

Lived Experiences of Early Married Girls in Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts of Zambia: A Phenomenological Study

Olypa Sibongile Margaret Danobo^{1*}, Clifford Munyama²

Department of Psychology and Counselling, Chreso University, Zambia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800696>

Received: 26 August 2026; Accepted: 31 August 2026; Published: 16 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Early marriage remains a significant social and psychosocial concern in Zambia, particularly where poverty, limited educational opportunities, adolescent pregnancy, and gendered expectations intersect. This study explored the lived experiences of young women who entered marriage before the age of 18 in Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts of Zambia. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed. Thirty young women aged 15–24 years were targeted, with 15 participants from each district; 22 participated, comprising 12 from Chongwe and 10 from Rufunsa. Participants were purposively selected because they had direct experience of marriage before age 18. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis supported by NVivo 12. The analysis generated themes concerning drivers of early marriage, psychological experiences, emotional experiences, social autonomy, and family decision-making. Poverty, limited educational opportunity, early pregnancy, and family expectations concerning girls' sexuality emerged as important drivers. Participants described low self-esteem, inadequate emotional support, reduced independence, and limited participation in marital and educational decisions. Parents and guardians were frequently perceived as having substantial influence over decisions concerning marriage. Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Theory was used to interpret how individual experiences were connected to family, community, cultural, and structural contexts. The study concludes that early marriage is a multidimensional lived experience affecting autonomy, emotional well-being, education, and future opportunities. Because the evidence derives from two districts, the findings are interpreted as context-specific rather than nationally representative. The study recommends integrated interventions combining legal protection, poverty reduction, educational support, community norm change, and culturally responsive psychosocial services.

Keywords: Child Marriage, Early Marriage, Lived Experiences, Phenomenology, Psychosocial Well-Being, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is an important social institution that can provide companionship, family identity, social belonging, and a framework for family formation. However, marriage before the age of 18 can interrupt education and expose girls to adult responsibilities before they have developed the social, economic, and psychological resources required to negotiate those responsibilities. Child marriage therefore has implications not only for education and health but also for autonomy, identity, relationships, and psychological well-being.

In Zambia, recent national evidence indicates that child marriage remains a substantial concern. UNICEF reports that approximately 29% of young women aged 20–24 were married before age 18 based on available national survey evidence, although the 2024 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey suggests a decline from the 2018 level. UNICEF's recent Zambia country profile also reports that the Government amended the Marriage Act in December 2023, removing the provision that had permitted marriage between ages 16 and 18 with court endorsement and thereby establishing 18 as the minimum age for statutory and customary marriage.

Recent Zambian research also indicates that poverty and gendered social norms continue to create an enabling environment for child marriage. UNICEF's assessment identifies poverty, expectations that girls should become wives and caregivers, and differences between statutory law and community understandings of

adulthood as important contextual factors. Such evidence suggests that child marriage cannot be adequately understood as an isolated individual decision; rather, it develops within interacting economic, family, cultural, and institutional environments.

The present study focuses on Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts in Lusaka Province. The purpose was not to estimate national prevalence but to understand how young women who entered marriage before adulthood experienced and interpreted that transition. A phenomenological perspective was therefore appropriate because it prioritises participants' accounts of meaning, perception, emotion, and everyday experience.

The study was guided by three objectives: to identify key drivers of early marriage in Chongwe and Rufunsa; to examine the psychological, emotional, and social experiences of young women who entered marriage before adulthood; and to understand perceptions and decision-making processes concerning early marriage.

Problem Statement

Despite legal and programme responses to child marriage, the practice persists in some Zambian communities. Existing research has documented associations between early marriage and poverty, educational disadvantage, adolescent pregnancy, gender inequality, and social norms. However, prevalence and association studies provide limited insight into how girls and young women themselves interpret the transition into marriage and its consequences for identity, emotional security, autonomy, relationships, and aspirations. There is therefore a need for context-specific qualitative evidence that centres the voices of affected young women. This study addresses that gap through a phenomenological exploration of experiences in Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. At the microsystem level, participants' experiences were connected to parents, spouses, in-laws, peers, and immediate household relationships. At the mesosystem level, relationships between family, education, community and other social environments shaped opportunities and constraints. The exosystem includes community resources and other indirect structures that can influence family circumstances. The macrosystem encompasses cultural expectations, gender norms, social values, and legal frameworks. The chronosystem draws attention to changes across time, including the transition from childhood to marriage and the changing legal environment in Zambia.

The framework was useful because participants did not describe early marriage simply as a personal event. Their accounts linked marriage decisions to household poverty, educational opportunities, parental expectations, pregnancy, sexuality, bride-price considerations, and marital power. The ecological framework therefore provided a bridge between the subjective experiences explored phenomenologically and the social environments in which those experiences occurred.

The framework was interpretive rather than deterministic. The study did not assume that poverty or culture automatically produces child marriage; these factors were examined as contextual influences interacting with family decisions and participants' own experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poverty, Education and Early Marriage

Economic disadvantage is consistently associated with child marriage. Families experiencing financial insecurity may have fewer resources to support girls' continued education and may perceive marriage as reducing household costs or creating an economic relationship with another family. Education can act as a protective factor because remaining in school extends girls' future opportunities and can delay marriage.

Pregnancy and Social Expectations

Adolescent pregnancy can contribute to pressure for marriage, particularly where pregnancy outside marriage is associated with stigma or family shame. In such contexts, marriage may be viewed as a response to pregnancy rather than as a decision based on the developmental readiness or preferences of the girl. Recent Zambian evidence similarly identifies adolescent pregnancy and gendered expectations as interconnected issues in the child-marriage environment.

Psychosocial and Autonomy-Related Consequences

Early marriage can affect autonomy, relationships, educational continuity, and psychological well-being. Young wives may have limited influence over education, reproductive decisions, finances, mobility, and household decisions. These constraints can be experienced as loss of independence, emotional isolation, low confidence, or uncertainty about the future.

Research Gap

The existing evidence provides substantial information about prevalence and associated factors, but local qualitative accounts of how young women experience early marriage remain less visible. The current study contributes contextual evidence from two districts and specifically examines the interaction between drivers of marriage, psychological and emotional experiences, autonomy, and family decision-making.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Phenomenological Approach

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design. The methodological purpose was to understand the meaning participants attached to entering marriage before adulthood. The phenomenon under investigation was therefore not simply child marriage as a social problem but the lived experience of being married before age 18. Participants were encouraged to describe what happened, how they experienced it, how they interpreted changes in their lives, and how they understood decisions made by themselves and their families.

The study used thematic analysis to organise and interpret interview material. This distinction is important: phenomenology defined the orientation of the inquiry, while thematic analysis provided the analytic procedure for identifying patterned meanings across accounts. The analysis therefore does not claim to use a formal phenomenological analytic method such as Colaizzi's or van Manen's full analytic procedure. Instead, it used phenomenologically informed interviewing and interpretation followed by systematic thematic analysis.

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts of Lusaka Province, Zambia. The target population comprised young women aged 15–24 years who had entered marriage before age 18 and resided in the study areas. Thirty participants were targeted, 15 from each district. Twenty-two participated: 12 from Chongwe and 10 from Rufunsa.

The available study records indicate that 11 of the 22 participants were aged 18–20 years and 5 were aged 21–24 years; the remaining six were aged 15–17 years. Other demographic and marital characteristics were not systematically reported in the manuscript materials available for revision. Characteristics such as age at marriage, duration of marriage, number of children, educational attainment, and marital status at interview should only be added after verification against the original participant records.

Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience of the phenomenon. Study records indicate that community leaders, organisations working with young women, and health workers assisted in

identifying eligible participants. Participation was voluntary and confidentiality was emphasised. Participant identifiers were replaced by codes such as R1, R2 and R3.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews using an open-ended interview guide. Study records describe interviews as lasting approximately 45–60 minutes and being conducted in English, Bemba, or Nyanja according to participant preference, with translation support where required. The guide addressed emotional well-being, family relationships, education, decision-making, and perceived consequences of early marriage. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and supplemented by field notes.

Data Saturation

The original methodology identified saturation as the principle guiding sample adequacy, but the manuscript did not previously explain how saturation was assessed. The final sample comprised 22 participants after an original target of 30. The revised manuscript therefore reports the achieved sample without claiming statistical adequacy. The authors should verify from field records whether saturation was explicitly assessed and, if so, identify the point at which no substantially new themes were emerging. If a formal saturation log was not maintained, the manuscript should state this rather than retrospectively claiming saturation.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study materials specify six stages: familiarisation with transcripts, coding, generation of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytic account. NVivo 12 was used to assist with coding and organisation. Coding was informed by the research objectives while allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts. The analysis remained close to participants' language and was subsequently interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework.

Researcher Reflexivity

Because phenomenological inquiry recognises that researchers participate in interpretation, reflexivity was important. The researchers maintained awareness that their professional, cultural, academic, and gender-related positions could influence how participants' narratives were heard and interpreted. The analytic process emphasised participants' own descriptions, participant codes, field notes, and comparison of emerging interpretations against interview material. The authors should insert any additional reflexive procedures actually documented, such as reflexive journals, supervision, or peer debriefing.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through procedures reported in the study materials. The interview guide was reviewed for clarity and cultural appropriateness, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and participant codes were used to protect confidentiality. The study materials also report member checking and peer debriefing as strategies used to reduce interpretive bias. Dependability was supported by a common interview guide and documentation of analytic steps. Where translation was required, attention was given to preserving intended meanings.

Ethical Considerations

The study involved a sensitive topic and potentially vulnerable participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent or assent procedures were applied according to participant age and applicable ethical requirements, confidentiality was maintained, and participants were identified by codes. Interviews were conducted in private settings. Study materials indicate trauma-sensitive interviewing and counselling referral

where distress arose. The final submission must state the exact ethics review committee, approval number, and approval date; these details were not available in the supplied manuscript and have not been invented.

Limitations

The small purposive sample limits transferability beyond the study settings. The study was limited to two districts and therefore does not support national prevalence claims. Participants' accounts may have been influenced by recall or social desirability. Translation may involve loss of nuance. Finally, although the study adopted a phenomenological orientation, thematic analysis was used rather than a formal named phenomenological analytic method; this distinction is made explicit for methodological transparency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile and Participation

Twenty-two of the 30 targeted participants took part. Twelve were from Chongwe and 10 from Rufunsa. Eleven participants were aged 18–20 years and five were aged 21–24 years, while six were aged 15–17 years. These figures are descriptive and provide context for interpreting the narratives rather than statistical estimates.

Poverty and Limited Educational Opportunity

Ten participants identified poverty as a principal driver of early marriage, while six identified limited educational opportunity. Participants described marriage as a response to economic hardship and, in some cases, as an alternative to continued schooling. One participant from Rufunsa explained that families may see marrying daughters as a way out of poverty, while another from Chongwe described families as viewing marriage as a means of generating resources. A participant from Chongwe also linked limited educational opportunity to girls' expectations of marriage.

These accounts align with the ecological framework. Poverty shapes household decisions and educational opportunities beyond the individual level, while schooling is influenced by family resources and community opportunities. The findings also align with recent Zambian evidence identifying poverty as a primary driver of child marriage. However, these findings represent participants' perceptions within the two districts and should not be treated as proof that poverty alone causes child marriage.

Early Pregnancy and Social Pressure

Four participants identified early pregnancy as a driver of early marriage. Participants described pregnancy outside marriage as a source of shame or social pressure that could lead parents to arrange or encourage marriage. One participant from Rufunsa explained that the shame associated with pregnancy before marriage could lead parents to marry daughters at young ages. Another reported that families could pressure the person responsible for the pregnancy to marry the girl.

From an ecological perspective, pregnancy is an individual event that can trigger family and community responses. Its significance therefore lies not simply in its occurrence but in the social responses that may narrow a girl's perceived options. Recent Zambian evidence similarly identifies adolescent pregnancy and gendered expectations as interconnected issues in the child-marriage environment.

Cultural Expectations and Protection of Girls' Sexuality

Four participants identified protection of girls' sexuality as a reason for early marriage. Participants described parental beliefs that marriage would prevent premarital sexual activity and protect family reputation. One participant from Chongwe explained that parents could perceive early marriage as a way of preserving family pride, while a participant from Rufunsa described marriage as a means of preventing sexual behaviour that might bring shame to the family.

This theme demonstrates the macrosystem dimension of Bronfenbrenner's framework. Cultural expectations can influence family decisions even when those decisions restrict girls' autonomy. The finding should not be interpreted as suggesting that all Zambian families hold these beliefs; it illustrates how particular expectations were experienced by participants in the study communities.

Psychological Experience: Low Self-Esteem

Ten participants described low self-esteem or reduced confidence as an important psychological experience. One participant from Rufunsa reported that entering marriage young deprived her of education and opportunities to improve herself, which affected her confidence. Another participant from Chongwe described having little say in marriage and being taught to obey husbands, which she associated with diminished self-esteem.

These accounts connect psychological experience to both developmental and ecological processes. At the individual level, participants described changes in confidence and aspirations. At family and marital levels, restricted decision-making shaped self-perception. At the macrosystem level, gender expectations concerning obedience and wifhood influenced these experiences.

Emotional Experience: Inadequate Spousal Support

Eight participants reported inadequate emotional support from spouses. One participant described being in a polygamous marriage and experiencing limited emotional support during pregnancy. Another reported that her spouse paid little attention to emotional needs for attention, love, and care. These accounts indicate that marriage did not necessarily provide emotional security for participants and that some experienced loneliness or emotional neglect.

The theme illustrates the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's model because the marital relationship is an immediate environment. It also demonstrates the interaction between individual needs and relational power. The finding should not be generalised to all marriages involving young women; it indicates that emotional support was an important dimension for a substantial subgroup of participants.

Reduced Autonomy and Decision-Making Power

Four participants specifically described loss of independence and decision-making power within marriage. One participant from Rufunsa reported having little or no say in marital decisions because her spouse made decisions on her behalf. Another participant from Chongwe described a lack of independence to pursue activities that might benefit herself and her family.

Reduced autonomy connects directly with the ecological framework because agency is shaped by immediate marital relationships and broader gender expectations. The finding is also consistent with literature showing that young married women can have limited influence over education, reproductive health, finances, mobility, and other personal decisions.

Family Control over Marriage Decisions

Nine participants reported that early marriage decisions were largely controlled by parents, with eight further describing marriage as an expected goal in families unable to finance girls' education. Four participants associated parents' low educational attainment with stronger preference for marriage over schooling, while two described the monetary value of bride price as a factor influencing parental decisions.

This theme is central to the ecological interpretation of early marriage. Decisions occurred within family systems rather than solely at the individual level. The accounts also suggest an intergenerational process in which parents' educational and marital histories could influence how they viewed daughters' futures. The bride-price finding is based on two participants' accounts and should therefore be treated as a minority theme rather than a dominant explanation.

Integrative Interpretation

Across the themes, early marriage emerged as an interaction between structural constraints and everyday relationships. Poverty and limited education narrowed opportunities; pregnancy generated social pressure; cultural expectations shaped ideas about sexuality and family honour; parental decisions influenced the timing of marriage; and marital relationships shaped emotional support and autonomy. Bronfenbrenner's framework helps explain how experiences such as low self-esteem or uncertainty about the future can be connected to family, community, cultural, and structural environments.

The phenomenological orientation keeps the analysis grounded in how participants experienced these systems. Rather than presenting poverty, culture, or family authority as deterministic causes, the study shows how participants interpreted these influences in their own lives. This combination strengthens the explanatory value of the findings while avoiding claims that exceed the evidence.

Implications for Counselling, Policy and Practice

Counselling services for young women who have experienced early marriage should not focus only on marital adjustment. They should also address self-esteem, educational aspirations, decision-making, emotional support, identity, and future planning. Services should be culturally responsive and recognise the family and community systems within which participants live.

Prevention should combine enforcement of the legal minimum age with interventions addressing poverty and educational access. Community programmes should engage parents, traditional and community leaders, men, boys, and girls in discussions about education, gender norms, adolescent pregnancy, and children's rights. For women who have already entered early marriage, referral systems linking counselling, education, health, social protection, and legal services may be more appropriate than single-sector interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of young women who entered marriage before age 18 in Chongwe and Rufunsa Districts. The findings indicate that poverty, limited educational opportunity, early pregnancy, cultural expectations concerning girls' sexuality, and family decision-making were important dimensions of participants' experiences. Participants also described low self-esteem, inadequate emotional support, reduced independence, and limited participation in decisions affecting their lives.

Early marriage should therefore be understood as a multidimensional lived experience rather than simply an event defined by age. Bronfenbrenner's framework helps explain how individual psychological and emotional experiences are connected to family relationships, community expectations, economic conditions, and wider social norms. However, the findings are context-specific and should not be treated as statistically representative of Zambia as a whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Child-protection authorities should strengthen implementation of Zambia's minimum-age legislation while ensuring that customary and community structures understand the legal protections available to children. Poverty-reduction and social-protection interventions should prioritise households where economic hardship threatens girls' continued education. Community interventions should challenge gender norms that define girls primarily through wifehood, sexuality, or caregiving.

Programmes should support girls at risk of marriage to remain in or return to education. Counselling and peer-support services should be integrated into community responses for young women who have already experienced early marriage. Future research should include larger multisite qualitative samples and examine the experiences of husbands, parents, traditional leaders, and service providers.

Limitations of the Study

The small purposive sample limits transferability beyond the study settings. The study was conducted in two districts and therefore does not support national prevalence claims. Participants' accounts may have been influenced by recall, sensitivity, or social desirability. Where interviews involved translation, some linguistic nuance may have been lost.

The manuscript also has limited verified demographic information beyond age and district, and additional characteristics should not be inferred without returning to the original participant records. Finally, although the study adopted a phenomenological orientation, thematic analysis was used rather than a formal named phenomenological analytic method.

Ethical Approval and Participant Protection

The study followed procedures for voluntary participation, informed consent or assent as applicable, confidentiality, use of participant codes, private interviewing, and referral for counselling when distress was identified. Approval ethics committee action number 22492-08-2025

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualisation of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and preparation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

REFERENCES

1. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.
3. Erulkar, A. (2013). Early marriage, marital relations and intimate partner violence in Ethiopia. *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 39(1), 6–13.
4. Kidman, R. (2017). Child marriage and intimate partner violence: A comparative study of 34 countries. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 46(2), 662–675. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyw225>
5. Parsons, J., Edmeades, J., Kes, A., Petroni, S., Sexton, M., & Wodon, Q. (2015). Economic impacts of child marriage: A review of the literature. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13(3), 12–22.
6. Raj, A. (2010). When empowerment fails: Love and marriage in rural India. *Social Science & Medicine*, 70(10), 1497–1504.
7. UNICEF. (2025). *Global Programme on Ending Child Marriage in Zambia 2024 report*. UNICEF Zambia.
8. UNICEF. (2025). *An assessment of gendered social norms and their relationship to child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in Zambia*. UNICEF Zambia.
9. UNICEF. (2024). *Child marriage data*. UNICEF Data.
10. Wodon, Q., Male, C., Nayihouba, A., Onagoruwa, A., Savadogo, A., Yedan, A., Edmeades, J., Kes, A., John, N., Murithi, L., Nguyen, H., & Petroni, S. (2017). *Economic impacts of child marriage: Global synthesis report*. World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.
11. Zambia Statistics Agency, Ministry of Health, Zambia, & ICF. (2020). *Zambia demographic and health survey 2018*. Zambia Statistics Agency and ICF.

APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT PROFILE AVAILABLE FROM STUDY RECORDS

Characteristic	Category	n	%
District	Chongwe	12	54.5
District	Rufunsa	10	45.5
Age	15–17 years	6	27.3
Age	18–20 years	11	50.0
Age	21–24 years	5	22.7
Total	All participants	22	100.0

Appendix B. Verbatim Participant Quotations

1. We come from poor families which see marrying off their daughters as a way of generating capital for improving their living.” (R3, Chongwe)
2. There are limited education opportunities available for young girls, all we look forward is getting married which has contributed to the increased number of early child marriages.” (R5, Chongwe)
3. The shame that comes with young girls getting pregnant before marriage forces parents to have their impregnated daughters married off at young ages.” (R6, Rufunsa)
4. Entering marriage at a younger age has deprived me of education and opportunities to better myself which has affected my self-confidence.” (R12, Rufunsa)
5. I am in polygamous marriage and I lack emotional support from my husband especially in periods when am pregnant.” (R14, Chongwe)
6. I have little and sometimes no say in the decisions made in our marriage as my spouse makes all the decisions which has made me to be unproductive.” (R17, Rufunsa)
7. The decisions on us getting married are made by our parents and getting married early has prevented me from progressing with my school.” (R6, Rufunsa)
8. Our parents dropped out of school and got married early, so they highly rate early marriage than school.” (R11, Rufunsa)