



Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce in Zambia

This policy brief highlights findings from the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a qualitative study carried out by Child Frontiers between 2018 and 2020 with young married, cohabiting, and divorced adolescents and young people in three communities in the Kalulushi, Mazabuka and Katete districts of Zambia. Almost all of the young people were born and raised in contexts of poverty. Sister studies were undertaken by Young Lives in Ethiopia, Peru and India (the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) as part of a four-country programme of comparative research. YMAPS was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

The key findings for Zambia are:

- In a country where statutory law prohibits marriage under the age of 21, nearly all the young people in the study live in informal, cohabiting relationships, though most consider themselves to be husbands and wives, as do their families.
- For both girls and boys, pregnancy is the primary driver of school dropout, but not all girls who had given birth were studying when they became pregnant. Nevertheless, young people express a strong appreciation of the value of education.
- Unintended pregnancy is the main reason why children and young people marry or start living together.
- Although for some, romantic love is a motivator for marriage and cohabitation, for many girls and young women, relationships are established as a way to meet their basic needs and those of their children. Young men, on the other hand, are motivated in large part by sexual curiosity.
- The vast majority of young people have limited information on sex and pregnancy prevention and little access to contraception and reproductive health services.
- Traditional gender roles prevail in young marriages and relationships, with girls and young women performing the majority of household work and childcare, and boys and young men being seen as providers, even when they find it hard to earn any income.
- Marital conflict and violence are common among young married and cohabiting couples, sometimes leading to divorce or separation.
- The quality of young people's relationships with their families of origin appears to be an important predictor of both early marriage and individuals' capacity to manage marriage and parenthood, as well as separation and divorce.
- Despite the challenges of marriage and parenthood, single, married and divorced young parents say their children are their greatest source of happiness and the foundation of their hopes for the future.

Introduction

Preventing adolescent pregnancy and marriage is high on the political agenda in Zambia, where marriage under the age of 21 is illegal, but 15 per cent of young women aged 15 to 19 are married or cohabiting, and 29 per cent have given birth. Abundant evidence of adverse consequences has galvanised action at the national, district and local levels to try to reduce the numbers of girls who marry and give birth before they are 18.

However, little is known about the views and experiences of young married, cohabiting and divorced girls and young women, and even less about the boys and young men who are involved as boyfriends, husbands, ex-husbands, fathers and sons-in-law.

This study explored the reasons why children and young people marry, cohabit or have children, and examined how they navigate their new roles and relationships, including parenting, separation and divorce, their experiences of support and services, and their varied motivations and aspirations.

During the research in Zambia, individual interviews were conducted with 84 young people aged between 14 and 24. This included 48 girls and young women and 36 young men. In addition, focus group discussions and group and individual interviews were held with 130 service providers, community leaders, married, divorced and never-married adolescents, and male and female parents of married adolescents.

Key findings

Marriage under 21 is illegal in Zambia, and nearly all the young people in the study are not formally married, though most consider themselves to be husbands and wives, as do their families

“ He impregnated me and the whole family rose up and said that since my parents are both late [passed away] ... I should be taken to him. ”

(Divorced girl, Kalulushi, 17; began cohabiting at 16 after becoming pregnant)

“ When a girl is chased and then you take her in with you ... [her parents] have abandoned her with you: that's marriage. ”

(Focus group of boys, Kalulushi)

Marriage is a revered institution in Zambia. Adolescent marriages, when consecrated, take place in defiance of Zambian law, which forbids the marriage of any person below the age of 21. Marriages under these circumstances take place only under customary law and are not officially registered.

In the past few years, with greater attention to child marriage and increased pressure on local authorities to speak out against and outlaw the practice, there appears to be fewer customary marriages taking place between adolescents, and between adolescents and adults (for example, between a teenage girl and an adult man).

Despite this apparent decline, significant numbers of girls and boys continue to live together and establish families together at a young age. These young people consider themselves to be 'married', refer to each other as 'husband' and 'wife' and understand themselves to have the same obligations to one another and each other's families as if they were formally married. Families also accept this, sometimes reluctantly, with some older adults asserting that adolescent pregnancy is a result of a changing culture in which young people no longer respect and defer to their parents.

For both girls and boys, pregnancy is the primary driver of school dropout but not all girls who had given birth were studying when they became pregnant. Nevertheless, young people expressed a strong appreciation of the value of education

“ I got pregnant, that's how I stopped school ... I tried to go back – my parents said they didn't have money, so I thought of just getting married ... maybe [now] if I continue with school I could benefit in the future. ”

(Married young woman, Katete, 18; stopped school in Grade 5)

“ I stopped school in Grade 9 ... It so happened that I impregnated a girl when I was still at school so I was being pressured ... to [look after] the girl I impregnated so I had to leave school. ”

(Divorced young man, Mazabuka, 24; married at 17)

More than 80 per cent of the young people in the study had dropped out of primary or secondary school, especially girls, either before or after they became pregnant. If a girl became pregnant while a student, she was almost always required to leave. Despite the National Re-entry into School Policy, none of the girls in this study had re-enrolled after they had given birth. Those who drop out to give birth or care for a child are usually unable to return because their responsibilities require that they remain home to care for the child and the household; in addition, with a child to care for, young parents are usually unable to pay the fees needed to re-enrol, or afford the associated financial and opportunity costs. Some also fear being stigmatised by teachers and peers.

Among those boys who were enrolled when their girlfriends became pregnant, nearly all were told by their head teachers that they needed to leave school in order to earn money to support their pregnant girlfriend and meet their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. None of them returned to school while still married. A few of those who did not end up establishing a long-term relationship, or for whom marriage did not work out, did re-enrol.

The low completion rates do not reflect a lack of interest in schooling. On the contrary, nearly all young people expressed a deep desire to complete secondary school in the belief that education was the key to a better future.

Unintended pregnancy is the main reason why children and young people marry or start living together

“ I met my husband when I was 15 years old at the market and we became friends ... I became pregnant just five months ... after knowing him. I got married because life was not okay for me and I was suffering. I did not want to get married but circumstances pushed me to it. ”

(Married young woman, Kalulushi, 18; became pregnant at 15 and married at 16)

“ I met my wife in 2015 and started dating her. After some time, she became pregnant. I did not want to marry as I was just forced and the lady was brought to my house. My parents and cousin put pressure on me. ”

(Divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20)

In this study, the average age of first sexual encounter was between 12 and 17 for girls, and 15 and 16 for boys. About one-third of respondents (12 boys, 17 girls) were in school when the pregnancy occurred, 30 per cent of whom were enrolled at primary level.

Once pregnant, it was common for girls to move in with the boy or young man involved, even if the pregnancy was the result of a one-night stand and the two individuals were virtual strangers to each other. Only two of the 48 girls and young women had not been pregnant when they started living with their partners. Sometimes cohabitation was a choice they made. Other times, it was the result of family pressure. Young people in these circumstances often felt they had been 'forced' into marrying or cohabiting; this tension then affected the way they related to each other once living together.

Although for some, romantic love is a motivator for marriage, for most girls and young women a union is seen as a means of sustaining their financial and material needs. Young men, on the other hand, are sexually curious rather than seeking a long-term relationship

“ Sometimes the reason why we marry is because we don't want to play around because there are so many diseases around. ”

(Focus group, married boy, 17)

“ What was making me happy was that he was helping me and he was also helping my family. ”

(Married girl, Kalulushi, 17; became pregnant and married at 16)

Whereas boys' engagement in sexual activity is generally motivated by curiosity, peer pressure and desire, girls, especially those under the age of 15 or 16, are more likely to commence sexual relationships in an effort to secure material and financial support to meet their needs and those of their family. Sometimes they pursue these interactions of their own volition, and sometimes they are pressured or forced to do so by their parents or other caregivers.

Some young couples marry for love, but this was the least common reason given for marriage. A number of boys and young men, especially those whose parents had died or who had a history of difficult family relationships, spoke of the joy they felt in sharing their lives with a caring partner. But such expressions of spousal appreciation were rarely made by girls and young women. Instead, they tended to find happiness in marriage when it brought with it an improvement in material and financial circumstances.

A significant proportion of young people in this study grew up in single-parent households or with guardians who were not their biological parents, usually aunts or grandparents. These circumstances were typically the result of the break up, divorce or death of one or both parents.

The vast majority of the young people have limited information on sex and pregnancy prevention and little access to contraception and reproductive health services

““ At school ... to avoid early pregnancies they even tell us that we don't have to have sex before marriage, but then you will find that ... we want to try so that we taste how it feels like. ””

(Divorced young man, Mazabuka, 24; became a father at 20 with a 16-year-old girl)

““ No one told me anything about preventing a pregnancy and marriage ””

(Never-married girl, Katete, 17; became a mother at 16)

Given that practical information on contraception and adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services is difficult to obtain (and often stigmatised and stigmatising), many girls and boys have to contend with unintended pregnancy. Despite the reality, well known among parents and older adults in the community, that girls and boys engage in sexual activities often as early as the onset of puberty, health clinics and staff were said to be unfriendly to teenagers and to stigmatise those who wanted information on sexual health.

Most of the information children and young people have on pregnancy prevention was made available to them after they had become pregnant or their baby had been born. What young people do know they learn from school, grandparents, mothers (for boys), friends and community peer educators and is mostly incomplete, inaccurate and focused on abstinence and condom use (for boys).

Traditional gender roles prevail in young marriages and relationships, with girls and young women performing the majority of household work and childcare, and boys and young men being seen as the providers

““ I need to find food for my child to eat, I need to look for clothes for my child and at times even before I am given money by my parents, I have to do piece work. So, I have seen that being in a marriage where you are financially not doing fine is hard. ””

(Married boy, Katete, 22; became a father at 19 and married at 20)

““ If I was in school, I would not be going through all this. I don't even know where I am heading, and I can't ask for any form of help. ””

(Married girl, Mazabuka, 19; pregnant at 17 and married at 18)

In all three study communities, girls take on the vast amount of the work required for subsistence and family and household functioning. In Katete, they work in the fields, whereas in Mazabuka and Kalulushi they are most often engaged in petty trading. They cook, clean, fetch water, wash clothing, care for the children in the household and bathe their husbands. They are also expected to make themselves available for sex whenever their husband wants. In general, girls and young women in these contexts have very little decision-making power in their relationships and within their households, especially when living with their in-laws. Most young couples say they would prefer to live separately from their families but few have the means to do so.

Young men feel pressure to be the provider, even when, as is often the case, they cannot find any work, and thus have to rely on parents or other family members to support them to meet their basic needs. This dependence leaves many young men feeling as though they are not performing their role as provider. The majority of young husbands, including those who had made their own decision to marry or cohabit, feel that marriage had imposed upon them a series of responsibilities that they are unable to meet. Young wives agree with these assessments and most express disappointment and frustration at their husbands' or partners' inability to care for them and their children.

Marital conflict and violence are common among young married and cohabiting couples, sometimes leading to divorce or separation

““ The only reason my marriage ended is because I used to be beaten because he did not want me, the marriage was just forced ... He was just fine when we were dating but when we got married, we would be fine one day and be fighting the other day, plus he used to drink and smoke. ””

(Divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; became pregnant then married at 16)

““ The pressures of the girl after marriage, the pressures I was going through were too many. I failed to provide a lot of household needs because I was young ... I later divorced. ””

(Divorced young man, Katete, 22; married at 14 and divorced at 16, stopped school in Grade 9)

Young married women and men struggle to make a life for themselves in environments characterised by intense economic hardship, where the frustrations of young men at not being able to meet their expected social roles as providers augments their vulnerability to using alcohol and violence. The weight of these potent and unceasing pressures leaves the vast majority of respondents, both male and female, disappointed that married life is not as they had expected it to be. They also feel that they do not have the maturity or financial stability to manage their problems effectively.

Married and divorced girls and young women spoke about the alcohol abuse of their husbands and the violence that they inflicted upon them. The experiences of sexual and physical violence were among the most common reasons for divorce among young couples, sometimes initiated by the woman, and sometimes by supportive family members, often fathers or grandfathers, who sought to protect their daughter or grandchild. Most divorced children and young people reported that despite the stigma that they experienced as a result of their relationship dissolving, life has improved since their marriage ended. But there was little support available to them.

The quality of young people's relationships with their families of origin appears to be an important predictor of their capacity to manage the challenges that accompany marriage and parenthood

““ I get help from my mother... She would give me maybe 50 Kwacha or 100 Kwacha [US\$3 or US\$ 6] and I go get the things for the baby. ””

(Never-married young man, Kalulushi, 24; became a father at 16)

““ My aunt [helps us] when she has money and sometimes when she is not around, I am given money – [the child's grandfather] sends money for washing powder, lotion and the like. ””

(Divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; married at 16 and divorced at 17)

Those who have strong, supportive relationships with adult family members and are able to rely on them for advice, assistance with child care, and material and financial support, appear to feel less isolated and overwhelmed

when they confront marital problems, difficulties with in-laws and other challenges, such as the disappointment that came with being out of school. For those whose marriages are troubled and sometimes violent, parents, siblings, grandparents and others often provide support and do their best to monitor the well-being of their loved ones. Single mothers appear to have more autonomy than their married and divorced peers, but only when they have the support of their families.

In the vast majority of cases, however, families were already struggling to meet their basic needs and the requirement to support married, cohabiting or divorced young people and their children places additional economic pressures on the entire household. This situation leaves all involved in even greater poverty and with fewer opportunities to forge improved lives.

Despite the challenges of parenthood, the greatest source of happiness for both parents is their children, on whom they also pin their hopes for the future

““ I would like to get a good job to be able to take care of my child and his educational needs, and to also get my own place. ””

(Married young man, Mazabuka, 21; married at 19, became a father at 17)

““ I just want to raise my child even though I am struggling. I want my child to learn even more than I have. I will try all I can to ensure that my child learns. If there is someone who can give me capital so that I can start trading then my child would not suffer, he will go to school. ””

(Divorced girl, Kalulushi, 21; married at 17)

Parenthood enhances the self-respect and social standing of married and cohabiting young women and men. The social value associated with parenthood is inseparable from the personal experiences of being a mother and father in the three communities, where the vast majority describe the joy they find in being with their children and their commitment to building a better future for them and ensuring that they go to school. For young men, these joys relate to the existence of their child as a demonstration of their virility and the continuation of their family line.

Like young husbands and fathers, many girls and young women say that having a child to cherish is their main – and often only – joy in marriage. Many young parents focus their hopes on improving their children's future and ensuring that they are able to attend and complete school.

Policy recommendations

1. Improve policies promoting access to quality and affordable education for adolescent girls and boys living in poverty, and provide married and cohabiting children and young people with incentives for enrolling and staying in school.
2. Strengthen and broaden existing initiatives by government and partners to provide safe, appropriate, targeted economic support and opportunities for adolescent girls and young women, boys and young men, and their families.
3. Improve and expand sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, including access to SRH information and contraception and abortion services for young women and men, whether married or not, and ensure that they feel welcome and respected in these contexts.
4. Engage men and boys to understand how social norms on masculinity, sexuality and power are learned, and how they can be challenged and transformed in order to strengthen gender equality, including through reducing violence against women and girls. Involve young women in these discussions as well.
5. Provide and strengthen programmes and services that prevent and respond to violence against girls and young women, including those that enable girls to safely report experiences of violence, and those that work with boys and young men.
6. Improve the evidence base on young people who marry, cohabit or become parents before the age of 18. Better understanding of the circumstances and experiences of married and cohabiting children and young people is a crucial first step in the design of targeted and appropriate policies and services to meet their needs.

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