

Socio-cultural and religious implications of child marriage: Honouring Dora Moono Nyambe's advocacy for female children

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ABSTRACT: Child marriage remains a pressing socio-cultural and religious issue, particularly in communities where entrenched patriarchal norms and economic constraints perpetuate this harmful practice. This study examines the advocacy and transformative efforts of the late Dora Moono Nyambe in Mapulungwe, Zambia, where her humanitarian work saved approximately 500 female children from the perils of early marriage. The research addresses a critical gap in understanding how grassroots interventions can bridge cultural traditions and modern advocacy for female rights. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study incorporates primary data through interviews and testimonies of beneficiaries and secondary data from digital archives and published reports. Hermeneutical analysis and digital content evaluation provide detailed insights into the socio-religious frameworks underpinning child marriage and the strategies employed to counteract them. Grounded in the Social Change Theory, the research evaluates the interplay between traditional values and evolving societal norms influenced by advocacy and education. Findings highlight that Dora Nyambe's initiatives provided not only immediate rescue and shelter for vulnerable girls but also long-term educational opportunities and empowerment, thus disrupting generational cycles of poverty and oppression. Recommendations advocate for sustained community-based interventions, enhanced governmental policies, and strategic use of digital platforms to amplify grassroots efforts globally. This study honours Dora Moono Nyambe's legacy, emphasizing the critical role of localized leadership and international support in eradicating child marriage and promoting sustainable development for marginalized female children.

Keywords: Advocacy, child marriage, Dora Moono Nyambe, female children, implications.

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage remains a pervasive issue with profound socio-cultural and religious implications, particularly in regions where patriarchal traditions and economic instability intersect to perpetuate the practice. This phenomenon undermines the rights and dignity of female children, depriving them of education, health, and autonomy, while entrenching cycles of poverty and gender inequality. In this context, the late Dora Moono Nyambe emerges as a beacon of advocacy, dedicating her life to rescuing and empowering female children in rural Zambia,

where the prevalence of child marriage remains alarmingly high. Her charity work, particularly in Mapapa Village, serves as a testament to the transformative power of education, community engagement, and faith in dismantling harmful cultural practices. The pervasive issue of female child marriage, particularly across developing countries in Asia and Africa, has been extensively critiqued by scholars worldwide for its deplorable nature and profoundly adverse effects on both the female child and society at large. Girl child marriage, defined by Efevbera

and Bhabha (2020) as the formal or informal union of girls under 18, affects 650 million girls and women worldwide and poses a significant barrier to global health, development, and gender equality. The authors critically examine the term, emphasizing its sociopolitical and value-laden dimensions, which have evolved since the 1800s. Unlike terms such as "early" or "adolescent marriage", they argue that "girl child marriage" more effectively encapsulates the issue's complexity and aligns with global efforts. However, inconsistent terminology across disciplines undermines a unified understanding, measurement, and response. The authors call for deliberate and harmonized language in global health discourse to enhance clarity, foster stakeholder collaboration, and drive impactful solutions.

Kidman *et al.* (2024) leverage longitudinal data from rural Malawi to unpack the persistent drivers of child marriage, where 26% of girls marry before age 18 despite legal prohibitions. Using Cox proportional hazard models, their study identifies three critical factors influencing early marriage. First, educational lag, girls behind in school are significantly more likely to marry early, highlighting the protective role of education as an alternative to marriage. Second, community norms matter, child marriage rates drop when caregivers perceive widespread disapproval of the practice, underscoring the power of shifting social attitudes. Surprisingly, greater awareness of child marriage laws correlates with higher rates of early marriage, suggesting that legal knowledge alone does not deter, and may even reflect girls' increased agency in navigating marriage decisions. These findings challenge traditional narratives of victimhood, emphasizing the sophisticated interplay of opportunity, societal norms, and agency in shaping child marriage dynamics. Rumble *et al.* (2018) using data from the 2012 Indonesian Demographic and Health Survey and the Adolescent Reproductive Health Survey, identify key determinants of child marriage in Indonesia, focusing on demographic and socioeconomic factors. The authors found that 17% of women aged 20-24 had married before 18, and 6% before 16. Education, wealth, and media exposure emerged as protective factors against early marriage, while rural residence was a significant risk factor. Regional variations highlighted the influence of religious, ethnic, and geographic factors. Their study reveals that young women generally reject child marriage, offering a critical opportunity for structural interventions. Future efforts should prioritize gender-transformative education and economic strengthening programs, with cost-effectiveness assessments, to eradicate child marriage in Indonesia and globally.

Seta (2023) in his study conducted through 13 semi-structured interviews in the Kathmandu Valley in May 2019, explores the impact of child marriage on the health of women in Nepal. He identifies key factors contributing to child marriage, including poverty, lack of education, societal norms, and low social status. The health

consequences highlighted by participants include early pregnancy complications, mental health issues, and the negative impact of dropping out of school. Mental health was particularly affected by isolation, pressure to work at home, and being too young for marriage. Seta's study emphasizes the importance of raising awareness, rural outreach, and providing education and employment opportunities for women to address the root causes of child marriage. The findings corroborate existing literature, while also revealing a gap in qualitative research concerning the mental health impacts and health-seeking behaviors of child brides. Watson (2024) expounds on the complexities of addressing child marriage through legal reforms; revealing significant challenges, as laws alone are insufficient to eradicate this practice. While legislative action is crucial, its impact is often limited without accompanying structural changes that address the underlying drivers of child marriage, such as gender inequality, poverty, and discriminatory social norms. Legal frameworks must be intersectional, considering how factors like age, class, ethnicity, and disability intersect to increase vulnerability to forced marriage. Moreover, criminalisation and punitive measures, though important, may not always lead to tangible changes in prevalence, especially without robust support systems, survivor-centred services, and accessible justice. Additionally, laws need to be contextual, flexible, and uphold the evolving capacities of adolescent girls, ensuring that their rights and agency in decision-making are recognized. Watson's inquiry instructs that legal reforms must be complemented by comprehensive strategies promoting girls' human rights, gender equality, and access to education, employment, and justice, aiming to advocate long-term societal transformation.

Adeyemi *et al.* (2023) investigate the causes and challenges of girl-child marriage in Kankara Local Government Area, Katsina State, Northwest Nigeria, revealing that cultural, religious, and economic factors contribute to the persistence of this harmful practice despite national and international laws prohibiting it. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with twenty child brides, their study finds that girl-child marriages lead to significant psychological, emotional, and social trauma, hindering the potential and future of the affected girls. The practice is shown to violate the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and obstruct the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to eradicating poverty, hunger, and discrimination. The authors conclude with recommendations for intensive awareness campaigns and counselling programs aimed at educating both parents and girls in Northern Nigeria on the dangers of child marriage.

Kuswanto *et al.* (2024) probe the prevalence and determinants of female child marriage in Indonesia, utilizing data from the 2017 Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey with a sample of 9,333 females aged 15-20.

Their research finds that the prevalence of female child marriage in Indonesia is alarmingly high, at approximately 12.53%. Key factors contributing to this phenomenon include a lack of education, lower socioeconomic status, rural residency, and geographic location, with females in the eastern regions and those from poorer backgrounds being more likely to marry early. In contrast, higher educational attainment, greater wealth, and residing in central Indonesia were associated with a reduced likelihood of female child marriage. The most significant determinant identified was educational level, which strongly influenced marriage rates. The authors underscore the importance of female empowerment through education and poverty reduction as critical strategies to combat child marriage. They hence advocate for improved access to information and high-quality education as essential measures to achieve gender equality and eliminate female child marriage by 2030, in line with the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5).

Against these backdrops, this study investigates the socio-cultural and religious dimensions of child marriage, emphasizing and honouring the transformative advocacy of the late Dora Moono Nyambe in protecting the rights of female children, significantly in rural communities with a focus on Mapulungwe, Zambia. Employing a qualitative methodology, it integrates initial data from interviews and testimonies of beneficiaries with supplementary data from digital archives and published reports. Anchored in Social Change Theory, and through hermeneutical analysis alongside digital content evaluation; the study elucidates the socio-cultural and religious implications of female child marriage, proposing actionable strategies to address it directly and effectively.

CONCEPTUALIZING FEMALE CHILD MARRIAGE

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2023) asserts that female child marriage refers to the formal marriage or informal union of girls under the age of 18, a practice rooted in entrenched gender inequality that disproportionately affects females compared to their male counterparts. It represents a pervasive human rights violation, robbing girls of their childhood and undermining their well-being and future potential. The agency maintains that this practice perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality, as child brides are often subjected to domestic violence, early pregnancy, and limited educational opportunities, leading to adverse economic, health, and social outcomes. UNICEF also delineates that compounded by global crises such as armed conflict, climate change, and the residual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of female child marriage jeopardizes global efforts, including those outlined in the United Nations Sustainable

Development Goals, to eradicate it by 2030.

Efevbera *et al.* (2019) posit that female child marriage, grounded in international human rights guidelines and demographic frameworks, is defined as a self-reported formal union occurring before the age of 18. This phenomenon, as captured by Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), involves women reporting their marital status and detailing either the month and year or their age at the onset of cohabitation with their husbands. The authors elucidate that to enhance analytical precision, female child marriage is further classified into three distinct categories based on age at marriage: below 14 years (very early child marriage), 14-15 years, and 16-17 years. These classifications enable a comprehensive exploration of the socio-economic, health, and autonomy-related consequences of female child marriage across varying early marital ages, with comparisons drawn against adult marriage, which occurs at 18 years or older.

Pourtaheri *et al.* (2024) aver that female child marriage can be defined as a legally or socially sanctioned union where at least one party, typically the female, is below the age of 18, thereby infringing upon their fundamental rights and disrupting their development into adulthood. The authors expound that the practice often arises from deeply rooted cultural, religious, or economic motivations, perpetuating cycles of poverty, inequality, and limited access to education or health services. In advanced discourse, child marriage is not merely a cultural anomaly but a multidimensional social issue that undermines global efforts to achieve gender equality, protect childhood, and uphold international human rights standards. Its persistence signals systemic failures in safeguarding vulnerable populations, necessitating an integrative approach to prevention through education, legal reforms, community engagement, and sustainable economic empowerment.

Female child marriage is neither biblical nor reflective of God's design for human relationships, as it contravenes the principles of maturity, mutual consent, and the sanctity of marriage outlined in Scripture. The Bible emphasizes the importance of preparation and readiness for marriage, as seen in Genesis 2:24, where marriage is described as a union of two mature individuals who leave their parents to establish a new, independent household. Furthermore, Ephesians 6:4 admonishes parents to "bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord", which implies nurturing them to full maturity rather than exposing them prematurely to the responsibilities of marital life. Female child marriage undermines this divine mandate by prioritizing cultural or economic gains over the holistic development and spiritual well-being of the child, thus marking a failure of parental stewardship and responsibility. It contradicts God's purpose for marriage as a partnership grounded in love, equality, and readiness, and instead perpetuates harm, inequality, and brokenness within families and communities: Consequently, any religion that

promotes female child marriage is a fanatical institution exploiting faith for personal agendas

The theoretical underpinning and its relevance to the study's rationales

This study is rooted in Social Change Theory, aligned with Kurt Lewin's 1947 proposition. Social Change Theory explores how societal structures, values, and norms evolve over time in response to internal and external stimuli. Lewin's approach primarily emphasizes group dynamics and the psychological underpinnings of societal transformation. According to the chronicles of Lewin (1947), the theory operates through a three-step process: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Unfreezing involves creating awareness of the need for change, challenging existing norms and attitudes. The changing phase entails the transition to new behaviours and values through education, adaptation, or conflict resolution. Finally, refreezing secures the newly adopted norms as a stable framework within the societal structure. Through focusing on the interplay of forces that either promote or resist change, Lewin highlights the complex mechanisms that drive societal evolution, making his work foundational in both sociology and organizational psychology.

Kurt Lewin's 1947 contributions to Social Change Theory, particularly through his Change Management Theory and Field Theory, significantly shaped the understanding of how social systems and behaviours undergo transformation. His model of social change, encapsulated in the "unfreeze-change-refreeze" process, emphasizes the necessity of creating motivation for change by challenging existing norms, as seen in Dora Nyambe's advocacy against child marriage, where raising awareness and creating a sense of urgency about the issue align with Lewin's unfreeze phase. The change phase involves the introduction of new practices, ideas, or behaviours, akin to Nyambe's efforts to shift societal attitudes, promote legal reforms, and encourage education to combat child marriage. Finally, the refreeze phase ensures that these changes are solidified and integrated into societal structures, emphasizing the importance of institutional and societal reinforcement to prevent a reversion to old norms, much like Nyambe's long-term commitment to safeguarding female children from early marriage. Lewin's framework underscores that social change is not merely a behavioural shift but a process that involves psychological readiness, societal adaptation, and sustained effort from both individuals and institutions.

The Social Change Theory apposite to Kurt Lewin's premise, which emphasizes the transformation of social structures and cultural norms over time through collective action, offers a powerful tool for analyzing the socio-cultural and religious implications of child marriage. This theory argues that societal shifts occur when individuals or

groups challenge existing norms, structures, or values, aiming for a more equitable and just society. Dora Moono Nyambe's advocacy aligns with this theory as a catalyst for social reform. Nyambe's efforts to combat child marriage highlight how challenging harmful practices within societal systems can spark significant change. Her work exemplifies how activism can challenge traditional norms, particularly in cultures where child marriage is entrenched, and shift attitudes toward the protection of female children. Through her advocacy, she illuminated the harmful consequences of child marriage, consistent with the Social Change Theory's view that awareness and education are essential for encouraging systemic transformation.

Dora Nyambe's role as a reformer can be further explored through the Social Change Theory, which underscores the importance of individual and collective efforts in initiating cultural shifts. Nyambe's advocacy was not merely a critique of child marriage; it served as a call to action, aiming to galvanize communities, faith-based organizations, and legal systems to reconsider their stances on the practice. Her work epitomized the reformer's ability to influence public opinion and policy through both grassroots movements and high-level discussions. As she exposed the abuse of female children through child marriage, Nyambe contributed to the gradual transformation of societal norms. Her efforts not only mobilized communities to challenge harmful traditions but also led to greater awareness and legal reforms that aligned with human rights and gender equality. This aligns with the Social Change Theory's concept that social movements, when strategically directed, can lead to the institutionalization of progressive reforms.

The Social Change Theory also highlights the transformative potential of advocacy in the face of deeply ingrained socio-cultural norms. Dora Moono Nyambe's tireless efforts in exposing the evils of child marriage show how challenging societal constructs that are historically accepted can be an essential step in creating lasting change. Through her advocacy within the context of faith, human rights, and women's empowerment, Nyambe addressed the complex intersection of culture, religion, and gender inequality. According to the Social Change Theory, such a multi-faceted approach can transform societal attitudes through both emotional and rational appeals to justice. Nyambe's work brought attention to the harmful impact of child marriage on the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of female children, using a combination of personal testimony, community outreach, and public campaigns. Her advocacy serves as a model for how social movements can adapt to societal contexts and drive cultural shifts through sustained, collaborative efforts.

Combating child marriage with the Social Change Theory necessitates a comprehensive strategy that includes educational outreach, legal reform, and shifting societal attitudes. Dora Nyambe's work exemplified how

these elements can work together to dismantle harmful practices. The theory posits that social movements are most successful when they incorporate education, collective action, and policy reform to address fundamental issues. Nyambe used advocacy to educate communities about the long-term consequences of child marriage, pushing for reforms that would better protect female children. Her work played a key role in changing laws and altering cultural narratives around gender roles, marriage, and the value of girls within society. The Social Change Theory emphasizes that significant social change occurs when people move from passive acceptance of harmful practices to active resistance and transformation. In the case of child marriage, Nyambe's efforts reinforced the theory's tenets through advocating for a holistic approach that encompasses both individual and societal levels.

Data-Driven Investigations

Mann *et al.* (2015) in their study discovered that Zambia records one of the highest rates of female child marriage in Africa, with a staggering prevalence of 42%. In districts like Katete, Lusaka, Luwingu, Mufulira, Mwinilunga, and Senanga, girls as young as 12 are often forced into unions driven by poverty, limited educational access, and social pressures. The authors accentuate that many of these marriages bypass traditional customs, lack parental consent, and are marked by instability, with most ending in divorce within a year. Girls face early pregnancies, domestic violence, and truncated personal development, while families see child marriage as a survival strategy amidst economic hardship. The practice thrives on the absence of viable alternatives for economic and social advancement, underscoring the urgent need for harmonized marriage laws, community sensitization, and access to education and livelihood opportunities to break this cycle of vulnerability. UN Women Africa (2020) intimate that The UN Women study reveals that Zambia has one of the highest child marriage rates globally, with 31% of women aged 20-24 married before age 18. Mpulungu and Chama districts are among the focal areas of intervention under the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) program, which seeks to address the endemic issue of child marriage through second-chance education. Despite global progress in reducing child marriage, cultural attitudes and poverty remain significant barriers in Zambia. Traditional norms normalize the practice, while economic hardships often push families to marry off their daughters to alleviate financial burdens. The organization equally portray that in response, the IBSA Fund program, launched in 2020, has provided scholarships for over 1,800 survivors of child marriage, enabling them to return to school and rebuild their lives. In lieu with the Boards records, the testimonies of survivors like Nancy Musenge from Mpulungu and Ireen from Chama illustrate the harsh realities of early marriage.

Nancy, married at 17 due to mistreatment and poverty after her father's death, is now back in school with her husband's support. Ireen, pregnant at 14 and abandoned by her child's father, returned to school with her mother's encouragement and IBSA sponsorship. Both stories highlight the crucial role of education in transforming lives and breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency. These efforts align with Zambia's Seventh Development Plan and the SDGs, emphasizing multi-sectoral approaches involving ministries of Gender, Education, and Traditional Affairs. As First Lady Esther Lungu (cited by UN Women Africa) remarks, empowering girls through education is a vital step toward eradicating child marriage and fostering gender equality.

Krzych (2020) argues that while Zambia has made notable strides in addressing child marriage through legislative frameworks and international collaboration, significant gaps remain unexamined. He avers for instance that despite the establishment of a minimum marriage age of 18 and its role in co-sponsoring the 2013 UNGA resolution on child marriage, the persistence of socio-economic and cultural challenges undermines these efforts. Poverty, limited access to education in rural areas, and deeply rooted traditional practices continue to drive early marriages, often bypassing legal oversight. The author maintains that furthermore, the enforcement of these laws, particularly in remote communities, is weak, with a lack of resources and institutional capacity to monitor compliance. Crucially, pertinent to Krzych's analysis, existing reports fail to provide empirical data on the measurable impacts of Zambia's interventions, leaving questions about their effectiveness unanswered. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive monitoring systems and targeted strategies that address the root causes of child marriage, ensuring sustainable progress. Musunte (2024) documents that Child marriage remains a pressing issue in Zambia, underpinned by a blend of religious, cultural, and socio-economic factors. The commodification of lobola (bride price) has intensified, especially in rural communities, where girls are often married off to alleviate familial poverty. He illustrates for instance that in Nakonde District, Astridah Namukonda, married at 15, killed her husband in 2023, highlighting the dire psychological effects of early marriages. Despite Zambia's constitutional provisions setting the legal marriage age at 21, customary law permits child marriages, undermining statutory protections. Alarmingly, Musunte posits that statistics reveal that 31% of Zambian women aged 20–24 were married before 18, compared to just 2% of men, with girls as young as 11 entering "child-to-child" unions and others forced into "adult-to-child" marriages or cover-ups following pregnancies. The author indicates that addressing this crisis requires recognizing the three prevalent forms of child marriage which include child-to-child, adult-to-child, and pregnancy cover-ups, while combating cultural norms that objectify girls. Community

reports often fail to identify child marriage as a crime, further perpetuating this practice. Churches, central to Zambian communities, must spearhead advocacy, offering education to parents and support to girls, while discouraging early marriage discussions. Leaders must also harmonize statutory and customary laws to ensure the protection of minors. Ending child marriage entirely, not just reducing its prevalence requires empowering communities with accurate information, enforcing justice, and dismantling societal perceptions that limit girls to roles of marriage and motherhood.

Nevertheless, it is worth commending that the Zambian Government has demonstrated a resolute commitment to eradicating child marriage through a series of impactful legislative, policy, and advocacy measures. According to the files of Mumba (2023) alongside the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2024), central to these efforts is the historic 2023 Marriage Act, which unequivocally prohibits marriage for individuals under 18, including under customary law, addressing the nation's alarming child marriage prevalence of 29%. Under the leadership of President Hakainde Hichilema and Minister Doreen Mwamba, the government has championed the legal and policy framework as a critical tool for combating gender-based violence and protecting children's rights. Mwamba's advocacy, informed by personal encounters with the devastating effects of child marriage, catalyzed the enactment of this law, supported by her previous work on the Children's Code Act of 2022. The First Lady, Mutinta Hichilema, has prioritized ending child marriage through nationwide awareness campaigns, mentorship programs, and partnerships with traditional leaders. Complemented by the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme, the government integrates sexual and reproductive health services and promotes positive social norms to tackle adolescent pregnancy and its link to child marriage. These multifaceted efforts signify a unified approach to safeguarding the futures of Zambia's young girls, nurturing a society where they can thrive. However, Ncube (2024) reasons that the major challenges to the Zambian Marriage Act prohibiting child marriage include inadequate public awareness, insufficient budgetary allocation for multi-sectoral interventions, weak institutional frameworks and enforcement mechanisms, limited accountability measures, and persistent socio-cultural norms undermining legal reforms: Little wonder female child marriage still persists in Zambia.

SOCIAL REFORMS, LEGACY AND PASSING OF DORA MOONO NYAMBE

According to the dossiers of Hibbert (2023), Das (2024) and Lusaka Times Editor (2024), Late Dora Moono Nyambe, a 30-year-old humanitarian from Lusaka, Zambia, represents an unparalleled commitment to social reform

and child welfare. In 2019, she made a life-changing decision to leave her urban teaching career and relocate to Mapapa, a remote village plagued by poverty and child marriage. There, she established Footprints of Hope, a charitable foundation dedicated to eradicating systemic issues affecting vulnerable children. Starting with just five students under the shade of a Mpundu tree, she grew her mission into a beacon of hope, eventually grooming over 200 children and adopting 13 as her own. Through the innovative use of TikTok, Late Dora attracted over 4 million followers, leveraging this global platform to share her mission, raise awareness, and garner grassroots funding. This approach enabled her to provide education, food, and essential care to more than 500 children, ensuring they receive three daily meals and holistic support. Late Dora's educational initiatives highlight her unwavering commitment to creating long-term change. Under the banner of Footprints of Hope, she built four schools that serve children from kindergarten to grade 12, with aspirations to support students through college preparation. Her focus extends beyond academics, encompassing infrastructure projects like dormitories and family homes for the most vulnerable. Through emphasizing the children's potential rather than their hardships, Late Dora nurtured a culture of hope and resilience. Her hands-on involvement and community-focused philosophy underscore her unique grassroots model of development, rejecting corporate and governmental dependency in favour of collective action. This approach galvanized local support, enabling the village of Mapapa to become a self-sustaining hub of educational reform and social empowerment.

Through her humanitarian work, the Late Dora Moono Nyambe became a transformative force in Zambia, confronting child marriage and championing access to education for disadvantaged children. Her TikTok presence not only amplified her message but also mobilized small donations from supporters worldwide, proving that innovative outreach could drive integrated change. As a mother to 13 adopted children, she exemplified the depth of personal sacrifice involved in her mission. Her efforts have empowered the children of Mapapa to envision a future unbound by the limitations of poverty and societal neglect. Via fostering accountability for abusers and emphasizing creativity and holistic care, Late Dora transformed the narrative surrounding rural children from one of despair to one of limitless potential. Late Dora Moono Nyambe's life serves as a poignant testament to the power of individual agency in addressing entrenched societal challenges. Her legacy demands a concerted effort to sustain her vision, urging governments, civil society, and media to institutionalize her initiatives and celebrate similar transformative figures. Her story highlights the capacity of grassroots efforts to enact profound change, challenging prevailing notions of philanthropy that prioritize financial contributions over personal dedication.

Late Dora's untimely passing is a stark reminder of the enduring impact of selflessness and the fragility of life. Her work continues to inspire collective action, urging society to prioritize the welfare of marginalized communities, honour unsung heroes, and cultivate structural reforms that align with her dream of a world where every child can dream, learn, and thrive.

Regrettably, as Hall (2024) and Blanchet (2024) enunciate, Late Dora Moono Nyambe, tragically passed away at the age of 32 on Christmas Day, December 25, 2024. While the cause of her death remains undisclosed, Late Dora had previously shared a TikTok post on December 16, 2024, revealing a leg injury, though no direct connection between this injury and her passing has been confirmed. In her final days, Late Dora Moona continued her advocacy, launching a GoFundMe campaign to raise \$80,000 for a new bus to facilitate transportation for her students in Mapapa. The campaign had garnered over \$41,000 by the time of her death, reflecting her ability to inspire global support for her cause. Her efforts were documented in the 2023 book *Under a Zambian Tree* by Northeastern University alum Joseph Schmitt, which highlighted her resilience and unwavering commitment to addressing poverty, malnutrition, and educational inequality. Late Dora Moona's work not only provided material aid but also sought to change narratives, emphasizing the creativity, talents, and aspirations of African children beyond their struggles. Her sudden death has left a profound void in the lives of those she served and the millions she inspired worldwide. Her Legacy is worthy of honour and further advancement.

IMPLICATIONS OF FEMALE CHILD MARRIAGE

The socio-religious implications

Female child marriage, prevalent in many societies, especially in developing regions, carries profound socio-religious implications that shape the lives of young girls, their communities, and broader societal structures. From a social standpoint, child marriage curtails a girl's education and limits her access to opportunities, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. Early marriage often places girls in domestic roles, stifling their potential for economic independence and social mobility. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological toll of early marriage is significant, as girls are forced into adult responsibilities and relationships before they have the maturity to exploit them: N. Mulenga, C. Kapambwe and L. Sakala (personal communication, January 4th, 2025) explicate that this can result in mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Religiously, child marriage raises complex questions about the interpretation of sacred texts and traditions. In

some communities, cultural practices tied to marriage are justified through religious doctrine, leading to tensions between modern human rights standards and traditional beliefs. However, religious leaders advocating for the protection of children's rights emphasize that faith traditions should support the dignity and well-being of all individuals, particularly the vulnerable. The intersection of religion and gender often exacerbates the situation, with gender roles deeply ingrained in religious teachings that can reinforce the notion of a woman's place being in the home and marriage. This influences how societies perceive the roles of women and girls, often downplaying the importance of their personal development, health, and autonomy. A religion that promotes female child marriage is twisted, as it perpetuates gender inequality, cultural patriarchy, and violates fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, the practice of child marriage undermines efforts to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women, as it institutionalizes a power imbalance within marriage, with girls typically subjected to the authority of older husbands. This unequal power dynamic not only affects the girl's physical and emotional health but also impacts the vast community by reducing female participation in the workforce and leadership roles, ultimately hindering economic development. The intersection of these social and religious forces forms a complex web that keeps female child marriage entrenched in many societies, challenging efforts for reform and highlighting the need for a multi-faceted approach to eradicate the practice while respecting cultural and religious diversity.

The practice of female child marriage raises profound questions about the perceived virtues embedded within religious ideals and faith, particularly when it is observed that some religious communities, including certain interpretations of Islam, as well as elements of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and even Christianity, have been implicated in its perpetuation. Religious teachings are often regarded as moral compasses that advocate for the protection, dignity, and equal treatment of all individuals, especially women and children. However, when these faiths are seen to either condone or fail to adequately challenge the practice of child marriage, it exposes a dissonance between the supposed virtues of compassion, justice, and human flourishing espoused by these religions and the cultural practices they inadvertently support. In Islam, the Quran provides a controversial basis for child marriage, particularly in Surah At-Talaq (65:4), which permits marriage to prepubescent girls, stipulating a waiting period (iddah) for those who have not yet menstruated (The Quran, 2021). According to Salenda (2016) and Maclean (2019), some Islamic scholars and clerics like the deputy grand imam of al-Azhar and Salenda, argue that this reflects the cultural context of the time rather than an endorsement of child marriage in modern society; thus marriage should be based on the consent of

both parties and particularly the young woman. However, this verse has been cited in support of child marriage by certain interpretations, leading to a disjunction between religious ideals of justice and the perpetuation of practices harmful to female children. This discrepancy undermines the credibility of religious institutions as moral authorities, raising critical ethical concerns about the role of faith in addressing harmful practices. Furthermore, it compels a reevaluation of how religious doctrine and tradition are interpreted and applied, particularly in relation to the protection of vulnerable populations such as female children, whose rights and agency are often compromised in the name of cultural or religious adherence.

Socio-cultural implications

Female child marriage carries profound socio-cultural implications that perpetuate gender inequality, stifle personal autonomy, and reinforce traditional gender norms within communities. This practice deeply embedded in many cultures, as M. Chanda, S. Lungu and F. Iliyah (personal communication, January 4th, 2025) illuminate, often symbolizes the transition from girlhood to womanhood in societies where women's roles are primarily defined by marriage and motherhood. As a result, the cultural value placed on early marriage reinforces the perception that a woman's worth is intrinsically linked to her ability to bear children and maintain a household, rather than to her individual potential, education, or career aspirations. This paradigm significantly limits the life choices available to girls, effectively stripping them of their agency and perpetuating generational cycles of limited educational attainment and economic dependency.

Moreover, A. Ojalogbu, I. Maigari and F. Dauda (personal communication, January 6th, 2025) unravel that female child marriage plays a significant role in preserving patriarchal structures within societies. In many cultures, early marriage serves as a means to control women's sexuality and assert familial authority, as families often view marriage as a tool for managing social and economic security. The cultural expectation that girls should marry early is often driven by the desire to preserve family honor, which, in some contexts, is perceived as threatened by a woman's independence or refusal to marry. Consequently, the practice of child marriage becomes an entrenched social norm, with societal pressure reinforcing the idea that girls' futures are predetermined by their marital status rather than their capabilities or desires.

The socio-cultural consequences of child marriage extend beyond the individual, affecting entire communities. As girls are married off at a young age, their education is frequently disrupted, leading to lower literacy rates among women, which in turn limits extensive social mobility and economic development. This societal stagnation often results in a reinforcing feedback loop, where communities

continue to prioritize early marriage for girls, perpetuating cycles of poverty, illiteracy, and gender-based disparities. Furthermore, child marriage reinforces traditional roles that view women as secondary to men, limiting their participation in civic, political, and economic spheres, and stifling broader efforts toward gender equality and social progress. In this way, female child marriage is not only a personal tragedy for the girls involved but also a significant cultural impediment to societal advancement.

The practice of female child marriage can be viewed as a stark reflection of cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in harmful traditions, which, when scrutinized from a contemporary global perspective, is often deemed barbaric and inhumane. Such practices stand in direct opposition to modern ideals of human rights and equality, further perpetuating gender-based inequality. This antiquated custom not only hampers the progress of affected communities but also tarnishes the reputation of the regions where it persists. For nations aiming to attract foreign investment, the prevalence of child marriage may serve as a significant deterrent, as potential investors and businesses are increasingly drawn to countries that uphold ethical practices and promote the well-being of all citizens, regardless of gender. Additionally, the stigma attached to such practices can negatively impact tourism, as travellers and international visitors are unlikely to visit areas perceived as backward or oppressive. This cultural inheritance, thus, poses a threat to both economic growth and international relations, discouraging collaboration with nations that continue to permit child marriage under the guise of tradition.

Health implications

Female child marriage is strongly associated with a range of severe health risks, including numerous reproductive and general health complications. I. Ezebialu and C. Ezeanyeku (personal communication, December 7th, 2024) explicate that early sexual activity, often before the body is physically mature, increases the likelihood of complications during pregnancy, childbirth, and later reproductive health. They assert that girls who marry at a young age are at heightened risk of developing uterine diseases, such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can lead to chronic pelvic pain, infertility, and increased susceptibility to other infections. The premature onset of pregnancy also significantly elevates the risk of obstetric fistula, a severe and often debilitating condition caused by prolonged labour, which is more common in young girls whose bodies are not yet ready for childbirth. Additionally, the pressure of early pregnancy and childbirth can result in maternal and infant mortality, as younger girls are less likely to access adequate prenatal and postnatal care. J. Meludu and E. Eze (personal communication, December 7th, 2024) elucidate that beyond reproductive

health, early marriage contributes to a higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, as young brides are often unable to negotiate safe sexual practices or access protective measures. Psychologically, the stress and trauma associated with early marriage and childbirth can lead to mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, the compounded effects of early marriage on the overall health of girls, including nutritional deficiencies, increased vulnerability to chronic diseases, and lack of proper healthcare access, result in a pervasive health crisis that not only impacts the affected girls but also undermines the broader public health landscape in regions where the practice is prevalent.

In addition to the reproductive health risks, female child marriage exacerbates the likelihood of developing a range of long-term physical and psychological health conditions. The nutritional deficiencies that often accompany early marriage, due to limited access to proper food, education, and healthcare, lead to stunted growth, anemia, and weakened immune systems, leaving young brides particularly vulnerable to chronic illnesses. Furthermore, the emotional and psychological burden of child marriage as already perceived in this study, which often includes isolation, forced dependence, and abuse, has long-lasting effects on mental well-being. This trauma frequently manifests as long-term conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly in those who experience domestic violence, sexual abuse, or coercion. The social isolation of young brides can also lead to feelings of loneliness, disempowerment, and low self-esteem, which contribute to poorer overall health. Moreover, the social stigma attached to early marriage often results in young girls being denied access to support systems, exacerbating the physical and mental health risks. The combination of these factors, including physical injury, disease, mental health struggles, and lack of healthcare, creates a detrimental cycle that perpetuates not only the health issues of the individuals involved but also the integral social and economic challenges of entire communities, reducing overall productivity and wellbeing.

Early female child marriage often leads to repeated pregnancies at a time when a girl's body is still developing, which heightens the risk of maternal morbidity and mortality. I. Beluchukwu (personal communication, December 7, 2024) enlighten that each subsequent pregnancy before a girl reaches full physical maturity increases her vulnerability to complications such as eclampsia, preeclampsia, and gestational diabetes. These conditions, if left untreated, can result in severe health consequences for both the young mother and her baby. Furthermore, the cumulative physical toll of early childbearing on the female body can cause long-term reproductive health issues, such as uterine prolapse, which may lead to chronic pain, urinary incontinence, and sexual dysfunction. The chronic nature of these health

problems often results in lifelong suffering, social stigma, and diminished quality of life, with limited access to proper treatment due to societal barriers and healthcare inadequacies.

In addition to the physical health risks, the psychological and emotional consequences of female child marriage are profound and enduring. Many young brides experience a significant loss of autonomy and personal agency, as they are expected to assume adult roles and responsibilities before reaching emotional and psychological maturity. This forced transition often leads to feelings of helplessness, trauma, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Psychological stress from constant pressure to meet marital and societal expectations can contribute to mental health disorders such as severe depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The high prevalence of intimate partner violence in early marriages further exacerbates these mental health challenges, as many young girls are subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by their husbands, resulting in an increased risk of psychological trauma. The social isolation often experienced by child brides, coupled with a lack of supportive networks and limited educational opportunities, further deepens their vulnerability to mental health issues. These compounded health effects not only impact the individual girls but also perpetuate ample cycles of poverty, disempowerment, and societal instability.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the profound socio-cultural and religious implications of child marriage, with a particular emphasis on the heroic advocacy of Late Dora Moono Nyambe. Her work serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need to dismantle harmful traditions that jeopardize the well-being and future of female children. Challenging entrenched societal norms and invoking moral imperatives, Late Dora Moona's initiatives have illuminated a pathway toward empowering young girls through education, health awareness, and community engagement. The findings affirm that combating child marriage requires a multidimensional approach that combines advocacy, policy intervention, and cultural reformation.

While this study highlights critical aspects of the issue, it is not exhaustive. The complexity of child marriage, deeply rooted in cultural, economic, and religious contexts, calls for broader exploration to address its varied realities. Specific religious doctrines and their interpretations, whether used to justify or combat child marriage, warrant further examination. Additionally, exploring the economic dimensions, such as poverty alleviation and its role in reducing child marriages, remains essential for deeper understanding and effective intervention.

To advance the discourse, scholars and policymakers should consider longitudinal studies that track the impact

of interventions inspired by Late Dora's work. Comparative studies across different cultural and religious landscapes could reveal innovative strategies for addressing this global challenge. Honouring Late Dora Moono Nyambe's legacy requires that future research remains committed to exploring holistic solutions that prioritize the dignity, autonomy, and potential of every female child. This approach ensures that her advocacy continues to inspire actionable change across generations and borders.

Recommendations

This study proposes the following targeted socio-cultural and religious recommendations, grounded in rigorous analysis, to address the identified gaps:

1. The Zambian government must take more decisive steps to thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of the Late Dora Moono Nyambe, a courageous advocate for female children and their protection from the detrimental effects of child marriage. This work passionately calls for justice in her name, urging that her untimely passing be examined with the utmost transparency and diligence. Furthermore, it is crucial that both the government and non-governmental organizations collaborate to immortalize Late Dora's legacy by ensuring that her invaluable contributions to the fight against child marriage and her tireless efforts in championing the rights of female children continue to inspire and influence future generations. Through preserving her memory and promoting her vision, Zambia can honour her commitment to social change and amplify the impact of her life's work, ensuring that her advocacy remains a beacon of hope for the empowerment of women and girls across the nation.
2. This study emphasizes the need for caution in publicizing personal achievements and sensitive initiatives on social media platforms, given the potential for adverse reactions in a world marked by increasing wickedness. The Late Dora Moono Nyambe, renowned for her tireless efforts to combat female child marriage, notably used TikTok to expose and challenge the practices of those endorsing such injustices. While her activism gained widespread acclaim, it is plausible that her public outspokenness might have provoked hostility from detractors who perceived her advocacy as a direct affront. Considering the abruptness of her demise, it is not inconceivable to hypothesize that she may have fallen victim to retaliatory actions aimed at silencing her voice and halting her noble mission. This underscores the precarious balance between advocacy and personal safety in the digital age.
3. Strengthening Legal Systems and Enforcement: The establishment and enforcement of robust legal systems is paramount in combating child marriage in Mapulungwe Zambia and other regions across Africa. Governments must not only pass laws that set the minimum age for marriage at 18 but also ensure stringent penalties for those who circumvent these laws. Legal reforms should include proactive measures for educating the public about the consequences of child marriage, with a focus on the health, educational, and social risks faced by young girls. Effective law enforcement must be bolstered with adequate resources to monitor and prevent child marriages, particularly in rural areas where such practices are more prevalent.
4. Community Education, Awareness Campaigns alongside Improving Access to Education for Girls: A comprehensive approach to ending child marriage involves extensive community-based education and awareness campaigns. These initiatives should target local leaders, parents, and young girls, providing them with information about the dangers of early marriage. Community engagement is crucial to altering deeply entrenched cultural norms that perpetuate child marriage. Involving elders, religious leaders, and other influential figures in the education process can help the message against child marriage gain wider acceptance and respect. Programs should emphasize the importance of education for girls and the social and economic benefits of delaying marriage until adulthood. Access to quality education is one of the most effective tools in preventing child marriage. Girls who are educated are more likely to delay marriage, as they can better understand their rights and have increased opportunities for economic independence. In Mapulungwe Zambia and similar regions, governments and NGOs should focus on removing barriers to education for girls, such as long distances to schools, lack of female teachers, and cultural biases against educating girls. Scholarships, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns can encourage parents to keep their daughters in school and delay marriage.
5. Empowering young girls and women with the skills, resources, and support networks to make informed choices about their futures is essential. Vocational training, leadership development programs, and access to healthcare can provide alternative pathways for young girls, which reduce the social and economic pressures that may push them into marriage. Establishing safe spaces for girls, such as community centres and support networks, where they can share their experiences and receive guidance, can also help prevent early marriages by providing a sense of community and solidarity.
6. Collaboration between Governments, NGOs, and Religious Institutions: Ending child marriage in

Mapulungwe Zambia and other African communities requires collaboration across multiple sectors. Governments, NGOs, and religious institutions should work together to address the root causes of child marriage, such as poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education. NGOs can provide on-the-ground support, while governments should create policies that incentivize social change. Religious institutions, which hold significant influence in many African societies, can play a critical role in advocating against child marriage by promoting alternative cultural practices that prioritize the well-being of girls.

7. Providing Support for Girls at Risk of Marriage including Incentivizing Delayed Marriage through Economic Empowerment Programs: Girls who are at risk of child marriage need immediate protection and support. Establishing safe shelters, offering counseling services, and providing access to legal and medical support can help girls escape forced marriages or avoid entering them in the first place. These services should be readily accessible in both urban and rural areas. In Mapulungwe Zambia, setting up child protection units within local law enforcement agencies can further safeguard vulnerable girls. Additionally, providing financial support for families who are at risk of marrying off their daughters can reduce the economic incentives driving the practice. Socioeconomic incentives play a crucial role in ending child marriage. Offering financial incentives, such as cash transfers or agricultural support, to families that keep their daughters in school and delay marriage can shift parental attitudes toward early marriage. Governments and NGOs should partner to create community-driven economic empowerment programs that help families find alternative ways to sustain themselves without resorting to child marriage. Providing parents with financial independence and opportunities for social mobility reduces the economic pressures that often lead to child marriage.
8. Monitoring and Data Collection: Systematic monitoring and data collection are key to understanding the scope of child marriage and measuring the effectiveness of interventions. Governments and international organizations should invest in comprehensive data collection on child marriage practices, including geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. This data should inform policy decisions and program development. Regular monitoring can ensure that laws and policies are being effectively implemented and that resources are being allocated to areas where they are most needed.
9. African countries, particularly Zambia, where female child marriage remains prevalent, should prioritize child spacing and family planning as key strategies to mitigate this issue and reduce rapid childbirth rates. Implementing comprehensive reproductive health

education and increasing access to affordable contraceptives can help address the underlying factors driving this practice. Legislators, governments, and stakeholders must collaborate to design and implement culturally sensitive initiatives that respect community values while promoting the well-being of girls and women. Families must also learn to give birth to the number of children they can comfortably train without resorting to giving female children away in marriage to strangers for support. Encouraging male involvement and community participation in reproductive health discussions can further enhance the impact of such efforts, eventually improving societal outcomes and reducing the prevalence of child marriages.

10. African countries, particularly Zambia, must recognize the intrinsic value of female children as equally significant and divinely created beings alongside their male counterparts. The abuse of a female child, especially through practices such as child marriage, undermines the very foundation of human continuity, disrespects the sanctity of motherhood, and threatens the future of humanity. Such acts not only jeopardize the well-being and potential of the individual but also violate the divine order established to ensure balance and harmony within society. Protecting female children from child marriage is not merely a social or cultural obligation but a moral imperative that safeguards humanity's collective destiny and honours the sacredness of life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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