

## Original Research Article

# Implications of Female Teenage Marriages on Human Rights Violation in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe

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Received: 22.06.2023

Accepted: 31.07.2023

Published: 06.10.2023

**Journal homepage:**<https://www.easpublisher.com>**Quick Response Code**

**Abstract:** The study sought to investigate the implications of female teenage marriages on human rights violation in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methodology design with a QUANT – QUAL criterion was adopted for the study. Quantitative results were cross-examined with findings from qualitative data, which explored alternative explanations for violation of Married Female Teenagers (MFTs)' human rights. Respondents were 192 MFTs who were randomly sampled from the target population while participants were 17 MFTs and five (5) Key Informants who were purposively sampled from the target population. Respondents provided the required information through a closed-ended questionnaire while participants and Key Informants were engaged in face-to-face interviews using semi-structured questionnaire. Data from Focus Group Discussions were obtained through unstructured questionnaire. Quantitative research data were analysed using the SPSS 21.0 while Content Thematic Analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data. The study revealed that teenage marriages violated MFTs' rights to; pursue education, enjoy good health, engage in income generating projects, be protected from sexual and verbal abuse and make independent decisions while in marriage. Husbands hindered the right to education for MFTs. Right to engage in income generating projects was hindered by lack of capital and refusal by some husbands and in-laws. The rights to make independent decisions were thwarted by restrictions imposed by husbands on MFTs' movement, choice, association and belonging. The Government and its development partners were recommended to reach out to male teenagers and men with sexuality and gender-based violence (GBV) programmes.

**Keywords:** Human rights, implications, female teenage marriage, Mt Darwin District, Mashonaland Central Province.

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## INTRODUCTION

The current international opinion is that teenage marriages violate girls' right to health, life, education, survival and development, freedom from sexual abuse, dignity and personal integrity, protection and influence decisions (Mwambene & Mawodza, 2016; Save the Children, 2016). Legal voice on teenage marriages was first heard in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) decreed that marriage participants must be mature enough to freely and fully consent their marriages. In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child advanced the dialogue on children's rights by demanding the protection of children from harmful

traditional practices such approval of child marriages. Thereafter, the General Recommendation No. 21 (1994) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) set 18 years as the minimum age for marriage for both men and women. To date 193 countries worldwide have ratified legislative requirements for teenage marriages. Despite the ratification of these legal declarations and recommendations, the prevalence of teenage marriages continue to escalate especially in developing countries like Zimbabwe. This study was triggered by the escalation of teenage marriages and scarcity of

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researched knowledge on the implications of teenage marriages on the human rights of teenagers in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. Despite these rampant teenage marriages particularly in developing countries, they still remain a human rights issue. Mengistu (2015) considers teenage marriage as a violation of human and women rights. This notion is endorsed by the Human Rights Watch (2011) which argues that teenage marriages violate the girls' rights to; psychological wellbeing, non-discrimination, protection of best interest of the child, life, development, to be protected from all forms of violence and sexual abuse, health, education, and express their views. Similarly, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (2005) concurs that teenage marriages violate victims' rights to educational and vocational information and guidance as well as the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. UNFPA (2012) acknowledges that teenage marriage is a human rights violation that denies a girl of her childhood, disrupts her education, limits her opportunities, increases her risk of violence and abuse, and jeopardizes her health. Furthermore, teenage marriage eliminates the child's freedom to choose when and whom to marry. It is evident that teenage marriage renders the female teenager redundant in terms of professional, skills development and economic growth. There is an urgent need for research to guide Government ameliorative and/ or preventative interventions for teenage marriages in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the implications of teenage marriages on human rights violation in the Mt Darwin District of Zimbabwe. The study sought to answer the following questions: (a) Are the human rights of female teenagers in marriage violated? (b) In what ways are the human rights of married teenagers violated? The results of the study might be critical in guiding strategies to curb teenage marriages. The findings could also enhance the call for child protection programming, awareness and even alert Human Right Activists of the harmful effects of teenage marriages. Based on the study findings, strategies to curb teenage marriages and their effects could be changed, thereby opting for vigorous ways that might save the teenagers from the devastating effects of early marriages.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The study utilised a mixed research method design to investigate the implications of teenage marriages on human rights violation among a Zimbabwean sample of female teenagers. Specifically, an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method design was adopted for this study. The focus was on collecting both numerical and verbal evidence data to provide an in-depth understanding of the problem under study

The study was conducted in three phases. The first phase involved administration of a closed-ended

structured questionnaire to 192 MFTs respondents who were randomly sampled from Mt Darwin District. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 MFTs participants who were selected through Extreme or Deviant Case Sampling (Patton, 2001), from the 192 MFTs who responded to the closed-ended structured questionnaire in the first phase. The ages of teenagers who were included in the study ranged from 16 years to 19 years. Participants for the third phase were Key informants who were purposively drawn from community-based decision makers who included District Development Coordinator, District Head of Ministry of Women Affairs, Community. Small and Medium Enterprise Development, District Head of Youths, Sport and Employment Creation, District and Head of Social Services, Apostolic Sect leaders. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also included in the third phase and involved information-rich Community leaders and Community Volunteer workers who selected through Intensity sampling (Patton, 2001).

Data for the study were collected using closed-ended structured questionnaire, open-ended (for interviews) and unstructured (for FGDs) questionnaires. The data collection instruments were developed and checked for reliability and validity through continuous expert consultation and pre-testing with respondents in the research population who did not participate in the actual research. For the closed-ended structured questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was computed using SPSS Version 21.0, statistical software package. A Cronbach's  $\alpha$  value above the 0.70 recommended by Field (2009) was obtained and the questionnaire was judged to be reliable for field data collection. For open-ended questionnaires, steps were taken to demonstrate credibility and ensure trustworthiness.

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the office of the Provincial Development Coordinator, District Development Coordinator and Community gatekeepers. Before data collection, each respondent and participant verbally agreed or signed a consent form to participate in the study. The respondents and participants received detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, risks and benefits including their rights and the contact information of the researchers. The use of a procedure in which the illiterate respondents were assisted by the researchers to fill in the required information ensured that everyone in the sample answered the same questions thereby enabling researchers to obtain a high response rate (Constantinos *et al.*, 2011).

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 was used to analyse quantitative data collected for the purpose of the study. Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies and percentages) provided a condensed description. Qualitative data were analysed using the Thematic Content approach. The data were analysed following the Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six-

phase guide which is a very useful framework for conducting this kind of analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire respondents were 192 married female teenagers within the age range of 16 years to 19 years. Forty respondents belonged to mainline churches, 123 to Apostolic Sects and 29 to African Traditional Religion. One hundred and fifteen respondents had Zimbabwe secondary school education, 73 had Zimbabwe primary education while four had never been to school. These respondents were randomly sampled from a population of married female teenagers in Mt Darwin district. Seventeen MFTs and five Key Informants, participated in face-to-face interviews and were sampled from the target population. Key informant interviews were mainly done to District-based community-development practitioners who included District Development Coordinator, District Head of Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development, District Head of Youths and employment creation, District head, Sport and Culture and District Head of Social Services and one Apostolic Sect Leader. Focus Group Discussions

participants included the Village heads, Councillors and Child Case Workers.

### Right to pursue education while in marriage

As shown in Table 1 below, 80.7% were not satisfied with their level of education and did not see opportunities to pursue education while in marriage. On the other hand, 19.3% were satisfied with their level of education and saw opportunities to advance themselves while in marriage. Verbatim statement captured from a 16-year-old teenager who participated in-depth interviews confirmed the interest to pursue education while in marriage but was not afforded the opportunity. She said;

*“I wanted to be able to read like others. There is no opportunity now”.*

Key informants who participated in focus group discussions provided the explanation for violation of the right to pursue education while in marriage. They disclosed that most husbands were reluctant to send their wives back to school because they were either school dropouts or did not go to school, so they did not value education.

**Table 1: Rights to pursue education while in marriage**

Question	Yes	No	Total
Are you satisfied with the level of your education?	37 (19.3%)	155 (80.7%)	192 (100%)
Are there opportunities to advance yourself while still marriage?	37 (19.3%)	155 (80.7%)	192 (100%)

### Right to enjoy good health while in marriage

Table 2 shows quantitative analysis results for violation of right to enjoy good health among married female teenagers. The majority of the respondents reported having no health problems while 24.5% had varying health related problems. 8.9% were always sick, 5.7% had human excretion problems, 5.2% had urinal problems and 4.7% had contracted Sexual Transmitted Infections (STIs). The findings from the interviews with MFTs, Key informants and FGDs participants revealed that female teenagers experience various health problems which violate their rights to enjoy good health while marriage. In one in-depth interview, a 16-year-old married female teenager belonging to the Apostolic church and in a polygamous marriage said:

*“Since the delivery of my first-born baby I been always feeling sick. I always have painful backache and feet. I think there is something that went wrong during delivery process, but I have not gone to the hospital because our church does not allow me to do so. The other wives told me to sneak to hospital like what they do as well. They told me to go to hospital if I want to have a live baby of which they did after experiencing numerous infant deaths”.*

Two 18-year-old participants corroborated this statement. The first one said:

*“I once had STI. I went together with him (meaning husband) for treatment secretly without his other wives knowing. I do not know the type of STI because I got treatment from the Herbalist. His other wives warned me that I should take care because he likes women so much”.*

While the second 18-year-old interviewed participant said:

*“I always feel sick. Mostly I suffer from headaches and stomach pains”.*

The KIIs confirmed that the MFTs were susceptible to many health-related problems because of their marriage patterns and circumstances. One Key Informant gave this elaboration:

*“These MFTs encounter labour complications, miscarriages, STIs and HIV because of polygamous marriages there are in and largely due to their husbands who are womanizers”.*

From the above statements, it is clear that teenage marriage threatens human rights and is a major concern. It should be noted that, some health problems of MFTs belonging to the Apostolic churches, might remain hidden because of their church doctrines that forbid congregants to seek modern medical assistance (visiting clinics and hospitals).

**Table 2: Right to enjoy good health while in marriage**

Health Problem	Frequency	Percentage
Complications in urinating	10	5.2
Excretion problems	11	5.7
Contraction of Sexual transmitted infections	9	4.7
Always sick	17	8.9
None of the above	145	75.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>192</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Right to engage in income generating projects while in marriage**

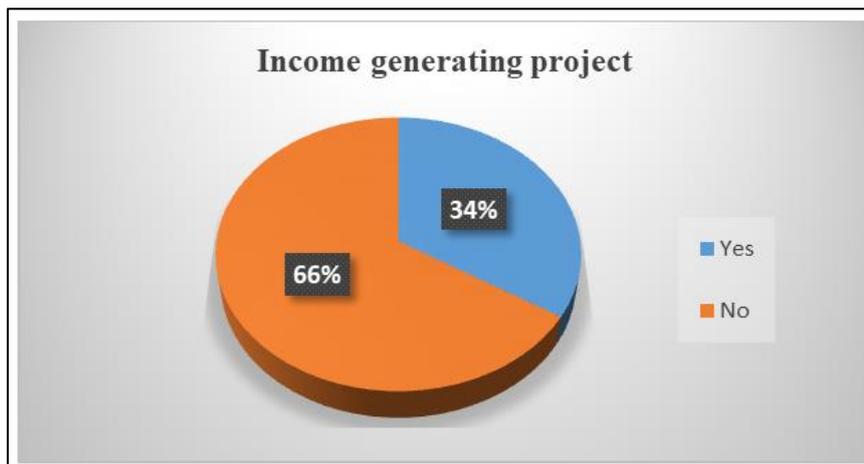
Quantitative data shows that 66% of respondents were not participating in income generating activities to support their livelihoods whilst 34% of them were doing so. Interview data revealed that lack of capital and refusal by husbands and in-laws hampered MFTs’ participation in income generating activities. One 18-year-old interview participant had this to say:

*“My husband does not want me to go into income generating activities like buying and selling, he says other men will propose and marry me”.*

In support, another 16-year-old interview participant said:

*“I do not have a capital. I cannot get it anywhere since I am supposed to be at home all the times”.*

Preventing MFTs from participating in income generating activities is a violation of their right to earn an income while in marriage as they fail to break generational circles of poverty.



**Figure 1: Distribution of MFTs by Income Generating Projects**

**Right to be protected from sexual and verbal abuse while in marriage**

The respondents of the questionnaire acknowledged experiencing sexual and verbal abuse in their marriages. As shown in Table 3 below 28.1% of the MFTs experienced sexual abuse while 51% experienced verbal abuse. Interview data indicates that husbands, in-laws and senior wives respectively, were perpetrators of sexual and verbal violence. Sexual abuse was in the form of being forced to engage in sexual relationship even when feeling unwell, tired or not feeling like doing it. Verbatim statements captured from two interview participants illustrated sexual abuse experienced by MFTs. A 16-year-old participant said:

*“I encounter sexual abuses. My husband does not want to bath. He forces me to make love with him even if I not feeling like”.*

A 17-year-old participant reported similar abuse:

*“I encounter sexual abuses, even if I am tired, ill or not feeling like doing it, he shouts at me and force me to do it”.*

Verbal abuse took the form of shouts, blaming, mockery, gossiping, negative comments, demeaning words and threats. One participant had this to say:

*“My in-law teams up with his son, (my husband) to shout at me and demean me. I always feel like committing suicide after being shouting at”.*

Another participant confirmed by saying:

*“My husband verbally abuses me. His words are piecing and painful. He says he should not have married me because I am a prostitute”.*

The third participant had this to say:

*My mother in-law seems to like the first wife of his son than me. Sometimes she speaks in riddles”.*

The Key informants confirmed that the MFTs were subjected to sexual and verbal abuse in their

marriages. Some interviewed participants were emotionally affected as they recounted abusive experiences in their marriages. Due to abuse in marriages, MFTs were very emotional and suffered from inferiority complex.

**Table 3: Right to be protected from sexual and verbal abuse while in marriage**

Question	Yes	No	Total
Do you sometimes encounter sexual violence in your marriage?	54 (28.1%)	138 (71.9%)	192 (100%)
Do you sometimes encounter verbal abuse from your husband or in-laws?	98 (51%)	94 (49%)	192 (100%)

**Right to make independent decisions while in marriage**

Table 4 below shows that 70% of the respondents were not at liberty to go to the shops alone, 66.7% were not at liberty to visit their friends at will, 66.1% were not at liberty to visit their relatives and 60.9% were not at liberty to attend the community meetings. These quantitative results were crossed examined with findings from the key informant

interviews, which explored alternative explanations for these restrictions on MFTs. Key informants reported that MFTs’ husbands were jealous and feared that their wives could be negatively influenced by corrupt women in the community given their tender ages. It is evident that MFTs were isolated and lacked freedom to move or associate as they wished. Thus, their rights to freedom of movement, choice, association and belonging were violated.

**Table 4: Right to make independent decisions while in marriage**

Question	Yes	No	Total
Are you at liberty to go to the shops	30%	70%	100%
Are you at liberty to visit friends	33.3%	66.7%	100%
Are you at liberty to visit your relatives	33.9%	66.1%	100%
Are you at liberty to attend community meetings	39.1%	60.9%	100%

The study findings indicated that five categories of human rights of MFTs in Mt Darwin District were violated. These were the rights to; pursue education, enjoy good health, engage in income generating projects, be protected from sexual and verbal abuse and make independent decisions. These violations are discussed with reference to studies conducted in other parts of the world.

Married female teenagers who were included in this study were not satisfied with their level of education and expressed willingness to pursue education while in marriage. However, their educational ambitions could not be fulfilled because husbands and in-laws would not allow them to pursue education while in marriage. According to the outcomes of interviews and FGDs, husbands of MFTs were unwilling to approve and support their spouses because they were school dropouts who were ignorant about the value of education. The study findings echoed with several other studies conducted elsewhere in the world. One such study was conducted in Kenya and revealed that early motherhood responsibilities exposed girls to suffering in the hands of cruel and abusive partners that deny them opportunity to pursue and complete education like boy counterparts (Messpir cited in Ganira *et al.*, 2015:2). A second study with similar results was conducted in Ghana (Britwum *et al.*, 2017:42), which indicated that in the marital homes, approval of MFT’s re-entry into school is subject to the endorsement by the entire family of the husband. This

arrangement made it difficult for married female teenagers to re-enter schools or complete their education once married (Sharma, 2016). Mwambene and Mawodza (2016) concluded that female teenager marriages destroy the right to education for girls.

The study findings revealed a significant prevalence of health-related problems among MFTs. These included general illnesses, excretion problems, urinary problems and STIs. Some of these health problems resulted from the promiscuous behaviours of the MFTs’ husbands. The study findings were in line with other similar studies conducted elsewhere in Africa which associated teenage marriages with health problems such as sexually transmitted infections, HIV, cervical cancer, spine pains, lower abdomen cramps and obstetric fistula (Mahato, 2016; Pathfinder, 2006; Upreti, 2019:3). It is evident that poverty, negligence and church doctrines hampered the MFTs from seeking medical assistance.

According to the study findings, a significant number of MFTs did not participate in income generating projects to alleviate poverty. The hampering factors were lack of capital and disapproval by husbands and in-laws. Similar findings emerged in studies conducted in Indonesia and Nicaragua (Hidayana *et al.*, 2016:25). Greene (2019) attributed failure by MFTs in Nicaragua to participate in income generating projects to spousal disapproval and lack of funds. Greene further noted that

spousal disapprovals were meant to isolate the MFTs from social connections so as to increase control over their lives. Violation of economic rights of MFTs appear to be prevalent in resource-constrained countries and may need to be addressed to break the vicious circle of poverty.

Sexual abuse was prevalent among MFTs who were part of this study. Interview data revealed that husbands of MFTs forced their spouses into sexual activities when sick, tired or not feeling like doing it. Findings of this study echoed with findings from several studies conducted elsewhere in the world. For example, a study conducted by Greene (2019:35) in Nicaragua revealed that girls in union often “consented” to sex in order to keep their partners or to avoid other violence. Another study conducted by Girls Not Brides (2015) in India, found that girls who marry before 18 were more likely to report intimate partner violence and forced sex than those married later. An earlier study conducted by ICRW (2004:15) and its partners on the well-being of adolescents in India’s Bihar and Jharkhand States observed that child brides often had signs and symptoms of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress. Montazeri *et al.*, (2016:2) concluded that 29% of all married teenager girls experienced intimate partner violence. Sexual violence could be attributed to asymmetrical power in female teenagers’ marriage relationships.

Study findings also showed a significant prevalence of verbal abuse among MFTs who were included in this study. Interview and focus group data revealed that verbal abuse took the form of shouts, blaming, mockery, gossiping, negative comments, demeaning words and threats. Mahato (2016) claimed that teenagers were psychological and emotional impacted by their marriages. Other researchers have specifically observed that verbal abuse led to psychological traumas such as immobility and loss of self-confidence (Ahmed *et al.*, 2013 and Singh, 1996). In view of the abuse perpetrated on MFTs by husbands, in-laws, senior wives and other members of the extended family, MFTs need protection to enjoy their rights to peace and freedom. Verbal abuse has negative psychological impact, it can decrease one’s self-esteem, cause unnecessary stresses and conquer confidence, of which in extreme cases, these may lead to suicidal ideations.

According to quantitative findings of this study a significant number of MFTs could not voluntarily decide to go to the shops, visit friends and their relatives or even attend community meetings. Interviews and Focus Group Discussion data revealed that husbands or in-laws had to authorise any movements and interactions outside the household. Though perceived as a way of protecting MFTs from envious men and bad women, this practice demonstrates gross captive-like life, characterised by isolation, lack of freedom to move, belong or associate with others. The study findings

concurrent with other studies conducted by Karei and Erulkar (2010) which found that early marriages imposed social isolation on girls bringing unwanted separation from their friends and family. Herliana (2018:65) reported that early marriage brought feeling of being ‘tied’ and their ‘freedom’ is taken away as can be seen in the following quote:

*“...before my marriage I could easily go out with my friends, but now I can’t do it anymore. I am not allowed to hang out with my friends....”* (YN, 18 years-old, a housewife).

According to Phillips *et al.*, (2002) suicide attempts were prevalent among MFTs due to failed attempts to interact with others in the society or community. Like anyone else, MFTs have also the rights to socialize, belong, freely move, independently decide and attend community meetings. The hindrances to these aspects, grossly violate their rights as human beings.

The study provided evidence that MFTs’ human rights were violated in Mt Darwin District. The violation of human rights has negative physical, psychological, emotional, social, mental and spiritual impact to the functionality of a person. Due to the tender ages of MFTs’, which have bearings on their decision-making capacity, some have failed to cope with the violations. Attempted suicides, left marriages, gone into many marriages and even into prostitution. It is high time the Governments and development partners should re-think. As much as they are putting efforts and resources to prevent early marriages, at the same time they should not turn a blind eye on those already in marriage. Studies have revealed that the teenagers in marriage carry multi-burdens for the sake of their marriages, at the expense of violation of their human rights.

## CONCLUSION

The study found that the MFTs were too young to handle the dynamics of marriage. The MFTs were denied the rights to go to school, rights to socialize, rights of movement, economic rights, belongingness rights, rights to stay in peace without verbal and physical abuse and rights to make own decision about their sexual life. They led a captive-life-style. The MFTs cited physical, emotional, social, mental and psychological violations emanating from their abusive and loveless husbands, demanding and oppressive in-laws (especially mothers in-law). The time to prevent and stop teenage marriages is now not tomorrow. Like anyone else, those already in marriage should be protected and fully enjoy their human rights. They should have all the applicable and necessary freedom, for example attending community meetings where knowledge, capacitation and empowerment occur. Rethinking about early marriages would imply finding ways of addressing these anomalies in order to uphold the human rights of married female teenagers whose undetected health problems could become more complicated with devastating consequences. Policies and strategies should be re-visited and amended for the

betterment of teenagers in and out of marriage, while collaborative and concentrated efforts of preventing early marriages are on-going.

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**Cite This Article:** Eniko Chenge, Boniface C. Chisaka, Levison Maunganidze (2023). Implications of Female Teenage Marriages on Human Rights Violation in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. *EAS J Psychol Behav Sci*, 5(5), 160-166.