



Exploring the Integration of Social Work in Community-Based Socio-Protection of the Girl Child from Early Marriages.

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ABSTRACT

Girl marriage has been identified by the United Nations (2015) as a harmful practice and listed as one of the global agenda to be ended by 2030. In Malawi, protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse is not only a basic value but also an obligation clearly set out in the bill of rights. Girl marriage is prevalent in the most parts of Malawi like Mangochi which has high number of young girls being involved in child marriage which result in school dropout. This study was premised on exploring community-based socio-protection of the girl child from early marriages. The study has used both qualitative and quantitative research approach. The target population included young girls who are involved in child marriage, parents, Group village Headman, social workers and other organization involved in combating child marriages in Changamire village and the sample size which was used was 30 and the researcher used purposive and simple random kind of sampling. The researcher engaged statistical package for social science (SPSS) as a tool to analyze and interpret the data obtained. In addition, the researcher aimed to obtain insightful perceptions and recommendations from participants. The main findings of the study show that a lot of young girls are being involved in child marriages because of poverty which is a major root cause of it. The study suggest that they should outline a series of community-oriented interventions which will blend psychological, social and structural support to promote mental health and well-being in the contexts of child marriage.

Key words: *Cultural Resistance, Cultural Values, Political Interference, Policies, Legal Framework, Rehabilitation*

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to UNICEF (2015:12), “child marriage includes any legal or customary union involving a boy or a girl below the age of eighteen, or any marriage without the free and full consent of both intended spouses”. However, Maphanga (2011:33) defined marriage in the context of traditional child marriage as a practice involving a union of a young girl married to an older man. The

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 16 explains that “every marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties” (UNICEF, 2008:16). In relation to the above definitions, girl marriage is regarded as forced marriage even if consent is given, as any person under the age of 18 cannot give free and full consent. In this study, girl marriage and early marriage are used interchangeably and therefore ‘early marriage’ means ‘girl marriage’.

In communities that are deeply rooted in cultural norms, economic constraints and gender inequalities, it is prevalent to see child marriages. These early marriages have profound negative consequences on girls’ physical, emotional and psychological well-being as well as their access to education and future opportunities. Through their deep understanding of community dynamics and cultural contexts, social workers can work closely with families, communities and relevant stakeholders to challenge harmful norms and practices that perpetuate child marriages.

A social worker is referred to in the capacity of a social protector who safeguards social and human rights of populations at risk, for instance by protecting children’s rights (patel, 2015:145). As a child protector, a social worker takes immediate action necessary to protect the child at risk from acute harm (Becket, 2007:37).

Social workers involved in combating child marriages adopt a multi-faceted approach. They engage in community awareness campaigns, conduct workshops and provide counselling sessions to parents, families and community members. By raising awareness about the consequences of child marriages, social workers aim to shift mindset and empower communities to prioritize girl’s education as a means to break the cycle of poverty and discrimination. Despite the persistent gender disparities in access to education in many societies, social workers actively engage in efforts to remove barriers to girl’s education and create safe and inclusive learning environments.

Social workers design and implement education programs that address systemic issues such as poverty, gender bias and cultural barriers. They work closely with schools, communities and families to increase school enrollment for girls, reduce dropout rates and improve the quality of education provided. By conducting awareness campaigns and organizing parent-teacher meetings, social workers foster a supportive environment that values and encourages girl’s education.

Moreover, social workers collaborate with local organizations, government agencies and civil societies to implement child protection policies and legal frameworks that safeguard children's rights. They advocate for and support the enforcement of laws that dictate the minimum age for marriage and work to eradicate harmful practices such as dowry and bride price. Social workers also provide support and rehabilitation to victim of child marriages, ensuring they receive proper care, education and opportunities for a better future.

Furthermore, social workers collaborate with policy makers and stakeholders to advocate for policy changes that prioritize girl's education. They contribute to the development and implementation of education policies and programs that are inclusive, gender-responsive and sensitive to the unique needs and challenges faced by girls.

1.3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The issue of child marriage and lack of education for girls continues to be a significant concern in many parts of the world. Despite a small increase in mean age at first marriage for women in Malawi, from 17.8 years in 1992 to 18.2 in 2015/6 among women, child marriage or marriage before the age of 18 remains a significant issue in a number of districts. Survey data suggest that 42.1% of all women aged 20-24 report being married by age 18, down from nearly half in 2010 (49.6%) but still higher than neighboring Zambia (29.0%) and Zimbabwe (32.4%). (UNICEF, 2012).

Studies conducted as part of this project found that 31.0% of girls 15-19 are ever married with a median age at marriage of 16.4 years at Changamire village in Mangochi district. Most young girls in Changamire village face a lot of problems that force them to enter into early marriages which bring a lot of harmful challenges in their life. Malawi rank as number 12 of the highest child marriage rates in the world, (UNICEF, 2017).

However, despite the critical role of social workers in combating child marriages and promoting girl's education, there are several challenges in Changamire village that needs to be addressed. Things like cultural resistance, patriarch norms and societal prejudices. Furthermore, orphans, the poor and girls without someone to look after them are particularly vulnerable to child marriage (UNICEF, UNAIDS AND WHO, 2010). Therefore, this study aimed at exploring the community-based socio-protection of a girl child from early marriages with emphasis on inclusion, challenges and prospects in social work.

1.4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.4.1. MAIN OBJECTIVE

The study was being conducted to explore the community-based socio-protection of the girl child from early marriages.

1.4.2. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE

- To investigate the social determinants of child marriages.
- To explore the effects of child marriages on the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of young girls.
- To find out the challenges government and other stakeholders face in combating child marriages.

2.1 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Child marriage is a human rights violation that has been extensively addressed through country specific reports by NGOs, international organizations and academic scholars. The Global Programme supports legislative reform efforts to raise the age of consent to marriage to 18 years. The application and enforcement of child marriage laws has to consider the provision of justice, remedies and protection services for child victims of marriage and associated human rights violations. In addition, countries have to establish systems for the mandatory registration of births and civil, customary and religious marriages. Governance and justice systems should contribute to broader efforts to end child marriages that include the promotion of change in social norms and gender norms and the provision of services and greater opportunities for adolescent girls and boys. (UNICEF, 2021c).

Setting high minimum age for both sexual consent and marriage is problematic. If the age of sexual consent coincides with that of marriage both are set at 18 years, it effectively criminalizes behavior in which large number of young people are engaged in societies throughout the world. In Mongolia, research indicates that 38 per cent of 16 years old have started sexual activity. In Zimbabwe, 30 per cent of girls between 15 and 19 years of age have had sex at least once. In the United Kingdom, 64 per cent of girls have had sex before the age of 18 years, and in Iceland and Denmark, the figure was over 70 per cent. (Maculan, 2020).

In Bangladesh, for example, underage girls and boys are punished with imprisonment of up to 15 days or fined, or both (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, 2017). In South Africa, the age of sexual consent is now 16 years for boys and girls and includes same sex sexual experiences. Children will not be criminally charged if they have sex when both partners are between 12 and 16 years old. And it is not criminal for a child under 16 years to have sex with a partner less than two years older. The law stipulates access to reproductive health services from the age of 16 years and puts the minimum age of marriage at 18 years.

The African charter on the rights and welfare of the child (ACRWC) defines a child as a person under the age of 18 years and the Africa Youth Charter defines a minor as a person between the ages of 15-17. Despite legislation, child marriage continues to affect millions of girls every year in Africa with the result outcome of high birth-rates of maternal and child mortality, obstetric fistulae, premature births, still births, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases leading to cervical cancer and domestic violence.

2.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

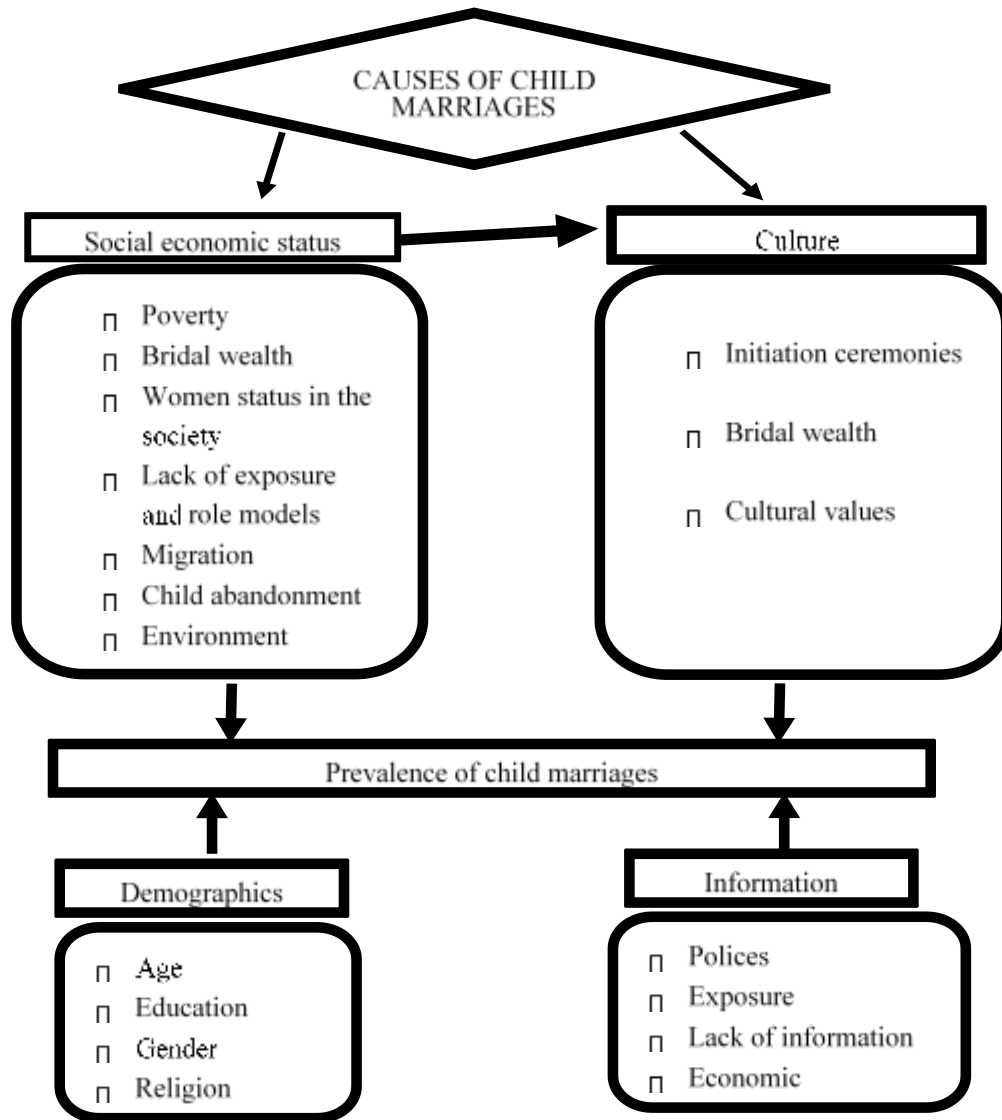


Figure 2.5: Conceptual Framework

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative method was used because it emphasizes on the depth of understanding associated with ideographic concerns, Silverman (2013:83). Furthermore, it attempts to tap the deeper meaning of particular human experiences and is intended to generate theoretical richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers (Rubin, 2001). Qualitative study, implies a direct discern with experiences as it is lived or felt with the aim of understanding experiences as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or lived it (Swinton and Mowat, 2006). This was helping to build rapport with teenage girls and other respondent that were being affected by cases of child marriages and also it was easy for the victims to express their view in their own way. Quantitatively, it was used in order to show the situation at hand as how many girls were being affected by child marriages and how it was progressing over the years which made social workers to take part in combating these child marriages and to promote the girl's education. In addition, the quantitative method was also helping to show which age group were being affected with this practice.

3.2 POPULATION AREA AND SAMPLE

This research was conducted in Mangochi, Traditional Authority Chimwala in Changamire village. The reason behind the selection of the area is that, the area experiences great number of child marriages which makes some social workers to take part in combating these child marriages and to promote the girl's education and also the area has a great number of girls that do not go to school. Mangochi is one of 31 administrative districts in Malawi and one of 13 districts in southern region with high prevalence rate of child marriages (GENET, 2011).

S.NO	ENTITY	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
1.	Girls	15
2.	Head teachers	2
3.	Group village headman	1
4.	Parents	10
5.	Social workers	3

Table 3.3: Number of respondents

The number of people who were considered as respondents comprised of girls who have been married before at a young age, those girls that are still in the marriage, head teachers as the ones that recognize dropout rates in schools, Group Village Headman, parents and official from social work offices.

3.4 SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

3.4.1 PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

According to Schutt (2003) this is a technique of sampling in which each sample element is selected for a purpose. In this study, it was employed to generate rich data from experienced personnel, for instance, social workers and other non-governmental officials that deal with child marriages like YONECO.

3.4.2 SIMPLE RANDOM SAMPLING

Schutt (2003) defined simple random sampling as a method of sampling in which every sample element is selected only on the basis of chance, through a random process. In this research the simple random sampling was that of young girls in the village who experience child marriages together with the Group Village Headman (GVH) and social workers, where the names of the victims were written on a paper and put in a container and randomly selected to be used for the study.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

3.5.1 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Focus groups may be called discussion groups or group interviews, a number of people are asked to come together in a group to discuss a certain issue (Dawson, 2002). This study was holding focus group discussion separately with different community members including young girls, school, teachers, parents (mothers and fathers separately to maintain free discussion) on customs, traditions and values surrounding child marriage and girls' formal education in the local community. Specific questions were asked and the groups was guided through the discussion to ensure that they address those questions but the resulting information was qualitative and quantitative and relatively unstructured.

3.5.2 INTERVIEW ADMINISTERED QUESTIONNAIRE

An interview is a data collection technique that involves oral questioning of respondents, either individually or as a group (Dawson, 2002). Those questionnaires were administered to girls and other respondent in order to get clear understanding on child marriages in the community as it affects the target population and also villagers. It was containing both open ended and closed ended questions. It was involving face to face interview which was having distinct advantage of enabling the researcher to establish rapport with potential participants and therefore gain their cooperation.

3.5.3 PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

The major source of data which was used by the researcher is primary source. Primary data is information gathered directly from respondents. This is through focus group discussion and interview administered questionnaire.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.2.1. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD MARRIAGES IN CHANGAMIRE VILLAGE

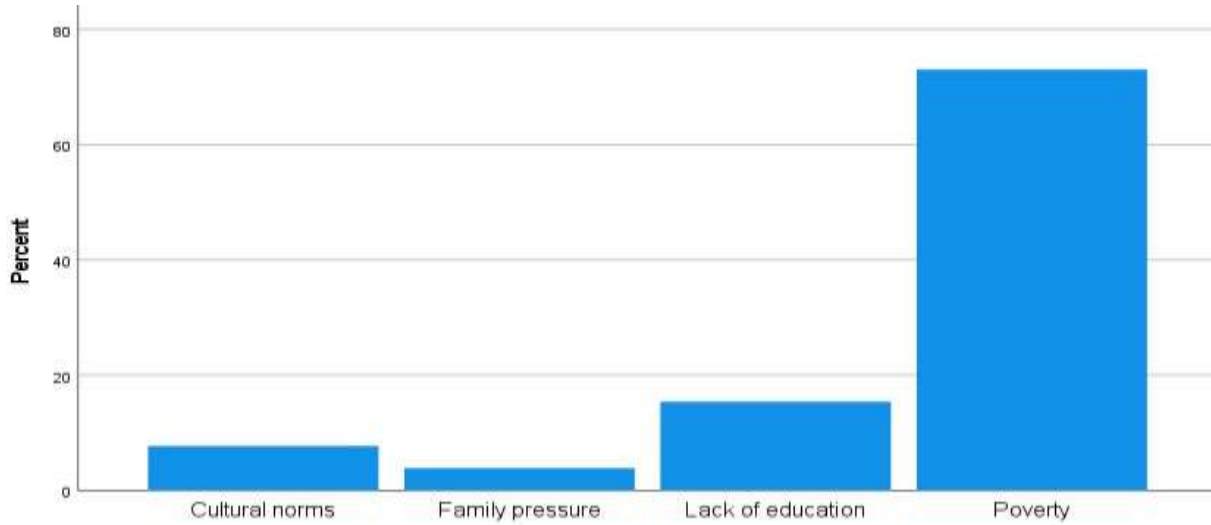


Figure 4.2.1: Showing factors contributing to child marriages.

4.2.2 MAJOR ROOT CAUSE OF CHILD MARRIAGES

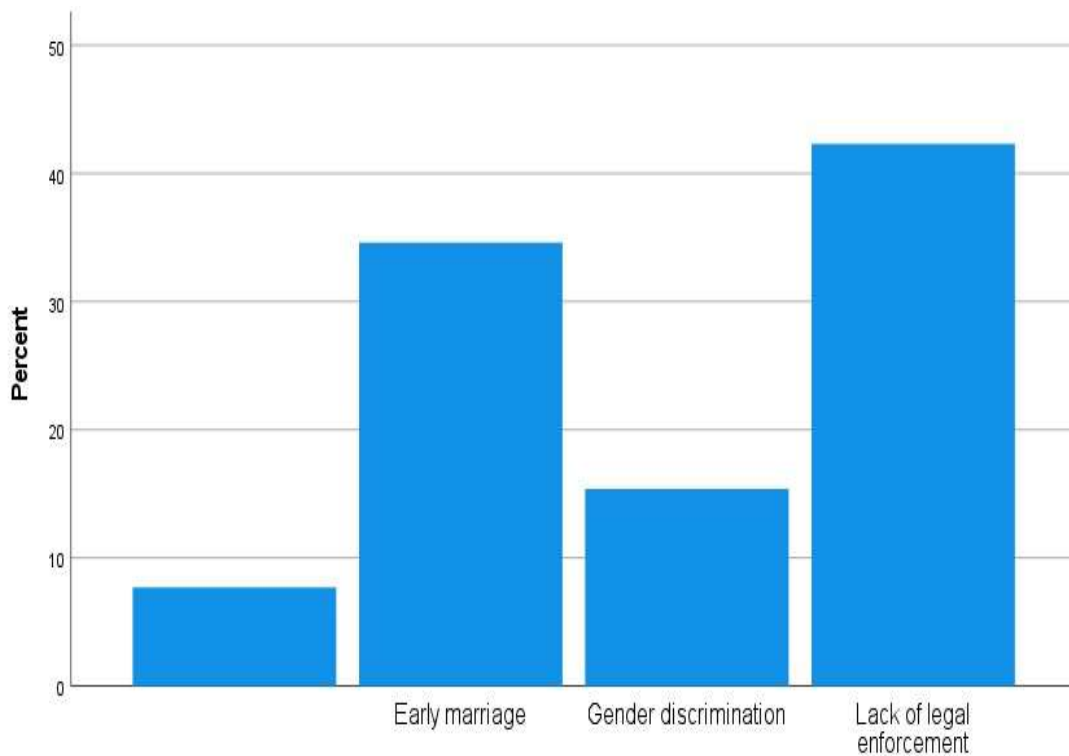


Figure 4.2.2: Showing major root causes of Child marriages

4.2.3. IMPACT OF EARLY MARRIAGES ON PHYSICAL HEALTH OF YOUNG GIRLS.

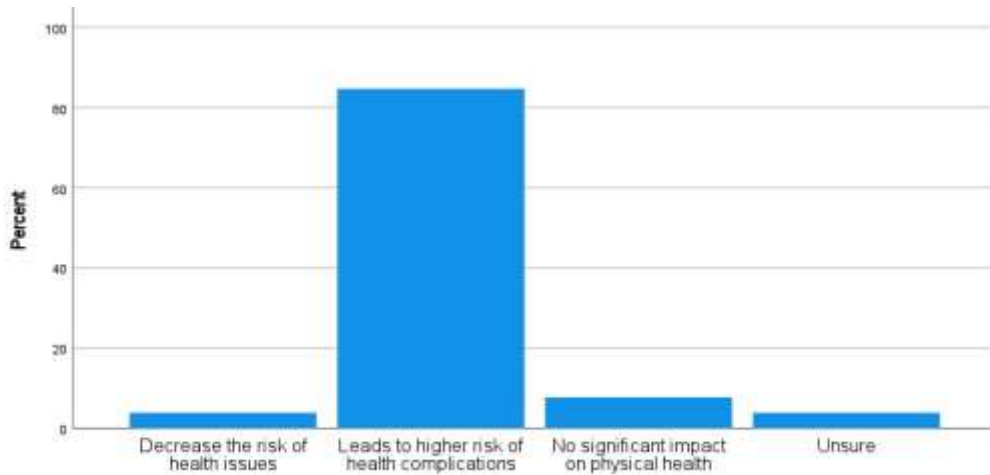


Figure 4.2.3: Showing opinions on how early marriages impact the physical health of young girls.

4.3. EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES THAT YOUNG GIRLS OFTEN FACE IN CHILD MARRIAGES.

The table below indicates the emotional challenges that young girls often face in child marriage.

Many respondents answered that depression others said anxiety and many more.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	All of the above	9	34.6	34.6	34.6
	Anxiety	7	26.9	26.9	61.5
	Depression	10	38.5	38.5	100.0
	Total	26	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.3: Showing emotional challenges that young girls face in marriages

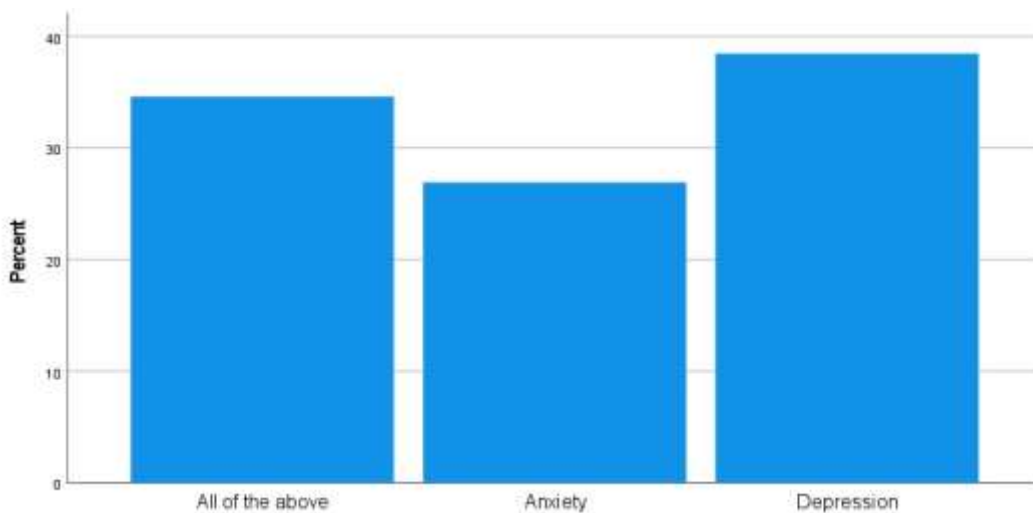


Figure 4.3: Showing emotional challenges that young girls face in marriages

4.4. CHALLENGES THE GOVERNMENT FACE IN COMBATING CHILD MARRIAGE

The table below shows the challenges that the government face in combating child marriages and the following are the answers that the respondents gave with their percentages, lack of resources with 46.2%, seconded by cultural resistance with 38.5%, and political interference with 7.7%.

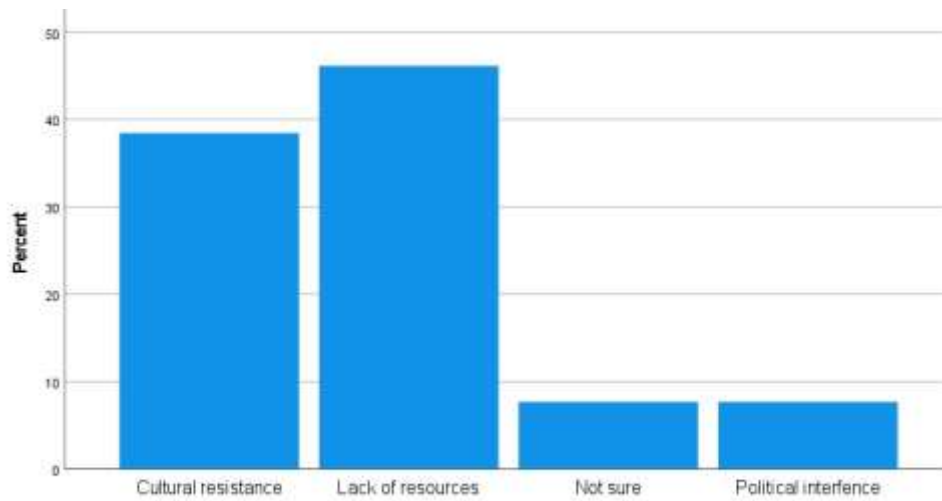


Figure 4.4: Showing biggest challenges that the government face in combating child marriage

4.5. STAKEHOLDERS THAT ARE SUPPOSED TO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT IN COMBATING CHILD MARRIAGES

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Community leaders	6	23.1	23.1	23.1
	Non – government organization (NGO)	14	53.8	53.8	76.9
	Religious institutions	6	23.1	23.1	100.0
	Total	26	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.5: Showing stakeholders that are supposed to support the government in combating child marriages

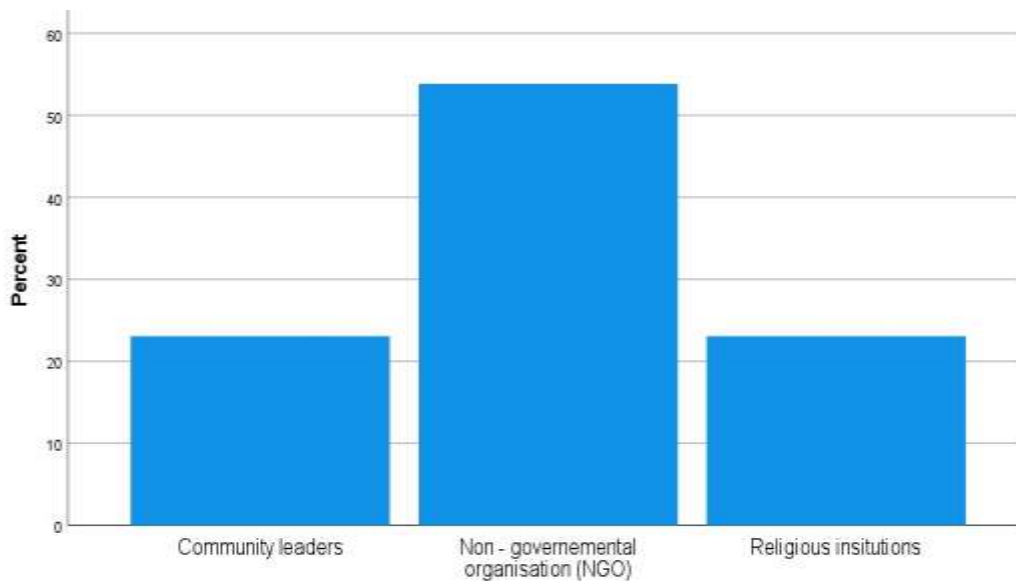


Figure 4.5: Showing stakeholders that are supposed to support the government in combating child marriages

5. FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 FINDINGS

The findings in the study revealed that child marriages are still increasing tremendously in Malawi more especially Mangochi district in Changamire village being the case study. In Changamire village T/A Chimwala where the study took place a lot of girls are getting married at an early age due to poverty as a major root cause. Most of the youth in this village are vulnerable as they are dormant and have nothing to do apart from fishing in the lake and migrating to south Africa for most boys and for girls just staying home waiting for their young husbands who went to south Africa. There is little interest in school activities and this blocks them from getting important information about their lives and development. The area needs more civic education on why education is important to all.

The by-laws that are already in place have to be strengthened by revising the weak policies and by-laws. Bring in amendments clauses that will bring justice to offenders without being bias. There is a need to have visitation of a lot of female role models who will inspire a lot of girls that whatever a boy child can do, a girl child can even do better.

Laws are there to protect children who are involved in child marriages but the implementation process makes child marriages to still exist at community and national level. For example, in Malawi we do not have specific strategies in implementing child marriages policies. This have made a lot of people to not be aware with child marriage impacts and ways of overcoming child marriage cases. Therefore, many people have normalized child marriage as a way of living, ending poverty as well as accepting it culturally.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE STAKEHOLDERS

- There is a need for stakeholders and the government to intensify civic education in the area of Changamire village T/A Chimwala and other areas that are going through the same problem.
- Government in collaboration with different stakeholders should bring recreation centers in the area so that youth can be busy to develop other skills and help each other in shaping their future. They should switch their minds to other activities apart from being involved in child marriages as a way of ending poverty.
- Girl child education and back to school campaign initiatives have to be prioritized in Changamire village and it should be compulsory.
- Different stakeholders together with the government should introduce adult literacy education centers where those who didn't have time to learn and be conversant with information can have a chance to do so. And it can also be an opportunity to impart knowledge on how child marriages have destroyed the development growth of the area.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMUNITY (CHANGAMIRE VILLAGE)

- Chiefs of Changamire village together with head teachers should introduce partnership of schools from this area to other schools that are doing fine within the country. Let the children (students) have school visits and admire what others are doing. During the research study it was discovered that Changamire school lost 10 students who got pregnant. Hence education visit to other places will enlighten the girls that there is more outside than dropping out from school.
- It is also recommended for the community to come up with by-laws that of prohibiting child marriages and stiff punishment should be given to all people who are found in perpetuating towards the occurrence of child marriages.
- Stiffer punishment should also be introduced to both parents and guardians of the children involved in child marriages.

5.4 RECOMMENDATION TO NGOS

- NGOs are recommended to implement different programs that will help in combating child marriages at community and national level as well.

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