

"Advancing Gender Equity: Addressing Child Marriage And Mental Health Challenges In Zambia"

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Abstract : Child marriage remains a critical issue in Zambia, with particularly high rates in Chipata, Eastern Province. This paper examines the intersection of gender equity, mental health, and child protection, focusing on the impact of child marriage on young girls in the region. The study highlights the socio-economic and cultural factors driving child marriage, including poverty, entrenched cultural norms, and limited access to education. These factors often result in girls being married at a young age, severely limiting their personal and educational development. This practice jeopardizes their mental well-being, with many facing depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. Data from Lifeline/Childline Zambia's toll-free helpline reveals the rising prevalence of child marriage, particularly in rural areas. Girls married before 18 are at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence, psychological trauma, and restricted access to resources such as education and healthcare. These girls often exhibit mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and suicidal thoughts. However, mental health remains an often-overlooked aspect in the response to child marriage, with stigma and lack of awareness preventing proper care and intervention. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative data from Lifeline/Childline Zambia's helpline records and qualitative data from community focus groups and key informant interviews. The findings underscore the drivers of child marriage in Chipata—poverty, cultural expectations, and limited educational opportunities—while also highlighting the severe mental health consequences for child brides. Girls who have experienced early marriage report higher instances of depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies compared to their unmarried peers. The paper proposes several community-based interventions to address both child marriage and the mental health challenges faced by young girls. First, it recommends culturally sensitive workshops aimed at challenging harmful norms that perpetuate early marriage and promoting gender equity. Engaging community leaders and using local languages will be essential for these interventions to succeed. Secondly, it advocates for strengthening legal frameworks and enforcing laws against child marriage. Despite existing legal provisions, enforcement is weak, and further advocacy is necessary to ensure that girls' rights are protected. In addition to these interventions, the paper highlights the need for improved mental health services tailored to the needs of child brides. Establishing accessible, community-based mental health support systems will help address the psychological toll of early marriage. Furthermore, providing scholarships and vocational training will empower girls economically and reduce the financial pressures that often lead to early marriages. This study contributes to the global discourse on gender equity and mental health by offering a detailed analysis of the situation in Zambia, suggesting targeted, culturally sensitive interventions that can be adapted to other regions facing similar challenges. The findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach that integrates mental health, education, and legal advocacy to combat child marriage and promote gender equity.

Keywords : child marriage, gender equity, mental health, poverty

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