
An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to assess the impact of the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) on reducing instances of early marriage among girls in Isoka District, Zambia. A qualitative research approach was used employing a case study design. The targeted study sample was eighteen (18) participants. Research indicated that factors such as the age at which individuals marry for the first time, the absence of financial support services, and poverty, among other elements, played a significant role in the prevalence of early marriages among girls in the district. The research indicated that the UCZ has a Child Protection Policy and Procedures Manual established in 2016, which provides guidance to church members and stakeholders on how to care for all children and protect them from harmful influences that could hinder their development. The findings of the study suggested that while the UCZ has programs aimed at engaging both boys and girls, as well as reviewing policies affecting women's lives, the practice of initiating young girls into puberty (chisungu) highlighted that the residents of Isoka District still adhered to traditional patriarchal beliefs and customs. These beliefs often led to the coercion of daughters into early marriages, thereby promoting early marriage among girls. The study proposed that the government should ensure the establishment of recreational and skills training centers in every district to keep young people engaged and help prevent early marriages, particularly for those who have dropped out of school.

KEYWORDS: early marriages, combating initiatives, customs, traditions, policies

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early marriage constitutes a detrimental cultural practice in which a female minor is united in matrimony with a male who is considerably older, with the decision being made by her parents and the surrounding community on her behalf (Wondie et al, 2011). Moreover, Wondie et al. (2011) highlight that the Declaration of Human Rights supports the right to voluntary and thorough consent in marriage. They assert that such consent cannot be truly voluntary and thorough if one participant does not possess the necessary maturity to make an informed decision about choosing a life partner. Parents often feel that a young girl has potential to enhance their economic sustainability; therefore, they wish to marry off their young daughters, as they consider them to be economic liabilities. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states that early marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited; effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years and above (UNICEF, 2001).

As child marriage has more to do with age and the psychological and physical development of the parties to a marriage, the concept is often used interchangeably with the term early marriage to signify that one or more of the parties to a marriage are not ready for the responsibilities that come with marriage itself (Jain and Kurz, 2007). It is for this reason that on an international scale, child marriage is characterized as either a formal or informal union, which encompasses religious or customary marriage, involving individuals who are below the age of eighteen. Early marriage refers to any matrimonial union that takes place prior to the individual reaching the age of eighteen, occurring before the person is adequately equipped physically, physiologically, and psychologically to assume the obligations associated with marriage and parenthood. Being coerced into marriage prior to the ability to provide informed consent constitutes a violation of the fundamental human rights of both girls and boys.

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2018) indicates that a significant proportion of married youth consists of girls, with projections suggesting that one in three girls in the developing world enters into marriage prior to reaching the age of eighteen years. Furthermore, the report elucidates that annually, approximately twelve million girls are wed before they attain eighteen years of age. This circumstance infringes upon their rights and childhood, frequently culminating in the cessation of their formal education and the commencement of their roles as wives and mothers, which carries substantial physical, psychological, and emotional ramifications. UNICEF (2018) adds that Zambia has one of the highest early marriage rates in the world with 42 percent of women aged 20-24 years married by the age of eighteen. For this reason, early marriage has currently become a topic of discussion among several development platforms in Zambia. For example, in December 2013, at the symposium on ending early marriage held in Lusaka, a former First Lady declared early marriage a national crisis and called for its criminalization (Munthali, 2015).

In Zambia, an estimated 23 per cent of girls are married off before the age of eighteen (Gillian *et al*, 2015). According to the CAMFED report of 2015, out of the 98.5 percent total number of girls who enrolled in school in 2015, 27 percent dropped out of school as compared to boys at 18% (CAMFED, 2015). The United Nations Population Fund, World Vision Zambia and Population Council and Panos Institute of Southern Africa all affirm early marriage as one of the leading causes of girls dropping out of schools in rural areas (UNFPA, 2012). This is a discomfiting scenario, especially in rural districts like Isoka. This study was therefore significant because it might bring to reality the problems and combating measures of early marriage in different communities in Isoka District and many other districts in Zambia and beyond.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Combating measures of early marriage

A positive political and social environment for ending early marriage is evident in the Zambian government. Like its neighbours, the country is implementing a national strategy to reduce and eventually eliminate early marriage (Panos Institute of Southern Africa, 2014). The ongoing Ending Early Marriage campaign has engaged traditional leaders in creating a better understanding of the negative effects of early marriage and has served as a springboard for the creation of a national strategy for ending early marriage (Panos Institute of Southern Africa, 2014).

In 2016, Zambia's Ministry of Gender led a consortium, together with the coalition of the Central Statistical Office (CSO), in developing and launching the National Strategy on Ending Early Marriage in Zambia for the period 2016–2021, for which a National Plan of Action was launched in December 2017. The goal of the National Strategy was to reduce early marriage by 40 percent by 2021 (UNICEF Zambia, 2015). The goal was in line with the following objectives: to strengthen multi-sectoral responses to reduce children's vulnerability to marriage; to facilitate positive change in prevailing attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, and practices that contribute to the practice of early marriage; to facilitate the development and review of policies and legislation; to ensure a consistent approach to protecting child rights and promoting their well-being; to facilitate the provision of child-sensitive social services to reduce children's vulnerability to early marriages; and to effectively mobilize financial resources to facilitate the implementation of programs aimed at reducing children's vulnerability to early marriages.

In response to the challenge posed by Early Marriage, the Zambian Government, in conjunction with the UNFPA, UNICEF, and UK Aid Direct (UKAID) via the Department for International Development (DFID), the Government of Canada and other collaborative partners, has formulated and implemented the National Strategy to Eradicate Early Marriage (UNICEF Zambia, 2015). In addition to various interventions devised to mitigate the underlying causes of early marriage, there exists a pressing necessity to actively involve the affected populations and other relevant stakeholders in addressing detrimental cultural practices and norms that contribute to the ongoing perpetuation of this issue.

The Zambian Government has initiated efforts to educate traditional leaders about the negative impacts of early marriage. In 1997, Zambia implemented a School Re-Entry Policy that allows girls who become pregnant while enrolled in school to return to their studies after giving birth. This policy is a strategy that is being considered for all the schools in Zambia and is being followed by school authorities (McCadden and Danielle, 2015). In support of this, Omondi (2008) highlights that the policy allows girls who fall while attending school to be re-admitted without conditions, allowing them to resume their education shortly after taking a maternity leave. The government is set to strengthen the re-entry of girls after their babies have grown and together with other stakeholders sensitise communities to the negative socio-cultural practices that reduce the effective participation of girls in education (Mulama, 2006). Mulama (2006) adds that with cooperative implementers, unconditional re-entry ensures that potential performers are given a second chance to excel though some missionary schools like Catholic schools have not accepted the re-entry policy citing that the Church promotes abstinence and not otherwise.

According to the Early Marriage Zambia Draft Policy (2017), the government has instituted a national response to address early marriages by launching a multi-stakeholders anti-early marriage campaign. Measures have been established to address the issue of early marriages, which include the formation of a Civil Society Coalition against Early Marriage, a ten-member ministerial committee overseen by the Ministry of Gender, a Draft Policy aimed at Ending Early Marriage, and a National Strategy for

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

Ending Early Marriage covering the years 2016-2021. It is essential that these initiatives are expedited and adequately supported to diminish and ultimately eliminate early marriage (Early Marriage Policy, 2017). Education for girls is a highly effective approach to safeguarding them from early marriage. Musyoki (2016) indicated that providing all girls with access to primary education could lead to a decrease in the rates of early marriage.

Increasing girls' education in Zambia is a particularly significant strategy given that, more than 80 per cent of school girls aged 10-14 have never attended school, and are at risk of early marriage (Musyoki, 2016). A report from the African Union (AU) Campaign to End Early Marriage in Africa indicates that a majority of studies conducted over the last decade highlight the influence of religion and cultural traditions in both the continuation and the reduction of early marriage across the continent (AU, 2015). A core objective of the AU Campaign is aimed at promoting and advocating for the rights of women and girls in Africa. The primary aim of the initiative, which was set to take place over an initial period of four years (2014-2017), was to hasten the cessation of early marriage in Africa. This would be achieved by raising awareness across the continent about the consequences of this practice and by advocating for legal and policy measures that protect and promote human rights.

The 87-page document, titled 'The Effects of Traditional and Religious Practices of Early Marriage on Africa's Political and Economic Development,' outlines various initiatives that provide optimism for the future. Among these are the Faith Effect Program operating in Ethiopia and Nigeria, as well as a recent initiative in Zambia led by the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs (AU, 2015). Furthermore, AU (2015) indicates that this campaign aims to enhance ongoing efforts by governments and partners to eliminate early marriage, focusing on advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, along with providing technical assistance and capacity building.

The Church in Zambia has a reputation for providing quality education for girls through the schools, which are found in different parts of the country, including rural areas. The Church has provided opportunities for empowering girls through formal education since its very inception in Zambia. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ) though emphasizes much on spiritual matters, preaches against early marriage and do advocate for girls to be educated and become relevant in society (Hot FM Zambia, 2020). Moreover, the UCZ Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual (2016) states that the Christian Council of Zambia (CCZ) has traditionally been involved in service delivery and is considerably influential in Zambia in its pastoral and social delivery. Additionally, Pew Research Centre (2012) asserted that religious leaders had the greatest reach within the local communities; members of the local communities participated in religious groups. As spiritual guides, religious leaders are among the most respected figures in many communities and often contribute to prescribing which behaviour is acceptable or not (Pew Research Centre, 2012).

Pew Research Centre (2012) also reported that religious leaders and the church in particular, could help change existing norms in communities and be critical allies in the movement to end early marriage. The report indicated that over the past few decades, religious leaders from various faiths have played a role in combating early marriage by working alongside development organizations. They have made public pledges, engaged in campaigns, and participated in training sessions to enhance their ability to educate others about the negative effects of early marriage through their sermons and to consider potential solutions (Pew Research Centre, 2012). However, Anderson (2004) appeared to challenge the stance of religious leaders regarding the elimination of early marriage. While he acknowledged that these leaders hold significant sway within their communities, he noted their hesitance to actively work towards ending the practice of early marriage.

In other words, Anderson (2004) seemed to suggest that religious leaders have more influence in the community and if they were to take a role, which they have not, early marriage would be combated. The church being closer to the community, does have influence in the community, and can immensely contribute to ending early marriage, but to suggest that, religion is a determinant factor of early marriage or that, religious leaders are not taking any role to combat the vice, might not be an understatement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was informed by the Radical Feminist Theory articulated by Pilcher and Imelda (2008), which originated in the 18th century. Radical feminist theory examines patriarchy as the fundamental source of women's subjugation.

Further, the authors added that violence and injustice against women deepened the structure of patriarchal capitalism. They argued that sexualism was so deeply rooted in the social system of patriarchal capitalism that a radical change in the people's culture was needed (Pilcher and Imelda, 2008). In the current study, combating early marriage in Isoka District might be hampered by the traditions and beliefs that compel young girls to marry at an early age. The Radical Feminists Theory further assert that women can only be liberated through debates meant to overhaul patriarchal structures (Pilcher and Imelda, 2008). Radical feminists analyze gender inequality by asserting that men hold power over women and primarily benefit from the oppression of women (Bryson, 1995). Moreover, Walby (1997) observed that feminists argue that men are the ruling class, and women the subject class. In most African cultures, girls were raised to be housewives, mothers and home-makers, doing domestic duties. The boys were expected to become heads of their households and primary earners, which required them to receive an education and accumulate wealth to effectively manage their homes (Walby, 1997). In contrast, Rowland and Klein (1998) argued that the revolutionary

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

goals of radical feminism were initially articulated through its focus on women; they posited that women's experiences and needs are fundamental to societal well-being.

Additionally, Rowland and Klein (1998) argued that radical feminist theory is developed by women for the benefit of women. This perspective considers all women as part of an oppressed group, highlighting that no woman can safely navigate public spaces or live in her own home without facing the risk of male violence. This theory was pertinent to this research as it enabled the investigator to examine various elements of Namwanga Culture, particularly their beliefs, customs, and practices that elucidate the reasons behind and strategies for addressing early marriage among girls in Isoka District.

METHODOLOGY

The present research utilized a qualitative methodology due to the study's requirements, which necessitated direct interaction between the researcher and participants to gather data within their natural settings. Therefore, in this study, a case study design was used as it allowed the researcher to retain a holistic view of real-life events, such as individual life cycles and small group behaviour such as women involved in early marriage. Purposive sampling was employed to choose Isoka District over other districts in Muchinga Province due to the high number of cases reported in the district, particularly in the two villages that were part of the study.

The composition of the sample was as follows: six victims of early marriage who were the key participants, four parents of the victims, two teachers, two traditional leaders, two leaders of the UCZ Isoka Main Congregation and two police officers from the Department of Victim Support Unit. Concerning the sampling technique used to select the eighteen participants, the researcher used snowball sampling. Interview and Focus Group Discussions were the methods used to collect data. Data were analysed using thematic analysis by first checking the responses gathered from the participants and grouping them according to common themes. All the participants expressed willingness to participate in the study. Participants were also free to withdraw from the study whenever they so wished.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The UCZ Helping to Combat Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

In trying to combat early marriages in Isoka District, the study established that the UCZ used the following strategies discussed in the sections that follow: forming groups for people, opening up recreational facilities, designing sensitization programmes, engagement of youths and empowerment programmes.

Forming Groups for Elderly People

The study discovered that the UCZ formed groups of elderly men and women to be speaking to the parents as well as the youths about the consequences of early marriage. One victim of the vice said, "The church has mobilised groups of elderly men and women who teach and sensitise both girls and boys on the importance of growing to maturity by avoiding sex and preserving it for marriage." This was supported by another victim of early marriage who indicated that the creation of women groups to venture into skills training of victims of early marriage was a combating measure taken by the church to end early marriage in the district. Additionally, the church helped to combat early marriage by opening up recreational facilities to enable youths to channel their energies to sports, and through sensitisation programmes. This helped to accelerate the AU (2015) campaign to end early marriage in Africa by supporting legal and policy actions in the protection and promotion of human rights.

Sensitisation Programmes

The findings gathered from the UCZ church leaders showed that the Church came up with programmes which focused on three activities: working with both boys and girls, the community and the legal system, and reviewing policies that affected the lives of the people, such as the Re-entry policy, which allowed pregnant girls to go back to school after delivery. In support of this Omondi (2008) points out that the re-entry policy allowed girls who became pregnant while in school to be re-admitted unconditionally to continue with their education soon after the maternity break. Moreover, the Zambian government was set to strengthen the re-entry of girls after their babies had grown and together with other stakeholders sensitised communities on the negative socio-cultural practices that reduced the effective participation of girls in education (Mulama, 2006).

The study further revealed that the UCZ came up with groups to help in sensitising the community. For this reason, the Church partnered with NGOs such as world Vision, to sensitise parents on the consequences of early marriage, making more parents alert and knowledgeable. The UCZ further set up guidance and counselling committees that counselled teenagers, making it easy for would-be victims to refrain from early marriage. This was supported by one of the teachers who emphasised, "The church has come out strongly to condemn the vice and support the government's efforts to stop early marriages in this district."

Through sensitisation programmes, youths were taught and sensitised on the advantages and disadvantages of early marriage and other cross-cutting issues, such as HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence. Sunday school and Youth Christian Fellowship were two activities presented in fourfold: spiritual, social, education and health. Youths shared information on these aspects in

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Planning Parenthood Zambia, health mothers and the traditional royal establishment. The findings further showed that the UCZ educated the youths on how to engage in Christian marriages, and never to get married before 21 years. This was done through Women's Christian fellowship groups in which information was shared and participants made vows never to be involved in early marriage. The church could therefore help change existing norms in communities and be critical allies in the movement to end early marriage (Pew Research Centre, 2012).

Engaging Youths

Furthermore, the findings showed that the UCZ engaged youths in different programmes such as Girls' and Boys' Brigades, Youth Christian Fellowship, Choir groups and through sports clubs to keep them busy away from church activities. Youth sports clubs were introduced at church for the youths to take part in netball and football, competing with other clubs. This was a recreation venture. The UCZ also embarked on an educational programme. This programme promoted a safer environment for learning by ensuring that community members interacted with the school authorities and discussed issues related to the education of their children. One of the church leaders narrated:

The church has come up with youth groups which are key in disseminating information about the dangers of early marriage. Through these groups, youths are given a platform to share ideas about different social problems related to health, peer pressure and education in general. We also involve youths by engaging them and advising them to live by Christian values, encourage parents to have dialogue with their children on traditional norms, and discuss other concerns such as sexuality, which affect youths in one way or the other. (L1: Interview, November 2021)

The youth groups helped to keep the youths busy and to focus on their well-being and networks rather than focussing on early marriage. These findings were in line with Walby (1997) who observed that feminists argue that men are the ruling class and boys were to be household heads so engaging boys into different activities might help them to value women and avoid using them for their personal gain.

Promotion of Youth Empowerment

On the promotion of youth empowerment, the study established that the UCZ supported the girl child to go to school by sponsoring youths who performed well at secondary school to attain tertiary education. Sponsoring youths to attain higher education did not only help the Zambian government, through the MoE, to provide education to the rural masses but it also reduced cases of early marriage. The Zambian government planned to provide free education at primary school level. However, the findings from one of the teachers showed that boys and girls were used in different activities for the economic gain of families, so whether free education was introduced or not, some parents and guardians would still withdraw their children from school.

The results further showed that the UCZ initiated empowerment programmes aimed at helping young girls and boys from involving themselves in early marriage prematurely. It was in this sense that one of the victims of early marriage indicated in a focus group discussion, "Empowering girls is on the top agenda of the UCZ here in Isoka District. Girls are encouraged to embark on income-generating projects so that they can be self-reliant. The UCZ also provide vulnerable girls and their families with income-making opportunities so that the parents can start doing something meaningful to send their children to school." (E3: FGD, November 2021). In affirming this, one of the Head teachers, who took part in the study, indicated that the Church had youth programmes that aimed at teaching them life skills to enable them to earn an income as capital for starting small businesses. The UCZ understood that education and empowerment interventions were the most effective ways of reducing early marriage in Isoka district.

Furthermore, one of the teachers indicated that the Church empowered members and the locals with knowledge and skills so that they could use the skills to come up with income-generating businesses instead of earning income from their daughters' payment of bride price. For Ziwa (2014: 69) empowerment is seen in the light of:

the ability of an individual to be able to take personal decisions, awareness of individual rights, possession and utilisation of leadership skills as well as one's education of children, among others. These indicators are like rays of the sun which collectively produce light or improve lives for women as a result of empowerment. These indicators are among other critical components through which it can be justified that a woman is empowered socially and educationally.

So by using local radio station and drawing up a monthly programme in which youths were used to disseminate information, the Church empowered youths and advocated for the elimination of early marriage in Isoka District, thereby improving their lives. The church further used the pulpit to preach against early marriage. Women and men in the church formed groups to mentor girls and boys who became of age on how to be responsible adults. In the same vein, to combat the challenge of lack of transport, the women bought bicycles to be used for transport when visiting distant places and educate parents and youths on the benefits of avoiding early marriage. The Church partnered with the police, NGOs and other churches in the area.

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

Child protection policy

The findings further revealed that the UCZ had a Child Protection Policy and Procedures Manual (2016) which guided church members and stakeholders on how to care for all children and safeguard them from vices that undermined their potential. Moreover, the UCZ Child Protection Policy and Procedures Manual (2016) was designed and implemented to help the church members and non-members who were in contact with children to learn how to protect and support them in all circumstances. It also formed the basis upon which a child-friendly manual was to be developed for usage by youths themselves (Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual, 2016). Additionally, the Zambian government has instituted a national response to address early marriage by launching a multi-stakeholder's anti-early marriage campaign. Structures to fight early marriage were put in place including a civil society coalition against early marriage, a ten-member ministerial committee, a draft policy on ending early marriage and a National Strategy of Ending Early Marriage for the period 2016-2021 (Early Marriage Policy, 2017).

Therefore, as the findings gathered from the UCZ religious leaders showed, in UCZ congregations, the religious leaders were encouraged to give attention to children's needs during congregation meetings. The Sunday school teachers were trained in child protection and children's rights. The guiding principle in responding to any concerns or issues surrounding child protection was that the safety and welfare of the child should always come first. No child was to be put at risk by any action taken by the church members. The UCZ also collaborated and partnered with other service providers, both state and non-state agencies to ensure that each child received the necessary protection and interventions to guarantee their rights and wellbeing (Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual, 2016). Though the UCZ ensured that children had support and protection from any form of harassment and abuse, the study by the African Union (AU) 'Campaign to End Early Marriage in Africa' shows that most research over the past ten years identifies religion and cultural traditions as having a role to play in the slow progress in the elimination of early marriage on the continent (AU, 2015).

The findings also showed that in each UCZ congregation in Isoka District, children and adults were advised to report any cases, allegations or threats of early marriage within their community. People were free to report to the reverends, diaconal workers and youth workers or any trusted person. This was in line with the UCZ Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual (2016), which stated that all Churches workers and other leaders of the UCZ are encouraged to speak openly against all forms of early marriage, threats or allegations of child abuse, violence, neglect, exploitation; any form of violations were promptly dealt with in accordance with the set procedures (Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual, 2016). Additionally, the UCZ leaders, as is expected of other religious leaders, were encouraged to listen to victims of early marriage, counsel them in a godly manner, talk about their concerns and support them holistically. As the Child Protection Policy and Procedure Manual (2016) put it, the UCZ leaders ensured that the victims of early marriage were protected from any further abuse. As such, Zulu (2014) noted that the church was not only a mirror of society, but a voice of the voiceless too. By being a voice of the people, the church's action was linked to advocacy taken as a broad and overarching concept, which could involve engaging with the general public to raise awareness on an important issue as well as influencing policy-makers toward desired solutions. This reinforced the position by radical feminists that women could only be liberated through debates meant to overhaul patriarchal structures (Pilcher and Imelda, 2008).

However, it was questionable whether what was stated in the Child Protection Policy was actually implemented in the field of work. None of the participants, other than the religious leaders, made concrete reference to information in the policy.

Community Engagement

Additionally, the findings generally showed that parental and community engagement was a frequently used strategy. The primary motivation behind this strategy was to create an enabling environment in the understanding that the decision to marry girls early was generally in the hands of family and community elders, and that the resulting stigma and sanctions for failing to meet social expectations were instituted by the broader community. Girls rarely had the power or agency to decide on their own if, when, or whom to marry. Thus, parental education and community mobilization attempted to change social norms and forge a more supportive, less punitive environment for girls and families who were willing and ready to change and move away from the custom of early marriage. According to the UCZ leaders, enlisting and sensitising parents and community members helped to mitigate possible unintended consequences of girls' participation in the different programmes, and also reinforced a programme's messages and activities.

As delineated in the scholarly literature, the objective of the Zambia National Strategy aimed at eradicating early marriage was to achieve a reduction of 40 percent in early marriage occurrences by the year 2021 (UNICEF Zambia, 2015). In alignment with the aims of the national strategy, the United Church of Zambia (UCZ) in Isoka District played a pivotal role in fostering transformative shifts in the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and practices that perpetuated this societal issue, thereby ensuring a unified approach to safeguarding children's rights and enhancing their overall well-being, in addition to facilitating the delivery of child-sensitive social services aimed at diminishing children's susceptibility to early marriage, among various other interventions. This was accomplished through the diverse programs initiated by the Church. Consequently, the Church collaborated closely with the government in its efforts to alleviate the incidence of early marriage within the district.

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

Furthermore, the findings showed that the UCZ engaged youths in different other programmes such as Girls' and Boys' Brigades, Youth Christian Fellowship, Choir groups and through sports clubs to keep them busy away from church activities. In support of this, the UCZ embarked on an educational programme. This programme promoted a safer environment for learning by ensuring that community members interacted with the school authorities and discussed issues related to the education of their children. The findings further showed that the UCZ ensured that children had support and protection from harassment and abuse.

Initiatives to Advocate for Combating Early Marriage

With regard to initiatives to advocate for combating early marriage in Isoka District, the study revealed the following themes: Having lessons with the youths, Promoting youth gatherings and Promotion of youth empowerment.

Having Lessons with the Youths

The study discovered that the Church came up with lessons for the youths as one of the initiatives to combat early marriage in the District. In this vein, one of the religious leaders said in an interview, "The UCZ has introduced catechumen lessons that help youths learn more about their health and hygiene; hence, helping them to avoid early marriage." Issues to do with marriage were discussed with the girls. The study further showed that some girls did not want to marry but their parents were not financially capable of paying for their school fees. Therefore, the girls stopped school and got married. The church mobilized groups of elderly men and women who provided traditional education to both girls and boys, at different levels of maturity, on the importance of growing to maturity, putting sex and sexuality in its perspective.

The findings further showed that the church developed a curriculum used by parents and adult committees in their endeavour to teach the youth life skills in sexual and reproductive health. Additionally, lessons against developing interest in early marriage were provided through workshops. The training workshops focused on cultural matters and the value of traditional education as the only way to uphold traditional values and promote the Zambian culture. The training exposed girls to the benefits of traditional values such as humility, resilience and abstinence; including the negative effects of early sex and early marriage. Other topics discussed included the value and benefits of upholding personal dignity, high self-esteem and assertiveness to minimize inappropriate dressing, promiscuity, drunkenness, early pregnancy and early marriage among girls. This assertion was corroborated by Participant P4, a parent, who reported the organization of collective and communal educational sessions focused on the implications of early marriage. Participant P4 concluded, "The Church is working hard to eliminate early marriage by putting in place awareness lessons in the surrounding communities."

The church also continued to sensitise girls and boys on the importance of education. Early marriage separated the victims from their family and friends and most likely they experienced life-threatening complications during pregnancy and child birth. This was done because the church believes in creating a conducive environment for the girls so that they were assisted to improve their decision-making capacities.

Promote Youth Gatherings

Concerning youth gatherings Participant E4, one of the victims of early marriage, indicated that youth gatherings were organised and implemented by the UCZ as one of the initiatives to combat early marriage in Isoka District. Participant E4 added, "Promotion of youth gatherings such as music festivals, Bible quizzes and poetry to advocate for the elimination of early marriage helps our youths to have information on the issue. We use the information to advise other youths to refrain from marrying at an early age." These sentiments were supported by Participant E6 who indicated that the UCZ in Isoka District designed programmes which helped youths, especially those not yet married, to put marriage in its perspective. The Church ensured that the activities were carried out as planned and were helpful to the youths by making follow-up visits to their (youths) homes."

Furthermore, Participant E1, a victim of early marriage stated the following:

I commend the UCZ for the skills development programme where youths are being helped to avoid premature marriage. The church has done this by opening a radio programme to teach survival skills to women. I find this programme useful because it targets people at the grassroots. At least the majority of the people in this area own a radio, so they benefit from the programme. To keep the youths busy and active in whatever activities or businesses they were involved in, the Church also advocates for sponsorship of these activities.

At this juncture, it is worth stating that for radical feminists, women can only be liberated through debates meant to overhaul patriarchal structures (Pilcher and Imelda, 2008). The efforts of the UCZ established by this research fit within this framework in facilitation and campaigns against early marriages as a form of oppression for young girls. The establishments made by this study that, by culture, girls are raised to be housewives, mothers, and homemakers whose domestic duties confirm the radical feminists who analyse gender inequality as a situation in which men dominate women and benefit from the subordination of women (Bryson, 1999:5). This theory has brought various aspects of the Namwanga Culture on their customs into context as it explains the causes, combating measures and effects of gender inequalities that arise from early marriage in the district.

Anderson's (2004) assertion suggested that religious leaders had more influence in the community and that if they were to take a role, which they have not, early marriage would end. The current researcher agrees with Anderson's view that the church in

An Examination of The Initiatives by The United Church of Zambia in Combating Early Marriage of Girls in Isoka District

general was closer to the community, had influence in the community and could immensely contribute to ending early marriage, but to suggest that the church had not yet taken any role in ending early marriage might not be true. In Isoka district, the UCZ religious leaders tried to combat early marriage but the onus was on the parents, traditional leaders and the victims themselves to adhere to the measures. The Church cannot be totally blamed if the mitigation measures are not adhered to.

CONCLUSION

The research was informed by the Radical Feminist Theory posited by Pilcher and Imelda (2008), which scrutinized patriarchy as the fundamental source of female subjugation. Gender marginalisation was so deeply rooted in the social system of patriarchal capitalism that reformation in the people's culture was needed. Therefore, in order to combat early marriage in Isoka District, the study established that the UCZ had programmes in which they worked with the girls and the community and reviewed policies that touched on women's lives. The study further established that the UCZ had a Child Protection Policy and Procedures Manual (2016) which guided church members and stakeholders on how to care for and protect their children from vices that undermined their potential. Furthermore, the involvement of parents and community members constituted a commonly employed tactic to cultivate a supportive milieu, recognizing that the determination to facilitate early marriages for girls predominantly resided with familial and community leaders. The gaps were identified in literature reviewed were therefore filled and the discovery that in Isoka District, the people were still attached to their traditional beliefs and practices in this modern era might be new.

In the current study early marriage compelled girls to be in subjection to their husbands whom they had been forced to marry. In line with feminist theory, many girls did not question the decision of their husbands but hoped to be subject to their schemes and desires and faithfully submitted to them in the name of keeping the marriage and fulfilling their duties as wives. As such, this study has established that combating early marriage in Isoka District and other districts in Zambia was laden with the traditions, cultures, customs and beliefs that obliged young girls to marry, or married off at an early age. To combat the scourge, the Zambian government should ensure that every district has recreational and skills training centres where young people could be kept busy and avoid early marriage, especially after dropping out of school. The Zambian government should further consider funding the UCZ and other churches in Zambia so that more sensitisation campaigns should be held in the communities. Finally, there is need to further review policies related to early marriage and ensure that they are strengthened to help reduce cases of early marriage not only in Isoka District but also other districts in Zambia.

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