 2013) is the supreme law of the country. According to the Constitution of Zimbabwe, a child is defined as “Every boy and girl under the age of eighteen years”. The children’s act defines a child as anyone below the age of eighteen. From this, only a person who has reached the marriageable age of eighteen is eligible to get married. Given the supremacy of the constitution of Zimbabwe any one marrying under the age of eighteen is violating the law. However, with the existence of incoherence in the law in Zimbabwe, there is immediate need for the law makers to realign the marriage and customary act to the provisions of the constitution. There is the existence of gaps and perpetrators have managed to walk away scot free without facing the full wrath of the law. According to Nour (2009), even in some countries where the legally age of marriage is eighteen, cultural traditions and religion take priority over legislative laws.

The constitution defines marriage as the union by full consent between a male and female who have reached legally agreed age which is eighteen. It is amusing that the society has defined marriage on the basis on paying *lobola* while infringing the rights of the girl child in consenting for marriage. Once a bride price has been paid to the father in the African culture of the Marange people a girl is married off without her full consent. Young girls below the age of twelve have been married due to this. Their sign of age is rather only limited to their eyes which is actually not true. Girls experience many things at puberty. Once a girl gets into puberty stage she is easily married without her full consent. Worth noting from the recent reports is that, once a girl starts attending initiation schools, her attendance at school diminishes. From the research conducted by the Girl Child network (GCC) as early as 2000 many schools in Mashonaland region near Marange experienced high rates of dropouts mainly the girl child at primary and high school. According to the Population Reference Bureau (2016), girls who marry young often drop out of school which leaves them with few income producing skills. All these have been attributed to child marriage practice in the area induced by religious affiliation. Thus in most cases *lobola* legalizes these marriages because the father as the head of the house hold has absolute control over the behaviour of his children.

The use of the constitution as the theory guiding the research works hand in hand with the Human rights framework enshrined in the constitution. The bill of rights is the starting point in the human rights discourse. Section 78 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe apparently deals with marriage rights. What can be deduced from this section is that adulthood start at eighteen years of age when one has the full consent to start a family of her own without coercion. However, though the law has been loud on the pre-conditions for a legal marriage, customary marriage falls short in setting a minimum age for marriage but give the consent to the family as the guardian of the child. In customary law context, it is not a matter of age that governs or defines a child but rather the eyes of the society. Once signs of puberty start to show on the girl child, she is eligible to get married, which is very deceiving judging from the fact that puberty even starts around twelve years these days leading to high rise in child marriage. It is imperative to note that Zimbabwe is a member of the SADC, AU and UN, this means that Zimbabwe is a signatory of several treaties guiding to protection of the girl child with regards to marriage and child sexual abuse.

3.1 Influence of Religion on Child Marriage

In Zimbabwe, just like in any other African state, marriage has been universal in all other aspects of people’s lives marriage is the ultimate goal. People are bound to get married and there are different forms of marriages that still even exist up to this date. The forms of marriages range from the Christian marriages to the African traditional marriages. The later include the exchange of money or economic good to the father of the spouse mainly the girl child. Marriages can be said to build alliances taking in consideration of the African culture. In many societies and mainly in the third world countries, as noted by Mhembere (2011); adolescents unions are used as a platform to build and fortify coalition between members of the same society or nearby societies. Marriages unify the people into one family thus this may lead to early child marriages as marriage brings in stronger family ties bonded by marriage.

The link between child marriages and religion in Zimbabwe cannot be under estimated judging from the power of religion to influence behavioral outcomes. Religion can shape behaviour from both societal and individual level. The African Initiated Churches (AIC) like Johane Masowe, Paul Mwaizha and Johane Marange command a very big size in Zimbabwe’s demography. A closer view of the AIC can reveal that the greater the number joining these AIC the greater the number of reported child marriage practices in the church. According to Maguranyanga (2011), apostolic doctrines continue to exert influence on the behaviour of apostolic women and female adolescents. Apostolic doctrine often inhibits women and young girls from using modern services. The influence of AIC cannot be overlooked due to the demographic size and the application of religion and the implications of these doctrines on the lives of adolescents girls. The marriages have further put more danger to the girl child as many cases of HIV viruses have

spread. In these sects many any children have even died in an attempt to give birth while they are still young. Although the marriage is not legally allowed many of these child unions happen while customarily they are married.

Furthermore, religious affiliation makes both the girl and the women to be submissive and docile. This attitude is believed to benefit the family in that they are seen as true Christians and their status in both the society and the church is lifted up. This misinterpretation of the good word in the bible coupled with the misuse of institutions like the church has thrown the girl child into harmful effects of child marriages. According to Hartman (1981) at the heart of this unions are issues of sexuality, power and patriarchy. Therefore worth noting is that all these factors are embodied in religion. Through religion a man s position as the head of the family is largely unquestioned, while the women play second fiddle to man. Therefore, men have the absolute authority in the family, this is supported by the presence of patriarchy in the Zimbabwean society. Power for decision making is derived from the religion. The AIC have the autonomy to sanction marriage of their members regardless of their age. Moreover, the link between religion and child marriage has further been hijacked by politicians in a bid to get the electorate turning the blind eye. Many AIC have committed crimes of child abuse and child marriages but the response by policy makers and law enforcers has continued to be disgraceful.

3.2 Consequences of Child Marriages

The following are the consequences of child marriages:

Increased infant & maternal health risk

Girls who may and conceive a child before their bodies are fully developed are very much at risk or danger of death. UNICEF (2007) reported that a girl aged fifteen is five times more likely to die during pregnancy and child birth than a woman in her 20s. Therefore with the practice of early child marriages; young girls within this age range have been married putting them more at risk of the above dangers to the health and wellbeing of children. Child marriage exposes young girls to these dangers as these young girls are impregnated before they are even biologically fit to have a baby. It is rather ironical that the society though approves this child marriage practice, the apostolic sect is forbidding girls or even new born babies access to quality health facilities at clinics and hospitals. Medical facilities available to these young girls are rather dangerous. Religious practices that damage the development of the kid and cause the sexual misuse or abuse of the child can't be said to be in the best interests of children in Zimbabwe. The society should try to mold its religious practices around the human right framework The Johane Marange church forbids all their members access to health care leading to high infant mortality and mortality deaths. There is need for the government and other stakeholders in the health sector to engage this religious group as access to health care in a human right. Worth noting is also the fact that these apostolic trained birth attendant lack the technical know-how as they are not intellectually trained to practice. Most of the people directly active in the child bearing practice are most of the times far from ideas to the technical requirements and modern safer methods of child bearing. This usually results in prolonged labour for both the older and younger pregnant women in labour. This labour on it's on has its own various complications to the young girls. There is very limited expertise and knowledge of signs and in most cases, there is poor diagnosis of the identified problem. They church forbids its members of using modern technology or even attend hospitals thus leading to high infant mortality risk and high mortality risk of the mothers.

HIV/AIDS

The epidemic has found a new breeding ground and it is on young married girls in the child marriage are usually exposed to unprotected sex and usually the union is a polygamous marriage. This further increases the risk of catching up with the epidemic. Those girls who marry early risk contracting HIV from their partners. Usually young girls are hitched to more elderly and sexually matured men with whom it's very hard to negotiate or arrange safer sexual behaviour. The husband in the apostolic sect usually is promiscuous that it puts the young girl at the risk of even contracting sexually transmitted infections like syphilis and gornhorea. Some sects, according to Maguranyanga (2011); totally reject the use of modern medicine, whereas others use to some extent. Apostolic sects like the Johane Marange view modern cutting edge restorative treatment as defying God's will hence unnatural and barbarian practises and as the devil s work. They firmly believe and trust that the ailment or illness result from evil. They only way to heal this is through prayer from the spiritual father in the sect. This means that members of the apostolic sect who have contracted the HIV virus do away with the anti-retroviral drugs which usually result high mortality rate for both the mother and the newly born babies.

Exposure to Domestic & Sexual Abuse

It is no secret that many girls who are married are sexually abused by their partners and are ignorant of marital

rape. Abuse sometimes maybe in form of emotional abuse, psychological abuse; just to mention, but a few. Young girls are not physically superior to their counterparts. Biologically men are powerful and muscular which makes it easy for man to beat of the young girls over disagreements on domestic issues. Young girls are or women in the African way of life are viewed as children such that in the house are treated as a child thus they are prone to corporal punishment or beating from the husband. It is worth noting that though these young girls are bitten off by their man, noting or little is being done by the family to protect them but rather they are forced to remain at the house as this would strain relations both in the society and at the church. Young girls are stigmatized and in the end they are emotionally traumatized by these union but they are nowhere else to turn to. The girls in the apostolic sect are at constant pressure from their peers to get married. According to UNICEF (2003), the hardship of dealing with a polygamous marriage and parenting is often beyond the capacity of an under-age wife. This means that young girls are very much incapable to handle a polygamous marriage as they are weak psychologically and emotionally. They are still kids who value things differently; they can't handle some demands of the family.

3.3 Analysis of Customary Law & Marriage Act Customary Law

Customary marriage originated from the African customs deeply imbedded in the African way of life. It seeks to harmonize the African way of life with the modern sources of law. Customs are a source of law in Zimbabwe. It is worth noting that there are various types of marriages in Zimbabwe and customary marriage in one of them. African customs like *Chimutsamapfiwa* has been imbedded in the African initiated churches further perpetuation the child marriage practise. In *Chimutsamapfiwa* practise, a young girl is married off to substitute for a sister of aunt who was once married but is deceased. This is only made possible in view of the African customs leading to under aged girls being married. Customary law as a source of law is very much respected in Zimbabwe s legal history. A closer view of the customary act shows that no age limits have been put into place to forbid the union of a constitutionally underage girl. In the customary marriage, it is rather a gentleman s agreement which fosters unity in the society, age is rather not the limiting factor, a girl is seen as mature once she has reached puberty stage. However, puberty stage is very common around twelve years for girls while the legally set age is sixteen. This means many girls in the African customs are more exposed to child marriage practice than girls.

Marriage Act

In Zimbabwe legislation has been put into place to protect young girls from harmful ills of the society like the early child marriages under this research. The marriage act was crafted long before the enactment of the constitution amendment 20 of 2013. This marriage act makes it illegal to have marital union with a young girl under the age of sixteen. In view with the criminal codification act is also illegal to have sexual relation with a young girl aged between sixteen as she is a minor under the act. These provisions have their tenant's routed in the marriage act of Zimbabwe.

The act gives sixteen as for girls and eighteen for boys as the age limit for marriage whether customarily or civil marriage. This has rather been discriminatory to the critical mind. The girl child is being neglected by the law and offering more support to the boy child while the girl child is already disadvantaged in the society. Meanwhile the constitution stipulates eighteen for box sexes. Hence the need to the immediate realignment of laws in Zimbabwe to conform to the constitution of Zimbabwe put in place in 2013. Another alternative to offer more cover to the girl child is extending the legal age to eighteen and bring equality to the girl child. Marriage law is in line with other international conventions on marriages and laws of Zimbabwe. This shows Zimbabwe has done much to adhere to international standards.

4 Methodology

The Women's Law Approach was employed to capture the women's views as they are the victims of the early child marriage practice. The thrust of the method employed was to incorporate the women in development and feminist approach on how women are treated and how the law reacts to the reality. The research is not representative of Zimbabwe as a whole but rather a sample of Zimbabwe in the name of Marange, which is the home of the apostolic church known as Johane Marange in Zimbabwe. The sample size of the study was selected using the heterogeneous sampling technique. The study used semi-structured questionnaires, interviews (*with voice recording*), and desk – review.

5 Results Discussion

Most girls who had entered in early marriages had not been forced by their parents or relatives. However, what we found ironical was that they could not find anything wrong in marrying so early in their lives. They found

marriage to be a stage in life which is inevitable; age to them was not special and shouldn't be put into consideration when dealing with marital issues in the apostolic sect. In the interview some respondents confessed that if they had much appreciation of the law earlier on in their lives they would not have married so early in their lives.

Moreover, the existence of the customary law and customary marriage was never in doubt. The respondents managed to fully bring out that they are very much aware of the customary law than the modern *marriage* law. There was evidence of the existence of two marriage systems, being the customary marriage and the registered marriage for the district administrator. From the interview it is evident that the first wife was the one who had a marriage certificate and the rest had that ordained by the district administrator *Kwa mudzviti*. Also from the marriage by the district administrator they were not made aware of age restriction imposed on them. From the interview, the issue of Human rights were foreign to the inhabitants of Marange especially members of the Johane Marange church. They had often heard of human rights in their life but the word *Kodzero* brought much familiarity to their faces as they heard it but the actual meaning and its implications in their lives was rather foreign to them.

Through the interviews with the teachers at school, they highlighted that some students disappear in class for the whole year and or forever depending on how the issue was handled. After getting grip with this reality, one respondent said:

“We as teachers are powerless when it comes to these matters because above everything else the child belongs to the parent. As the head of the house he has the power to decide whether to marry of his daughter or not. At the end of the day the child does what the father wants”

This proves that even though it is recommended that a teacher ought to report this to the school head, this has been a failure and has been compromised by the parallel structure of the society and religion. It is very difficult to separate the two from one another as they are interdependent on each other. The Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education is one of the components for early warning detectors of child marriages. The role of the teacher and the institution all in one have been eroded and disappeared, thus no longer relevant in the prevention of child marriages in Zimbabwe. According to Bentzon (1998) a woman use or non-use of her legal rights and freedom must be considered in light of the wider social and cultural opportunity structure she operates. In many instances as in view of this theory, girls have their predicament being not detected by the system in Zimbabwe. It is rather ironical that culture and religion are the two dominant forces compromising the ability and wish of state actors in carrying out their duty, due to the authority granted to them by the constitution and policy in Zimbabwe. Thus implementation is rather limited for the state agents to detect and immediately curb child bribes happening in their areas.

Several African practises seemed to work hand in glove with religion after going through with the research. African practises like *Kuzvarirwa* exposed girls to early child marriages in Marange. Young girls, as young as twelve years old were being married off to religious leaders in the sect under the pretence that it was God's will in uniting the two human beings together. One girl on condition of confidentiality managed to reveal that:

“Pandakange ndava grade seven baba namai vakanditi Mari yechikoro hapana zvino wakugara pamba ubetsere amai vako nekuchengeta vamwe vako. Zvisina nguva tete vakandiperekedza kumurume wangu vachiti ndatoroorwa uye ndavamunhu mukuru”

Translated: *When I was in grade seven, my parents (Father & Mother) told me that they could not afford my school fees, so I was supposed to stay at home and help my mother in taking care of my younger siblings. Within a short period of time at home, my aunt came and accompanied me to my husband and told me that I was now an adult.*

With the help of the family the *Kuzvarirwa* practice managed to put the young girl under wedlock to the church leader. This is an arrangement whereby a girl is married off to a male partner on an agreed arrangement before the girl was married. Some apostolic leaders in time may claim the girl after she has come of age. It is worth noting that these arrangements were made due to economic situation to the parent. In the apostolic sect of Johane Marange there is a belief that a genuine man is characterized as one who has numerous spouses. Thus the quest for younger wives is justified as these young wives possess qualities of subservience to their husband.

The force that is connected with the social undertones of virgin virtue makes it energizing for the men to go on a quest to obtain youthful virgin young ladies. In the Apostolic groups, regularly and consistently, young ladies have their virginity tried and scrutinized upon entering the church. One of the girls interviewed, gave a record of how her mother would periodically always check her virginity whenever she arrived home late even by five minutes late. Much emphasis is placed on the purity of young girls in the church by both the church and the family. If a girl was found not a virgin her reputation and that of the family would diminish and consequently the family is likely to lose out on the bride prize. It is in this view that girls are seen as objects that are fragile and very costly to the family especially in the Johane Marange sect.

Wedding a youthful virgin girl is a vital part of status and “genuine” manliness in the organization. The honor that is associated with virgin girls radically decreases in the apostolic sect in the event that one male married a deflowered girl. A flowered young lady conveys honor to herself as well as to her family, thus it is the duty of the

parent in time to usually marry off the girl to a suitable suitor as they know what is right and wrong for the child. Henceforth the young lady's virginity means turning into power in just one night. Male superiority in the community is granted by marrying virgin girls.

6 Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to curb the situation:

- i. There is need for genuine political will if the girl child is to be adequately protected against child marriage in Zimbabwe.
- ii. There is need for selective borrowing of doctrines from religion to marriages because religion keeps people ethically bounded.
- iii. Child marriages should be condemned at all levels.
- iv. Communities, especially the rural folks; should be educated on the dangers of child marriages.
- v. The government of Zimbabwe, with the help of non – governmental organizations should increase awareness campaigns on children's rights. Children's rights should be respected all the time.
- vi. Currently, the law on child marriages in Zimbabwe is crafted in a manner that overlooks the vulnerability of the girl child. Therefore, law – makers in Zimbabwe are encouraged to think twice on this issue.

7 Conclusions

Child marriage undermines growth potential by contributing to increased population growth, lower educational attainment and lifetime earnings, and higher health costs (Ueyama & Yamauchi, 2009). Child marriage hinders progress towards inclusive development, the eradication of poverty, and combating income and non – income inequalities, including gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Sayi & Sibanda, 2018). Indeed, child marriages do occur under the pretence that it is God's will and this has become the norm. Profoundly settled in the thinking behind this are issues of force and manliness where a genuine man is characterized by the number of virgin girls he weds and the quantity of wives he has. The “catch them young” mantra is wrongly applied here as this hinders the growth and development of the girl child in Zimbabwe. We note with kin interest, that religion; especially in Zimbabwe, should be handled with care in light of the girl child. The girl child, just like the boy child; deserves genuine support and protection.

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