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# Surviving early marriage: Lived experiences of young women in Zimbabwe's Makonde District

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## Abstract

The paper ascertained the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe's Makonde District. A rapid review and qualitative research approach frames this study. Researchers used methodological triangulation that promoted the use of several data collection methods to increase trustworthiness of the data. Atlas Ti version 22 was used to manage and support the qualitative thematic data analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The findings of this study revealed that young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe experienced abused life, poor living conditions, and growth and development vulnerabilities. The authors concluded that on-going support is highly recommended until young women who survived early child marriage have shown high levels of independence in their socioeconomic, mental, psychological, and financial wellbeing. It is therefore recommended that extensive research is needed in the areas of practice, teaching, literature, philosophy, and provision of welfare support and empowerment programs for young women who survived child marriages across the country. Thus, creating an enabling environment to change stereotypes that diminish efforts put forward by government in striving gender-inclusive human development opportunities.

**Keywords:** Early Marriages; Lived Experiences; Young Women; Zimbabwe's Makonde District

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## 1. Introduction

Child marriage is a widely known practice that has far reaching impact on young women all over the world. UNICEF (2018) states that 650 million women currently alive were married when they have not reached 18 years, and 125 million are found in Africa. UNICEF (2017) further states that each other 12 million children are married, with the highest rate of child marriages in South Asia with 285 million (44 per cent of the global total) and sub-Saharan Africa with 115 million (18 per cent of the global total) (UNICEF, 2018). Zimbabwe is among the countries in the region with the highest prevalence rates of child marriages exceeding 30 per cent, and the country is among 41 nations with the highest rates of child marriages (UNFPA, 2015; Sloth-Nielsen, 2016).

Young women who survived early marriage encountered many challenges from the moment they enter marriage as children until they become young women. The impact of child marriage has carried on to adulthood and ravaged their children and becomes a “generational curse”. Factors contributing to early child marriage in Zimbabwe include socioeconomic hardships (Muchacha and Matsika, 2018; Chinyoka et al., 2018; Kurebwa and Kurebwa, 2018), regressive cultural and marriage practices (Chitando, 2021; Psaki et al., 2021; Bengesai et al., 2021; Chitakure, 2016; Chae and Ngo, 2017), tradition and religious practices (Chamisa et al., 2019) and lack of law enforcement (Dzimire et al., 2017; Hallfors et al., 2016). Young women who survived early marriage continues to experience many hurdles in trying to navigate their survival means and support their children.

A lot of child marriage studies has been conducted in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe have not been extensively exhausted. As a result, on ongoing fight to reduce child marriage by various role players in Zimbabwe, amendments of child marriage laws were successfully implemented in May 2021. However, child marriage practice has already done unimaginable impact to young women in Zimbabwe. The Constitutional Court ruling on 20 January 2016 forbidden child marriages and invalidated the *Marriage Act* [Chapter 5:11] Section 22 (1) and the *Customary Marriage Act* 1951, however, child marriage practice had already deeply engrained its roots in all communities of Zimbabwe (Chikwinya, 2020; Hallfors et al., 2016).

In trying to mitigate the impact of child marriage, Zimbabwe has aligned the minimum age for marriage with international legal frameworks to 18 years. However, to the generations that have already been affected by child marriage the lived experiences has left so many challenging life events. The *Domestic Violence Act* 2007 criminalise marrying an underage in Zimbabwe. In the same vein, the Zimbabwe Domestic Act of 2007 age of consensual sex is 16 years making it difficult to stop child marriages and defeats the purpose of the recently aligned marriage Act and the Constitutional Court ruling on 20 January 2016 on the minimum age for marriage to 18 years. This loophole continuously creates a lot of impediments in eliminating early and child marriage.

Therefore, the study supports a gender-inclusive method for young women who survived early marriage to encourage the establishment and development of holistic management structures that recognize and seek to serve the best interest of young women before, during, and after policy implementation and to differentiate them in all development imaginations. The study is guided by the following objective to ascertain the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe. The paper will be discussed as follows: the theoretical framework, literature review, research methodology, findings and discussions, conclusion, and recommendations.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Transformative paradigm

The transformative paradigm was the theoretical framework of choice because it responds to the unfair treatment of people who cannot voice out for their rights, and concerns (Mertens, 2009). The theory advocates for the emancipation of the ignored voices of young women who survived early child marriage in Zimbabwe. This is going to be done by unpacking the lived experience of young women who survived early marriage. The lived experiences are going to play a crucial role in shaping the future development plans for women who had survived early marriage in Zimbabwe. The paradigm is applicable as it is linked to cultural responsiveness to matters related to child marriages. More so, matters of diversity related to power variance and trusting relationships because of choices and the influence the community or family members have on young women who survived early marriages is paramount to the paradigm.

Two assumptions shape this paradigm: first one clarifies the growing tensions because of the lack of unsatisfactory distribution of power relations that surrounds the inspection of what seems to be inflexible societal problem, and the forte originates in societies when their human rights are respected (Mertens, 2009). The notions that exist in this theory explain issues surrounding the lived experience of young women who survived early marriage. In rural setups, child marriages are culturally noticeable and have been practised since time immemorial. This has become a norm and has been instilled in people's beliefs to accept child marriage with its negative impact on young women.

The approach supported the respect and honour of young women's rights and needs in realising their will to change the stereotypes surrounding early marriages. The approach further seeks to unearth the ignored misconceptions that surrounded young women who survived early marriages. The approach does not "blame the victim mindset" or suggest that communities cannot impact change. In its place, the paradigm deliberates on conventionally applicable methods to allow understanding that solve sustainable societal transformation. Being reflective of the details of power, respect, and its effect on the status quo is also essential.

The paradigm intends to increase social fairness for women who survived early marriage. It must be acknowledged that the paradigm does not romanticise exclusively native and traditional because certain traditions coerce the repressed. The paradigm was useful in this research context because it accepted the critical viewpoint. The key viewpoint helped the researchers to explore the historical beginnings of social and political patterns. These patterns have received attention for long, and young women who survived early marriage have accepted and internalised unjust aspects of these patterns.

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1. Gender inequality

Centre for Human Rights (CHR) and the African Commission Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women (ACSRRW) (2018) comment that child marriage greatly impairs young girls married to older men. Furthermore, it is difficult to comprehend the social, cultural, and economic facets of the causes of child marriage without stating the poor standard of these young girls to marry an older man. Some causes of gender

inequality include religious beliefs and practices, customs, and formal and informal laws and customs that date back to the colonial era (CHR and ACSRRW, 2018). These causes can control women and girls' social and economic roles. Hodgkison (2016) indicates that women and girls are weakened to voice their voices, whereas boys are assisted to excel in life and are ascribed to a higher value. Lack of knowledge and good advice for most African families forces girls to lack value in their families; the belief is that the girl's work revolves around the kitchen and in the bedroom, which makes it difficult for girls to exercise their willpower. For instance, studies conducted in Niger (Shakya et al., 2022) and in Ghana (Ahonsi et al., 2019).

### 3.2. Tradition, culture, and religious beliefs

Certain traditions, cultures, and religious beliefs undermine women's and girl's rights and their will power (Psaki et al., 2021). Internalised respect for certain traditions, cultures, and beliefs made it difficult to reject them outrightly (Montazeri et al., 2016). Issues like beliefs about sexuality, gender roles, and women's subservience are found in many customary practices, traditions, cultures, and religious beliefs putting women and girls in a challenging stance (CHR and ACSRRW, 2018).

Certain church doctrines ill inform church followers. Churches like the White garments, Zionist, Islamic, and Moslem are among the religious sects that believe in early child marriage as a source of keeping the virginity for future husbands (Le Roux and Palm, 2018). Girls in these churches are forced to marry early to avoid premarital sexual practices and save family honour. African countries with a considerable figure of churches that inspire early child marriage have also amplified cases of child marriage. For instance, in Gambia, 95 percent of the populace are Muslims, and child marriage is not seen as an infringement of children's rights, it is seen as appropriate (CHR & ACSRRW, 2018). In Zimbabwe, the white garment and Zionist churches have a substantial number of groups, and Zimbabwe is amongst 41 nations with extreme occurrences of child marriages (UNFPA, 2015; Sloth-Nielsen, 2016).

### 3.3. Poverty

Girls Not Brides (2017) states that children from relegated families and societies, those societies with families that are unable to feed their children, particularly girls, are more than three times more likely to marry before they reach 18 years, and 50 per cent of girls who came from deprived families in less developed countries are married as children. Poverty in Africa is a staggering block to so many girls' prospects. The verdict behind marrying young girls could be self-serving and centralisation of the girl's well-being (Madzivire, 2019). The payment of the bride price is portrayed as a "source of income to save the family from poverty" (Girls Not Bride, 2019; Smaak and Varia, 2015; CHR and ACSRRW, 2018).

### 3.4. Lack of education

Child marriage and school dropouts are strongly correlated in Africa (Madzivire, 2019). Studies on enrolment showed that girls' staffing is more than boys' during primary school. However, girls do not finish secondary school compared to boys (Psaki et al., 2021). Girls from insignificant community backgrounds do not have the likelihood to finish secondary school for many reasons, such as parents unable to pay school fees and prioritising boys over girls (CHR and ACSRRW, 2018). This is because many African families consider that

supporting a boy child would benefit the family as he would take up the family name and honour, unlike the girl child who would be married and enrich the family she would get married to (Hodgkinson, 2016).

Girls Not Brides (2017) points out that over 60 per cent of women between the ages of 20-24 with no education were married before they reached 18 years. Furthermore, girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as compared to those with secondary or higher education. Lack of education is an impediment to the fulfilment of many girls' dreams.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Rapid review approach

Rapid review approach was applied because it was a method that provided summaries of literature in an opportune and resource-well-organised way by applying methods that simplify traditional systematic review process (Munn et al., 2015; Ganann et al., 2010). Qualitative, mixed-methods, and quantitative studies assessed (1) lived experiences of women survivors of early marriages, and (2) child marriages. Due to the array of included study designs, no meta-analysis was conducted. The research study followed the seven steps of a quick review described by Dobbins (2017).

- *Step 1: Define the research question.*

The authors formulated a research question: *What are the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe's Makonde District.*

- *Step 2: Search for research evidence.*

The authors did a preliminary database search utilising the North-West University library catalogue to find evidence to answer the research question. Other databases used were eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), Google Scholar, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, SocINDEX with Full Text, Academic Search Premier, CINAHL with Full Text, and JSTOR Journals.

- *Step 3: Determining relevance.*

The authors selected information based on the review's criteria and available resources as a screening method. The authors reviewed the titles and abstracts of all relevant papers. Full-text papers that meet the inclusion criteria were downloaded and re-evaluated. The flow diagram elucidates the total number of articles in inclusion and exclusion criteria.

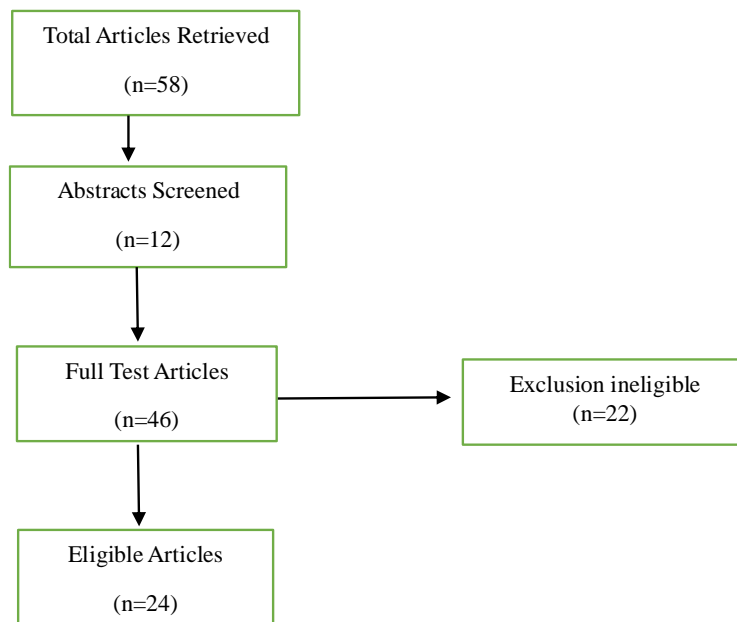
- *Step 4: Critically appraisal of information sources.*

The authors implemented the seven steps of the rapid review process and wrote the report once the rapid review process was completed. To reduce bias in selecting the reviewed data, Promoter acted as an independent reviewer, verifying the information throughout the process as explained by Bomhof-Roordink et al. (2019). Data was extracted and critically examined simultaneously during this procedure. The authors used the inclusion criteria as a guide to extract data from qualifying studies.

- *Step 5: Find applicability and transferability for future decision-making factors.*

This stage was critical for determining whether the obtained information applies to the local context (Zimbabwe's Makonde District). Titles and abstracts that match the search method were selected and

recognised. Titles and abstracts corresponding to the search strategy were chosen and recognised. Only those relevant to the current study were used in full text to produce the most accurate results.



**Figure 1.** Flow diagram of articles searched.

## 4.2. Qualitative research approach

Application of qualitative research approach was because the approach is participant-oriented enough to gather the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriages. The approach is committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009 cited by Alase, 2017).

### 4.2.1. Study area and selection

The study was conducted in Makonde district, Mashonaland West Province, north-central Zimbabwe which is located 125km northwest of Harare. Makonde District is a rural farming district.

### 4.2.2. Population and sampling

A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used. The population consisted of young women who survived early marriage, parents/legal guardian and practicing social workers. A total sample size of seventy eight (78) participants participated in answering the in depth, semi-structured and focus group interview guides. Twenty-eight (28) were young women who survived early marriage, twenty-eight (28) were parents, seventeen (17) were legal guardian, and five (5) practicing social workers. The age of young women who survived early marriage was 19 to 23 years, parents age was 38 to 60 years and legal guardian's age was 30 to 55 years. The sample size was reached when the authors could not collect new data from the participants. This

is well known as data saturation (Mwita, 2022). The reason why authors had three groups of participants was to get an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriages. This helped in understanding the lived experiences on a broad and unbiased point of view.

#### 4.2.3. Data collection

In-depth, and semi structured interviews and focus group discussion were used to collect data from participants. In-depth interviews were administered to young women who survived early marriages, semi-structured were administered to practicing social workers, and focus groups discussions were administered to parents/legal guardian. The interview guides were designed to get answers on the lived experiences of young women who survived early marriages.

#### 4.2.4. Trustworthiness

Data validity, credibility and reliability was enhanced by data triangulation.

#### 4.2.5. Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis as proposed by Braun et al. (2018) was used to analyses the data. To ensure that the codes were correctly identified, researchers double-checked data, and when satisfied the themes were analyzed to produce a final report. Atlas Ti version 22 was utilized to manage and support the qualitative thematic data analysis. The use of this qualitative software facilitated the virtual findings of the study as qualitative data was networked and projected for a better understanding of lived experiences of young women who survived early marriages. The data was presented using a structured and systematic scientific interpretation technique. An ethical approval letter was obtained from the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC).

## 5. Findings and discussions

This section presents the findings of the lived experience of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe's Makonde District. Three main themes with subthemes were identified:

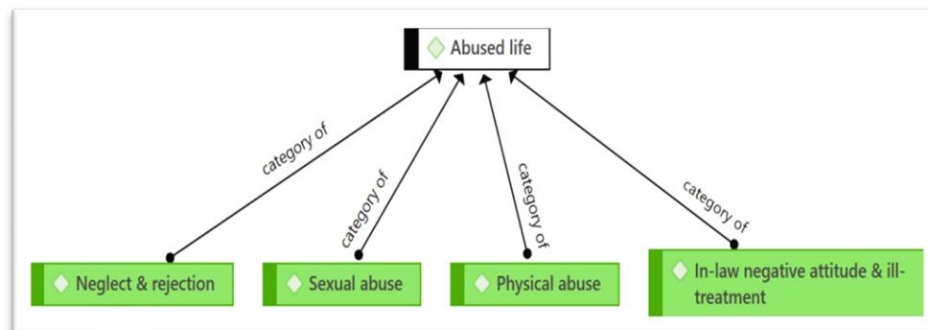
### 5.1. Abused life

#### 5.1.1. Physical abuse

Physical abuse was interpreted as any physical harm presented to young women who survived early marriage by their husbands or in-laws. Physical abuse was a strategy used to threaten young women not to leave their matrimonial homes or consult for secondary opinions about the physical abuse they experienced during early marriages. Physical abuse was also used as a source and form of control and manipulation towards young women who survived early marriage.

Physical abuse was exemplified through the following response:

*“Things were hard for me; I did not have joy because I was prohibited from socialising with my neighbours, my husband could check the footprints in our yard to check if anyone came during his absence”.*



**Figure 2.** Theme and subthemes of abused life (Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti).

In trying to safeguard the marriage, young women who survived early marriage were mentally, psychological, and physically affected in every aspect of their lives. Their youthful age at the time of marriage and lack of understanding of what marriage entails explains young women's inability to stand their ground when maltreated.

The findings of the study were supported by Plan International Zimbabwe (2016) postulates that child marriage is the primary passage in which all forms of abuse and exploitation affects children. Furthermore, Girls Not Brides (2022) contends that girls married below the age of 15 are 50 per cent likely to have experienced sexual, psychological, or physical abuse and violence from their partner, unlike girls married above 18 years. Not only do they receive intimate partner violence, but girls also go through sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological violence and abuse at the hands of their in-laws and relatives (UNICEF, 2014). Nasrullah et al. (2015) and Kidman (2017) also support the view that child marriage is dominated by all forms of abuse. Age differences between partners and gender roles worsen the circumstances.

### 5.1.2. Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse in young women who survived early marriage was interpreted as forced or unconsented sexual intercourse by their husbands. Husbands felt entitled to do so without any remorse because of the bride's price paid, and lack of decision-making capacity because of age difference. Sexual abuse was also enhanced by the support the husbands get from societal norms that support patriarchal ideologies that undermine women's decision-making on when, how, and where to have sexual intercourse or have children. Only the husband can decide as a supposedly head of the house.

The findings of the study showed that sexual abuse was mentioned repeatedly in early marriage:

*“He abused me physically and sexually. He forced me to have sex with him while I was having my monthly period”.*



The findings were maintained by the study conducted by Septiarum et al. (2019) postulate that young women who survived early marriage experienced sexual abuse in so many ways. For instance, their partners force them to have sex when they are not ready and without their consent. Young women who survived early marriage ended up having unintended pregnancies and contracting sexually transmitted diseases whilst young and unaware.

Young women who survived early marriage's families supported early marriage. For instance, payment of bride price, and occasional gifts from the groom cemented the relationships between two families making it difficult for the bride to leave the marriage or complain about the abuse. Consciously forgoing the negative impact sexual abuse has on young women who survived early marriage.

### 5.1.3. In-law's negative attitude and ill-treatment

In-law's negative attitude and ill-treatment was interpreted as any negative and unsupportive attitude uttered on young women who survived early marriage. The negative attitude and ill-treatment were portrayed in various forms such as emotional, verbal, physical, psychological, financial, and economic. One of the factors identified to cause in-law negative attitude and ill-treatment was the age these young women enter marriage made them unable to understand the demands of marriage, lack of maturity towards critical decision making and even unable to do house chores that married women are expected to do.

The findings reflected that in-law negative attitude and ill-treatment were interpreted as common in early marriage as alluded:

*"...They did not inform me in any of the discussions at home because of my age. I would be told the outcome, and at times will be told to go and do house chores instead of being part of the critical discussions happening in the house. At some point I was beaten for behaving like a child. No one had respect for me because of my age and physical appearance".*

The study's findings agreed with Gharacheh et al. (2020), remark that girls married young does not have the capacity to decide the number of children to have, make financial decisions and manage finances in the family, and use contraceptive methods. Parsons, Edmeades, Kes, Petroni, Sexton and Wodon (2015) further state that lack of decision-making is highly influenced by being poor, young, and uneducated. Young women who survived early marriage depend on their husband and husband family for survival which enhance their dependence and high chances of disrespected and ill-treated.

Young women were forced to remain in a toxic environment and endure in-law negative attitudes and ill-treatment because of societal and cultural norms that safeguard marriage institution regardless of its negative impact on early marriage. Moreover, those who experience failed marriages were ridiculed and stereotyped. All participants reflected that it was a taboo to come back from a failed marriage, and discrimination and rejection surrounded them all the time. Young women who survived early marriage experienced lack of support from their families or community members after leaving their marriages.

### 5.1.4. Neglect and rejection

Neglect and rejection were termed as the inability to get affection, love, support (financial, physical, psychological, mental, and emotional), and guidance from husband, family, friends, and public and private

institutions. Some of the factors contributing to neglect and rejection were age, lack of relevant skills for employment, and geographical location of the district.

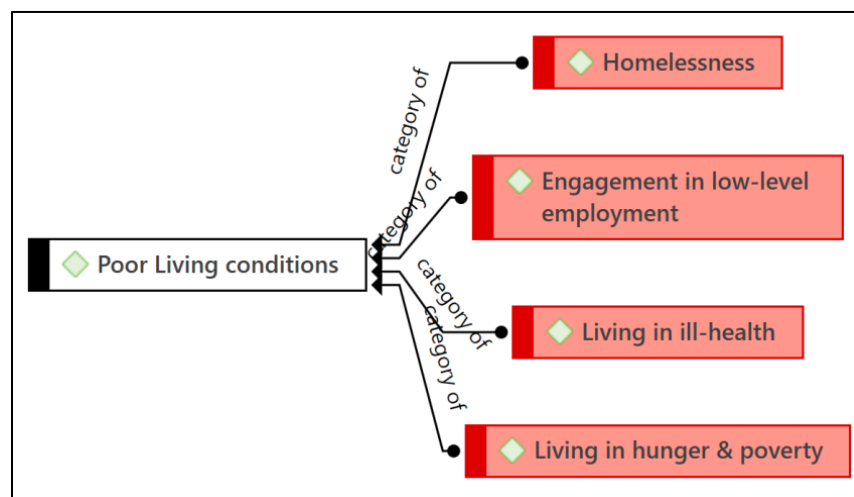
Neglect and rejection affected young women who survived early marriage’s well-being. The findings of the study indicated that:

*“Going back to their parental homes after divorce, they encounter rejection from their siblings, relatives, or parents. To those who return to their parent’s homes, you would find that there will be tensions between mother and father not agreeing to accommodate them. However, young women will stay because they have nowhere to go, but the environment will be harsh and unproductive for their livelihoods and welfare”.*

Plan International Zimbabwe (2016) advocate the view that young women who have survived early marriage experienced neglect and rejection. Plan International Zimbabwe (2016) further explains that when a girl is married and brought to a new family, she begins to have new social networks, leaving behind her family, friends, and school, which puts her at a greater disadvantage. The new family she enters does not know anyone, has no friends, and no form of support system. Neglect and rejection affected the well-being of young women who survived early marriage which led to factors like committing suicide, suffering from hunger and starvation, remaining dependent on abusers, dying from avoidable circumstances, and enduring harmful working conditions.

### 5.2. Poor living conditions

Figure 3 illustrates the various dimensions of poor living conditions experienced by young women who survived early marriages in Zimbabwe's Makonde District. Each of these elements reflects the severe socioeconomic challenges these women face, exacerbating their vulnerability and hindering their ability to improve their living conditions.



**Figure 3.** Theme and subthemes of poor living conditions (Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas.Ti).

### 5.2.1. Homelessness

Homelessness from the findings was interpreted as a state of lacking shelter. A good shelter provides protection and warmth against harsh weather conditions, good and comfortable sleep, and a peaceful state of mind, which reduces stressful factors for young women who survived early marriage. The findings of the study indicated that young women who survived early marriage experienced homelessness as exemplified through the following response:

*“My auntie chased me from their home saying I was old enough to get married and shelter myself. I stayed in the streets for a while and ended up eloping to an old man who provided shelter for me. I ended up becoming his wife”.*

Section 28 of The Constitution of Zimbabwe revealed that the State and all institutions and agencies of government at every level must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within the limits of the resources available to them, to enable every person to have access to adequate shelter. Young women who survived early marriages do not have sustainable shelter. It contradicts with section 28 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe's obligation. The government of Zimbabwe has failed to provide its obligation towards young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe's Makonde district.

### 5.2.2. Engagement in low-level employment

Engagement in low-level employment was interpreted as working for underpaying jobs. Young women who survived early marriage were saddened by the treatment they were subjected to because of lack of necessary skills, literacy level, and qualifications. This results in engagement in low-level employment that only provides hand-to-mouth food. Available employment opportunities were mostly in the informal sectors characterised by unsafe working conditions, and seasonal.

The findings of the study indicated that young women who survived early marriage engaged in low-level employment as expressed in the following response:

*“Here young women who survived early marriage survives on piece jobs. Piece jobs include cleaning houses, cutting the hedge, sweeping yards, washing clothes, vending, and selling in supermarkets and beer halls”.*

The findings of this study were maintained by Kurebwa and Kurebwa's (2018) study revealed that children who ended up in child marriage lacked primary or had no education as compared to girls who had attained primary and secondary school. Yaya et al. (2019) additionally emphasised that lack of education compromised girls' future aspirations and dreams. Going to school enables girls to receive empowerment skills to better their lives and future, increase employability and enhance them to make better social networking skills that assist and enhance their communication in advocating for their interests.

### 5.2.3. Living in ill-health.

Living in ill-health was construed as having livelihoods that are affected by sickness. Young women who survived early marriage were not able to fully engage in various activities in their homes and communities

because of living in ill-health. Illness was caused by complications during pregnancy and after childbirth, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, subjected to physical abuse, hunger and starvation, and unavailability of healthcare services for early diagnosis of any illness.

The findings of the study indicated that young women who survived early marriage experienced living in ill-health as expressed in the following response:

*"...Some now suffer from blood pressure as a result of the traumatic and stressful experience they have been subjected to".*

Other participants expressed that

*"...abusive men kept on biting young women who survived early marriage. Reports has been made to the police, but they end up coming back without serving their sentence or bribing the police to misplace the dockets. The abuse becomes worse when they come back".*

#### 5.2.4. Living in hunger and poverty

Living in hunger and poverty was interpreted as being unable to get adequate food to eat every day. This was linked to a lack of employment opportunities to work and provide for the family. Young women who survived early marriage lived in hunger and poverty because of a lack of economic opportunities in the communities they lived and did not have skills that match the job market.

The findings of the study indicated that young women who survived early marriage lived in hunger and poverty as shown through the following participant's opinion:

*"They beg for food every day and some of them have become part of our extended family. They survive on hand-to-mouth kind of lifestyle, and their children sleep on empty stomach".*

The findings of this study agreed with Madzivire (2019) who states that poverty in Africa is a stumbling block to so many girls' opportunities. Poverty is a driver of child marriage; the decision that lies behind the marrying of young girls could be self-serving and centralisation of the well-being of the girl herself. More so, Girls Not Bride (2019), Smaak and Varia (2015) and CHR & ACSRRW (2018) hold the position that payment of the bride price is seen as a way out of poverty by some families; girls are sent off to their husbands so that the husband can continue supporting the girl's family in many ways. Girls as young as ten years were married off to get consumer goods and bride wealth from the groom's family (Chinyoka et al., 2018).

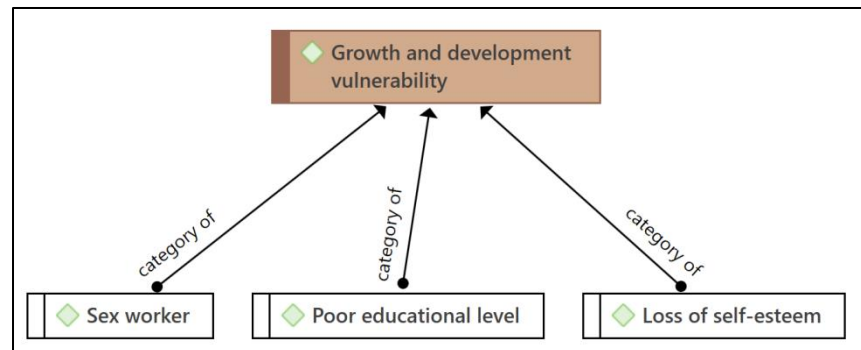
Studies conducted by Mann et al. (2015) for UNICEF in six districts of Zambia reveals the economic hardships that parents and legal guardian went through and forces them to marry their daughters to end hunger and poverty. The payment of the bride's price was a form of financial gain to the family, and the older daughter frees the whole family. The bride price that had been charged was used to take other children to school and buy food and any other outstanding items in the family.

Hodgkinson (2016) confirmed with the findings that child marriage made families live in poverty and experience economic hardships. Child marriage becomes a coping strategy used by families living in hunger and poverty. Chitempa (2018) showed that poverty makes parents/legal guardians stop their daughters from

going to school and getting married early. The whole process goes on to affect young women who survived early marriage.

### 5.3. Growth and development vulnerability

Figure 4 presents the theme of growth and development vulnerability, focusing on the adverse outcomes for young women who survived early marriages in Makonde District.



**Figure 4.** Theme and subthemes for growth and development vulnerability (Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti).

#### 5.3.1. Sex worker

Sex worker was construed as a person who survived on sleeping with men for money. Sex work has become a common, well-known form of ‘employment’ for young women who survived early marriage in Makonde district. The reason why sex work became a readily available source of livelihood for young women who survived early marriage was because the process does not require qualifications or experience, unlike any other formal and informal jobs. Young women who survived early marriage ended up being sex workers as they are no other choices to earn money or better living.

The findings of the study indicated that young women who survived early marriage ended up becoming sex workers and suffer from sexually transmitted diseases as reflected by one of the participants:

*“...Tendai (pseudo name) was sleeping with so many men. Currently, she is diagnosed with AIDS, and she is only 20 years. She rarely gets antiretroviral drugs on time. Her whole life is affected she can’t work for herself, and nobody want to live with her”.*

The findings of this study were corroborated by Frederick et al’s (2010) study that was carried out in Nepal. The study explains that two-thirds of the married girls and women in Nepal were engaged in sex work/prostitution because the mothers wanted to feed and provide for their children. Silverman’s (2015) study in Mexico shown that child marriage and adolescent motherhood are because of commercial sexual exploitation of girls caused by marital neglect. Vulnerabilities were higher in adolescent mothers, who would play motherly and fatherly roles to provide for and support the children.

The researchers observed that young women who survived early marriage engaged in prostitution in exchange for money and food because of their inability to look after themselves, and starvation caused them to become sex workers. Sex work is among the primary source of financial income as postulated by the participants in Makonde district. However, becoming a sex worker was reported to have long-term negative consequences compared to the money they had received.

### 5.3.2. Poor educational level

The findings of the study reflected that most young women who survived early marriage reportedly have poor educational level that cannot be considered in the labour market. Lack of basic education (primary and secondary level) because of parents/guardians unable to pay schools fees made young women who survived early marriage have poor educational qualifications. The findings of the study indicated that poor education level leads to a lack of relevant knowledge and parenting skills:

*“They are not skilled in parenting children. They do not even know how to handle their babies after birth or even look after themselves. They rarely attend hospitals and clinics for the immunisation of their children”.*

The findings of the study were confirmed by Madzivire (2019) who asserted that child marriage and school dropouts in Africa are closely interrelated. Psaki et al (2019) indicated that girls’ enrolment outnumbers boys during their primary level. However, girls will not reach, or complete secondary school compared to boys. In most African countries, girls from poor community backgrounds do not have the chance to complete secondary school due to many reasons such as parents’ being unable to pay school fees, early forced child marriage, prioritisation of the boy child over the girl child (Hodgkinson, 2016; CHR and ACSRRW, 2018; Davis et al., 2013). This is because many African families believe that supporting a boy child benefits the family as he takes up the family name and honour, unlike the girl who gets married and enriches the family she gets married to.

Girls Not Brides (2017) states that over 60 percent of women between the ages of 20-24 with no education were married before they reached 18 years. Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as compared to those with secondary or higher qualifications. Vogelstein (2013), Plan UK (2011), and Malhotra et al. (2011) hold the position that taking children to school reduces the chances of being married young, children at school are treated as minors, unlike children not going to school. Making girls stay at home increases their chances of marrying young as perpetrators of child marriage treat them as adults and ready for marriage.

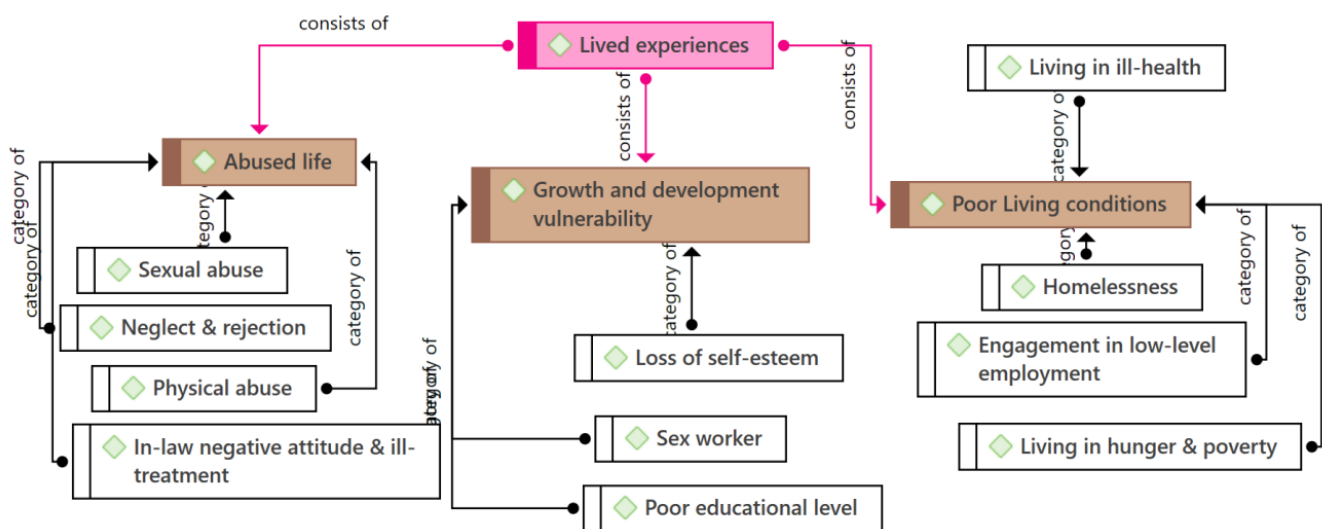
### 5.3.3. Loss of self-esteem

Loss of self-esteem emerged from the data as a feeling of unable to see or recognise one’s importance or valuable. This could be from close family or spouse. Loss of self-esteem was also worsened by abuse, suffering from sexually transmitted diseases, and illiteracy. Young women who survived early marriage were forced to shrink in their own space, which increased their level of self-esteem in whatever they wanted to do.

The findings of the study reflected that young woman who survived early marriage encountered loss of self-esteem:

*“Most of them lack self-confidence in voicing out their wishes and ill treatment they were subjected to. Their men would publicly tell them that no one will remarry them once you leave them. Their self-esteem is low such that they no longer believe in themselves”.*

Bengesai et al. (2021) establish that lack of education for girls makes them unable to level up their self-esteem as they are unsure of what they want or want to do with life. Plan International Zimbabwe (2016) notes that continuous physical and sexual abuse and intimate partner violence reduce young women who survived early marriage’s level of self-esteem. Wodon et al. (2020) findings maintain that regarding their employability, they are likely to earn low wages and continue to live in poverty and miserable lives for the rest of their lives. Being financial independent stimulates confidence in their decisions, thus increasing their self-esteem which is not the case with young women who survived early marriage.



**Figure 5.** summary of themes and subthemes for lived experience of young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe’s Makonde District (Source: Created by the researcher in Atlas. Ti).

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The authors identified lack of support from relevant Ministries as a major impediment in the provision of human development initiatives for young women who survived early marriage in Zimbabwe’s Makonde District. Therefore, the authors recommends that the Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare through its Department of Social Development could play an important role by engaging, collaborating, and encouraging other Ministries to promote sustainable human development programs and initiatives in Zimbabwe’s Makonde District.

The findings of the study recommended a gender responsive and gender inclusive method. Gender responsive focus on program, policy, or activities that addresses gender-based barriers, respects gender differences, and promotes gender-fair education. Gender inclusive focus on community respects human dignity, one’s right to self-identity and self-expression, and diversity. Thus, aiming to creating a safe and respectful

environment for all genders. This can be promoted and enhanced through educating the communities and providing awareness programs to sensitise the matter under discussion.

The authors have concluded that Zimbabwe's Makonde District lacks human development opportunities. Human development is more than just economic growth or physical size. It is about creating opportunities and choices for people to live fulfilling lives. Human development includes enhance of infrastructure development (such as building more primary and secondary schools; refurbishment of rural roads, providing adequate healthcare institutions, and police offices), and strengthening telecommunication system that augment easy rural-urban communication.

Revitalise collapsed industries (such as mines in Alaska or Mhangura, grain marketing boards (GMB) in Murereka, create more industries and support all farmers in this district with farming equipment that would enhance job creation that accommodate all gender). The district has the capacity to contribute to a sizeable gross domestic product for the country. This can only be feasible only if effective management, monitoring, and evaluation is done thoroughly and people who misuse power and resources are held accountable for their action.

Makonde District is a solely agriculture based (both large- and small-scale farming) hence, agriculture based human development initiatives need adequate support from the relevant Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development through its Departments. Funding agriculture based human development initiatives can reduce challenges experienced by young women who survived early marriages. Thus, reducing factors contributing to early marriages in Zimbabwe's Makonde District.

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