PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS IN CHILD MARRIAGES IN A MARGINALISED COMMUNITY IN NYANGA DISTRICT IN MANICALAND PROVINCE

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Abstract: *Child marriages continue to be a global challenge causing major physiological and psychological health problems. The purpose of the study was to explore the psychological experiences of girls in child marriages in a marginalised Community in Nyanga District. An interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the life-world of girls in child marriages. Twenty-five (25) participants were identified and recruited using snowball sampling. Data for the study was collected using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Content analysis was used to analyse and draw themes from the data. The aim was to attain a condensed and broad description of the psychological experiences of girls in child marriages. This involved reading out each in-depth interview and focus group discussion to identify potential codes and creating a coding system and assigning agreed-upon codes to relevant texts. The investigators independently coded data and compared notes to ensure reliability. The themes which emerged from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were lack of self-identity, depression, low self-esteem, isolation, post-traumatic stress, helplessness and lack of confidence. Support networks are important for girls in child marriages in marginalised communities of a low resourced country like Zimbabwe.*

Keywords: Psychological Experiences Child Marriages, Zimbabwe
Research Area: Social Science
Paper Type: Research Paper

1. INTRODUCTION

Child marriages are very prevalent especially in the developing majority world as one in three girls is married off below the age of eighteen (Svanemyr et al., 2013). Forty-four percent of child brides in the developing majority world reside in South Asia while 18% of them are found in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2018). Incidence of child marriages in Africa has been reported in the poorer rural sections of the community and fragile states hit by natural catastrophes or conflicts higher (UNICEF, 2014). Yaya et al. (2019) note that 35, 07% of girls in Zimbabwe marry before the age of 18. Women's Rights Groups (2019) cited by Mubaiwa (2019) argue that the prevalence of child marriages could be higher than 35% because about 70% of marriages in Zimbabwe are not registered. Generally, research suggests that the prevalence of child marriages among girls aged 15 to 20 years increased from 21% in 2009 to 25% in 2014 (Zimbabwe Multiple Indicator Monitoring Survey, 2009).

Especially in marginalized communities, the drivers of child marriages continue to be elusive. Some of the implicated factors are poverty, religion, culture and gender discrimination (Chuma, 2017). The World Bank (2014) concluded that varying, complex, interrelated social, economic and political factors fuel child marriages. Frequently reported psychological consequences of child marriages are lack of self-identity, depression, low self-esteem, isolation, post-traumatic stress, helplessness and lack of confidence (LIyod, 2000; Tadesse, Dereje & Belay, 2014; UNICEF, 2001). In adverse circumstances characterised by violence, poverty and lack of psychological services girls are at a greater risk for poor mental health compared to the boys. As child marriages impact the girl's health, future and family it imposes substantial economic costs at the national level with major implications on development and prosperity (Sokol, 2009). Therefore, not doing anything to prevent or reduce the incidence of child marriages is perceived to be a violation of human rights and discrimination against women.

Elimination of human rights violation by 2030 is one of the UN Sustainable Development goals which is included in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Zimbabwe has ratified and domesticated CEDAW by introducing the Marriage Bill of 2019. Section 3 of this bill puts the minimum age for marriage in Zimbabwe at 18 years. The Marriage Bill imposes criminal liability on any person involved in the marriage of a child under the age of 18 years. Thus, the law recognises the role of parents and the community play in promoting child marriages. However, the bill has some anomalies that may deter some of the core women rights which include failure to recognise unregistered marriages and polygamous unions before the law. These legal flaws have tended to perpetuate inequalities, violence and discrimination against women especially in the marginalized rural settings of Zimbabwe.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

This study sought to investigate the psychological experiences of girls in child marriages in a resource constrained rural community of Zimbabwe to advance the international dialogue on child marriages. Therefore, using a sample of Zimbabwean girls in child marriages the study addressed the following question: How does being a victim of child marriage impact the girl`s psychological experience? Study findings might be helpful to inform community psychology interventions for the psychological adaptation of girls in child marriages and their social support systems. Furthermore, the findings might help professionals working with girls in child marriages to understand the psychological aspects of child marriages important for community psychology intervention considerations.

3. METHOD

3.1 Research Design

The study utilised a qualitative approach to explore the psychological experiences of girls in child marriages. Specifically, an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the life-world of girls in child marriages. The approach is appropriate for studies to identify phenomena as they are perceived by the actors (Lester, 1999). It is through

a qualitative approach that actors' experiences are analysed and meanings are attached based on actions, behaviour, thoughts, feelings and beliefs. The research design provided a procedure involving studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Tadese, Dereje & Belay, 2014).

3.2 Participants and Setting

The study participants comprised 25 girls aged between 15 and 17 years who were married to spouses within the age range of 20 to 27 years drawn from a marginalized rural community in the Nyanga District of Zimbabwe. The girls who participated in the study had been in child marriages for more than six months. Snowball sampling strategy was used to reach out to girls in child marriages because the phenomenon under investigation is shroud in secrecy and it was difficult to locate suitable participants (Gilbert, 2001).

3.3 Data Collection

Participants were initially engaged in in-depth interviews on how child marriages impacted on their psychological experiences. The in-depth interviews were followed up with focus group discussions. All participant interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide to ensure administration consistency and allow for researchers probing of original responses (Harell & Bradley, 2009; Tichapondwa, 2013). Each interview took between 45 to 60 minutes and all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure credibility, in-depth individual interviews were conducted to get to the core of the girls' psychological experiences. Interview scripts were written in a notebook to allow for auditing of the research process and this helped to improve trustworthiness of the interview data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Focus group discussions provided opportunities for participants to get to the core of their psychological experiences by building on each other's experiences, ideas and comments to produce data rich in detail that is difficult to obtain during in-depth individual interviews (Maree, 2007 cited in Tichapondwa, 2013). The focus group discussions were researcher directed and lasted for 45 minutes. To allow for auditing of the focus group discussion process and to improve the trustworthiness of the data, agreed experiences, ideas and comments were written on a flipchart. The strategy is suitable for exploring unexpected comments so that new perspectives are obtained.

3.4 Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was sought from the department of child welfare in the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and community gatekeepers mandated to promote the wellbeing of the children. The ward coordinator identified a child bride in a homestead in the target ward and referred her to the researchers and using snowball sampling the target sample was recruited. Each participant signed a consent form. The interviews were scheduled for a time when the participants felt comfortable to talk to the researchers. Before the study commenced, participants received information about the research. The information provided explained in detail the research purpose, procedures, risks and benefits including the rights of the participant and contact information of the researchers. Provision was made that those who

felt psychological discomfort would be able to get help from a psychologist on standby. Interviews were followed up by focus group discussions and there were two groups for the process. It took the researchers four weeks to collect the study data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) was used to analyse and draw themes from the data. The aim was to attain a condensed and broad description of psychological experiences among girls in child marriages. This involved reading out each in-depth interview and focus group discussion to identify potential codes and creating a coding system and assigning agreed-upon codes to relevant texts (Braune & Clarke, 2006). The researchers independently coded data and compared notes to ensure reliability (Vaismoradi et al., 2015). Various themes and sub-themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions are presented in the Results section of this paper.

4. RESULTS

The psychological experiences that were reported by the participants included: lack of self-identity, depression, low self-esteem, isolation, post-traumatic stress, helplessness and lack of confidence.

4.1 Lack of Self-Identity

Participants in the study reported a lack of self-identity as child marriages denied them the opportunity to enjoy adolescence, the stage at which self-identity is normally sought and established. Child marriages abruptly moved them from childhood to adulthood (i.e., being wives and mothers) without an induction period and were not psychologically ready to take up the expected roles. The following typical statements captured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions exemplify participants' responses:

*'................the work at home is too much for me as there is a lot to be done such as cleaning, cooking doing the laundry and ironing .This got worse when I gave birth to our first child as the baby had her own demands too of being taken care of ....'(*Participant # 25)

'............I dropped out of school and lost all my friends I played with. My husband did not want me to play with them anymore as she insisted that I am now a wife. I miss playing with my friends a lot as I was so close to them from my childhood.......…' (Participant # 13)

It is a common tradition in Zimbabwe that girl children are viewed as sources of family income but family members rarely bother about the languishing of girl children in their marriages.

4.2 Lack of Self Esteem

Most of the girls in child marriages felt rejected and not valued as they were not consulted before being traded off, consequently, the girl children did not value themselves. Their feelings and thoughts are captured by the following typical words below.

'............when my parents forced me to marry the husband am staying with I felt rejected even though they tried to justify their cause of maintaining morality and dignity for the family. Up until now I feel as if I have no sense of worth to them ....' (Participant # 21)

'..............my husband is a drunkard and most of the times when he comes back home he physically beats me accusing me of having an affair with the boy next door who was once my classmate at school. I have come to accept his behavior as I blame myself for willingly eloping to him when I got pregnant.....' (Participant #12)

It is evident that girls in child marriages have deficient self-esteem.

4.3 Depression

Poverty and abuse in the girl children's marriages make them so sad that their eating habits have changed. Most girl children who participated in this study believe that they have depression. Their experiences are captured by the following typical responses:

'.................I usually have sleepless nights, worrying about how we will make ends meet as both my husband and I survive on piece jobs ......' (Participants #5).

'...........ever since I got married my eating habits have changed. Sometimes I lose my concentration as I tend to lose focus and become anxious about when my husband will stop his abusive behaviour.........' (Participants # 1).

4.4 Stress

The majority of girls in child marriages reported being stressed by poor relationships with their spouses, financial constraints and sexual violence perpetrated by their spouses. Their experiences are captured by the typical statements below:

'.......It has been two years I am married to my husband and he sometimes does not come home at all. He does not give me any money to buy groceries at all. At times we suffer from hunger with my child when he goes away and this stresses me ....' (Participant # 24).

'............ I was diagnosed with high blood pressure last year and am on medication as I speak. This was triggered by the miscarriage which was such a traumatic experience......' (Participant #17).

4.5 Loneliness

Most of the participants reported experiencing a sense of loneliness as they are separated from their friends, family and community. Loneliness is worsened by lack of love and poor communication with husbands, poor relationship with extended family and stigma associated with girls in child marriages in the community.

'.........I recently got married and am staying with my in laws but I have not yet got used to them. I feel so alone and lost at times as the environment and the people are still new. Am still yet to understand what they like and don't like. ....' (Participant # 8).

'……… it is a challenge to socialize with other women in the community as they are far older than me. When interacting with them they view me as a child not as a wife and this creates a gap in interaction…….' (Participant # 6).

4.6 Lack of Self Confidence

Girls in child marriages claimed that they had low self-confidence and often fail to achieve their life goals which include educational goals. Consequently, these girls tend to look down upon themselves as they believe that they do not have the necessary ability to achieve their goals. These attitudes are illustrated by the following typical responses captured during the interviews with the girls:

'………...I don't think I will be able to go back to school anymore as I was deprived. Now I have to put all my energy in taking care of the child .....' (Participant #7).

'………...I feel I do not have the ability to pursue my career anymore as I have a lot of responsibilities as a wife and mother now have achieved nothing in the marriage and I feel as a failure .....' (Participant # 1).

5. DISCUSSSION

The girls in child marriages self-perceived to lack of self-identity, confidence, to be depressed, isolated, helpless and to have low self-esteem and post-traumatic stress. These self-perceptions have been confirmed by several past studies conducted on the phenomenon. For example, Tadesse, Dereje and Belay (2014) note that most of the girls in child marriages at one point in time suffer from an identity crisis. One reason for the identity crisis is that these girls are forced into marriage while still at the adolescence stage which involves transitioning from childhood to adulthood and development of a sense of self (Sokol, 2009). In addition, UNICEF (2001) notes that girl children who are forced, on a religious basis, into polygamous marriages often belittle themselves as they are instructed to respect the elder wives.

In fact, UNICEF (2001) claims that elder wives emotionally abuse girl children in polygamous marriages. Although participants in the present study did not directly confirm being emotionally abused in their day to day social interactions, they acknowledged they were stressed and depressed in their marriages. The participants in this study agreed that the roles of wife and mother were devastating and demanding. This view was confirmed by Tadesse, Dereje and Belay (2014) who found out that girls in child marriages experienced pressure from husbands, in-laws and elder wives. LIyod (2000) also noted that stress and depression of girls in child marriages were triggered by deprivation of necessities such as food, finance, love and safety at home.

Limitations of the study include the use of a qualitative approach and the small sample size. Therefore, caution should be taken in generalising the results to girls in child marriages who were not part of this study. However, the use of the existing literature helped to put the findings in context and to show the extent to which the findings were consistent or divergent with other studies previously carried out.

6. CONCLUSION

Evidence from the present study and literature reviewed converge on the notion that girls in child marriages experience multiple psychological problems. The basic problem is that these girl children did not fully experience adolescence stage because becoming wives and mothers prematurely moved them into adulthood. Consequently, their psychological experiences include lack of self-identity, depression, low self-esteem, isolation, post-traumatic stress, helplessness and lack of confidence. It is evident from the study findings that girl children in child marriages need caring support systems.

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