

Original Research Article

SOCIAL CULTURAL NORMS ASSOCIATED WITH EARLY MARRIAGES AMONG ADOLESCENTS: CASE STUDY OF CHADIZA DISTRICT, EASTERN PROVINCE OF ZAMBIA

ABSTRACT

Zambia is ranked 16th among countries with the highest rate of child marriage in the world. According to some studies conducted, child marriage rates in the country stand at 42 per cent of women aged between 20 and 24 years married by the attainment of the age of 18 years old. The main objective of this study was to investigate social cultural norms associated with sexuality and child marriages among adolescents in Chadiza district, Eastern province of Zambia. The mixed method design both quantitative and qualitative was used because it provides the researcher with a more comprehensive view of the phenomena being studied in this case, social cultural norms associated with sexuality and child marriages. A Systematic sampling technique was used where every third household was selected for inclusion in the study sample and 150 respondents from which 100 girls and 50 boys were selected by applying a fixed interval. The study findings indicated that most cultural practices in the study area especially initiation ceremonies provoked a girl child to opt for an early sexual debut and early marriage. On the age at first sexual debut, results showed that the minimum age to engage in sexual intercourse by the respondents was 12 years while the maximum age was 22 years for both genders. The study further unearthed the reality that girls' initiation ceremonies exposed most girls to risk behaviours. After graduating from initiation ceremonies girls wanted to experiment whether they were really sexually able to handle any man since that is what they were taught in their initiation ceremonies a situation which led to early sexual debut among young girls and subsequently to early or teenage pregnancies and early marriages. The study recommends that the Zambian government through the responsible Ministry should regulate initiation ceremonies that pass on bad cultural practices to the adolescents and girls in particular. While appreciating the role initiation ceremonies play in preparing the adolescents for adult responsibilities, there is need to restructure the curriculum for initiation ceremonies to include sexual reproductive health rights and responsibilities.

Key words: *Social Cultural norms, sexual debut, child marriage, initiation adolescents*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is a global, continental and national problem. Child marriage can have devastating consequences for individual girls and their future children. Typically, it cuts short or limits a girl's education pursuit, compromising reproductive rights, sexual health, future employment and earnings and perpetuates personal and community poverty. Globally, more than one in four girls is married as a child before the age of 18 years [1]. In East and Southern Africa, the share was 36 per cent and 10 per cent of girls in the region were married by the age of 15 years [2]. The COVID-19 pandemic also compounded this problem further by relegating up to 10 million more girls to being child brides [2]. The prevalence of child marriages in East and Southern Africa stands at 36 per cent which is higher than the global average, and 10 per cent of girls in the region were married off before attaining the age of 15 years old [3]. However, the prevalence varies within and among countries from 52 per cent in South Sudan to 6 per cent in South Africa [3]. In twelve countries in the region, the prevalence of child marriages is greater than 30 per cent. In all other regions of the world, current rates of progress mean that the number of child brides is declining each year. This is not the case in Africa. In fact, even doubling the rate of reduction in child marriages would not be enough to reduce the number of child brides. A growing population combined with a slow decline in the practice of child marriages in Africa puts millions of girls at risk [3]. If current trends continue, almost half of the world's child brides by 2050 will be African.

Zambia has not been spared from the scourge of child marriages. Zambia has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world with 42 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years married by the age of 18 years [4]. Zambia is ranked 16th amongst countries with the highest rate of child marriages in the World [5]. Although the Marriage Act establishes a legal age for marriage, and the Penal Code considers sex with a girl under 16 years an offence in Zambia, these provisions have not been effective, especially in rural areas where customary law seem to be overriding the Constitutional Law[6]. An estimated 42 per cent of 20 to 24-year-old females were married by the age of 18 years in Zambia [2]. The report shows that among those aged between 15 and 9 years adolescents, 16.5 per cent of girls are married compared to the one per cent of boys.

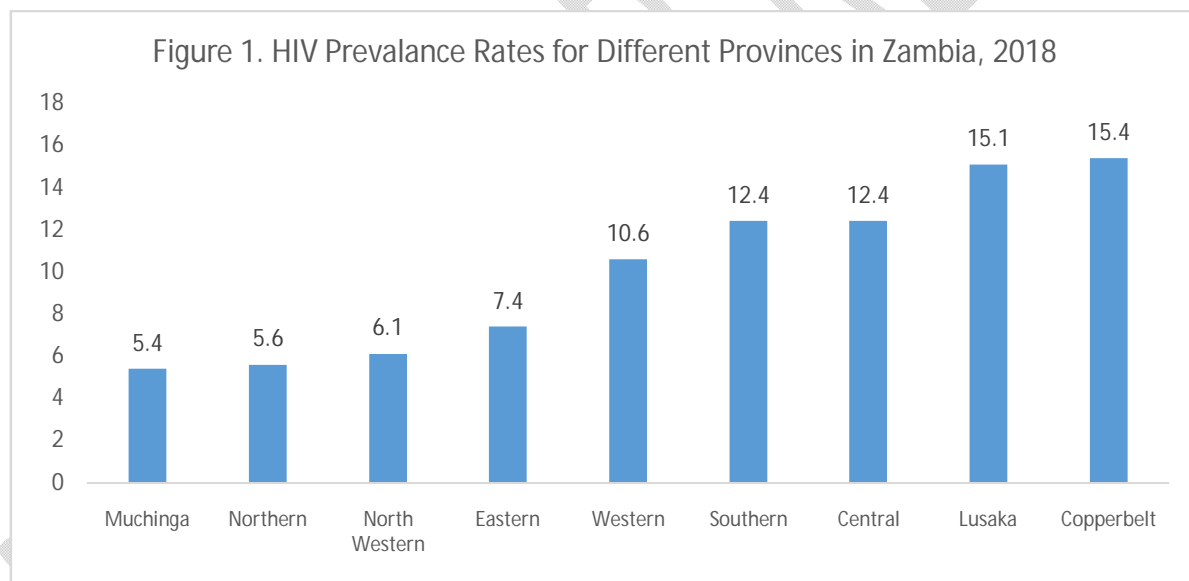
Despite being the vehicle through which societies preserve and transmit their culture and heritage from generation to generation, social cultural norms have also presented another side which is negative and harmful towards boys but most especially to girl's rights. Initiation rites consists of one or more prescribed ceremonial events, mandatory for all girls of a given society and are celebrated between their eighth and twentieth year ages [8]. Historically, initiation practices for girls were largely associated with marriage. For most traditions in Zambia, this usually this happened when a girl came of age, usually during her adolescent period and this usually was between the thirteenth and sixteenth years of age [8]. The girl would be handed over to a traditional counsellor in order to be initiated into womanhood. According to a research conducted in Chiradzulu in Malawi, initiation ceremony marked the passage from childhood to adulthood [9]. In Malawi, female initiation ceremonies involved young girls of ages between 10 years and 15 years [10]. The ceremony takes a period of about two weeks whereby girls are isolated and kept in a hut away from their homes during which period they are not allowed to go out of that hut. The only people the girls interact with are the counsellors who teach the young girls how to appease a man sexually without using a condom emphasising that they should practice what they are taught immediately upon concluding the initiation or else their bodies would be dry and brittle for life. In most cases young girls become pregnant and because of fear of bringing dishonour to their families, they are forced to get married [10]. Initiation ceremonies reinforce gender and sexual identity in young girls. The stage of initiation represents the ultimate stepping into adulthood and loss of childhood innocence. In a study conducted on female initiation rituals and sexuality in Northern Mozambique, it was found out that during the initiation ceremony, girls were taught about sex and how to appease a man during a sexual act. They were taught that failure to do so would attract a social disapproval. Young girls were taught about the initiation ceremonies between man and woman and this conveyed the reproductive role of a sexual act. They had to keep what they learnt as a secret to themselves [8]. Mayaka in her study conducted to determine the possibility of using initiation ceremonies entry points in the fight against HIV and AIDS agrees with many findings which point out that initiation ceremonies are widely practiced in Zambia and that they are used predominantly to teach about sex and sexuality to girls who attained puberty and young women who were about to enter marriage unions [11].

Although the objective of the study was different the study was able to link initiation ceremonies to sexuality and marriage. Rasing [9] states that 'the rite of passage' consists of three parts. The first takes place in the bush; the second is performed in the house; and the third part is performed in the yard near the house' These stages show the structure of initiation rites and the educational value attached to them [9]. Further, refers to these stages as seclusion, segregation or coming out, signifying the importance of the rites. Analysing the meaning of initiation rites and ceremonies is not easy because they have various representations. However, for the purpose of this study, emphasis is placed on the role initiation ceremonies play in influencing the adolescents into child marriage. Nangoma [12] also adds that initiation ceremonies in Zambia such as '*Chinamwali* and *Nyau* of the Chewa people in Eastern province have a strong influence on child marriages because of the sexually oriented teachings provided during this period when girls are secluded. These practices tend to influence the young people to desiring marriage as they feel ready for marriage after going through the rites. Further, a study on urban sexual behaviour survey found that men are considered higher status and women with low socio-economic status are limited in their ability to negotiate safe sexual relationships [13]. Menon further argued that young people are more influenced by alcohol use by peer influence which may have a significant impact on adolescent sexual behavior [14].

All these initiation ceremonies reviewed under this study point to one thing which is sex and 'preparation for marriage'. Marriage is a crucial component of gender interactions and identity among Zambian societies. Adults who have never been married were uncommon historically, and marriage is still a significant part of masculinity and womanhood. Women are too frequently seen as the "junior partner" in marriage. Girls literally marry earlier than boys, and many of these could become mothers at around the age of 15 years [15]. Chapter 50 of the Marriage Act states that in order to marry, an individual must have the written permission of a parent or guardian who is at least 21 years old. However, marriages governed by customary law are exempt from the Marriage Act and are actually permitted as long as the child (almost always a female) has reached puberty [15]. Even though this is also subject to parental permission (not the formalised written consent, which is a legal document), it leads to families marrying off girls as young as 12 years or 13 years old so long they have reached puberty. It is clear that girls in this circumstance forfeit not only their right to education and their chance of individual autonomy or

independence, but also their right to childhood. From what we have highlighted above, it is quite clear that some or most cultural norms are discriminatory against girls and women and that these norms create poverty which is compounded by lack of employment opportunities for girls and young women who pursue marriage as a seemingly viable alternative for girls [15].

Consequently, increased initiation ceremonies among adolescents lead to increased sexual activities among this population group which equally have implications on HIV/AIDS infections in the district and province as a whole. This is due to the fact that this type of education through initiation ceremonies rarely if at all includes safe sex education among girls. The Zambia Demographic and Healthy Survey for 2018 indicated that the HIV infections were common in all the provinces and among rural provinces, Eastern province was third at 7.4 % HIV prevalence rates and one of the common drivers of infections is unprotected sex among adolescents [4]. Figure 1 below shows the provincial prevalence rates in Zambia.



The scenario given by the above table which was taken five years ago does not significantly differ from the current situation because these initiation ceremonies have not decreased but remain the same despite interventions which have been taken. And moreover, the remote areas are difficult to reach and NGOS or non-governmental organizations and government institutions that spearhead HIV awareness may not be represented equally in all remote areas in the country and this leaves the traditions which might be spreaders of HIV to continue uninterrupted.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed research design which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to collecting, analysing, interpreting and reporting data. This mixed method approach was used because it incorporates the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Mixed methods also provide the researcher with a more comprehensive view of the phenomena being studied, in this case the social cultural norms associated with sexuality and child marriages. This study used systematic sampling technique to select the required sample. Systematic sampling was used where every third household was selected for inclusion in the study, 150 respondents (100 girls and 50 boys) were selected using systematic selection method by applying a fixed interval. Selection of the respondents was done first by listing eligible males and females in each sampled household and subsequently selecting the sex of the respondent randomly. If there were two or more eligible respondents in a household, one of them was selected randomly. A selection table was designed to facilitate this operation. A total number of 150 participants were drawn as a sample from the parent population. Out of these, majority (96) representing 64 per cent were female and (54) representing 36 per cent were male. Qualitative design was used to answer the how questions while quantitative data was used for the continuous data collected. The information from the participants was gathered using a structured interview questionnaire.

3.0 RESULTS

The level of education of respondents was considered due to its potential to influence child marriages. Results showed that most of the respondents engaged in child marriages had either never been to school or had dropped out of school. Overall results showed that 50 respondents had attained junior level of education representing the highest percentage 33.3 per cent followed by 39 respondents who had attained senior secondary level of education. Seven (7) respondents indicated that they had never been to school while 5 respondents representing 3.3 per cent had attained at least tertiary level of education. Analysis by gender, the 5 respondents who indicated that they had attained tertiary level of education were males while none were females. The overall results showed that 12 respondents indicated that they were employed. Analysed by sex

the results showed that an equal number of respondents of 6 males and females were employed. Further, the results showed that only 15 respondents representing 10 per cent parents and guardians were employed while 135 respondents representing 90 per cent were not employed. The marital status of the respondents showed that the majority 103 respondents representing 68.7 per cent were not married while 38 were married representing 25.3 per cent. Six respondents representing 4 per cent were separated while the least 3 respondents representing 2 per cent were divorced. Analysed by gender, 38 respondents that were married, 15 were males and 23 were females. Out of the 103 respondents that were single, 35 were males and 6) were females.

The Table above shows that out of the 150 respondents, most respondents 68 representing the highest percentage of 45 per cent belonged to other religious denominations other than the options provided. This was followed by Catholics with 41 respondents representing 27 per cent and the least was SDA with six respondents representing 4 per cent.

Table 1 Background characteristics of the respondent

Background Characteristics	Categories	Sex of the Respondent		Total
		Male	Female	
Age	15-17	22.2%	29.2%	26.7%
	18-20	14.8%	36.5%	28.7%
	21-23	57.4%	22.9%	35.3%
	24+	5.6%	11.5%	9.3%
Educational level	Never	5%	3%	4.0%
	Junior primary	12%	11%	11.5%
	Senior Primary	1%	25%	13.5%
	Junior Secondary	23%	23%	23.0%
	Senior Secondary	9%	30%	19.8%
	Tertiary	5%	1%	3.2%
Employment status	Currently working	11.1%	6.2%	8.0%
	Not working	88.9%	93.8%	92.0%
Marital Status	Married	27.8%	24.0%	25.3%
	Divorced	0%	3.1%	2.0%
	Single	64.8%	70.8%	68.7%
	Separated	7.4%	2.1%	4.0%
Religious denomination	Catholic	31.5%	25.0%	27.3%
	Anglican	22.2%	6.2%	12.0%

	SDA	3.7%	4.2%	4.0%
	Pentecostal	5.6%	14.6%	11.3%
	Other	37.0%	50.0%	45.3%

Opinion about the preferred age of marriage

Out of the 41 respondents who were either married or divorced, 30 were females and 11 were males. Results showed that the youngest age at first marriage for each gender was 14 years while oldest age at first marriage of the respondents was 24 years and the average age at first marriage was 16.5 years. Most of the respondents got married at 18 years. Analysed by gender out of the 30 female respondents who got married, the youngest age at first marriage was at 14 years and the oldest age was 19 years with an average age of 15.3 years. For male respondents the youngest age at first marriage was 16 years while the oldest age was 24 years. The average age at first marriage for the males was 17.9 years. Further, the average age differences between partners of the 41 respondents who were married was (4) years, male.

Table 2. Preferred age of marriage of respondent by Gender

Preferred Age of Marriage of Respondent	Sex of the Respondent		Total
	Male	Female	
13-15 YRS	83.3%	85.4%	84.7%
16-18 YRS	9.3%	10.4%	10.0%
19-21 YRS	7.4%	4.2%	5.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

When respondents were asked to state the preferred age at which boys and girls get married in their communities, it was found out that the majority of the respondents indicated that boys married at least by the age of 18 while girls married by the age of 16 years. However, results indicated that the preferred age of marriage ranged from 15 to 30 years with many of them marrying by 18th birthday for males and 15 years to 25 years for females with many of them tending to marry around this age range.

Respondents were asked to state boys' preferred age of marriage in their communities. Results (N 150) show that though most the respondents indicated that the preferred age of marriage for

boys was 18 years, the actual preferred average age of marriage for boys was 19.48 years with standard deviation of 2.849. The preferred minimum age of marriage for boys was found to be 15 years and maximum was 30 years. Results (N 150) further showed that the majority of the respondents indicated that the preferred age of marriage for girls in their community was 17 years. Although it was so, the minimum age of marriage for girls was 13 years and maximum was 25 years. Results further show that the average preferred age of marriage for girls was 16.51 years with standard deviation of 2.132.

3.1 Reasons for Engaging in Child Marriage by Sex

Table 3 : Reasons for Engaging in Child Marriage by Sex

Reasons for engaging in child marriage	Sex of the Respondent		Total
	Male	Female	
Emotional reasons	10.1	35.1%	23.5%
Family Honor	13.0%	10.4%	11.3%
Economic reasons	8.11%	17.6%	13.8%
Security	24.1%	21.9%	22.7%
To resolve family disputes	40.7%	38.5%	39.3%
To prevent getting pregnant outside marriage	13.0%	16.7%	15.3%
Others	9.3%	12.5%	11.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Results (N150) showed that most of the respondents 68 indicated emotional reasons as motivation and expectation for getting married before legal age of marriage, followed by 38 who indicated economic reasons and 23 who indicated to have children. Eleven respondents' family honour and 4 respondents indicated fear of losing virginity. Religious reasons, fear of Gender Based Violence (GBV) and other reasons accounted for 2 respondents each. On the reasons for engaging in child marriage the majority of respondents 60 indicated that engaging in child marriage prevented getting pregnant outside marriage. This was followed by 33 respondents who indicated that children engaged in child marriage for personal security and 23 respondents indicated that child marriage helped to resolve family disputes which came as a result of pregnancy. Family honor and other reasons were cited by 16 respondents each.

Social Cultural Sexual practices and Child marriages

When asked whether respondents had undergone any initiation ceremony, results (N150) showed that the majority 91 respondents indicated they underwent initiation ceremony while 59 indicated they had not. By gender results (N 91) showed that 61 were females and 30 were males. About the type of the initiation ceremony respondents underwent it was found that all the 61 females underwent *Chinamwali* ceremony while all males 30 underwent *Nyau* ceremony. An interview with an elderly woman who underwent initiation ceremony indicated that there were actually two types of initiation ceremonies for each gender; *Chingondo* and *Kalumbu* for young girls and boys respectively, and *Chinamwali* and *Nyau* for the adolescent girls and boys respectively.

On whether it was compulsory to undergo initiation ceremony, results (N 150) showed that the majority 135 respondents indicated that it was not compulsory while 15 respondents indicated that it was compulsory. However, results from interviews show that even though initiation was not compulsory, girls who were not initiated suffered social stigma from either fellow girls who were initiated or those not initiated:

“It is quite a challenge to school girls who undergo the initiation, because girls want to put to practice what they learn during the ceremony and usually they stop school. In many cases girls want to go into marriage immediately after initiation ceremony. They feel out of place and insecure because they always think of what they were taught during the initiation. They don’t feel comfortable even with their own friends because their friends consider them to have grown older than them. They even start addressing them with much respect than before” (an account from an elderly woman).

Results (N91) showed that the majority of the respondents 63 underwent initiation ceremonies between the age of 11 years and 15 years, 21 underwent initiation between 16 years and 20 years and 7 respondents underwent initiation between 5 years and 10 years.

“Girls who are between 5 years and 10 years are first initiated in *Vingondo* initiation and boys of the same age are initiated in

Kalumbu. When girls reach the age between 13 years and 17 years they undergo another initiation called *chinamwali*", (*Woman 2*).

Respondents were asked to account for the reasons for undergoing an initiation ceremony. Results (N 150) showed that the majority of the respondents 115 indicated self-esteem followed by 15 who indicated cultural demand, 13 indicated other reasons and 7 indicated gaining acceptance in the community. Results from an interview with an elderly woman who underwent initiation ceremony showed that the desire to learn about the traditions were the reason for undergoing an initiation ceremony. She narrated that the traditional rites that took place during the initiation period:

"I first learnt about the rites of the bush. I was led to a nearby bush which is also referred to as a dumping area, where they dispose of rubbish, where we had to recite some rituals. This place means that all the traditions the girl has to learn are not with every elderly woman around but with the instructor (aphungu) of that girl who is undergoing the initiation. The instructor is chosen from among the elderly women who are well vested in initiation rites. An instructor is well vested with initiation rites than any other woman in the village and she is trusted to teach those rites to the girl under initiation. The other women usually ten (10) of them just accompany the girl called "Ndola") from the house of her parents to the initiation house" (Elderly Woman).

The interview with an elderly Woman 3 who underwent initiation further reviewed many rituals taught to the young girls during the initiation. Some of the rites bordered on sex in matrimonial relationships. The interview gave an account on these rites:

"In the house, the girl (ndola) is told to undress the top and remain with a skirt. The Girl (ndola) is told how she should conduct herself before her husband when she is married and to other men. They teach about how to conduct oneself during a sexual affair (kunyung'ulila) with the husband and much time is also spent on respect towards the husband. The girl is taught how to kneel down (thyole) before the husband. This takes

longer because the girl has to learn how to bend her legs and it is difficult in the first stages. In some cases, girls fail to perfect the art of kneeling until graduation. They teach how to kneel (*Thyole*) because it is a traditional practice that signifies respect to the husband. Girls are also taught how to keep the husband clean by shaving him on his private parts (*kumoyo*) and in the armpits. Lessons on kneeling down are taught in the morning by the instructor and other rites are taught by other women in the evening. They teach the girl on how to clean herself on her private parts by shaving before meeting her husband for sex. *Kunying'ulila* means dancing or wriggling or move her waist to the husband during sexual intercourse.

She is taught that she is not supposed to be stiff or rigid during the sexual intercourse. A demonstration is done on this in the initiation house. They tell you to lie down and another woman comes on top of you and you are told to shake/dance. That lesson goes until you learn how to do it perfectly” (Woman 3).

Other rites are also performed on the private part of the girl being initiated. An account of this was also given by Woman 4:

“The girl is told to undress the top and later on undresses the skirt to check if rituals of the private parts were done. It is required that the two flaps that cover the vagina should be extending outwards. This is done by pulling them during childhood. If this was not done it is during the initiation ceremony the ritual of pulling the flaps covering the vagina is done. It is believed that a girl who has no extended flaps may risk being divorced by her husband. Sometimes men can have more than one partner, and from those partners they are able to compare who has flaps on private part and who does not have. It is believed that men like women or girls who have flaps covering the vagina and if you do not have, you are taken to be an irresponsible woman who skipped some

stages during childhood. This is a ritual which has been passed to us by our parents. The husband may tell the girl/woman to go and ask other women in order to have the girl's flaps pulled and extended. If that is not done the woman may risk being divorced" (Woman 4).

When asked to give an opinion about whether initiation ceremonies were good or bad, results of interview from Woman 4 showed that initiation ceremonies were bad:

"Girls are spoiled because they want to experiment what they are taught during initiation and they end up ruining their future through early pregnancies, early marriage or stop schooling. You will find that very young girls sometimes a girl who is in grade three is sent for initiation ceremony just because she has reached puberty and these days it is more common that girls reach puberty early before the right age. They fear that the girl may fall pregnant before she is initiated. I wish initiation ceremonies could be abolished to allow girls concentrate on school because it is a recipe for early pregnancies and child marriage" (Woman 4).

4.0 DISCUSSION

An examination of socio-cultural sexual practices associated with child marriage revealed several cultural practices that were practiced at early stages at the adolescents' life. The first cultural practice was sexual encounter. It was revealed that boys and girls had their sexual debut as early as 12 years of age usually with a regular partner. Early sexual debut was largely influenced by peer pressure from friends of the same gender. Major reasons for engaging in sex were expression of love, expectation of gifts or money and for fun. It was also revealed that the adolescents had unprotected sex (without a condom) largely due non-availability of the commodity at the time of sex, inadequate knowledge on condom use and partner refusing to use a condom.

The study sought to find out if there were situations when respondents did not want to have sex but were persuaded by their partners. It was revealed that in some instances some form of coercion was used. It was further revealed that girls were more prone to be persuaded or coerced to have sex by their boyfriends. The study revealed that most adolescents got married at an early age. Most girls got married at the age of 14 years while boys at the age of 16 years. Choices made by the adolescent was top on the list of compelling reasons for getting married alongside family

pressure and coercion. The adolescents who got married at the latter age revealed by the study showed that they chose their own marriage partner. In the absence of these compelling reasons the study revealed that the preferred age of marriage was 18 years for boys and 16 years for girls. Most of the adolescents had their first births during their teen ages usually 15 years for girls and 17 years for boys. Those with higher levels of education had their children during their older ages compared to those with lower levels of education.

The study established that most adolescents got married at early ages to avoid getting pregnant before getting married or got married to the partner whom they had a child with outside marriage. It was also found out that there was a perception in the community where a study was conducted that those girls who fell pregnant before marriage had very little chances of getting married later in life leading to them getting married to the partner who impregnated them. This is the reason why Sumalatha [16] noted that culturally appropriate programmes that provide families and communities with education and reproductive health services could help stop child marriage, early pregnancies and illness and death in young mothers and their children.

Even though initiation ceremonies were not compulsory, both boys and girls underwent initiation ceremonies at early ages of between five years and ten years. The major reason for initiating both boys and girls was self-esteem. The community considered the uninitiated members as misfits. Initiation also played an important stage in one's life from childhood to adulthood. It was revealed that sex lessons comprised a large component of the curriculum for initiation especially for girls. The study revealed a relationship between initiation and child marriage as the adolescent boys and girls yearned to experiment sex after going through the sexual lessons during initiation ceremonies. The findings agree with what Menon [2018] noted about initiation ceremonies. They argued that culture at a community level, was widely considered to have a role to play in influencing sexuality and age of sexual debut. It included cultural beliefs and practices which were encountered along the course life of particularly at birth, puberty, marriage, divorce or death [19]. These cultural practices existed for both males and females. When discussing young people's sexuality, it is crucial to focus on initiation ceremonies, which are conducted in the period of adolescence.

Although initiation ceremonies have come under scrutiny because of communicating contradictory ideas about sexuality, some scholars like Rasing (2004) pointed out that initiation

ceremonies were about the cosmology of the specific society and contain not only practical information but also religious and spiritual or supernatural elements. For women, it signifies the move from passivity to activity and revisits notions of child and adulthood, initiated and uninitiated as well as the “boundaries between genders”. It deconstructs and reconstructs these to form a new identity for young women. In a changing socio-political context, initiation ceremonies persist as a form of resistance as they are a means to build a relationship between past and present, and they draw on collective memory in a changing and globalised world to keep rooted in a sense of communal identity since "the rite is a representation of continuity" [9].

Level of education was also identified as a factor associated with child marriages in Chadiza and responded to that question in this study. This was done in line with the literature reviewed which indicated that the level of education was a good predictor of sexuality and child marriages among adolescents. The findings revealed that 50 respondents attained junior level of education representing the highest percentage (33.3%) followed by 39 respondents who attained senior secondary level of education. Seven (7) respondents indicated that they had never been to school while 5 respondents representing 3.3 per cent had attained at least tertiary level of education. Analysis by gender, the 5 respondents who indicated that they had attained tertiary level of education were males while there were no females.

This is in line with other research works that found out that the risk of early marriage decreased with women’s educational levels. Nasrullah [19], found out that across all four countries of the study, risk of early marriage decreased with the levels of education. The findings indicated that women without formal education have a higher risk of early union than their secondary or higher educated counterparts. This suggests that the lower the level of education, the higher the chance of getting into early marriage. Furthermore, illiterate women are more likely to get married by the age of 18 years than their literate counterparts in Malawi. The current study found out that women’s current age was a crucial predictor of early marriage among Congolese, Malian and Malawian young women. Multivariate analysis shows that adolescent women aged between 15 year and 19 years were more likely to experience early union than their young adult women aged between 20 years and 24 years counterparts.

To the contrary, John [20] argued that in fact its early marriages that impacted on women's education adversely and not the other way round. There could be unobservables which could affect both the decision of early marriage and educational outcomes which had a bias to its association, with educational differences explained by pre-existing characteristics of women who marry young versus later. For example, girls who are weaker academically would have lower incentives to carry on with education and their families would face lower losses by marrying them early in terms of forgone income. Since ability was positively associated to both female schooling and timing of marriage, the impact of marriage timing could be the upper biased. At the same time, in some countries (e.g., Bangladesh, India) even non-poor families might have disincentive to invest in their daughters' schooling and delaying marriage since this would increase the price a girl had to pay as dowry payments rose as girls become older [21].

When respondents were asked how the communities perceived girls who fell pregnant before marriage, results showed that most of the respondents 68 indicated that communities perceived them to have little chance of getting married. This was followed by 56 respondents who indicated that communities accepted it as normal. The other 26 respondents indicated that girls who fell pregnant before marriage brought dishonor to their families. However, there were growing concerns on the best measures of perceptions and attitudes. Petroni [22] developed and pre-tested among female adolescents aged between 15 years and 17 years old. The study found out that some of the respondents understood that child marriage was a bad thing and by taking part in the research, they could help prevent child marriages. Some of them clearly stated that pregnancy was the reason why some of the girls got married at a young age. They also raised concerns that those girls who got married at a young age did not know what risks were in child marriages. The girls knew that those who got married early were not afraid of the potential risks associated with child marriages because they were unaware of such risks. Other respondents thought it was normal to get married at a young age because they saw their friends and acquaintances getting married early.

The implications of this study to the health of adolescents are numerous. One obvious advantage is to be able to assess their perceptions about child marriages as scores, which could be utilised in order to come up with the policies and programmes regarding adolescents' health. The scale consists of such construct as an opinion about pre-marital sex. By understanding the adolescent

girls' perception of pre-marital sex, the data could be used to develop educational materials that support and empower adolescent girls with more adequate knowledge on sexual health.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study sought to find out the social cultural norms that contribute to child marriages in the selected communities of Chadiza district. The study established that certain gender norms shaped the thinking and sexual behaviour of adolescents, some of which were linked to child marriages. Such gender norms included early sexual debut influenced by sexual teaching of initiation ceremonies conducted at early ages of the adolescents influenced child marriages. Early sexual encounters and unavailability of sexual reproductive health services exposed young girls to early pregnancies, which in most cases lead to marital unions to avoid being unmarried for life. Further, inadequate knowledge in the community about the legal marriage age left the community with no proper guidance and this contributed to child marriages. From the study results, it was recommended that government through the appropriate Ministry should regulate initiation ceremonies that passed on bad cultural practices to the adolescents. While appreciating the role initiation ceremonies played in preparing the adolescents for adult responsibilities, there is need to restrict the curriculum for initiation to include sexual reproductive health rights and remove explicit sexual teachings which increased curiosity among the initiated girls to engage in early sex soon after the initiation ceremony. This would help equip adolescents with age appropriate messages that would help them refrain from high risk sexual behaviours. The government and cooperating partners should also enhance the provision of reproductive health services to include other forms of informal institutions of socialisation. Apart from that, government needs to raise awareness about legal marriage age in Zambia and closely monitor the ages at which children got married in the far-fetched and remote areas. This is because this current study found out that the level of knowledge on the legal marriage age was very low or was not known by most community members. Most parents also opted to marry off their children for various reasons among them economic hardships. There is therefore need to not only raise awareness on the need for adolescents to know the benefits of getting marriage at the right age but also there is need to educate parents and guardians on the dangers of marrying off their children early. Further, it is also important that traditional leaders through the government should also up their efforts in ensuring that their subjects adhered to the legal provisions in so far as early marriages were concerned.

Consent

As per international standard or university standard, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

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