

Developing a Community Centred-Framework for Eliminating Child Marriages in Rural Zimbabwe. A Case of Bocha Marange

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ABSTRACT

Child marriage is a significant barrier to gender equality and development in Africa, profoundly impacting girls' sexual and reproductive health (SRH). This study investigates the persistent prevalence of child marriages in the Bocha area of Marange, Zimbabwe, a region significantly influenced by the Johane Marange Apostolic Church. Utilizing a qualitative research approach guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants to explore the lived experiences of women and girls. The findings reveal that child marriage is driven by a complex interplay of socio-religious factors, including pervasive poverty and hunger, the economic influence of artisanal miners, a widespread lack of education and awareness, and the church's doctrine which sanctifies early marriage, polygamy, and rejects medical intervention. The research further determined that existing interventions including education policies, legal frameworks, and NGO-led empowerment programmes have been largely ineffective due to poor implementation, a lack of sustainability, and the significant socio-political influence of the church which shields perpetrators. In response, this study proposes the Integrative Bocha Referral Pathway Model, a comprehensive, community-centred solution that emphasizes food security, holistic inclusion of men and boys, community-wide sensitization, and a liberal, collaborative engagement with the church leadership. The study concludes that eradicating child marriage in this context requires a multifaceted, sustainable model that addresses the root causes and empowers the entire community, rather than focusing solely on the girl child.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Johane Marange Apostolic Church, Socio-Religious Factors, Zimbabwe, Community-Based Model, Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Women account for more than 50 per cent of Africa's combined population, yet they contributed to only 33 per cent of the continent's collective GDP in 2018 (Moodley, 2019). This pinpoints to the second-fiddle role women are playing towards the development of the continent. This is due to poor progress on gender equality in the region (Pandey, 2019). Early marriages caused by religious beliefs have been one of the major components which has been most prominent in perpetuating the predominant predicament of girls and women's inferiority in many parts of the continent. In Zimbabwe, the Manicaland province, particularly, in the Marange area caught a storm when the death of Memory Machaya, a 14-year-old girl died while giving birth in the Marange area and this was condemned by the United Nations (United Nations, 2023). The Passover Feast of the Johane Marange Church provides an environment where young girls as young as 10 years old are married and impregnated on the context of spirituality. An estimate of 8000 girls, including those in Mutare Rural District with reference to Marange area have been forced into early marriage due to different reasons (Moyo, 2024). Manicaland Province has 38.1% of early child pregnancy, making it the fifth out of the 10 provinces and rural girls are twice more likely to be married before reaching 18 years as compared to their urban counterparts (National Adolescent Fertility Study, 2016). Child marriage is a cross-cutting issue and

sadly, cases of girls being married before 18 years has surged from 4.99% to 5.99% in 2019. These statistics have been witnessed as well in different parts of the country including the Manicaland province which this research focused on. Therefore, this research will focus more on the challenges of women and girls' sexual reproductive health who are in the Marange community. Good sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is fundamental to ensuring that individuals, families and populations live lives that are healthy, sustainable and meaningful. In Zimbabwe, poor sexual and reproductive health is associated with a huge burden of diseases at national level.

Furthermore, 500 million new sexually transmitted infections are recorded every year in China (UNFPA, 2014). A quarter of a million women dying in childbirth; over 200 million people with an unmet need for family planning; and a majority of adolescents and young people in the world still have incorrect and inadequate knowledge around fundamental issues such as HIV. In China, poor sexual and reproductive health results in an estimated 48,000 new infections and 28,000 deaths from HIV per year, about four thousand women dying in childbirth. One quarter of women experience violence at some point in their lives, and 14% of men in one Chinese study reported perpetrating rape against a female partner (UNFPA, 2014)

At the heart of SRH lies the concept of healthy sexuality meaning a safe and satisfying sexual life, a positive attitude to sexual relationships, and freedom to express sexual and gender identity. Healthy sexuality, in turn, relies upon the protection, promotion and enabling of fundamental human rights in relation to sexuality. Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes (Yaya and Belizan, 2020). Reproductive health therefore implies that people can have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so. The World Health Organization (2023) stipulated that reproductive sexual health is a topical issue among the young girls and women in developing countries and needs to be addressed. This however has remained a perception rather than a reality in the Marange area due to the prevalence of the Johane Marange church doctrine which believes in early child marriage and pregnancy.

Furthermore, UNFPA (2017), more than 650 million girls in the world are married off before attaining the age of 18, that is one in five girls representing close to 18%. This clearly shows that the problems which are affecting the girlchild in the Marange community are global. The church has directed church elders to marry young girls in the church and this has endangered the lives of the young girls in the church. Chirongoma (2014), the prevalence of early child marriages has been caused by religious and cultural factors. In addition, UNICEF (2019) asserted that these young girls are not allowed to use sanitary pads and seek medical treatment. Magede (2020), the Johane Marange Church doctrine usually harps on the view that, their members are not allowed to seek medical treatment. This has caused many of the girls to suffer from premature death. According to Mbiwiriri (2021), more than 17.6 of the girls in the Johane Marange Apostolic Church suffer from premature death because they are not allowed to seek medical treatment, and this usually manifests into poor sexual reproductive health. This has been a terrible experience for the young girls because at school they are encouraged to seek medical treatment, and this has caused cognitive dissonance in the young girls, which a psychological condition is caused by two contradictory beliefs.

The leadership of Johane Marange Apostolic Church do not openly encourage their congregants to seek medical treatment, but they place emphasis on the power of the holy spirit within the church and this has caused poor sexual reproductive health in the women and girls (Musevenzi, 2017). This has been a serious cause of concern because many of the girls have fallen prey to death especially birth, as they are encouraged to give birth in the shrine. Johane Marange Apostolic Church were mainly formed during the liberation struggle supporting the black empowerment movements during the colonial period (Tarusarira, 2022). These churches hold an Ubuntu perspective which is African initiative. These churches are different from the contemporary Pentecostal churches in terms of doctrine. In a world, where affirmative action towards the women is being implemented these churches continue to critique the rights which are being given to women. Chitando, Gunda and Kugler (2014) posit that Johane Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe, have subjected women to a second-fiddle role. These differences are the reason why this research has solemnly focused on AICs, with particularity to the Johane Marange church which is in Manicaland. Chirongoma (2024) acknowledged that there has been a lot of awareness and legislations which are meant to address the issue of early child marriage

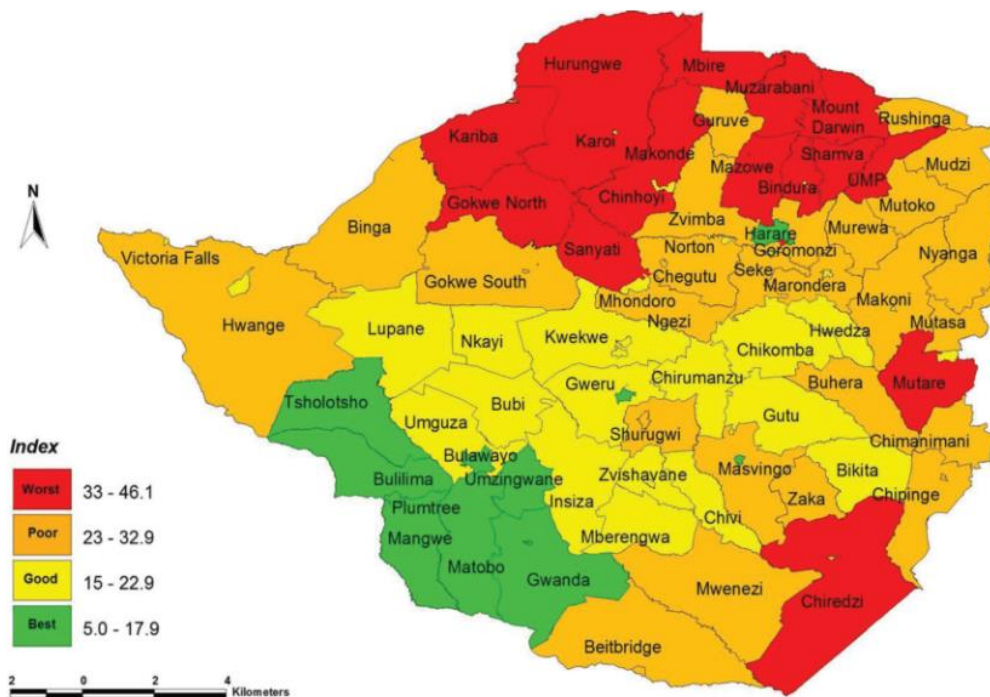
amongst both boys and girls, but with reference to girls, it has fallen short of addressing the magnitude of the problem. Nyoni (2019) mentioned that in Zimbabwe, particularly Marange, early child marriages continue to manifest because of the political immunity which these churches have from the government. Chitando, et al, (2014) note that young girls as young as nine years old are married in the Johane Marange Church and this is a tradition which is over half a century old. The consequences of this action have witnessed many young girls having birth complications and an increased mortality rate. Girlchild dropouts in the clusters of Marange which include Mafarikwa, Zvipiripiri, St Noah and Maponde secondary schools. (Manicaland Provincial Education Office, 2024)

Ezra Chitando & Chirongoma (2021) have posited that the mostly affected Manicaland districts are Mutare, Buhera and Chipinge and this has increased the girlchild dropouts' rates, as they embrace marriages at a very young age. Hodzi (2024) agrees to the sentiments earlier alluded by Chitando and Chirongoma that there is the need to implement the reforms which are stipulated in the African Union `s Agenda 2063. The leeway and trajectory stipulated by the continent `s governing body is of paramount significance towards eradicating early child marriages and pregnancies.

The World Health Organization (2019), stipulates that's, incidents of women and girls abuse have recently shown diverse and unique patterns across various regions, particularly in rural and urban areas. Recent trends indicate an alarming increase in poor sexual reproductive health cases globally (World Health Organization , 2024). The World Health Organization (2020) emphasizes that child abuse encompasses a range of forms, including emotional, sexual, physical, and neglectful behaviours. Children today encounter numerous challenges, often stemming from their home and community environments. This research placed critical attention to girl children who are experiencing poor sexual reproductive health due to religious cases of African Initiated Churches. According to Hall, Moreau & Trussel (2012), religious factors often contribute to the maltreatment experienced by women and girls in exacerbating their suffering with reference to sexual reproductive health. Disparities in the types of poor health faced by the women and girls have often been witnessed in the Marange area. There are variations in women and girls' poor health manifestations that are linked to different environments, with religious factors playing a significant role in the occurrence of abuse. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reported that over 2000 women and girls have died in the United States because of religious convictions, underscoring the alarming prevalence of such incidents. These findings highlight a concerning trend of poor sexual reproductive health among the women and girls within most of the countries.

In 2023, the mortality rate of the young girls in the Johane Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe has been reported to be at 26%, albeit officially no word has been uttered (Mwanyangureni,2023). Furthermore, he maintains that the church staunchly rejects any medical intervention, instead treatment services are offered by the church`s midwives and prophets. In most of the cases, the young girls are victims of the torrid and petrifying times which they encounter, which mainly leads to death. The United Nations (2022) urged the Zimbabwe to deliver justice for a 14-year-old girl, Memory Machaya who died giving birth at the Mafarikwa Shrine in Marange. The United Nations was forced to intervene after the Zimbabwean government lacked particularity and interest in bringing the perpetrator to book. This is a challenge which the young girls in the Johane Marange Apostolic Church are encountering with reference to sexual reproductive health.

Mazingaizo (2022) reported a case of a 9-year-old girl who was impregnated by her father in Tsholotsho also indicated the stumbling block, which the young girls who are in Johane Marange Apostolic Church as they are prematurely impregnated before reaching their potentiality. The father who had impregnated his daughter argued that the instruction came from the Holy Spirit. Figure 1.1 shows how rampant early childhood marriages in Zimbabwe are:



Midlands State University Law Review 2017

Figure 2: District Prevalence Mapping of Teenage (Child) Marriages in Zimbabwe¹⁰

Map 9: Proportion of female teenage (15-19 years) married population,

Figure1.1 (Source: Midlands State University Law Review:2017)

In the above diagrammatic illustration, only Matabeleland South and North have small number of young girls who are experiencing poor reproductive and sexual health among the country's ten provinces (Midlands State University, 2017). Despite awareness campaigns which have been done on sexual reproductive health, an increase in the number of girls who are falling prey to poor sexual reproductive health has increased in the whole country but some of the hotspot areas were highlighted and Mutare in which Marange community falls in was also indicated to be very critical. This begs the answer to the question that there is the need for a model which can be tailored to address early child pregnancy and marriages. Therefore, this research seeks to thoroughly understand the challenges and doctrinal perspectives which are enhancing poor sexual reproductive health among the women and girls in the Johane Marange apostolic sect in Marange

Developing countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, have witnessed a concerning rise in instances of poor sexual reproductive health, largely influenced by religious factors. Akwara (2023) points out that despite facing increased risks of adherence to proper sexual reproductive health, women and girls in these regions often have no choice but to remain in their environments due to a lack of exposure and religious beliefs. This shortage of resources is frequently cited as a key factor contributing to the high prevalence of poor sexual reproductive health in Africa. Morris & Nunu (2021) further highlighted the impact of African Traditional religion on child socialization, which has been criticized globally for causing poor sexual reproductive health through asserting how the latter encourages the use of herbs for any healing process. The Johane Marange Church is more prominent in rural Zimbabwe and 70% of the population resides in the rural areas, as they are characterized by high levels of poverty and limited access to basic necessities, hence, women and girls' exploitation has become prevalent (World Bank Group, 2019).

Problem Statement

Many of the young girls in Marange are being prematurely impregnated and this affects their educational prospects. Girls as young as nine years old have been impregnated and most Johane Marange Apostolic Church have staunchly rejected medical intervention towards giving birth and any other medical intervention. An increase in the girl child mortality rate has been witnessed from 6% to 23,4% in the last four years and this is a serious cause for concern (Mwanyangureni, 2023). The unavailability of sanitary pads and related resources needed for their menstrual cycle is also another notable problem, which the young girls are facing in

the Marange community. Many of the young girls' bright future has been destroyed, as they enter the marriage institution without fully understanding what it entails. Birth complications have also characterized the plight which the young girls face, and an increase in the mortality rate has been recorded. There is the need for a tailored model which can address the continued existence and perpetuation of early child pregnancy and marriage.

Aim And Objectives

The aim of the research is to develop a comprehensive community centred model for eliminating child marriages in Bocha, Marange Area.

To investigate the socio-religious factors leading to high prevalence of child marriages in Bocha, Marange area

To assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at addressing child marriages in Bocha, Marange area

To develop a practical community-based solution aimed at addressing child marriages in Bocha, Marange area

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used the qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach is a process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, all-inclusive picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. The study employed the qualitative research paradigm, which focuses on conducting in-depth investigations into the experiences within the social world which the girls and women in the Marange community are being exposed to. The decision to employ qualitative research methods in studying the experiences of women and girls in the Marange community was rooted in the method's ability to capture the intricacies of their lived realities. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world. This research was conducted in Mafarikwa, Marange, and particularly focused with the women and girls in Johane Marange apostolic sect. The research implemented the use of the semi-structured interviews. This research used the purposive and convenience sampling procedures. The sampling size for this research will be 12 participants and they were selected based on the phenomenological research design which indicates that the participants should be in the range of 6-12 participants. Thematic analysis was used in the research to effectively highlight the data collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Poverty and Hunger

The study found out that, most of the people residing in the Bocha, area is hunger stricken and socially dilapidated. This is a phenomenon which has forced them to initiate marriages amongst families. The Bocha, area is in region III of the five agricultural regions in Zimbabwe and is characterised by low rainfalls and infertile soils. This has made many families to experience food insecurity. In a motive to secure family ties with well-up and rich families, young girls have been used as the bait to secure food stability in the area. In the area, many of the people believe that by marrying their young girls to families who are rich, this means a constant supply network of food and utilities which can help them as a family and this is one of the key factors. Chireshe (2023) highlighted that marrying young girls at a tender age is a common phenomenon in Bocha, as families will be seeking the bridal price and cattle to eradicate poverty and hunger. This study shows that one of the main social reasons why there is a high prevalence of child marriage in Bocha is because of poverty and hunger.

Below are some of the utterances that were shared by the participants during the data collection process:

"I have been a teacher at Mafarikwa Secondary School, most of the young girls barely finish their Form one year, as they would have been married. The reason being poverty and hunger. Most of the established men

here, have more than four or five wives and these are young girls married so that their families can sustain themselves economically” (Participant 1, 23/09/2025)

“It’s very true our soils are infertile and its very hot in this area you cannot plant anything, reason most families struggle with hunger. Most families actually struggle to feed their children and pay school fees, hence, when an opportunity presents itself for the young girls to be married, it becomes a straightjacket without considering age or anything” (Participant 6, 26/09/2025)

The aforementioned highlights that one of the social problems which is responsible for a high prevalence of child marriages is poverty and hunger. The responses given by the participants effectively reflect that young girls are being married off because their families will be struggling socially and economically, hence, the paying of the bride price offers a panacea to the challenge. Chirongoma (2014) also highlighted that Bocha area is characterised by low rainfalls and very high temperatures and this has exacerbated the vulnerability of the young girls.

Artisanal Mining Activities

Another contributing phenomenon which was responsible for a high rate of child marriages was the presence of artisanal mining activities. Bocha area is very close to the famous Chiadzwa diamonds and the presence of artisanal miners have created another social phenomenon. These miners charm the young girls with money and food and they become so vulnerable. This is also another aspect which has contributed the prevalence of child marriages in the Bocha area. It is also pivotal and vital to state that most of these artisanal miners will be having huge amounts of money and it becomes very easy to lure the young girls into a marriage. This is a fundamental perpetuating factor which has made it inevitable for child marriages to be eradicated in the Bocha area. The participants were so vocal about the artisanal miners.

The interviewees who participated in the study, articulated that,

“The artisanal miners are a menace to this community because that’s where they find easy targets for marriages as compared to Mutare and this has left us bitter, because they use money on the young girls. I do not entirely blame the artisanal miners, some of the parents are even willing to initiate a marriage between their young children and the artisanal miners because of the proceeds obtained from mining” (Participant 3, 18/09/2025)

“The honest truth is that those artisanal miners do not love our children, to them its just fun, many of the young girls who have been impregnated are still here and they have been left behind, so to be honest the artisanal miners are problematic because of their behaviour of just impregnating the young girls” (Participant 9, 28/09/2025)

“The advantage of the artisanal miners is money; they flaunt their money to the young girls and buy them drinks and chips which ends up in the young girls being impregnated and married”. (Participant, 02/10/2025)

The responses which were given by the participants also indicated another social cause contributing to the prevalence of child marriages in Bocha. The prominence of artisanal miners was articulated as another immense contributor to the rising statistics of child marriages in Bocha. Artisanal miners are usually uneducated school dropouts who practise illegal mining activities. Chitumba (2021) noted the same trend in Shurugwi, a mining town, where young girls were being impregnated by the artisanal miners because of their financial masculinity.

Lack of Education and Awareness

Most of the young girls who are married in Bocha between the ages of 9-15, lack the fundamental education to understand the implications of marriage and this is also another contributing factor. Most of the young girls in Bocha due to religious beliefs as well prefer to drop-out of school. Rationale decision-making and choices of these young girls is not correctly aligned, hence, most times horrendous decision-making because of lack of education. This was confirmed by the participants in the study.

The participants in the study also alluded to the lack of education and awareness, elaborating that,

“I believe in the wrong country, it is in Bocha, where you can find one school having more than 30 drop-outs per term, because here, education is not important, children prefer marriage especially the young girls. The parents are not educated as well and they do not understand the importance, hence, when an opportunity for marriage presents itself, they give it precedence over anything else, and this lack of education has made the families to make painful decisions which destroys the future of the young girls” (Participant 5, 24/10/2025)

“The very fact that most of these girls drop-out of school before even reaching grade 7 shows that the only thing that they will be waiting for is marriage and this is a challenge which has made them to get into marriages at a tender age and experience the devastating realities of life at a very tender age without realizing the inimical effects and this is a factor which have hindered the future of the Bocha people” (Participant 7, 15/10/2025)

The participants in the study bemoaned lack of education and awareness as the leading causes of child marriages in the area. One notable aspect was the fact that the responses clearly highlighted that lack of education and awareness was between the both the young girls and their parents. Their parents are also victims of the same system which made them to be married at a very tender age and they see nothing wrong with it.

Johane Marange Apostolic Church

The overwhelming response the study got from the participants was that the church is hugely responsible for the child marriages. The Johane Marange Apostolic Church believes in child marriages. The responses which were obtained from the participants stated that this is a church tradition which is done in July, during their Passover feast. The church believes in male autonomy and female inferiority. The church is very radical towards female education and believes in polygamy and procreation. The other notable point of particularity is that the church does not embrace medical intervention, as it believes that the divine providence through the holy spirit can cure all the health-related challenges faced by its congregants

Below are some of the contributions made by the participants with reference to the role of the church towards child marriages;

“The church`s doctrine is eloquent about polygamous marriage institutions and how men should marry many wives regardless of their age. It is enshrined in their church doctrine that once the holy spirit gives a directive no one should go against it and this is how many young girls have been married before even reaching the age of 12” (Participant 4, 27/10/2025)

“The church does not allow medical intervention, therefore even when a child is impregnated through rape, they say the man have to marry the young girl and stay school does not matter what matters is marriage and this is how most girls have been lured into marriage” (Participant 8, 26/10/2025)

“The church is powerful, I doubt anything can be done, look at the global case of Memory Machaya, she died at the age of 14 while giving birth, the United Nations condemned the church but nothing was done because it`s their spiritual belief and it is what it is but everything you hear about young girls as young as 9, 10 and 11 years old being married off its very true” (Participant 3, 29/10/2025)

“Most of the people, if 90% of the total population here in the Bocha area are members of the Johane Marange Apostolic Church and they see no problem in child marriages from the school officials, parents and the local authorities and this is how powerful the church because annually even, the President of this country visits their shrine” (Participant 6, 23/10/2025)

The feedback which was given by the participants showed that the church`s theology and doctrine radically believe in patriarchy and child marriages as per the directive of the holy spirit. The government of Zimbabwe, from a political perspective has a huge following of the Johane Marange faithful`s, who vote for them overwhelming and this is one of the reasons why the church has been immunised from persecution. The reflections also hinted and highlighted how powerful the church through its socio-ecological structure which

encompasses various powerful and prominent individuals, who are able to protect the church. The fact that almost 90% of the people in the Bocha area are members of the church with the same shared beliefs, values and norms justify the reason why the parents of these young girls see nothing wrong with the child marriages but rather celebrate the marriage institution.

The effectiveness of interventions aimed at addressing child marriages in Bocha, Marange Area.

Education Policy

The education policy has tried to mitigate the prevalence of child marriages however it has fallen short considering the fact that the policy itself does not have arresting powers but a mere blueprint meant to highlight what is acceptable. The Education policy has been guided by the Zimbabwean Constitution Amendment (2013), Marriage Act (2022) and Education Act (2020) but however the effectiveness of the education policy has remained shielded in the midst of antiquity. The participants acknowledged the stipulations of the education policy through allowing basic free education up to 18 years and the marriage age being 18 but simply stated that this is more theoretical than practical here in the Bocha area.

These are some of the contributions which were made by the participants in the study about the education policy:

“It’s very true the education act which was enabled in 2020 stipulated that there should be basic and free education to all the children, indirectly fighting child marriages but despite the provision the girlchild school drop-out rate continue to skyrocket and this highlights that the intervention can not be necessarily labelled to be effective” (Participant 1, 25/10/2025)

“The problem to be honest is not the education policy and supportive policies, they know these are there but they also know that even if cases of child marriages are reported by whistle blowers, the parents and the local authorities will not testify against child marriages and it’s a system which is very much intact and this has rendered all these policies ineffective” (Participant 4, 23/10/2025)

“Since the passing on of these bills, many cases of child marriages which have even led to the death of these young girls have been reported and made public but the perpetrators have not been convicted they have been protected by the church. This paints a picture where we believe on paper that we have the tools to fight child marriages but their effectiveness is a different story altogether. (Participant 7, 28/10/2025)

All of the participants in the study acknowledged the presence of the education policy but questioned its effectiveness because of the fact that it continues to be undermined by school drop-out rates and increasing cases of child marriages. Most of the participants argued that we have no shortage of policies meant to address child marriages but their application remains a deficiency which needs be cured because having frameworks without implementation is a dead horse theory.

Alternative Empowerment Programmes

Different non-governmental organizations have championed empowerment programmes in the Bocha area. Despite the presence of the alternative empowerment programmes, statistics indicate an increase in the number of child marriages. The empowerment programmes which have been brought by the non-governmental organizations include case clinics, role modelling, indabas and economic projects. These are some of the empowerment programmes which have been championed by the organizations and have fallen short of addressing the continued prevalence of child marriages in the Bocha area. The main contributions which were made by the participants stated that, although these organizations had introduced these empowerment programmes child marriages have continued to be prominent.

These are some of the contributions which were made by the participants in the study,

“Many organizations have flocked to the Bocha area implementing different empowerment programmes meant to address the plight faced by the young girls and some of the organizations are CAMFED, CARE, Higherlife

Foundation, Mercy Corps, Simukai Centre and Plan International. The challenge is that their empowerment programmes do not have a sustainability plan, therefore, once they leave the Bocha area, the programmes cease as well”

“Most of the girls despise the empowerment programmes which do not benefit them materially and embrace those programmes which give them uniforms or money. This shows that the desired outcomes and impact will never be realized because the victims are more concerned with material benefits rather than mental liberation and this has reduced the effectiveness of the empowerment programmes”

“Personally, I think, that most of the organizations who come to the Bocha area are not entirely concerned with helping our girls and community but it helps them acquire a lot of funding and gives them visibility, thus, they too, I doubt they are concerned with effective implementation but taking pictures and saying we are doing something in the popular, Bocha area”

The work which the non-governmental organizations are doing in the Bocha area through raising awareness was also mentioned by the participants. The ineffectiveness of the empowerment programme was two-folded because the young girls themselves prefer programmes which are materialistic and these are the ones which they pay undivided attention to. The other notable point of concern which was raised by the participants in the study was that some of the non-governmental organizations are concerned with the publicity and funding more than the impact of their empowerment programmes. This was another notable issue which was raised by the participants in the study as reducing the effectiveness of the programmes implemented towards empowering the young girls about early pregnancies and marriages in the Bocha area.

Legal and Policy-Framework

The study was also inquisitive about the legal and policy framework towards child marriages in the country. The Zimbabwean government in enacted a law which stipulated that the legal age of marriage is now 18. The age changed from 16 and 18 years as a result of protecting the young girls from early marriages and finish secondary school. The results obtained in the study indicated that while the law might be honoured and implemented in most parts of the country, when it comes to Bocha area, this becomes a different story altogether. Most of the participants in the study acknowledged that the legal and policy frameworks are non-existent in the Bocha area because no one cares about them, the church will protect its congregants.

These are some of the contributions which were made by the participants in the study,

“The Johane Marange Apostolic church is very powerful in this country, nothing is done to its members, so people might talk about the law and policies but these does not apply to them because they are shielded by the highest offices in the land. When Memory Machaya died, the world got alarmed and made a lot of noise but did you ever heard that the perpetrator was arrested, this shows you how powerful the church is, and you cannot really mention about laws and policies to them which forbid child marriages when it’s a church tradition which has been present since time immemorial”

“I always hear it on radio and the newspapers that so and so have been arrested because of impregnating minors, but these are things which I witness on a daily occasion here in the Bocha area and no one has ever been arrested or convicted for them, hence, yes the laws are there but this is our doctrine which has existed way before the so-called marriage amendments”

The participants in the study acknowledged the existence of the laws and policies which prohibit child marriages but however asserted that despite their litigation child marriages continue to exist because it is a fundamental doctrine of the church. Therefore, this renders the conclusion that laws and policies are there but their implementation is not effective and this has caused the inevitability of child marriages in the Bocha area.

Practical community-based solutions aimed at addressing child marriages in Bocha Marange Area.

Holistic Men and Boys Inclusion

In the recent past all the programmes which were being done towards addressing child marriages were girl child -centred and focused. The study participants effectively reflected that while targeting the young girls in schools and the community was ideal, there was the need to have a holistic approach which is inclusive of the perpetrators. They believed that there is the need for men and boys to be included in the programmes as they need too to be empowered. Currently, 90% of the empowerment programmes done in the Bocha area are targeting the young girls only (Chireshe, 2023). The predominant predicament currently being faced in the Bocha area is that the target population for the empowerment programmes is partially correct but it leaves another fundamental group of people are vital to problem.

The interviewees who participated in the study, elucidated that,

“The way child marriages issues are addressed by those who come to this area, it makes it look like the girls are impregnating themselves as they are given lectures after lectures but none of the organizations or ministries have made an effort to include men and boys from the Bocha community and empower them on why the girls should finish school first before getting married. I think this is a solution which can be effective in addressing the problems of child marriages in this community”

“The girls as far as I know are not the problem, they are persuaded by the boys or it’s given as a directive from the church through the holy spirit and this is how they end up married at a tender age. There is the need to include the men and boys in the Bocha area in most of the empowerment programmes so that they get to know and understand why they should allow the young girls to grow up and make rationalized decisions before marrying them”

“ I have lived in this community for the past 45 years and I have never seen an organization which comes here and says it also wants to address the men and boys pertaining to child marriages but they are the ones marrying these young girls and when they are approached and told the directives of the holy spirit, the young girls can not resist anything , therefore , for their interventions to be effective , there is the need for a holistic approach which encompasses both men and boys”

The feedback which was given by the participants indicated that a practical solution which has been ignored for long is the inclusion of men and boys in the Bocha area into the empowerment programmes. An inclusive empowerment programme which addresses the likely victims and perpetrators of child marriages and this can go a long way in eradicating the prevalence of child marriages in the Bocha area.

Community Sensitization Programmes

Most of the inhabitants of the Bocha area are members of the Johane Marange Apostolic church and there is the need for community sensitization programmes. These community sensitization programmes can go a long way in addressing the predominance of child marriages in the community. There is the need to educate the community members of the Bocha area why child marriages should not be of virtue and change the precedence and narrative. Most of the participants in the research supported the need for community sensitization programmes.

The interviewees in the study asserted and accentuated that,

“Many of the interventions towards eradicating child marriages in the Bocha area have focused with the young girls but what is often overlooked is the fact that these girls can deny the marriage but their parents will coerce them to be married and drop-out of school, hence, there is the need for the community too, to be educated”

“The idea for the girls to be married off at a tender age is a collaborative one mainly patriarchal, hence there is the need for the fathers and mothers, uncles and grandmothers to be involved in the empowerment programmes because they are the real decision makers behind the young girls”

“When most young girls are being married and the community accepts and see it as normal it simply means that the community as well needs to be sensitized because what they have accepted as normal is irrational”

The responses of the participants in the study highlighted that the mistake which characterises most of the interventions done towards child marriages is that they only focus on the young girls ignoring the socio-ecological patterns and dynamics which are crucial, like in this case the community. Therefore, the need to encompass the community is pivotal and vital towards the attainment of the desired objective.

Liberal Engagement with the Johane Marange Apostolic Church Leadership

History has been constant and has repeated itself not once or twice but times without numbers in the Johane Marange Apostolic Church. Most of the organizations which have approached the church for discussions on child marriages took a radical approach to their interventions but the participants believe in the need for a more liberal approach to the Johane Marange Apostolic Church leadership. The development of infrastructure which has been witnessed in the Bocha area through the construction of St Noah Primary and Secondary Schools clearly shows a change of approach with reference to the church's priorities.

Some of the participants in the study highlighted that,

“The church is willing to give an ear even to the externals and this has been shown by how it transformed into an advocate of girlchild education through the construction of St Noah Primary and Secondary schools. The schools even enrol the girlchild but this is a church which once did not belief in educating the girlchild but that changed through a continued integrative process, therefore although engagements with the church might take time but it's a step in the right direction”

“The church is powerful in the Bocha area controlling the surrounding areas of Buhera, Chipinge, Mutare and Chimanmani, hence, the church is the major stakeholder in all this and there is the need to discuss with the church how we can collectively fight child marriages.

The participants in the study believed that for a successful fight to be wedged against child marriages the church is the major stakeholders and it needs to be included. However, the main point which was emphasized by the participants, was the fact that there is the need for a liberal approach towards the Johane Marange church leadership. The participants indicated that the church had failed to tolerate individuals and organizations who were radical towards the church, hence there is the need for a liberal engagement with the Johane Marange Apostolic Church leadership.

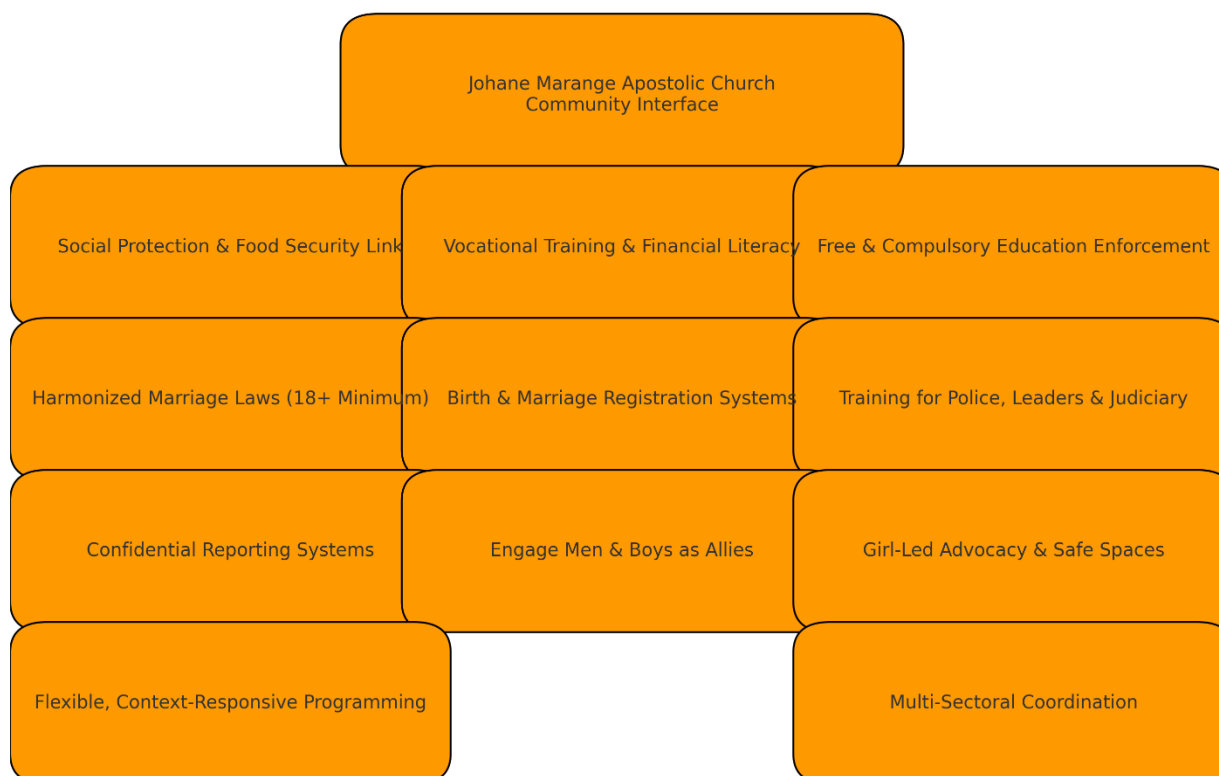
CONCLUSIONS

The study noted that indeed child marriages continues to be pervasive amongst the young girls in the Bocha area. The study concluded that there is a myriad of factors which are contributing to the inevitability of child marriages in the Bocha area and these are poverty and hunger, presence of artisanal miners, lack of education and awareness and Johane Marange Apostolic Church. The study acknowledged that there are interventions which have been made in the past to address the prevalence of child marriages they have fallen short of addressing the predominant predicament.

The interventions which have been activated to address child marriages such as the Education Policy (2020) and Marriage Act (2022) have not been effective in eradicating child marriages, thus the need for a review. The recommendations from the participants effectively reflected that there is the need for a holistic men and boys alliance empowerment programme towards child marriages, community sensitization programmes and liberal engagement with the Johane Marange Apostolic Church leadership. The study, thus, immensely contributes to the review of the interventions towards child marriages in the Bocha Area. This study will highlight a tailored localized model which will be used to address child marriages in the Bocha area paying undivided attention to the pillar of sustainability.

RECOMMENDED MODEL

4 -Stage Integrative Bocha Pathway Model



Source: (Researcher: 2025)

The role of church remains the fundamental foundation and pillar towards the total elimination of child marriages in the Bocha area and wields the power to advocate for all the other pillars in the model. In the Integrative Bocha pathway for a strong response to the child marriages, there is the need to accept that the community is an ecosystem which has many branches and they all have a part to play for the efficiency and effectiveness of the model. While the church remains the most important pillar, the pathway model stipulated that at the first stage there is social protection and food security, vocational training and financial literacy, free and compulsory education for the girls. These skills are crucial and pivotal because they enable the girls to be self-sufficient and avoid relaying on marriage as a panacea for poverty.

These are the fundamental inputs which are required for eradicating early child pregnancy and marriage. The second stage of the pathway model was characterized by a legislative approach towards the epidemic issue which has affected the Bocha community. This included enforcement of harmonized marriage laws, birth and marriage registration systems and training for community leaders, police and judiciary officers operating in Bocha. On a broader engagement level, which is stage three, the model advocated for more social mitigatory strategies such as confidential reporting systems which can be activated in both primary and secondary schools, engaging boys and men as allies not as sexual predators, girl led advocacy and safe spaces. The final stage of the model was more centered towards the contributions of the external stakeholders mainly non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations and community-based organizations. These can play a vital and pivotal role towards providing conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and sustainable community projects

which can furnish financial masculinity to the young girls who are victims of early child pregnancy and marriage. This model is a holistic and inclusive model for championing an anti-early pregnancy and marriage in the Bocha area as witnessed through its different levels of intervention while emphasizing the sacrosanct role of the church towards the elimination of this phenomenon.

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