



Technical Brief

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL LEADERS IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGES IN ZAMBIA

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Background

By definition, child marriage is the formal or informal union of anyone below the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2015). In Africa, high cases of child marriage continue to cause concern¹. In East and Southern African countries, child marriage is estimated at 36%, with more than 10% of children, particularly girls, married by the age of 15 (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2018). In Zambia alone, child marriage prevalence is estimated at 29%, a slight decline from 31% reported in 2018². The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019³ exacerbated child marriage cases as children experienced additional exposure to vulnerabilities that led to child marriages. World Vision International's Aftershock report of 2020 reported that hardships related to loss of income at the family level due to effects of the pandemic lead to households adopting harmful coping mechanisms, including child marriage. As household incomes continue to dwindle, the marriage of girls younger than 18 can be perceived by parents and guardians as a means of reducing the household burden or earning incomes through informal dowry-based economies⁴. In Zambia,

evidence has shown that poverty and lack of income at the family level are some of the underlying factors contributing to child marriages. Other factors include strong cultural and traditional norms that encourage initiation ceremonies⁵ for children who have attained puberty, which aim to teach girls how to please men sexually and run homes. These are girls who are too young to be exposed to such information⁶.

Realizing the need to prevent children from getting into marriages and containing traditional practices harmful to children, World Vision Zambia launched the *"it takes Zambia to end child marriage"* campaign. The campaign raises awareness of the destructive practices of child marriages and other associated traditional practices. Traditional leaders that come in to protect children against child marriage within their communities are at the core of contributing to ending child marriages in Zambia.

This Technical Brief provides an insight into activities traditional leaders are implementing in their chiefdoms to end child marriages.

Technical Approaches

As key influencers in the fight against child marriages, Traditional leaders have adopted three-pronged approaches to end child marriages in their chiefdoms. These include establishing child protection committees, formulating child protection by-laws, and creating opportunities to generate income at the chiefdom level to empower and support girls' education.

1. Establishment of Chiefdom Child Protection Committees

Chiefdom Child Protection Committees are established and operate at three levels. These levels include Village, Zonal, and Chiefdom level Committees. At the Village level, community leaders known as Headmen/Women sensitize households on the

¹UNICEF, 2018

²UNICEF, 2018

³World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news/item/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>

⁴World Vision International, 2020. COVID-19 Aftershock Report

⁵Initiation ceremonies are traditional rites of passage for girls into womanhood that attain puberty

⁶UNICEF and Population Council of Zambia, 2015

adverse effects of child marriages targeting children, parents and guardians, and communities. They also disseminate messages on keeping children, especially girls, in school. World Vision Zambia developed standardized and summarised messages to raise awareness, which were produced in the ending child marriage educational materials (flipcharts and mats)⁷. In addition to sensitization activities, the Village Level Committees also look out for cases of children married before 18. Once such issues are discovered, they report to the Zonal Child Protection Committees⁸, the higher-level office, to refer cases of child marriages. The Zonal Committees comprise selected senior headmen and women. Their leading role is to support Village-level activities to prevent child marriages. The Zonal and Village Level Committees also conduct joint operations to withdraw girls taken into child marriages. The Zonal Committees further escalate the cases of child marriages to the Chiefdom Level Committee, the high-level committee at the chiefdom level overseeing all efforts to prevent child marriages. The Chiefdom Level Committees headed by the Prime Minister or Senior Traditional Council work with the District Child Protection Committee (DCPC)⁹. In addition, cases at the chiefdom level are reported to the Victim Support Unit of the Zambia Police, which is one organ that addresses matters of child marriages within the DCPC. The traditional leadership supervises all the structures at the chiefdom level. In some chiefdoms, the Community Crime Prevention Unit (CCPU) has been incorporated and integrated to contribute to the fight against child marriages.

2. Formulation of Chiefdom Child Protection By-laws

Customary Law is recognized by the Constitution of the Republic of Zambia, and one stands to be prosecuted if they act contrary to the traditional norms (Revised Constitution of Zambia, 2016). However, the traditional or customary Laws are verbal, not written or documented. With support from World Vision Zambia, Traditional leaders now write and document laws that govern their chiefdoms. Within the established rules, aspects of child protection and ending child marriages are included to ensure that all members of the communities are aware that the chiefdom upholds child protection practices and bans child marriages. To ensure inclusiveness in the formulation of the Chiefdom Child protection By-laws, the District Judicial team, the Victim Support Unit, the Social Welfare Department and the Ministry of Education, all based at the district level, provide the necessary support to the process. At this stage, child protection laws are aligned to the national child protection policies and regulations that have been adapted from international instruments such as the

Convention on the Rights of a Child, the African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of a Child and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on child protection¹⁰. By the end of 2021, out of the 35 Senior Traditional Leaders working with World Vision Zambia in 25 Area Programmes, 18 had put in place chiefdom-level child protection by-laws to reform traditional practises that lead to child marriages and other forms of abuse.

3. Community Empowerment and Income Generation Programs to Support Vulnerable Girls Rescued from Marriage and those at risk of Child Marriage

Of the 35 Senior traditional leaders working with World Vision Zambia in the campaign to end child marriages, four initiated programmes to support vulnerable households and children affected by poverty, lack of education opportunities, sexual violence and child marriages to promote the wellbeing of children.

For example, in the Eastern Province of Zambia, under the Madzimawe Foundation, founded by Senior Chief Madzimawe of the Ngoni speaking people and Chief Nduka of the Nsenga speaking people, the traditional leaders tackle issues to do with gender-based violence in the chiefdoms working through their Village, Zonal and Chiefdom (palace/central) Child Protection Committees. The foundations work with parents, girls and boys, to ensure that school-going children are given the financial and other necessary support to achieve their education. The traditional leaders also work with the DCPC to follow up and rescue girls who get into marriages for various reasons and support them back to school.

Other traditional leaders support communities with income-generating activities to provide opportunities for children, especially girls, in poor households to have money for school. For example, in addition to promoting child protection initiatives, Chief Kanyama of North-Western Province and his foundation invested in a fish farming project. The Kanyama Foundation has a fish hatchery that grows fingerlings and gives to vulnerable households with school-going girls and boys as fish seeds to go and grow in their fish ponds for productive purposes. As a result, the vulnerable families have constructed fish ponds where fingerlings are deposited for 6 to 7 months to grow—after that, harvested and sold to generate income for school-going children.

In Chibwika Chiefdom, in North-Western Zambia, in addition to putting up child protection By-Laws that ban child

⁷Flipcharts and floor mats were developed by World Vision Zambia to support awareness raising on the dangers of child marriages in communities

⁸Zonal Committees are comprised of members of 5 to 10 villages

⁹District Child Protection Committees are comprised of Heads of Departments from all Ministries at District level.

¹⁰Ministry of Community Development and Social Services

marriages, the traditional leader responded to one of the critical challenges faced by school-going children within his jurisdiction of lack of school boarding facility. With support from the community, the traditional leadership built a 56-capacity girls' dormitory and ablution block to reduce the challenge of the lack of school boarding facilities. The initiative benefited girls that walked distances of up to 50 to 100km to access Secondary Education in the chiefdom.

Before building new boarding facilities, children, especially girls, rented grass thatched houses in communities closer to school, where they were unprotected and unguided. As a result, they fell prey to men that exploited them for sexual favours in exchange for money and other material things, resulting in pregnancies and child marriages.

Outcomes of the Traditional Leaders' Interventions in Ending Child Marriages

- The Child Protection Committees at various levels of governance at the Chiefdom level have supported children affected by child marriage. Since the inception of the ending child marriage campaign on 21st March 2018, World Vision Zambia, with the support of the Child Protection Committees, recorded 1,335 cases of child marriages and retrieved 936 girls. Of the 936 girls retrieved from marriages, 440 were retrieved through the direct work and support of the traditional leaders. In addition, close to 700 rescued girls were supported to return to school using various sources of income, including family support and income-generating activities initiated by traditional leaders.
- Furthermore, in 2021, the World Vision Zambia endline evaluation report conducted in World Vision Zambia's operational areas found a significant reduction in the

number of adolescents (aged 12-18 years), indicating that they were married before the age of 18. In 2021, only 2.3% stated that they got married before attaining the age of 18, compared to 7.2 percent reported in 2017 prior interventions (World Vision Zambia, 2021). This is attributed to well-coordinated community sensitization activities on ending child marriages, supported by traditional leaders. The drop in cases of child marriages is also attributed to the enforcement of community By-Laws that ban child marriages. Of the 35 chiefdoms where World Vision Zambia operates, 18 chiefdoms have formulated child protection By-Laws. Furthermore, eliminating harmful traditional practices such as initiation ceremonies and previously accepted societal norms, despite being detrimental to girls' lives, has contributed to changing mindsets of allowing children to marry once they attain puberty.

Limitations and Challenges

Implementation of the ending child marriage campaign has faced hurdles:

- Given the cultural diversity in Zambia and the solid traditional beliefs among many tribes, some traditional leaders are still struggling to accept the notion that allowing girls to marry before they reach 18 years should not be acceptable, nor should it be the norm. As a result, in most of these chiefdoms, puberty continues to be a qualifier for marriage.
- Currently, World Vision Zambia operates in 35 chiefdoms out of the 275 in Zambia. This entails that 240 chiefdoms are outside World Vision Zambia's catchment area and have not received the same sensitizations and interventions on child marriages as those within the World Vision Zambia's operational areas. Therefore, while headways to ending child marriages are realized in chiefdoms where World Vision Zambia operates, there tends to be opposition from Chiefdoms without interventions, which slows progress to

realizing gains of the ending child marriage campaign. Furthermore, the rural nature of some chiefdoms makes it challenging to reach, resulting in a lack of information on the dangers of child marriages.

- The absence of statutory laws that ban child marriages in Zambia has made it difficult for traditional leaders to take a clear stand prohibiting child marriages in their chiefdoms. As a result, people challenge them to show evidence or pieces of legislation that stops anyone from marrying a girl who has attained puberty yet is below 18.
- Suppose a traditional leader with a passion for ending child marriage dies; those who succeed may not have the same enthusiasm as the predecessor and would not be equally vested to take up the mantle of protecting children from child marriages. In some cases, succession wrangles have left some chiefdoms divided without a definite traditional leader to superintend over the people's affairs, including enforcing by-laws that ban child marriages.

Opportunities

Chiefdom to chiefdom exchange visits are opportunities that traditional leaders can use to foster learning among chiefs and their people about how others are dealing with ending child marriages and reforming some harmful traditional practices such as initiation ceremonies.

Exchange visits would also enable other traditional leaders to learn about programs such as establishing foundations, fish farming, and community projects of building school boarding facilities and expanding classroom space for secondary education. This can be achieved with support from NGOs and other partners, including the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services.

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