



Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce in Zambia

Oliver Mweemba and Gillian Mann

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About YMAPS



This research report was authored by Child Frontiers and produced by Young Lives as part of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood.

YMAPS is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children.

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Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID),
University of Oxford, Queen Elizabeth House, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk • Twitter: [@yloxford](https://twitter.com/yloxford) and [@yMAPStudy](https://twitter.com/yMAPStudy)

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The authors

Oliver Mweemba is trained in applied social science in health, with an interest in masculinity, sexuality and HIV prevention. He is a Lecturer/Researcher in the Department of Health Promotion and Education, School of Public Health at the University of Zambia. Oliver is the co-Principal Investigator for the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study in Zambia (YMAPS), focusing on experiences of children who marry and become parents, and the predictors of and motivations for child marriage and parenthood. He was previously a co-Investigator in a US National Institutes of Health-funded project examining a dyad approach to combination HIV prevention in pregnancy for Zambia and Malawi, and a co-Principal Investigator in an H3 Africa multi-centre and collaborative study with the University of Oxford, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and University of Cape Town. The study, funded by Wellcome Trust, aimed at developing a robust and supportive ethical and governance framework for genomic research in Africa.

Gillian Mann is a social anthropologist with a background in child development, learning and cognition. She is the co-Principal Investigator for the YMAPS study, and is also Head of Research and Evaluation for Child Frontiers and a Research Associate for Young Lives. Her work is focused on bridging the divide between academic and policy- and intervention-oriented research on issues related to children's well-being and protection. A major emphasis has been on understanding how boys and girls make a meaningful life for themselves in adverse circumstances, including in contexts of poverty, migration, violence, displacement, family separation and ill health. Gillian has written and published for a variety of audiences, including academics, policymakers and practitioners, from peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, to training and programme manuals.

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Research highlights

This research was carried out with unmarried young parents, and married and divorced girls, boys, young women and young men in three communities in Kalulushi, Mazabuka and Katete districts of Zambia. In these settings:

Pregnancy, marriage and parenthood are inseparable in nearly all instances. On average, in the research sample, the age of first sexual encounter was between 12-17 for girls and 15-16 for boys. Although romantic love and affection led some boys and girls and young people to engage in sexual activity at a young age, this reason was less common than others. Whereas boys' engagement in sexual activity was generally motivated by curiosity, peer pressure and desire, girls, especially those under the age of 15 or 16, were 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 pursued these interactions of their own volition, and sometimes they were pressured or forced to do so by their parents. Given that practical information on contraception and adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services are difficult to obtain (and often stigmatised and stigmatising), unintended pregnancy is a reality that many girls have to contend with in these settings. Faced with this situation, many moved in with the boy or young man who made them pregnant, even if this person was a virtual stranger. After a short time, cohabiting relationships of this type are regularly deemed a 'marriage' by the young couple, and almost always by their parents, family members and the community at large.

Marriage is appreciated for different reasons by girls and young women and boys and young men. It was rare for young couples to describe marriage in positive terms, particularly among girls and young women. Although some 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, such expressions of spousal appreciation were rarely made by girls and young women. Instead, young wives tended to find happiness in marriage when it brought with it an improvement in material and financial circumstances. On the whole, the majority of young husbands felt that marriage had imposed upon them a series of responsibilities that they were unable to meet; young wives agreed with these assessments and most expressed disappointment and frustration at their husbands' inability to care for them and their child(ren).

Marital conflict and divorce are extremely common among young people. Many of the problems young couples face in marriage are the same as those experienced by people who marry at older ages. The difference is that these young people feel that they do not have the maturity or experience to manage their problems effectively, and thus have to rely on their parents or other family members to support them to meet their basic needs. This dependence leaves young men, in particular, feeling as though they are not capably performing their role as provider. Some feel trapped because they do not see how their situation is going to change, in either the short or the long term. It is also significant that many young married and divorced interviewees said that they did not want to marry in the first place, but were forced to by their parents or in-laws or by broader socio-economic circumstances, including unintended pregnancy. Most divorcees reported that despite the stigma that they experienced as a divorced young person, life had improved since the dissolution of their marriage.

Despite the challenges of parenthood, the greatest source of happiness in the lives of never-married parents, and married and divorced children and young people – both male and female – is their children. Parenthood is a means of fulfilling one's expected social roles and in this research, it enhanced the self-respect and social standing of young married individuals. The vast majority described the joy they found in being with their young child(ren) and a commitment to building a better future for them.

Girls and young women have very little decision-making power, although single mothers appear to have more autonomy than their married and divorced peers. Among married couples who live with the husband's family, mothers-in-law typically control the family budget and are responsible for the allocation of domestic tasks. Divorced girls and young women tend not to own any property and it is rare for them to salvage any belongings from their marriage, aside from the occasional cooking pot. This leaves them entirely dependent on families for their well-being. Single, never-married mothers, on the other hand, tend to live with supportive parents who provide assistance with child care and basic needs while also supporting their daughter to grow into her role as a mother.

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. Those who had strong, supportive relationships with adult family members and were able to rely on them for advice, assistance with child care, and material and financial support, appeared to feel less isolated and overwhelmed when they confronted marital problems, difficulties with in-laws and other difficulties, such as the disappointment that came with being out of school.

Violence is a common feature of marital life. The married girls and young women most at risk were those who lived with their husbands, independent of extended family. The experiences of sexual and physical violence were among the most common reasons for divorce among young couples, sometimes initiated by the wife, and sometimes by supportive family members, often fathers or grandfathers, who sought to protect their daughter or grandchild. Although older women reported violence to be a common aspect of married life among women of all ages, it was not possible in this study to determine whether married girls and young women are more vulnerable to violence than those who marry at older ages.

Young parents and married and divorced children and young people share similar hopes and plans for the future. By far the most commonly articulated aspiration was the desire to re-enrol in school and complete secondary education. Children and young people also dreamed of improving their general economic well-being and that of their families. Some young parents focused their hopes on improving their children's future.

Part 1: Introduction, background and methods

1.1. *Setting the scene*

Preventing adolescent pregnancy and marriage is high on the political agenda in Zambia, where 17 per cent of young women age 15-19 are married and 28.5 per cent have given birth (Government of Zambia, CSO, MOH, and ICF International 2014). Abundant evidence of adverse consequences has galvanised a series of actors at the national, district and local levels to try to reduce the numbers of girls who marry and give birth before the age of 18. Prevention efforts have been multipronged; interventions aimed at policy and legislative change, and revised service provision in education, health, and social and child protection have been underway for at least the last five years.¹ Despite these sizeable efforts, large numbers of girls continue to get pregnant, give birth, get married, and get separated and divorced. In Zambia, and globally, little is known about the views and experiences of those in these circumstances, and even less about the boys and young men who are involved as boyfriends, husbands, ex-husbands, fathers and sons-in-law.

Efforts are underway in Zambia to better understand these phenomena, their drivers and impacts. In the last decade, several studies have explored these issues, principally the factors that lead to adolescent marriage and pregnancy, including: poverty and material deprivation; inaccessible, unaffordable and poor-quality schooling; limited opportunities for labour force participation and wage employment; relationships with parents and guardians that involve violence, abuse, maltreatment and discrimination; absence of recreational activities; peer pressure; inaccessibility of relevant and appropriate information and services on family planning and safe sex; and a deficiency of advice and counselling from knowledgeable and supportive adults.

Although the drivers of marriage and pregnancy are increasingly well understood, there is a dearth of evidence on how the children who marry, cohabit or have children navigate their new roles and relationships, including experiences of parenting, separation and divorce, and the types of support and services that are available to them. Moreover, little is known about how the choices, opportunities, experiences and relationships of those children who marry, cohabit or have children are shaped by age, gender and the changing social, cultural and structural contexts in which they and their families are living.

The research findings presented in this report are designed to address this important knowledge gap. The report documents the lives of young people who became parents and/or were married in their teens. It explores their life histories in the context of the household and community environments in which they live, including their experience of schooling, work and domestic life. It presents this information in order to deepen our understanding of the experiences of girls and boys who marry and become parents, the predictors of and motivations for adolescent marriage and parenthood, and the wider implications for sexual and reproductive health and for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender inequality in Zambia. As part of a larger comparative study on these topics in three other countries – Ethiopia, India, and Peru – the intention is to illuminate the specific experiences and impacts in these very different settings so that patterns of similarity and difference can be identified and addressed at the national and

¹ The national priority given to these efforts was formally demonstrated in April 2013 when the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, supported by the former First Lady, started a nationwide campaign to end child marriage.

global levels. By engaging with a range of national and international policy actors throughout the research process, from inception through to dissemination, the study aims to contribute high-quality, up-to-date, contextual evidence to inform policies and programmes to reduce child marriage and parenthood, but also to support those young people who are married and are parents, in Zambia and beyond.

1.2. Terms and concepts

Definitions of who is a 'child', an 'adolescent' and an 'adult' vary in different contexts at different times. The majority of literature on 'child marriage' refers to the experiences of people under the age of 18, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In the communities where this research took place, childhood is a dynamic and shifting category that is shaped by social, cultural and economic context. It is defined not by chronological age but by the achievement of a constellation of individual developmental and context-specific milestones. Maturity is measured by pubertal changes, performance of initiation rites, completion or withdrawal from school, engagement in sexual relations, participation in full time labour and/or wage employment, and the growing ability to care for oneself and others, among other things. There is thus no abrupt age demarcation of childhood into adulthood; a 'child' can be anyone from a newborn baby to an unmarried male or female in their twenties who resides with parents or extended family members. Likewise, depending on circumstance, a girl may begin her transition to adulthood as young as age 12, and a boy at 14.

The terms 'child', 'girl', 'boy' and 'child marriage' are problematic in this context. Although it is not always a perfect fit, because this research in Zambia is a part of a larger, comparative study across four countries, the terms 'girls' and 'boys' are used to refer to females and males under the age of 18. 'Adolescents' is an overlapping category used to refer to those between 12-19 years old. 'Young women' and 'young men' are used for those between 18-25 years old. When either or both a girl and a boy marry before the age of 18, the term 'child marriage' is used in this report, mostly to ensure that findings from Zambia about married females and males in this age group are considered alongside those in other settings where 'child marriage' is a widely understood term. This report also occasionally refers to marriage and pregnancy among 'adolescents' and 'teens'.

Just as understandings of who is a 'child' and an 'adult' are contextually determined, so too is the term 'marriage'. In the three districts where this study took place, customary marriages between children and young people are infrequent and, according to local authorities, are declining, apparently in large part because Chiefs are banning the practice among those under the age of 18. In these settings, cohabitation has become increasingly common, wherein girlfriends and boyfriends move in together and establish a household, sometimes independently and sometimes among their extended family. In these instances, 'marriage' is used interchangeably with 'cohabitation'. A couple can thus be married and call each other 'husband' and 'wife', even if no ceremony or agreement has taken place between their families. When and if these relationships end, the parties to the 'divorce' are 'ex-husbands' and 'ex-wives'. So common are these appellations that it was often necessary to ask female interviewees whether they and their husbands had ever married. In recognition of the fact that cohabitation and marriage are generally understood within the same framework of relationships in the research communities, the two terms are used interchangeably throughout this report. However, where a formal marriage has taken place, this is noted.²

2 See Section 2.1 for a detailed discussion.

A number of other key terms are used throughout this report:

‘Never married’: This is used to refer to young parents who are not married and have not previously been married or in a cohabiting relationship. Occasionally, the term ‘single parent’ is also used for this same category of girls, boys, young women and young men.

‘Separated’/‘divorced’: A separation is when two people who have been living together as a couple decide to live apart, but a decision to permanently end the relationship has not been made. A divorce is the termination of a marriage. These terms are sometimes written together, as ‘separated/divorced’, because informants rarely made a distinction between the temporary and permanent end of a marriage. This report uses these terms as they were employed in the research communities, where, like marriage, divorce was seldom formalised.

1.3. Structure of the report

This report is divided into two substantive parts. Part 1 describes the background to the research, the questions under investigation, and the methodology and methods employed. It also describes the sites where data were collected, the sample of people who participated, the ethical framework for the study and its challenges and limitations. Part 2 explores the main study findings, as they relate to who marries and why; the experience of married life and life as a young parent; separation and divorce; and future plans and aspirations. The report concludes with implications of the findings and provides a series of recommendations for change.

1.4. Research questions

The study was designed to investigate three overarching research questions:

1. Who marries, cohabitates or has children in childhood, why, and with what consequences for their well-being, identity and relationships?
2. How do children who marry, cohabit or have children navigate their new roles and relationships, including experiences of parenting, separation and divorce, and what support and services do they access?
3. How are the choices, opportunities, experiences and relationships of those children who marry, cohabit or have children shaped by age, gender, and the changing social, cultural and structural contexts in which they and their families are living?

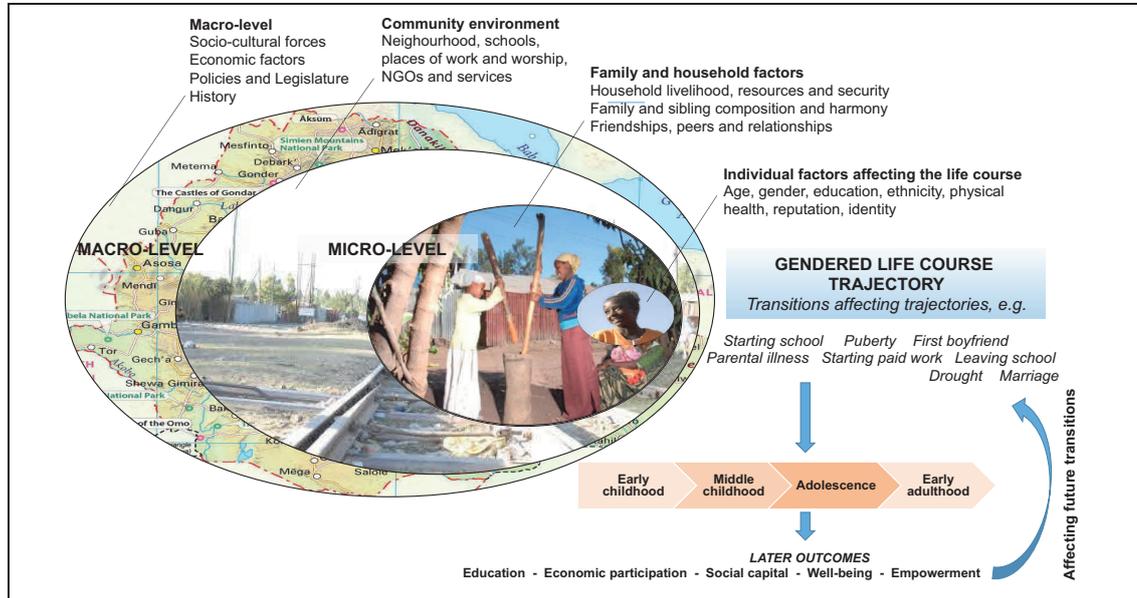
1.5. Methodology

Since the bulk of information on adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Zambia is quantitative in nature, the intention of this research was not to acquire statistically significant data. Instead, it was designed to generate new primary data using qualitative research methods that were developed for use in all four country case studies and adapted for use in Zambia. Its purpose was to better understand the perspectives of a variety of actors in a number of different settings and to use what was learnt to produce findings that are generalisable in some way, or which have resonance beyond the individual settings in which the primary data were collected.

In Zambia, as in the other three countries, the study employed a socio-ecological, life-course perspective, which accounts for the changing roles and responsibilities of girls and boys as they grow up and the dynamic structural, individual and relational contexts in which they live (see Figure 1). Data collection emphasised emic perspectives and a relational approach to understanding gender and family dynamics, cultural logics, power structures and the norms and practices that shape children’s and young people’s experiences, their relationships and roles in their families and in decision-making, and the social contexts of marriage, motherhood and

fatherhood, including young people's access to and experience of services. It was designed to generate data that resonate with young people, their families and communities and to maximise the policy relevance of the study's findings. A variety of policymakers and service providers were engaged at different stages of the research in order to ensure their familiarity with the study and the data obtained.

Figure 1: *Conceptual and theoretical framework*



Note: This framework was developed by Young Lives for many facets of their research on gender and adolescence. See Young Lives 2015.

1.6. Methods

Data collection involved a combination of desk-based, individual and group-based interview methods.³ Creative tools such as life history timelines and community mapping exercises were used to elicit discussion on particular topics (for example, events leading up to marriage and young couples' access to and experience of support and services). Selection of participants was designed to cluster interviews around 'core' children and young people, for example, by involving their spouses or parents, to enhance understanding of family and generational dynamics, power and change. By having a cumulative view of data from different contexts and different actors, the aim was to acquire as valid, reliable and objective information as possible.

The methods used included:

Review of relevant documentary sources: NGO and Government assessments, reports, ethnographic and other academic research, project needs assessments and evaluations, and any other relevant archival material were reviewed throughout the study and in the data analysis stage.

Semi-structured interviews: Individual interviews were conducted in person at the national, district and community levels, as well as by phone/Skype (where necessary and appropriate). Where appropriate, particularly among young respondents, drawings and other visual methods were used to encourage discussion and openness.

³ The data collection tools used in Zambia were adapted from the shared tools developed for all four YMAPS countries. These were developed from existing Young Lives interview guides. See Crivello et al. 2017.

Focus group discussions (FGDs): Discussions were held with members of the local community, including mothers and fathers of married children, service providers and community members. These sessions explored participants' specific experiences and opinions in an open, flexible and engaging manner. Participatory techniques were used, including biographic drawings, life story timelines, and community mapping. Each FGD involved 8-10 people over a period of approximately 2 hours.

This mixed methods approach was designed to help facilitate the full participation of different respondent groups, ensuring that people of different age groups, education and literacy levels, and those with disabilities were provided with the opportunity to fully contribute to and participate in the research.

All research tools were reviewed and approved in English, Nyanja, Tonga and Bemba by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee at the University of Zambia⁴ and were adapted by the research team both before and after piloting.

1.7. Research locations

Primary research was undertaken in three contrasting communities and individual participants were recruited from across these sites (a detailed listing of respondent groups and sample sizes is included in Table 1).

1. Rural: Katete (Eastern Province)
2. Urban: Kalulushi (Copperbelt Province)
3. Peri-urban: Mazabuka (Southern Province)

The sites were selected in consultation with stakeholders from Government, UN agencies and civil society organisations implementing programmes to tackle child marriage and teenage pregnancy. These included an inter-ministerial working group led by the Ministry of Gender, a multi and bilateral group led by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and a working group composed of civil society organisations, led by Plan International. The purpose of engaging stakeholders was to promote their participation in the research process and to ensure that the study met existing needs for data and evidence. In addition to the need to select one urban, one peri-urban and one rural community each, the following criteria were considered and a balance struck in the selection of research sites: prevalence of child marriage; poverty rates; age of sexual debut; fertility rates; age at first child bearing; secondary school enrolment rates; teen pregnancy rates; HIV prevalence rates; migration rates; divorce rates; level of involvement/advocacy of Chief; access to services/amenities; duration of child marriage within the community (i.e. longstanding versus relatively recent).

Data from the Central Statistical Office (CSO) indicated that each of these districts has markedly high rates of teenage pregnancy and child marriage.⁵ Additional reasons included:

- **Katete** was chosen to be the rural site because Child Frontiers had conducted qualitative research on the drivers of child marriage there (in 2015). Moreover, at the time of planning this study (2018), UNFPA and UNICEF had begun a multi-year engagement with Katete District officials to develop and implement a multi-sectoral response to reducing child marriage and delaying pregnancy among adolescents. Officials expressed a strong desire to obtain up-to-date information and insights into the experiences of young married and single

4 UNZABREC Reference Number: 008-05-18, approved June 2018; one-year extension for permit granted 14 June 2019.

5 Some of these data are public (for example, see Government of Zambia, Central Statistical Office 2014); others were provided to us, but are not yet public so cannot be quoted.

parents, since the majority of their information related to girls at risk of marriage, not those already in unions.

- **Kalulushi**, an urban area near to Kitwe in Northern Province, was selected because rates of child marriage and teenage pregnancy were higher than might be expected, given the assumption that these issues are more pervasive in rural than urban areas. A mining town on the edge of the Copperbelt, Kalulushi has high levels of unemployment due to the large-scale closures of mines in the area.
- **Mazabuka** was selected because, despite being relatively economically stable, rates of marriage and pregnancy are high. Mazabuka is home to Zambia's biggest sugar plantation and factory (Zambia Sugar). It is also home to large-scale commercial crop and livestock farming, making the district one of the most economically secure in Zambia.

In consultation with the Social Welfare Office in each of the districts, three specific communities were selected where the data were to be collected. In Katete, the community chosen was one where, despite significant sensitisation on the dangers of child marriage, the practice was nonetheless widely practiced. This community lies near the border with Mozambique and more than 50km from Katete town, the district capital. It has a population of about 10,000 people living in 54 villages, mostly from the Chewa ethnic group. It has four primary schools and three health clinics. Small-scale farming is the main economic activity.

In Mazabuka, three densely-populated communities that lie adjacent to each other were selected. All are within the urban centre of Mazabuka; one includes a squatter compound where migrant workers reside. Together, the population of these communities is about 31,000 people; they share two primary schools and one health clinic. Pre-study meetings were held with residential community leaders to brief them on the research and to discuss the feasibility of accessing the targeted groups of respondents.

In Kalulushi, the District Social Welfare office supported the selection of two adjacent communities about 30km from the district capital of Kitwe and identified a focal person at the sub-council level to help the team to identify appropriate sites and potential respondents. The population of this community is 14,378 people. It has one clinic, one primary school and one community school.⁶

1.8. Sample

Purposive sampling techniques were employed to identify specific groups of respondents in each of the three selected districts. Identification and recruitment were supported by community health volunteers, councillors for the areas, chairpersons for the village/community, and teachers from community schools, who contacted young people whom they knew to fit the respondent criteria and networks who could reach out on their behalf. This means of sampling can be very useful for situations where a specific number of respondents needs to be reached quickly and where sampling for proportionality is not a significant concern. Using a purposive sample enabled the selection of respondents where there was a strong likelihood of learning about the specific issues under investigation.

6 A community school one that is initiated by the community and in which teachers are volunteers who may not have formal training.

Table 1: Respondent groups and sample size

	Category of respondent	Sample size per site		Total no. of respondents in all three sites
		FGDs (~10 ppl/FGD)	Individual interviews	
1	Married/cohabitating girls and young women (24 years and under, with as many as possible currently under the age of 18 or who married before age 18)	1	8	10 in FGD + 24 individual interviews
2	Married/cohabitating boys and young men (24 years and under, with as many as possible currently under the age of 18 or who married before age 18) [3-4 boy fathers to be included in this group]	1	4	10 in FGD + 12 individual interviews
3	Spouses/partners of respondent married girls/women/boys/men		4	12 individual interviews
4	Never-married mothers (24 years and under, with as many as possible currently under the age of 18 or who had given birth before age 18)		3	9 individual interviews
5	Never married fathers (24 years and under, with as many as possible currently under the age of 18 or who became fathers before age 18)		3	9 individual interviews
6	Divorced/separated girls/young women (<24 years)		3	9 individual interviews
7	Divorced/separated boys/young men (<24 years)		3	9 individual interviews
8	Adult mothers of married young people/mothers-in-law/grandmothers	1		20 in FGDs
9	Adult fathers of married young people/fathers-in-law/grandfathers	1		20 in FGDs
10	Service providers (e.g. health worker; secondary school teacher, etc.) and other key stakeholders as relevant at district/village level (e.g. village Head/Chief; initiators (males and female); traditional counsellors; religious leaders (male and female, adults and children)		2	8 individual interviews (2 extra in Mazabuka)
	Total	4 FGDs in each site	28 individual interviews with young people and 2 service providers	90 interviews + 6 FGDs

1.9. Ethics and consent

This study was designed to comply with internationally recognised research standards and an ethical framework was drawn from previous guidelines developed by Child Frontiers and Young Lives.⁷ The approach was guided by the view that ethics are an ongoing process in research, an integral part of the methodology, and a potentially positive source for learning and enhancing data quality. The approach to ethics was refined through fieldworker training, piloting, ongoing reflection, engagement with recent literature, team discussions and data collection in the study sites. Potential risks to study participants were acknowledged and mitigation strategies identified in advance of data collection. Field teams agreed to a set of guidelines and principles and were encouraged to document and discuss any dilemmas in the spirit of transparency and shared learning. All parties signed a Researcher Code of Conduct and a child protection policy prior to their involvement in the research. Informed consent was sought throughout the research process, both before and during interviews and FGDs. Data protection and confidentiality were carefully considered and attended to through data management, storage and analysis protocols throughout the study.

7 This approach is informed and substantiated by the work of Alderson and Morrow 2004; Emanuel, Wendler and Grady 2000; Hart 2012; Morrow 2013.

1.10. Limitations and challenges

This study had several limitations. The majority of these related to the recruitment of young respondents at the community level. Over the last few years, large-scale media campaigns and other sensitisation activities about the law prohibiting marriage for anyone under the age of 18 have taken place in many parts of the country. In several areas, Chiefs and community leaders have banned the practice and have actively broken up child marriages (informally called 'rescues') (Zambia Daily Mail 2017). It is widely understood that marrying someone under the age of 18 is a chargeable offence and as a result many young people hide the fact that they are married, or do not formally marry, in fear that exposure will result in the young man going to prison. These tactics are further encouraged by the fact that under Zambian law, sex with anyone under the age of 16 is considered 'defilement' and is punishable with imprisonment; this law appears to be well-known, especially by young men, in the three communities where this research took place. Within this context, young married and divorced men and women in the research sites were sometimes difficult to identify and, once identified, were often reluctant to share their views and experiences. Some thought the research team was collaborating with government authorities and did not want to participate. Given this climate of fear and judgement surrounding child marriage and sex among adolescents, it is not surprising that those who did elect to participate were those who trusted the community volunteers who assisted in the recruitment of respondents. Because of this reliance on facilitators at the community level, it is possible that the research did not capture the breadth of experience of all divorced, married and unmarried young people. Those who agreed to participate were those whose marriages were not secret, or at least not entirely unknown to those outside their families.

A key objective of this study was to understand the perspectives of both partners in a marriage and interviews were held in all sites with young couples (each was interviewed independently). It was not possible in all cases to interview both partners, however, if one person was unable to participate at the last moment, usually because of logistical issues or domestic tasks. In these cases, efforts were made to recruit additional couples to interview.

A series of ethical challenges were confronted throughout this research. Foremost among these was the reality that nearly all young people interviewed were extremely poor and lived in very difficult conditions, often in tense relationships with partners, in-laws, parents and others. A number of young women reported having experienced violence at the hands of their husbands and other family members. Some of the divorced girls and young women who were interviewed had fled abusive relationships. Others were living with their husbands and children at the time of the interview. In these cases, individuals were advised to seek the services of the Victim Support Unit, a department under the Zambia Police that handles cases of domestic violence. None had sought this assistance previously, in some cases because they were unaware of these services and in others because they feared that the involvement of formal authorities would further complicate the challenges they were experiencing.

The material and financial challenges that confronted interviewees were so substantial that more than half of young interviewees, especially girls and young women, requested support from researchers to meet their child's basic needs for food and clothing. They also asked for assistance to meet other financial challenges, especially support to enable them to re-enrol in school. In such cases, we encouraged them to visit the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO) to see how they could access assistance, programmes and services. Those young women who reported having been abandoned by their partners were also advised to seek help from these sources. We also informed the DSWO and office of the District Commissioner that these issues had emerged and requested that they follow up with the Chiefs in the communities visited. These issues will also be raised when the research is disseminated among stakeholders at the district and national level.

Part 2: Key findings and discussion

2.1. Who gets pregnant, and/or married or cohabitates, and why?

Marriage is a revered institution in Zambia. Typically, marriages are established through customary and statutory law.⁸ It is not uncommon for a person to have both a traditional and a religious or civil marriage ceremony, or a combination of the two. Adolescent marriages, when consecrated, take place in defiance of Zambian law, which forbids the marriage of any person below the age of 21 years. 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 in some cases outlaw, the practice, there appear to be fewer customary marriages taking place between adolescents, and between adolescents and adults (for example, between a teenaged girl and a man). Despite this apparent decline, there remain significant numbers of girls and boys who live together and establish families together. 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. Most often, their families and others in the community also see these young couples as 'married', and treat them as such. This is the case for the vast majority of those who participated in this research.

This recognition of a cohabiting relationship as being akin to a formal marriage appears to be a new phenomenon in Zambia. For many, especially those in the older generations, a marriage cannot be considered a 'real' marriage unless a series of 'correct' procedures have taken place. The offering and acceptance of tokens of commitment, negotiations between families and close friends, and shared ceremonial feasts are important markers of a formal relationship that involves not only the individuals getting married, but also their families and communities (Chondoka 1998). Although a 'proper' marriage, which follows all of the necessary steps, was considered desirable by most of the young people, parents and other adults who participated in this research, this model was rarely implemented in practice among adolescents in the study communities. Unlike earlier research in other districts, which found that marriages that were not consecrated in the traditional manner were not respected or seen as legitimate in the eyes of older adults (Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015), this study found that young people who were living together and who called themselves 'married' were largely understood to be so, even if frowned upon by the community. This reluctant acceptance reflects the view, apparently increasingly popular, that marriage is what happens when a man and woman live together and have sex. As one young man explained: "When a girl is chased and then you take her in with you ... [her parents] have abandoned her with you: that's marriage" (KAL FGD Boys 2). For this reason, this report uses the term 'married' and 'cohabitating' interchangeably. However, on the rare occasion when respondents had been formally married or were in negotiations for a 'proper' marriage, this distinction is noted.

⁸ Zambia practices a dual legal system, comprised of both customary and statutory law. Marriages under customary law require that those marrying have reached puberty; parental consent to marry has been granted; bridewealth (lobola) has been negotiated and exchanged; and that a marriage ritual is performed. In contrast, marriages under statutory law are regulated by the Marriage Act (Government of the Republic of Zambia (2014), which stipulates that those marrying need to be at least 21 years of age; those below this age require parental consent. See Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015; Population Council, UNFPA, and Government of the Republic of Zambia 2017.

2.1.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 2 presents a summary of the socio-demographic characteristics of the boys and girls and young women and men interviewed. In total, 84 married/cohabitating, divorced and never married/cohabitated parents were interviewed across the three sites, 48 females and 36 males. The age range at the time of fieldwork in June-July 2018 was between 14-24 years. Approximately three-quarters of the girls and one-quarter of the boys interviewed were between 14-19 years, whereas one-quarter of those 20-24 years were female and three-quarters were male. A little less than half (14 boys, 26 girls) were married/cohabitating, 18 (9 boys, 9 girls) were not married parents, and 18 (9 boys, 9 girls) were separated or divorced. About one-third (8 boys, 19 girls) reported to have participated in an initiation ceremony of some sort to prepare them for marriage and adult life. These numbers reflect the predominance of the practice in Katete (Read 1956; Gausset 2001), and among girls in Kalulushi. Only one of 28 individuals (girls and boys) in Mazabuka had been initiated, a figure that is likely to reflect the fact that there are no formal initiation rites at puberty among the Tonga of Southern Province (Kapungwe 2003), who were widely represented among respondents in this site. In Kalulushi, only one of 12 boys interviewed had undergone initiation, whereas nearly all girls had: female initiation at puberty is a common practice among the Bemba (Richards 1982 [1956]; Gausset 2001), a group to which most respondents in this site belonged.

In terms of schooling, approximately one-fifth of respondents reported to have completed secondary school, one never enrolled, and the rest (69) had dropped out of school at various times: 38 (11 boys, 27 girls) left at primary level, 24 (12 boys, 12 girls) at junior secondary (Grades 8-9), and 7 (3 boys, 4 girls) at senior secondary level (Grades 10-12). At the time of fieldwork, about 10 per cent of those who had earlier dropped out had re-enrolled.

Regarding the timing of pregnancy and marriage, about one in five of the married and divorced girls interviewed were pregnant or had married under the age of 15 (9/48 cases) and three quarters had been between 16-19 years old (35/48 cases). A few could not remember how old they were when they married. The sample of boys tended to be older: approximately two-thirds were between 16-19 years old when they married, usually after their girlfriend, or a girl or young woman whom they had had sex with, became pregnant. All but two of the married girls in the study had been pregnant at the time of marriage. About one-third of the sample (12 boys, 17 girls) were in school when the pregnancy happened, 30 per cent of whom were in primary school.

These demographics, although broadly typical of the communities where data were collected, reflect the sample for this study and do not necessarily reflect broader prevalence at the community level, for which data were unavailable.

Table 2: Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the young women and men interviewed

Variables	Values	Mazabuka		Katete		Kalulushi		Total
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Age	10-19 years	9	3	16	7	12	0	47
	20-24 years	7	9	0	5	4	12	37
Respondent category	Married	8	4	8	4	8	4	36
	Not married	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
	Divorced	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
	Couples	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
Went through initiation ceremony	Yes	1	0	11	7	7	1	27
	No	15	12	5	5	9	11	57
Grade dropped from school	Never enrolled	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	1-7	7	1	13	7	7	3	38
	8-9	5	4	1	3	6	5	24
	10-12	2	2	1	0	1	1	7
	Completed school	2	5	0	2	2	3	14
Re-enrolled in school	Yes	0	3	0	2	3	0	8
	No	16	9	16	10	13	12	61
Age got pregnant/made a girl pregnant/got married	15 and below	1	3	5	8	3	4	24
	16-19	14	13	10	3	13	7	56
	Can't remember	1	0	1	1	0	1	4
Pregnant/got a girl pregnant/married while in school	Yes	6	6	4	4	7	2	29
	No	10	6	12	8	9	10	55
Grade got pregnant/got a girl pregnant/got married	1-7	1	0	3	2	1	1	8
	8-9	4	4	1	2	3	0	14
	10-12	1	2	0	0	3	1	7
	Out of school	10	6	12	8	9	10	55

2.1.2. Early life, household and community contexts

Research from Zambia and elsewhere indicates that the causes of adolescent marriage and pregnancy are multiple and varied, including poverty (Nour 2009; Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015), rural residence (Nour 2009; Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015), being out of school (Brown 2012; Tembo and Matenga 2008; WLSA et al. n.d.; Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015), the establishment and maintenance of social ties (Nour 2009; Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015), gender roles (Tembo and Matenga 2008), cultural values and initiation and other rites of passage (Rasing 2001; Tembo and Matenga 2008), death of parents (Palermo and Peterman 2009), being an orphan,⁹ step or foster child, or considered to be difficult or 'hard to manage' (Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015). Many of these broad factors have also been identified at the regional (Erulkar and Muthenge 2009; Nour 2006; Walker 2012; Kaggwa 2016) and global levels (Brown 2012; Jain and Kurz 2007; Malhotra et al. 2011; Nguyen and Wodon 2012), and similarly emerged in this study.

The majority of studies on child marriage in Zambia have explored the formal marriage of girls to men.¹⁰ The relationships investigated have tended to be those in which pregnancy follows

9 'Orphan' in this case refers to a child whose mother, father or both parents have died.

10 The 2013–14 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey reported the rate of marriage among 15-19-year-old girls to be 16.5 per cent; among 20-24-year-old females, 31.4 per cent were said to have married before age 18 (CSO, MOH, and ICF International 2014).

marriage, rather than the other way around. Likewise, studies of adolescent pregnancy have largely examined the circumstances of unmarried, single mothers and have focused much less on pregnancy in the context of informal marriage and cohabitation between peers. In those instances where pregnancy was the instigator for the establishment of marriage, as it was in nearly all cases explored in this study, the drivers of pregnancy were also the drivers of marriage. Despite the fact that the two streams of research – causes of formal marriage and causes of adolescent pregnancy – have been conceptually and practically separate in Zambia, their findings largely overlap. The most recent assessment of pregnancy among students in primary school in Eastern, Luapula and North-western provinces determined its primary causes to be poverty, peer pressure, and a lack of guidance and support from parents and other adults on sex, sexuality and reproductive health (Mwansa and Jacob 2015). These findings echo those made in a desk review on teenage pregnancy across the country (Restless Development 2012) and were among the main drivers of child marriage identified in a 2015 qualitative study in six districts (Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015). Other factors found to influence marriage, such as living in a rural area and being out of school, are also drivers of adolescent pregnancy, in Zambia and elsewhere (UNFPA 2013).

This study confirmed these and other findings. Importantly, it found that while marriage was motivated by pregnancy in nearly all cases, not all pregnancies led to marriage. Some girls and boys did not cohabit or continue their relationship when pregnancy occurred. In these cases, girls tended to remain with their parents or guardians, either because the boy involved fled the community or denied paternity, or because they chose to break up with him. In general, parental death, illness and divorce are common features in the lives of many young people in these circumstances. A significant proportion of the sample of young unmarried, married and divorced mothers and fathers had grown up in single-parent households or with guardians who were not their biological parents, usually aunts or grandparents. These living circumstances were typically the result of the break up, divorce or death of one or both parents.

“When my father died, I moved here with my grandfather. He even enrolled me into school here but the man I used to date impregnated me and then all my aunties and uncles rose against me and said that I can’t be troubling my grandfather but should get married to the man who impregnated me.” (KAL DIV G 03:¹¹ divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; became pregnant and then married at 16)

“After that I came back home and found that my father had been hit by stroke and couldn’t find money to sponsor me ... I started taking care of him while he was sick and that’s when I impregnated a girl and after that we started staying together” (KAT MB 01: married young man, Katete, 22; made a girl pregnant at 17 and married her at 20)

The predominance of these pre-existing contextual features was noted by respondents of all ages in all sites and confirmed in the personal stories of the individuals interviewed.

2.1.3. Schooling

All of the children and young people involved in this research were born and raised in contexts of poverty, characterised by a lack of opportunities for improved economic, material or social circumstances. Their families had struggled to provide for their basic needs and lived in precarity. Alongside the costs of food, shelter, medical care and other expenses, families were often unable

11 Respondent codes are provided for all quotes in the report. ‘KAL’, ‘KAT’ and ‘MAZ’ refer to the research site where the respondent resides (Kalulushi, Katete or Mazabuka); ‘MG/MB’, ‘DIV G/DIV B’ and ‘NM G/NM B’ refer to the respondent’s marital status and gender (Married girl/Married boy; Divorced girl/Divorced boy; Never-married girl/Never-married boy). The number following the codes refers to the identifying code for the respondent.

to pay school fees and to provide the required education-related materials. Often it was necessary to ration the little resources they had between their immediate and longer-term needs; investment in the education and welfare of the younger generation was in theory a priority but in practice frequently impossible to address. As a consequence, many of the girls and boys interviewed were those who were out of school and without a means of livelihood when they became pregnant, or when they impregnated their girlfriend or a girl whom they sometimes barely knew. Only one of the 84 young people interviewed had never attended school. More than half of girls (27/48) and nearly a third of boys (11/36) had not completed primary level education. Some had started late and had completed only one or two grades, whereas others had left in junior (12/48 girls and 12/36 boys) or senior secondary (4/48 girls and 3/36 boys). Only 4 of the 48 girls interviewed had completed secondary school; this figure was slightly higher for boys (10 of 36).

These high dropout rates and low levels of school completion are in keeping with national figures. Although there are regional disparities in some parts of the country, especially in Western Province, net attendance rates for the country as a whole are 80.4 per cent for primary school, with very little disparity between girls and boys (Government of Zambia, CSO, MOH, and ICF International 2014). At the secondary school level, enrolment and attendance rates are much lower: in 2015, the net enrolment rate for all students was 25.4 per cent (Government of the Republic of Zambia 2016). In reality, net attendance rates are even lower than reported, especially for girls, who are much more likely than boys to never enter junior or senior secondary or to drop out of these levels before completion (FHI 360 n.d.). Moreover, pass rates are low, with 55.3 per cent and 64.8 per cent of all students passing the Grade 9 and 12 examinations, respectively (UNICEF n.d.). These figures suggest that the education-related circumstances of the young people interviewed for this research are relatively typical among their peers in their communities.

The low completion rates among the young people interviewed do not reflect a lack of interest in schooling. On the contrary, nearly all expressed a strong appreciation for the value of education and a deep desire to complete secondary school. Their experience of school dropout falls into at least two distinct patterns. The first applies to those girls and boys who were in school when they met and when the girl became pregnant. In these circumstances, it was almost always the case that the pregnant girl was required to leave school. Despite the National Re-entry into School Policy,¹² none of the girls involved in this research had re-enrolled after they had given birth. Their responsibilities as mothers and as wives required that they remain home to care for the child and the household. Among those boys who were enrolled when their girlfriends became pregnant, nearly all were told by head teachers that they needed to leave school in order to earn money to support their pregnant girlfriend and, after the baby was born, to meet their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. None of the young men who had left school when their girlfriend became pregnant or when their child was born reported having returned to school while still married. A few of those boys who did not end up establishing a long-term relationship with the girl they had impregnated, or for whom marriage did not work out, were able to re-enrol.

“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 ... the pressure of being told to [look after] the girl I impregnated so I had to leave school.” (MBK DIV B 01: divorced young man, Mazabuka, 24; married at 17)

12 In 1997, the Government of Zambia enacted a re-entry policy that allows girls who drop out of school due to pregnancy to re-enroll in after giving birth. Although the policy has improved the enrolment rates of young mothers, its effectiveness has been hampered by a lack of clarity on how to implement it and the stigma, economic and social barriers that young women face in these circumstances. See Luntha 2016; UNICEF and The Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education of the Republic of Zambia 2014.

“I got pregnant, that’s how I stopped school ... I tried to go back to school – my parents said they didn’t have money because I was pregnant, so I thought of just getting married. Maybe in marriage I will find some benefits ... I think of going to school but I don’t have money and my parents have not had a good farming season, and maybe if I continue with school I could benefit in the future.” (KAT MG 03: married young woman, Katete, 18; stopped school in Grade 5)

“I started Grade 1 ... up to 9 [when] I got the girl pregnant after which I stopped school because I was told to marry. The pressures of the girl after marriage, the pressures I was going through were too many, I was failing to buy soap, I failed to provide a lot of household needs because I was young ... I later divorced. Then I went back to school and finished in 2016.” (KAT DIV B 03: divorced young man, Katete, 22; married at 14 and divorced at 16, stopped school in Grade 9)

The second pattern was for girls and boys who were already out of school to get into a relationship and for the girl to become pregnant. In these cases, school dropout preceded pregnancy and usually happened in primary or junior secondary school. Although most respondents spoke of their desire to return to school, it was clear that the barriers to their enrolment preceded the pregnancy and were the result of an inability to pay as well as the need to perform domestic responsibilities, such as earning money and providing care for siblings and sick parents.

“Life [before pregnancy] was very difficult ... It was difficult when my father left and my mother remained alone. My father remarried and my mother remained alone and I was very young. So life became very challenging and money to pay for my school became a challenge as well ... I stayed with my mother, that is when my husband asked me out, when I was 13 years old. When he asked me out, I wasn’t pregnant ... then I eventually got pregnant and I started living with him. I [then] got married in 2014, when I was 13 years old.” (KAL MG 08: married young woman, Kalulushi, 18; dropped out of school in Grade 4)

“I lacked financial support. I was often sent back home because of not paying school fees and when I told my parents they would tell me they didn’t have money. So that’s how I stopped.” (KAT DIV G 02: divorced young woman, Katete, 19; dropped out of school in Grade 6 at age 14 and married at 15)

“I would have loved to get married after completing school or when I was in my twenties ... But looking at our livelihood and how money for school was hard to find ... there was nothing I could do ... When I got married, my husband told me he would take me back to school but after his relative called him to go and work ... he disappeared and I only got a report that he had married again where he was, so this is how I have just remained like this.” (KAL DIV G 02 divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 21; dropped out of school in Grade 7, married at 17)

This strong desire to complete school was grounded in the view, widely held among respondents of all ages, that education was the key to a better future. Nearly all interviewees who had dropped out shared their fears that their dreams were no longer achievable and that, without schooling, they could hope for little more than subsistence for themselves and their families. This deep faith in the value of education sat alongside a niggling and uncomfortable sentiment that, in reality, going to school offered no guarantees of economic security and opportunity. At the community level, it was not always possible to see the clear benefits of education in the lives of those who had completed school, some of whom, interviewees and participants in group discussions noted, continued to live in poverty, just like everyone else. This realisation led some to question the transformative value of education and to ask themselves how they could make the best life possible: via a path of uncertain success (education) or via a more trusted mechanism for economic security and social advancement (marriage). While the former was

purely aspirational, the latter was grounded in role models, tradition and more visible benefits. Parents to young people in all three sites argued that, especially for those girls and boys who struggle academically for a number of reasons, it is difficult to choose the intangible over the tangible, especially if pregnancy is involved, which it typically is.

2.1.4. Behaviours and contexts associated with young parenthood

This study identified a complex web of interrelated behaviours and personal and social contexts that promoted pregnancy, parenthood and marriage among children and young people in the three districts. Because pregnancy was the driver of marriage in nearly all instances, it is difficult to disentangle the ways in which these two events unfold in the lives of young people. Both reflect the struggle inherent in the transition from childhood to adulthood in resource-constrained communities. The extremely difficult economic circumstances that characterise the settings where girls and boys were born, grew up and reside meant that adolescence brought increasing responsibilities to both diminish one's economic burden on the household while simultaneously contributing to its livelihood. After puberty, girls grew increasingly responsible for the costs associated with all but their most basic needs for food and shelter. Soap, lotion, sanitary materials and clothing became their responsibility, while boys at this stage were expected to contribute money to household costs such as food and rent. In most circumstances, the sizeable direct and opportunity costs of schooling led many to drop out before completing secondary school. Some sought and found income-earning opportunities through market selling and piecework. Others assisted with domestic tasks, such as gardening, cooking and cleaning. Most resorted to whatever means they had available to acquire money, however small the amount. In this environment, learning to hustle is an essential life skill.

This widespread need for capital takes place in an environment of limited opportunity. Despite significant effort, many young people are unable to obtain even temporary employment. In this context of great need, interviewees and young participants in group discussions described themselves as having nothing to do, of being bored and disheartened about their prospects in both the short and long term. These conditions and feelings appear to be broadly shared among young people, not just those who are married. Visiting the research sites on any day of the week, at almost any time of day, it was impossible to miss the small groups of young men who sat idly outside their homes or wandered the nearby roads. Young women and girls were less visible, as most are responsible for time-consuming tasks at home. The ordinary burgeoning of sexuality that accompanies adolescence thus happens in a setting characterised by long-standing norms and expectations of girls' and boys' roles and responsibilities after puberty, financial need, limited opportunity, and uncertainty about the future.

Most of the girls interviewed began engaging in sex and romantic relationships at a young age as a way of sustaining their financial and material needs. Girls are commonly expected to contribute to or cover their expenses once they have reached puberty; since most have almost no means of earning money, the implicit message many learn is that they can engage in transactional sex. Most keep these relationships quiet, however, because of the competing and powerful norms related to abstinence. They and those who participated in group discussions reported sexual debut to take place between the ages of 13-17, with a few cases occurring at 11 years old. Some girls sought money to meet personal or household needs. Others wanted assistance with school fees and had sex with young men who promised to provide this support, but rarely did.

“He told me that he would engage me, take me back to school as he will be paying for me and then after that, we will get married. But this relationship never even lasted, within a month ... I was pregnant, and when I told him he refused, and ran away.” (KAT NM G 03: never married girl, Katete, 16; dropped out of school in Grade 11; became a mother at 16)

“So when life became challenging, I found a man who could pay for my money for school so that I can complete school so that I can take care of my parents.” (KAL MG 06: married girl, Kalulushi, 17; married at 15)

Sometimes girls met young men in the community – at the market or on the street – and other times by frequenting bars, where many young men hang out. Several revealed stories of how they had deliberately sought out men in these ways. Key informants at the community level described how these means of exchanging sex and companionship for material and financial support were sometimes initiated by parents and forced upon girls:

“There is a certain girl ... The mother is single. This girl, starting from Grade 8, it is the mother who used to go out there, find a man, come with a man, with two men; one for herself and the other one for the Grade 8 child ... and tell her ‘should you refuse, you will not eat anything ... you will not have food’ ... This girl is only 14.” (Key informant, Kalulushi)

This research found that the engagement of young girls (12-14 years old) in sex and romantic relationships was a survival strategy and was not motivated by sexual desire, at least not initially. By contrast, there were no material benefits to boys and young men: those in this study began having sex slightly later than the girls, mostly around the age of 15-16; a small number in rural areas began at 14 years old. Importantly, whereas many girls were looking to establish long-term relationships with boys and young men whom they could rely on for sustained and reliable support, the vast majority of these same males were not looking for this type of relationship. They were attracted to girls and sexually curious but were not trying to find a wife or to become fathers; many were seeking a girl to have sex with and not necessarily a long-term girlfriend. For the most part, they were acting on desire, and their behaviour was to some extent motivated by encouragement and pressure of their peers:

“Sometimes you may be sitting then you see a girl and maybe her thighs, sometimes sex comes ... Okay, even what I just said and also there might be times when you are just walking and then a girl is walking ahead of you, just from the way she is walking, especially if she has big buttocks.” (KAL MB 03: married young man, Kalulushi, 17)

“We were just chilling with my friends, then I saw a girl passing by in that manner whereby you want to show your friends that you are no longer that shy boy anymore ... The way they knew me that I am a coward so maybe that peer pressure that every time you are the one being talked about in the group. So, when they came, I wanted to show them that I am now good in terms of talking to girls, that’s how I approached her. Upon approaching, she gave me her line and after that she became my girlfriend and things started moving whilst I was still in Grade 11.” (MBK NM B 01: never-married young man, Mazabuka, 20)

Sometimes the pursuit of sex for pleasure or in exchange for assistance led to sexual violence. Because this research was focused on pregnancy and marriage, these instances were revealed only in so far as they led to pregnancy and not in terms of more general prevalence. One girl in Katete, now divorced, reported becoming pregnant and then cohabitating with the young man who forced her to have sex with him; likewise, a young man in Kalulushi recounted how he had impregnated his then girlfriend, now wife, by force. The facts of this violence were shared openly by those respondents who chose to disclose their experiences. Although there were no questions in the interview guides that asked about sexual violence, it emerged spontaneously in all three sites as a feature of gender relations among adolescents as young as 15. This suggests that had the topic been an explicit focus of the research, even higher levels might have been revealed.

Importantly, romantic love and affection also led some boys and girls and young people to engage in sexual activity at a young age. A desire for tenderness and care, as well as a bit of fun, was a significant motivator for many young people, particularly those living with difficult family relationships, challenging financial and material circumstances, and few certainties

regarding how to make their way in the world. Marrying for love was, however, the least common reason for marriage revealed in this study.

“We love each other with my husband. My husband loves me and I love him.” (KAL MG 08: married young woman, Kalulushi, 18)

“I will talk about what happened to me, I was in love with a girl and we were both young, I don't know if it is me who was in love with her or it was her. Her parents even took me to the police cells on two occasions, and their daughter is even the one who used to come and bring me food and my love for her never ended and she got pregnant and they gave her to me.” (Young man, FGD, Mazabuka)

“I will tell you about my story: I had this girl I was in love with and her parents did not want us to be together because I was not working. They said if I wanted her, I should come and get her from Chingola, at the mother's place. They told me to look for money to get and I was helped with money and I got her.” (Young man, FGD, Mazabuka)

Sexual and gender norms

Sexual and gender norms also contribute to adolescent pregnancy (and the resultant marriage) in the research sites and across the country more generally (Svanemyr 2019). From a young age, children, and especially girls, receive contradictory messages about sex. On the one hand, they are told not to have sex. Among interviewees in this study, injunctions against sexual activity do not appear to be based on moral or religious grounds. Instead, parents of adolescents fear that girls will become pregnant outside of marriage and that, in so doing, they will have a baby before they are mature enough to care for it; they will have to drop out of school; and they will inflict a longstanding economic burden on their already-struggling families. Information and advice related to contraception is very difficult to access: many older adults in the research communities argued that having this information would only encourage young people to experiment with sex. Adolescent boys are also told by parents (usually mothers), teachers and others to refrain from having sex, also on primarily pragmatic grounds – becoming a father at a young age is widely understood to be a certain way to derail one's future plans because it introduces responsibilities that are incompatible with being in school and thus disrupts the dream that education will provide a means to a better life.

Alongside these restrictive norms are those that impute sex and sexuality as an integral part of gender relations. From a young age, children learn about sex. This is particularly the case in those communities where initiation rites take place at puberty. In Kalulushi, adult mothers reported that the preparation for initiation involves teaching pre-pubertal girls and boys how to perform sex and how to ‘handle’ a sexual partner in their marriage.

“You find that you are going for an initiation ceremony but in there this child will also be told things that she is not supposed to be told ... You begin to discuss sexual issues with a 7-year-old child just because she has gone through initiation.” (Key informant, teacher, Kalulushi)

“Culture itself is to blame. Once that child is about 13 years or 14 years, they are let loose, for lack of a better word. You find that they are so free to do whatever they want since they are considered to have grown up [as a result of] the initiation, yet a child is only 14. So now when they go out, they do whatever they want [have sex]. From there ... they find themselves in problems [get pregnant].” (Key informant, teacher, Katete)

Boys and young men were similarly reported to acquire sexual knowledge through these means, an experience that confirmed their growing understanding of sexual experience and prowess as a demonstration of masculinity (Simpson 2002). In an environment characterised by limited social and economic opportunity, having sex and impregnating a girl are one means of ‘proving’

one's manhood. Although there is no evidence to suggest that all or even a good proportion of girls were non-consenting in their sexual engagements, there also appears to be a coercive sex culture, where forced sex is not defined as rape but is considered somehow normal.

"I was just forced, I knew that my menstrual period days were close, but he never understood and forced me ... he forced me but it was not rape and it was not once."
(KAT NM G 03: never-married girl, Katete, 16; became pregnant at 15)

Some older adults in the communities asserted that adolescent pregnancy was a result of a changing culture in which young people no longer respect and defer to the mandates of their parents. They lamented the loss of control adults have over children's behaviour and voiced concerns about what they felt was a misplaced emphasis in contemporary Zambia on children's rights to behave as they like. They attributed other changes, such as the availability of internet-enabled smartphones and social media platforms to children's increased engagement and sex.

"The difference is that girls back then used to be obedient to parents. We became pregnant when we were old enough but those of nowadays, at the age of 10 years, she would become pregnant." (R10, KAT FGD – Mothers)

"In olden days there used to be rules and we would not hear that someone is pregnant. It was taboo and people would be surprised and ask what caused that. They used to follow the rules and pregnancies were not common. Right now there is no such fear like what one said, as they are going to school they are communicating on phones about where to meet and there they start having sexual relations. Pregnancies are the order of the day but back then it wasn't like this because they had fear." (KAL FGD – Fathers)

Access to sexual and reproductive health

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, the vast majority of the young people who participated in this study had limited information on sex and pregnancy prevention and little access to contraception and reproductive health services. Health clinics were said to be unfriendly to teenagers and to stigmatise those who wanted information on sexual health. What young people did know they learnt from school, grandparents, mothers (for boys), friends and community peer educators and was mostly incomplete, inaccurate and focused on abstinence and condom use (for boys). The few young men who reported having received information on pregnancy prevention said that they had not taken it seriously at the time.

"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 even us we want to try so that we taste how it feels like." (MBK DIV B 01: divorced young man, Mazabuka, 24; became a father at 20 with girl, age 16)

"My mother, she told me that I was too young to start indulging in sexual intercourse, [that] the right time will come for me to do it [but] I didn't believe her." (KAL NM B 03: never-married young man, Kalulushi, 21; became a parent at 16)

On these and other occasions, boys were surprised that their girlfriends or the girls they had had sex with had become pregnant. Pregnancy had not been entertained as a possibility. This was true for boys and a significant number of girls, many of whom described not knowing that they could get pregnant from 'only playing' and did not realise that they were pregnant until someone pointed out their growing belly to them. They had understood missed periods to be one-offs, markers of the unpredictability of menstruation, and not a sign of pregnancy per se. It is for these reasons that pregnancy was described by girls and boys as something that just happened to them, something over which they felt that they had had no control or decision-making power: statements like 'I fell pregnant' or 'the pregnancy occurred' were common refrains among those

interviewed. A very small number of female interviewees acknowledged that they had known pregnancy to be a possibility; no boys or young men made this admission.

In fact, most of the information children and young people had on pregnancy prevention was made available to them after they had become pregnant or after their baby had been born. It was at this point that they felt more comfortable to access services, and antenatal and postnatal visits to the clinic often included information about injectable forms of birth control and instructions on how to use a condom. During these visits, nurses were able to dispel the rumours that many young mothers had heard about the side effects of hormonal contraceptives: one prominent concern was that their use can prevent pregnancy permanently.¹³ Although none of those interviewed wanted to have another baby immediately following the birth of their child, eliminating the possibility of any future children was not a choice any were willing to make.

Although none of the girls and young women reported having had an abortion, a number of young mothers in each site explained that they had wanted to seek a termination when they initially learnt that they were pregnant. In the end, they were persuaded or decided against doing so by those with whom they chose to discuss their plans, including boyfriends/husbands and mothers. These individuals invariably emphasised the dangers associated with abortion and the fact that services can only be accessed via licensed practitioners in towns and cities.

“He asked me what I wanted us to do and when I said to terminate it he refused and said people die while trying to terminate pregnancies.” (KAL SP G 02: married young woman, Kalulushi, 22; got pregnant and married at 19)

“I thought about it, I was stopped [because I know] that people do die.” (KAT NM G 02: never-married girl, Katete, 17; got pregnant at 16 while in school, dropped out in Grade 5)

Although abortion is legal in Zambia, it is not socially countenanced (Zulu and Haaland 2019), and referral requirements, lack of trusted health care professionals and other barriers mean that the few services that are available are almost impossible to obtain. The practice remains hidden and those women and girls who do terminate their pregnancies tend to do so in secret, often keeping it from their boyfriends/husbands and friends and family. If anyone involved in this study had sought a termination (none were reported), the stigma and taboo nature of the practice may have influenced their decision to share their experiences. Nevertheless, in every research site, people of all ages said that it was possible to access herbs and medicines for this purpose and that they knew of those who had undergone abortions, mostly using traditional means provided by known elders in the community. One boy indicated that when his girlfriend became pregnant, he was advised by a friend that abortion was an option. He was given some herbs by an older woman to give his girlfriend to terminate the pregnancy but decided not to do it for fear of ‘complications’. Ultimately, this study found that objections to abortion were largely based on the risks the procedure posed to the individual girl or young woman. Moral or religious arguments did not appear to play a deciding role in choosing against a termination.¹⁴ Although some young men reported that they had convinced their girlfriends not to abort because they did not believe in “killing a human being” (KAL NM B 01: never-married boy, 24; became a father at 16, dropped out of school in Grade 9), the main reason that young women respondents did not abort was because they were convinced by others or came themselves to understand that they might die as a result of the procedure.

13 This understanding was also reported by adolescent girls in four communities in Southern Province, Zambia (Svanemyr 2019: 9).

14 This finding contrasts with the prominence paid to moral objections to abortion in other studies (see, for example, Haaland et al. 2019).

2.1.5. Behaviours and contexts associated with young marriage

As outlined above, the behaviours and environments that impact early pregnancy and parenthood are similar to and inseparable from those that influence marriage. Although there are no numerical data upon which to rely, pregnancy appears to be a main reason for marriage, especially – but not exclusively – for unions that are informal, among children and young people in Zambia.¹⁵ In all three research sites, the marriage of nearly every young married or divorced person was preceded by pregnancy. Both girls and boys detailed the direct and indirect pressure they experienced to establish a household with the girl who had become pregnant or the boy who was responsible. This pressure was felt regardless of whether the pregnancy emerged in the context of a long-standing romantic relationship or was the result of a one-night stand with a previously unknown sexual partner. Getting married was a way to preserve one's reputation and family honour. Importantly, it was also an effort to secure a means of meeting one's basic needs and those of the unborn child. It established a link between families that opened opportunities for the sharing of resources and labour when required. It also offered the potential to enhance one's own or one's parents' status in the community. Most girls described having little choice, either because they saw no other option for themselves or because their family had insisted upon them getting married.

“He impregnated me and the whole family rose up and said that since my parents are both late, rather than trouble them I should be taken to him.” (KAL DIV G 03: divorced girl, Kalulushi, 17; married at 16 after becoming pregnant)

“I met my husband when I was 15 years old at the market and we became friends. I met him in 2015 and he asked me out in July and I became pregnant December month end. It was just five months that had passed after knowing him. At that time when we met I was just selling vegetables at the market. I got married because life was not okay for me and I was suffering. That was the only option left for me. Even this time, my life is not all that okay. I did not want to get married but circumstances pushed me to it. There was no one who pushed me to getting married.” (KAL MG 04: married young woman, Kalulushi, 18; became pregnant at 15 and married at 16)

Boys and young men also experienced significant pressures to marry, mostly from their own families and those of the pregnant girl. Interviews with boys clearly revealed the way this pressure had made them feel. In all sites, they described feeling scared when they learnt that their girlfriends or previous sexual partners (even one-night stands) were pregnant. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities that they believed had unexpectedly fallen upon them, they wondered how they could ever get enough money to care for a wife and child, let alone to pay *lobola* (bride price), rent a house and cover all the other costs associated with having a family. They feared the disappointment and anger of their parents, especially their mothers. When the girls involved were under the age of 16, boys were especially fearful that they would be taken to the police and charged with defilement, which could result in prison or a fine or damage payment that would be impossible to pay.¹⁶ This fact alone led many boys to marry, regardless of their feelings for the pregnant girl involved. Some boys were clear that they married solely out of obligation and pressure:

15 Qualitative research elsewhere in Zambia has also shown this to be the case, including in a study by Steinhaus et al. (2016), which found pregnancy to be a precursor to marriage in two sites in Central province (Kabwe and Chibombo districts).

16 A 'damage payment' is money that is paid to the family of a girl who has become pregnant outside of marriage in lieu of a marriage. It is a common practice in the research sites and in many other parts of Zambia (see Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015).

“Let me just say I was not prepared in everything, coupled with being young. Even today, even if we married, we are still young, there was just no way out, it was a forcing matter, that’s all ... The parents, my wife’s parents, forced me.” (MBK MB 03: married young man, Mazabuka, 21; married at 19, became a father at 17)

“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.” (KAL DIV B 03: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20)

School-going boys in particular expressed a fear that by being married they would have to drop out of school. In this way, becoming a husband and father meant giving up on their dreams for a different life. In this hoped-for life, they were in their mid to late twenties when they married, by which point they would have completed secondary school, and be established in a secure job that gave them a good income and the ability to save money every month. In this dream life, marriage happened with someone they knew and cared about. It was a choice that they felt ready for and involved sacrifices that they were prepared to make. These dreams, shared by numerous interviewees, stand in stark contrast to their lived reality.

Group discussions with the mothers and fathers of married young people also revealed the significant pressures parents felt to provide for the needs of pregnant girls and, later, the child they gave birth to. Adult mothers’ and fathers’ own daily struggles to make ends meet were substantial and they often felt unable to take on any additional financial burden. They asserted the need for boys to take responsibility for the family that they had carelessly created and reported having delivered their daughters to these boys in order that they could be cared for. Some fathers spoke of the need to instil fear in boys; without it, they asserted, boys will grow bored with their pregnant girlfriend and start looking for other girls to have sex with – a dangerous road that will lead them to ignore their responsibilities and inflict suffering upon others. By giving these boys a pregnant young woman to care for, and by telling them what could happen to the girl and her unborn baby should the boy not meet his responsibilities, adults hope to frighten the boy into behaving well. It is a strategy that appears to work only some of the time.

It is important to note that although the vast majority of marriages among respondents were the result of pregnancy, a very small number of girls and boys and young women and men provided other reasons for marrying. Among girls, the need to access basic necessities such as food led them to seek marriage as a means of survival, in much the same way as they sought sexual relationships in exchange for material and financial support (see Section 2.1.3).

“Since I had a difficult life at my mother’s place, all I could think of is to just get married ... We never had enough maize produce after harvesting. We would just end up with a little, not [enough] to last us for long. For us to have enough food, we needed to work too hard in the fields.” (KAT MG 05: married girl, Katete, 18; married at 17, dropped out of school in Grade 4)

“I wanted to go to school and yet my parents had no money to take me to school. Then I thought to myself that instead of being a prostitute, no, it is impossible. It is better I get married.” (KAL MG 08: married young woman, Kalulushi, 19; married at 13)

These perspectives reflect girls’ and young women’s profound need for financial support, whereas boys and young men aspired to fulfil their sexual desire in the context of a safe, monogamous union:

“The reason why we get married is because we want to have sex any time. Each time you feel like you want sex, you just tell your friend you enter the house.” (KAL FGD boys, R8: married boy, 16)

“Sometimes the reason why we marry is because we don’t want to play around because there are so many diseases around. So it’s better you marry rather than sleeping with different ladies each day which may result in getting sick.” (KAL FGD boys, R7: married boy, 17)

Marriage among young people in the research communities was thus motivated by a series of personal, social and familial pressures. Girls themselves made the decision to marry or not to marry but were heavily influenced by others, including parents and other family members, and were motivated to a large extent by their own and their future child’s material and financial needs. Very often these decisions were almost exclusively pragmatic: they recognised the reality of their situation and sought to improve it in the best way possible. Boys, on the other hand, despite strong pressures from their partners and families, nevertheless appeared to wrestle more with a profound tension between strongly-felt obligations and responsibilities and the simultaneous desire to not close off one’s future to the hoped-for opportunities that schooling promised. Girls and young women, too, had imagined futures that they had had to give up when they decided to marry, yet they lamented this loss less often and obviously than boys and young men. Whereas most appeared to have accepted the reality of their situation as young mothers, many more boys and young men spoke of being forced into a situation that they had never wanted.

2.2. Married life

Marriages among the children and young people in the three research communities tended to fit two main types. The first are ‘forced’ marriages – those in which the family of a pregnant girl ‘chases her to her husband’, or brings her to the young man who impregnated her and leaves her there for him to look after. These marriages are considered ‘forced’ (*kutakatila* in Nyanja and Tonga; *kafwitila* in Bemba) because the boys and young men usually do not want to marry, and often the girls do not either. It is their families that insist that the two young people take responsibility for the pregnancy, by which they mean living together and forming a household together. Marriages can also be ‘forced’ when a young woman sleeps at a man’s house overnight and when she returns home she is evicted from the household, and told to go and move in with the man with whom she had slept the night. It was widely agreed by adult mothers and fathers that these ‘forced marriages’ are a result of children’s disobedience and usually involve young people who are not mature enough to be married, but whose behaviour nevertheless requires that they start this phase of life.

The second type of marriages commonly seen in this study are those that are ‘self-made’. These are unions in which two young people choose to become husband and wife. This choice may be made out of love, but more often it is a result of circumstance. Sometimes parents agree with their child’s decision to marry, and other times they do not, either because they do not approve of the spouse or because they fear the lost opportunities that will result, especially in terms of schooling. Many young people, especially young men, reject the idea that their parents can find them an appropriate spouse, and assert their right to marry the person of their choosing.

It was widely argued by adult mothers and fathers in the three research sites that these two forms of marriage are less than ideal. They bemoaned the loss of traditions such as parental engagement in the choice of spouse, parental consent, instruction and training in the skills needed for marriage, and family involvement in the determination of bride price and its payment. The changes they described reflect the reality that these practices are today largely obsolete: “Nowadays, we give our daughters free of charge”.¹⁷ Some said that weddings do still take place, but the marriages do not last long because “they marry each other before their wedding and

17 Respondent in FGD among adult fathers in Mazabuka (MBK FGD – Fathers).

without paying the bride price”.¹⁸ Finally, arranged marriages are uncommon in these settings, as are polygamous marriages.

Decision-making in marriage

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. When asked what aspects of their lives they make decisions about, those who did not live with their husband's family tended to say that they chose what food to eat according to market availability and price. Those who lived in this setting, however, said that they are required to abide by the rules of the household and to live according to the decisions of their mothers-in-law. They do not participate in domestic budgeting, meal planning and other aspects of day-to-day living, which are organised by their mothers-in-law. The only aspect over which they have some say appears to be in the direct care of their children. A similar situation was described in relation to unmarried mothers, or young women who return to live with their families after they have divorced or become separated from their husbands. As long as these girls and young women were reliant on the household head for their livelihood, they had to do as they were told.

When couples are married and living together, young women have far more decision-making power than they do when living with their in-laws. When asked whether they preferred to live with their husband's family or on their own as a couple, young women clearly stated their preference for living without their in-laws because doing so allowed them and their husbands to make their own decisions on matters that affect them and their children. These matters pertain not only to choices of what food to eat, how to prepare it and when to cook it, but also decisions about how to care for their child, how to spend their personal time, and which friends and visitors to pass time with.

Young men also shared these same sentiments. Most who were married stated that they preferred to live with their wives in their own home, rather than that of their parents, so that they could learn to function as a household on their own. Despite patrilocality being the traditional means of establishing a marital home in the three research sites, many young people were not keen on this option. One exception to this view was articulated by young men who had custody (informally granted) of their child and who relied on the support of parents, especially mothers, for financial and practical support in child rearing.

Joys and challenges in marriage

It is striking from the interviews conducted with young people that it was far easier for them to describe and discuss the challenges of their lives as married partners and parents than it was to articulate the joys. Nevertheless, both boys and girls and young people cited their children as their greatest source of marital happiness. This was also true of those young parents who never married. For young men, the joys conveyed were largely existential: they related the very existence of their child to the demonstration of their virility and the continuation of their family line:

“She gave me a child, that made me happy. The time when she told me that she is pregnant I accepted it and I was very happy, it made me very happy that I am a man.” (KAT DIV B 03: divorced young man, Katete, 22; married at 14 and divorced at 16)

18 Respondent in FGD among mothers in Mazabuka (MBK FGD – Mothers).

“I have found joy in having a child.” (KAL DIV B 03: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20; married at 19)

“It is joy to know that you can give birth and become a parent.” (KAL NM B 01: never-married boy, Kalulushi, 24; became a father at 16).

Like young husbands and fathers, many girls and young women said that having a child to cherish is their main – and often only – joy in marriage: “In my marriage, I found parenthood joyful as am able to take care of my child together with my husband” (KAT MG-08: married young woman, 19; married at 16).

Some young men, but very few young women, also spoke of the joy they felt as a result of sharing their lives with someone who cares about them. This sense of companionship appeared particularly important to those young men whose parents had died or who had difficult relationships with them or other family members:

“My wife is also very understanding and supportive; whenever I have got a problem she comes to help me. That’s what makes my marriage to be of joy.” (KAL SP B01: married young man, Kalulushi, 24; became a father and was married at 16)

“It was full of joy and we were happy as a couple in that there was a very good communication between the two of us and in most times my wife could encourage me whenever things went wrong. My wife was very understanding whenever I presented my problems to her and I could also understand her problems and so forth. In addition, we loved each other, that’s what was making me feel happy in my marriage.” (KAL DIV B01: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 22; married at 16)

These expressions of appreciation for a spouse’s understanding and supportive nature were not echoed by the girls and young women interviewed, who articulated the joys of marriage almost exclusively in relation to their own and their families’ improved material circumstances: the very fact of not having to struggle to acquire basic necessities was itself a reason to be happy:

“What was making me happy was that he was helping me and he was also helping my family.” (KAL MG 06: married girl, Kalulushi, 17; became pregnant and married at 16)

“He takes care of me, and he does what I ask for.” (MBK MG 05: married girl, Mazabuka, 16; married at 16)

“Being able to have easy access to things such as soap, lotion and someone to help with tilling of the land.” (KAT SP G01: married young woman, Katete, 18; pregnant at 17 and married at 18)

It was not difficult for young married and divorced children and young people to describe the challenges they faced in marriage. The vast majority of the problems they identified related to financial hardship, the inability to continue in school, communication difficulties, infidelity, the perceived inappropriateness of extra-familial advice, and having been married when one or both parties did not want to do so, or before one or both considered themselves ready. Boys and young men in particular lamented their inability to meet the needs of their wife and child, and their discomfort and unhappiness in having to rely on older family members, often parents and usually mothers, to provide the money needed for the young man’s family to function. Married and divorced girls and young women spoke at length about the alcohol abuse of their husbands and the violence that they inflicted upon them, often when they are drunk:

“Being beaten, he used to beat me when I was even sleeping and I have not done anything, he would beat me even the whole night; I would even spend some nights at my in-laws ... not leaving food, he would get the money and go and use it for beer drinking. When you talk about food he would shout at you saying he has no money and he would

even fail to buy washing soap for the baby.” (MBK DIV G01: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 19; married at 16)

“Problems are the ones where he gets my money I have earned from farming that I intend to use to buy soap or lotion ... he takes it beer drinking ... when I ask about how he has used the money, he beats me.” (KAT MG 07: married young woman, Katete, 18; married at 15)

These challenges reflect young married and divorced individuals’ struggle to make a life for themselves in environments characterised by intense economic hardship, where the frustrations of young men to meet their expected social roles augments their vulnerability to alcohol abuse and violence (Barker and Ricardo 2005). The weight of these potent and unceasing pressures left the vast majority of interviewees, both male and female, disappointed that married life was not as they had expected and in some cases, resigned to an unhappy future. When they were growing up, most had imagined that marriage would be an escape from the everyday challenges they faced in their natal homes; it would be a peaceful and harmonious relationship in which their basic needs would be met and more. The vast majority said that they married too young, and that by having done so, they had curtailed their ability to complete their formal education or to get a paying job. Marriage, many asserted, involved leaving one set of problems to arrive at another.

Interviewer: “How did you expect marriage to be?”

Respondent: “I thought as if I would find good things. I didn’t find good things but only found bad things.” (KAL MG 05: married girl, Kalulushi, 17; married at 15)

“My life was good when I was alone because I used to be at school and things were ok but now things are not ok because 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.” (KAT MB 01: married boy, Katete, 22; became a father at 19 and married at 20)

It is important to note that many of the problems young couples face in marriage are not different from those experienced by people who marry at older ages. The difference is that these young people feel that they do not have the maturity or experience to manage their problems effectively, and thus have to rely on their parents or other family members to support them to meet their basic needs. This dependence leaves young men, in particular, feeling as though they are not capably performing their role as provider. Some feel trapped because they do not see how their situation is going to change, either in the short or the long term. It is also significant that many young married and divorced interviewees said that they did not want to marry in the first place, that they were forced by their parents or their in-laws, or by broader socio-economic circumstances. These young men and women had no illusions about what married life would be like.

“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.” (MBK MG 08: married girl, Mazabuka, 19; pregnant at 17 and married at 18)

2.3. Young parenthood

Just as married life is full of challenges, so too is parenthood for the young mothers and fathers in the three research sites. The accident of pregnancy led quickly to the reality of parenthood. Older mothers and fathers in the communities stressed how unprepared young people in these situations were for the roles and responsibilities that came with being a parent. Young mothers and fathers themselves also asserted that it had never been their intention to become ‘early’ parents; most felt that the role had been foisted upon them by circumstance. And while the vast majority cherished their children, they felt burdened by the tremendous responsibilities that came

with looking after them. On the whole, young women were quick to find fault with the fathers of their child(ren), whom they criticised for not providing adequate money for food, soap and other necessities, either because the young men spent the money on alcohol or were felt not to care enough to work hard to earn what was needed. Young fathers were far less critical of the mothers to their children, whom most described as performing their role as best as possible, given the situations they found themselves in. Even single fathers voiced few complaints about their child's mother, except on those occasions when she had abandoned the child to run off with another man or had improperly cared for the child once in a new relationship.

Shame, discrimination and abandonment

Some girls reported feeling ashamed when they learnt that they would become mothers, and mixed feelings when they became parents.

“What made me feel bad was that I didn't have a man who will help me take care of the child and I knew that my parents will not make any efforts to look for my school fees because I have wronged them. This made me feel so bad that I cried.” (KAT NM G 03: never married girl, Katete, 16; became pregnant at 16 years)

“I was happy and sad at the time. I felt nice because I realised that I can give birth and I felt bad because I was very young and did not know how I was going to raise my child.” (KAL MG 01: married young woman, Kalulushi, 20; married at 16)

Very often these feelings reflected girls' understanding of the significant efforts that they would need to make as parents in their social and economic context. Although they may have lacked life experience and formal education, they knew well the hard work that was involved in raising a child: nearly all had themselves been raised in similarly challenging environments and had over the years provided care to younger siblings and family members. They had no illusions about what being a parent would be like, even if they could count on the support of family members and friends. Stigma and mockery by peers and acquaintances were a reality for a number of girls, as it was for this young woman in Kalulushi: “My friends laughed at me and mocked me for getting married and pregnant, and, worse off, becoming a young parent” (KAL MG 01: married young woman, Kalulushi, 20; married at 16).

The scorn directed at girls in these circumstances was particularly painful for those who experienced the disappointment and ire of their parents. Some, like this 16 year old, reflected on how becoming pregnant had destroyed their relationship with their own mothers and fathers: “The time I didn't have a child, my parents used to love me so much, but now, they do not because I wronged them and they do not see any good or even trust me” (KAT NM G 03: never-married girl, Katete, 16). The challenge for girls in these circumstances is that, in the absence of parental support, there was rarely anyone else to turn to, a situation that was especially acute for girls whose boyfriends had abandoned them upon learning of the pregnancy:

“The father has not acknowledged that the child is his ... His relatives were told about the baby but they have never shown up, though the man I was dating seems like a crook so he may have not even told his relatives.” (KAL NM G 02: never-married young woman, Kalulushi, 18; pregnant at 17)

With virtually no services accessible to them, girls felt compelled to find some way to support themselves in pregnancy and after giving birth. Some worked to repair relationships with their parents, others moved in with extended family members, friends or the family of the child's father. A great many were forced by their parents to move in with the young man involved, regardless of whether they wanted to do so. In most cases, girls recognised that the situation was far from ideal but felt that there were no other available options.

Girls' and young women's pragmatism was also characteristic of the young men who had impregnated them. For those girls and boys in the midst of an existing romantic relationship, cohabitation was commonly pursued, a solution most accepted as necessary. For those whose pregnancies resulted from short liaisons and one-night stands, cohabitation was the price nearly all felt they had to pay for their actions. Those boys and young men who did not want or felt incapable of sustaining a relationship with the mother of their child, usually left the community to live a distance away, or remained with their families with the understanding that they would not rekindle a relationship with the mother but would support the child financially as best they could.

Social roles and economic challenges

Marriage without pregnancy was rare in the three communities where this research was conducted. Consequently, the financial challenges experienced by couples nearly always involved meeting the needs of a child or children. Most of the girls and young women bemoaned that the fathers of their children and their family members would not or could not fully support their needs and those of their children.

"I am caring for the two children and the father to the children is not supporting me in any way. I have to feed the children and take the other child to school." (MBK DIV G 02: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 22; married at 15)

"They become instant parents so to say. They now have to take care of the child that they have brought. Now, it becomes a major problem because whilst [your parents are caring for you], you have brought another child – that now makes the whole thing now worse. So that now leads to problems such as whereby ... have made groups. They go out at night stealing from people and in the mines ... Like recently, there was a boy who was just released some three days ago [from policy custody] ... He was in Grade 7 when he dropped from school [because of inability to pay]. Whilst the family were still struggling to find some money, this boy got a girl pregnant. And that child was told to move from the guardian to the boy's place. Now, this boy had nothing to feed this girl with, what does he decide to do? He goes where there are some farms ... from here it is not very far from farming areas to steal." (Teacher, Kalulushi)

Some divorced and never-married girls and young women also found it difficult to support their own needs because the little money available was used to care for their child. While this often meant foregoing lotion and soap and much-needed new clothing for themselves, most upsetting to many who wanted to return to school was the reality that they could not pay the necessary fees, now or in the foreseeable future. They struggled with this realisation and the fear that they might also be unable to cover the costs of educating their young child when the time came:

"Life is still as it was then; we are still suffering as a family. Having a baby has had impact on my education because I am no longer in school for I have to raise this child and my parents were not happy with me. I identify myself as an adult since I am now a mother; I have to play the motherly role to my child so I am an adult." (KAL NM G 02: never-married young woman, Kalulushi, 18; pregnant at 17)

Similarly, boys and young men reported that they were expected to provide material and financial support to their child or children. However, most lamented that they were living in poverty and found it challenging to meet the roles expected of them as parents. Some reported that their lives had become increasingly difficult after becoming fathers because of these pressures.

"There is nothing good because it is the parent that suffers in buying things like blankets, washing soap and other things for the baby because they are still young and have nothing." (KAT FGD – Fathers)

Sharing the tasks of parenting

Impregnating a girl, or becoming pregnant or a parent leads to an abrupt shift in the way a child or young person is understood socially and within the vast majority of families. In what feels like overnight, a girl or boy moves from the category of 'worthy dependent' to 'unworthy' or 'should-no-longer-be dependent': by undertaking these 'grown up' actions, others accept or demand that those involved, including adolescents, must take responsibility for what they have done and prioritise above all else the care and well-being of their child. A significant proportion of the older adults involved in this study felt strongly that this was or should be the case. Others recognised the often overwhelming challenges their son or daughter faced, and continued to provide whatever financial, material and in-kind support they could. As essential as this support is to many young people in these circumstances, it usually comes at the cost of compromising their independence and sense of personal achievement: despite undertaking adult-like roles, such as being a mother or a father, they remain in a child-like position in relation to their parents and, by extension, much of society more generally. The result is an uncomfortable sense of not fitting in, of being 'in between', that can be confusing and disheartening for many, who see themselves as living on the margins of childhood and adulthood at the same time.

In such cases, because of the challenges that boys and girls face when they become parents, family members of young parents end up taking responsibility for taking care of the child born as well as the parent. These sentiments were common in both FGDs and key informant interviews where respondents explained the complex nature of young parenthood:

"They know that it is a problem in the sense that when the young people impregnate each other the children who are born become the responsibility of the parents. You find that they will marry each other, then after one, two, three, a year or two the marriage ends, they both go back to their parents and the child is taken care of by the mother to the girl. The child you saw seated here is my son's child and she is unwell. The mother is in Grade 9 at that school. [The child] was brought here when she was below 2 years old and she has been under our care since then." (KAT key informant – community: counsellor and chairperson)

"These are children who are still dependent on their parents, so when it comes especially social-economical it's very difficult for them to be independent. You find that they still cook together with their parents, even when the child is born, who takes care of the child, it's their parents ... if she is a single parent it's not easy. I am sure the burden also goes back to the parents." (KAT key informant – health worker)

Some young parents confirmed that they were provided material and financial support from some of their family members. Most of the girls reported that their families assumed responsibility for meeting the basic needs of their child and grandchild, such as food, especially when the boy and/or his family did not make these contributions. Such sentiments were overwhelmingly expressed in all three sites, especially by single young parents and those who divorced.

"My parents? They provide soap for washing clothes and food. And when times are hard it means we have to live with that, because that's how village life is." (KAT NM G 03: never-married girl, Katete, 16)

"It is my uncle ... He leaves money, we buy sugar and cook porridge for the baby, and when he leaves money and I need something for the baby I use the money." (MBK NM G 01: never-married girl, Mazabuka, 14; pregnant at 14)

"My aunt [helps us] when she has money and sometimes when she is not around and I am given money, [the child's grandfather] sends money for washing powder, lotion and the like. Even when I have money, I buy washing powder so that she is looking clean and the child

eats what we eat as well.” (KAL DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; married at 16 and divorced at 17)

Young men and boys also reported that as much as they had tried to support their children, their parents, mostly mothers or grandfathers, also assisted in parenting. This was also the case among girls and young women who were unmarried mothers and those who were divorced.

“I get help from my mother and she would give me maybe 50 Kwacha or 100 Kwacha and I go get the things for the baby.” (KAL NM B 01: never-married young man, Kalulushi, 24; became a father at 16)

“The grandmother and myself, when I have some money, when I do some piecework, I buy soap and clothes and at times I buy some food so that my child can be looking good.” (KAT DIV B 01: divorced young man, Katete, 21; married at 19)

“My son’s grandfather from his mother’s side is the one that takes care of the child most. He provides food and other things. I just take washing soap. My ex-wife also cares for the child, ensuring that the baby has bathed and eaten and generally taking care of the child. My life has been hard as I have no means of earning an income.” (KAL DIV B 03, divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20; married at 19 to 16-year-old girlfriend after she became pregnant, divorced after 6 months)

Parenthood as a source of respect

Notwithstanding the economic, social and relational challenges discussed above, young parents enjoyed their positions as mothers and fathers. Despite the fact that most had not intended to become parents when they did, and many people had been critical of the situation they had found themselves in, most described parenthood as a means of fulfilling their expected social roles, especially when it was undertaken together with a spouse in a happy marriage.

Breastfeeding, bathing and clothing the baby – these were the pleasures girls and young women described. Young mothers, and especially fathers, were explicit about how becoming a parent had improved their social status among their peers and the community more generally.

“[My friends] started respecting me because now I was a father ... the community also respect me now in the way they call and regard me now that I am father to someone.” (MBK MB 01: married young man, Mazabuka, 20; married at 18, dropped out of school in Grade 9)

“People now give me more respect, unlike when I didn’t have a child.” (KAT SP G 01: married young woman, Katete, 18; pregnant and married at 18)

“I have gained respect in that now people and my friends call me by my child’s name ‘Father of ‘Given’ unlike before.” (KAL DIV B 02: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 22; became a father and married at 16, to 13-year-old girl)

Young men’s aspirations to be a father have been reported in other contexts where there are few other means of demonstrating masculinity, such as through gainful employment. For those in these circumstances, fathering a child is often the only way to show their power and to establish themselves as a man in society (Hendricks, Swartz and Bhana 2010; Chimbiri 2007).

2.4. Separation, divorce and remarriage

This study also explored the lives of boys and girls and young people who have separated or divorced after marrying as an adolescent. The focus was on better understanding the reasons for separation or divorce, who is involved in the decision to divorce, reactions from family and the community, and experiences of life after divorce.

Reasons for separation or divorce

Young couples in this study became separated or divorced for a number of reasons. Among these, four main factors emerged in discussions with married, single and divorced children and young people, as well as with peers, adult parents to the couples, service providers and other members of the community. The first is related to the inability of the husband to meet the economic and material needs of the household. When this responsibility went unfulfilled for a significant period of time and there was no sign that things would change, some girls and young women decided to leave the marriage. Those who did so inevitably had the support of their family and hence had a place where they could move to – none of the female respondents left marriages when they did not have safe households to move to:

“The fights and insulting my parents and not leaving food at home and not leaving money for soap ... He would just give me a coin and go and drink with his friend ... so I decided to leave.” (MBK DIV G 01: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 19; married at 16)

In other cases, parents and other family members themselves chose to remove their daughters from material circumstances that they deemed unacceptably poor; some advised their sons-in-law to return to school in order to improve their capacity to provide for the family and reassured the couple that they could reunite once the young man had shown himself able to provide for a family.

“They came, her uncle came to our place there and said that we have seen that this guy can't manage to keep another person, especially because he is not working and did not complete school because if he had a certificate at least he could do something, so we have decided to withdraw the child ... This girl is just going to be home so if this gentleman has other plans for her, we will wait until the boy completes school or whatever it is that he will be doing and if they love each other, they will get married.” (KAL DIV B 01: divorced boy, Kalulushi, 22; married at 16)

“What happened was that when she went to give birth, she was taken that side [to her family]. She told them how we were living. Then her grandmother did not feel good so she said that [my wife] won't come back here, that 'you are both young, there is nothing you know, at least you should go back to school. Then when you are done, that's when you are going get married' ...” (MBK DIV B 03: divorced boy, Mazabuka, 20, married at 19 to a 16-year-old girl after making her pregnant)

The struggle to meet the costs of caring for a wife and child overwhelmed some boys and young men. Having exhausted all available avenues for support, a few reported instigating separation or divorce on these grounds.

“I initiated the idea of the divorce as I was unable to take care of my wife and child. I had no job and it was hard for me to buy food to feed the family. They would sleep on an empty stomach and I thought I was just troubling my wife. My wife understood and went back to her parents. I gave her most of the things in the house and only remained with a mattress.” (KAL DIV B 03: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20)

“Ah it was so difficult because everything was dependent on my uncle, because by then I did not have any other source of income to help support my child and wife. So I think that was the major challenge I had to go on with marriage.” (KAL DIV B 01: divorced boy, Kalulushi, 22; married at 16 and divorced at 18)

Although boys and young men generally received support from their families when they divorced under these circumstances, it is striking the extent to which they were teased and shamed by community members for failing to meet the financial needs of their wife and child. Because this

role was understood to be the sole proviso of husbands, open and often public shaming was rarely experienced by young women in the way that it was by young men.

“They [my family] were like, ‘Let her go if her relatives want her, which means they have seen a problem. She is not our child so we can’t make the decision’ ... My friends started laughing at me that I have failed to keep someone’s child ... I felt very bad.” (MBK DIV B 03: divorced boy, Mazabuka, 20; married at 19 to a 16-year-old girl after making her pregnant)

“I have been perceived as bad for separating with my wife. People laugh at me a lot for failing to take care of my family.” (KAL DIV B 03: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 20)

The second main reason for separation or divorce, reported by couples themselves and informants of all ages in each of the communities, was unfaithfulness in marriage and husbands’ and wives’ concomitant lack of trust in one another. Interviews with girls and young women often involved discussions of husbands’ sexual transgressions. Some said that they could not remain with someone who did not want to be in the marriage:

“I caught him cheating on me and after discussing this issue he told me he is no longer interested in me, therefore, I also allowed our marriage to end.” (KAT DIV G 02: divorced young woman, Katete, 19; married at 15)

“One day I found him cheating on me with another lady but did not do anything about it. But he repeated the same and I caught him again. That’s how I started complaining to him about what he’s doing and he started telling me that if I didn’t want to be married to him I should just leave instead of not wanting him to have fun. I explained to him that I still wanted us to be together but he should change. He told me that if it’s that, then we should just divorce, so that’s how we divorced.” (KAT DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Katete, 18; married at 13, divorced at 17)

Boys and young men also reported that they had divorced because their wives were promiscuous and they could not trust them to be faithful. This was emotionally painful for husbands, as it was for the young girls and women interviewed. However, young men (and not young women) also revealed a profound fear of exposure to HIV as a result of their wife’s behaviour. That young men were open about these concerns and young women were not may reflect the social acceptability in many settings that men can engage in multiple sexual relationships yet this behaviour is taboo for women.

“You will find messages on WhatsApp ... she could do anything she wanted. Sometimes she would sneak out of the house at night, when you look you just get surprised that the child has started crying. You try to look for her ...” (MBK DIV B 01: divorced young man, Mazabuka, 24; married at 17)

“At first everything was going on well. But what made our marriage end was that my wife started doing other things that I didn’t know, she started going out with other men. So I said to myself that I don’t know the status of those people she is going out with so she might just end up killing me. So it’s better she finds someone she has in mind than to infect me because it looks as if she no longer wants me.” (KAT DIV B 01: divorced young man, Katete, 21; married at 19)

The environment of hurt and mistrust that developed between couples sometimes led directly to divorce, as evidenced in the above quotes. At other times, tensions related to infidelity led husbands to be violent towards their wives when they perceived them to be demanding or overly judgmental: “He used to sleep with other women so that’s why we ended our marriage ... He was the kind of person that would beat me up when I complained about his behaviour” (KAT DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Katete, 18; married at 13 and mother to three children). Simmering conflicts and strains were also exacerbated by husbands drinking excessive amounts of alcohol,

according to girls and young women, adult mothers and fathers and service providers in all communities, especially in Kalulushi, where out-of-school, unemployed boys and young men were reported to begin drinking early in the day and to be drunk by mid-morning. Girls and young women said that this violence was particularly prevalent when they declined to have sex with their husbands, or when husbands were not in love with their wives but had felt forced to marry because of pregnancy. It was the desire to escape these experiences of physical violence that was the third main reason for divorce among young couples in this study. When this violence was thought to seriously threaten the well-being of the affected young woman, her family tended to encourage her decision to leave the marriage.

“My husband had a bad behaviour, he wanted to have sex with me during the time when I have my periods. So I got so surprised why he would want to have sex with me when I was attending ... So I refused and we started arguing. Then he got a knife and threatened me that if I don't have sex with him he will kill me. That's how I managed to overpower him and get out of the bedroom and left my child inside. I slept in a different room and the following morning I told everything to my relatives and left my matrimonial home.” (KAT DIV G 01: divorced young woman, Katete, 18; became pregnant and married at 15, divorced at 18)

“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 just didn't want me – that is why he was doing all this. 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.” (KAL DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; became pregnant then married at 16)

The fourth reason for divorce and separation was abandonment of the wife by the husband. A small number of husbands fled marriages when they were overwhelmed with their unmet responsibilities. This behaviour, however, was infrequent. Normally, when a young man fled it was upon learning of pregnancy, not after marriage. It was far more common for a young husband to leave his wife and child to seek employment in another community in the district, or in a large urban centre, such as Lusaka. In these cases, young men often met a new girlfriend and established a family with her in the new location; a desire for divorce had not been expressed upon departure (although it may have been the intention), but became the default situation after a period of time. All instances explored in the research involved the young men in these situations ceasing to provide support to their wives and children.

“After his relative called him to go and work, that is how he disappeared and I only got a report that he had married again where he was so this is how I have just remained like this ... That's how he left and he has switched off all his phones and then his relatives started telling me that he had married and had a child there. I was pregnant here but he never left or sent anything.” (KAL DIV G 02: divorced girl, Kalulushi, 19)

“When he goes he would go for a long time without coming back ... he would be unreachable and when he comes back he would say that if I am tired of staying here I should go ... He even stopped paying rent ... and got his clothes and left saying that if I remain then I will be paying rent, that is how I left ... Later he called to tell me that he had married and left Lusaka for the Copperbelt and that if I am lucky he will be sending support for the children ... I didn't stay, I also left. It ended and the court said it was not marriage since he didn't pay *lobola*.” (MBK DIV G 03: divorced girl, Mazabuka, 22; pregnant and married at 16)

Actors in decision-making for divorce or separation

The decision to divorce or separate was influenced by different actors, and depended in large part on the extent of social and familial support available to young women and men in marriage. In this study's sample, divorced young women and men tended to be those who had not been living with extended family. Instead, they were largely those who had been living independently

as a couple at the time of divorce. Some of the reasons for marital breakdown, such as the experience of profound levels of violence, were those that could only be realised in this more autonomous household set up. In these cases, young women and men often decided on their own to end their relationship, usually after a period of prolonged struggle and an understanding that there was no foreseeable way to remain together.

Not all young married couples who lived outside the households of extended family and in-laws had strained relationships with family. In these cases, parents, siblings, grandparents and others were in close touch with the couple and were up to date on the state of the relationship and the challenges being faced within the couple. These people provided support when they could and did their best to monitor the well-being of their loved ones. There were a few instances in this study where mothers encouraged their sons, or at least did not dissuade them, to leave their marriages when they felt that their grandchild was not being adequately cared for. Likewise, when family members learnt of ongoing marital violence and abuse against a young female relative, they sometimes – but not always – stepped in and dissolved the marriage.

“It was my grandfather. People used to take reports to him and one day he witnessed it for himself and he saw and heard the insults ... What my husband used to do, insulting me, telling me that he did not love or want me and starving me. My grandfather also wasn't happy because I was his grandchild.” (KAL DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; became pregnant then married at 16)

These examples of assertive and protective action by family stand in contrast to the situation of some girls and young women in particular. For those who had no supportive relationships with family, and in some cases few friends to rely on for comfort and advice, the decision to stay or leave a marriage was a solitary and often frightening decision.

Life after divorce

Despite the apparent stigma that some young divorced people experienced in the community, most reported that life had improved since the dissolution of their marriage. They expressed relief and very few voiced regret; this was especially true for girls and young women who had left abusive marriages, all of whom described a huge improvement in their emotional and physical well-being as a result of having left this suffering behind. Some were disinclined to marry again, which, in a society that reveres marriage as a core institution (despite abundant evidence of the problems that it can cause), is a telling reflection of the extent of the challenges they had experienced.

“I go to the fields alone, there is no one to beat me up and now I decide everything by myself and I don't depend on anyone.” (KAT DIV G 02: divorced young woman, Katete, 19; married at 15)

“How can you stay in marriage when you are being beaten and being chased and told you are not wanted, how can you stay there? I like that I am single as now I wouldn't even want to get married because I will be thinking he is just the same as my ex-husband. It is fine just like that and you would even wish to just be single and not get married?” (KAL DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; married at 16)

“I have become free minded and have less worries because my parents are helping me to raise my child and they are providing things like soap, lotion and there are no stiff rules like how it was with my husband.” (KAT DIV G 01: divorced young woman, Katete, 18; pregnant then married at 15, divorced at 18)

Divorced young men and boys also expressed similar sentiments. They, too, reported a sense of relief to have left their marriages behind:

“Now I am now free and feeling good ... A lot of things are difficult but when you are alone you are free because you will not have a lot of things to think about but when you are in a marriage you do. My life now is okay because I am free, I can do things that can help me in my life without a disturbance from anyone.” (KAT DIV B 01: divorced young man, Katete, 21; married at 19)

Despite the widely shared view that divorce had brought an improvement to their psychological well-being, the majority of divorced young people continued to struggle with the same material and financial challenges that they had lived with in marriage. Girls, in particular, bemoaned their loss of autonomy to make decisions on financial matters because they no longer controlled the budget; as divorce often led them to return to reside with their family, they once again became dependent on their guardian's decisions on how resources were to be allocated. None owned any property and very few were able to salvage any belongings from their marriage, aside from the occasional cooking pot. This situation left them entirely dependent on families for their well-being, an experience that was difficult for some to handle when they had tasted the independence marriage had provided.

“It has been difficult. It is difficult [especially with] the children. The children need a lot of things, they need clothes, food; they need to bathe and eat ... The court said if he doesn't want me then he should be supporting the children ... The court said three hundred for this and another three when the other child is born [but] he has not paid from the time he went.” (MBK DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 22; became pregnant and married at 16)

“When I was married, I was making my own budget and that made me happy but this time my grandmother makes budgets for me. My grandmother accepted me in her house and welcomed me ... This time I have financial difficulties, when I was married I was able to have money and make budgets but this time I rarely have access to income and [cannot] make my own budgets.” (KAL DIV G 01: divorced young woman, Kalulushi, 19; became pregnant and married at 18; divorced at 19).

Unlike the girls and young women interviewed, a few boys described disappointment that their marriages had ended. One explained that he had been raised by a single parent and that he did not wish the same for his child. Another bemoaned the suffering that his former wife and child had been enduring since the divorce. He, like a few others, said he missed his wife and continued to feel great affection for her.

“My heart is in great pain because my ex-wife's siblings are all dead and there will be no one to take care of her; and the fact that she stays alone is more or less like killing her. Further, she always blames me for having caused her current situation and she thinks that if she was in school, she would have been doing something else now and mostly I miss her encouragement and the advice she used to give me and I still love her.” (KAL DIV B 02: divorced young man, Kalulushi, 22; became a father and married at 16, to 13-year-old girl)

The issues raised by young people related to divorce of separation were also discussed with key informants and adult parents in all communities. The general view expressed was that because children and young people enter marriage early, they are not psychologically mature enough to handle its pressures, nor are they financially independent to meet the material needs of a family. Further, community members argued that many young married people are those who were raised by single parents, step parents or grandparents, either as a result of death or divorce. They asserted that this combination of immaturity, inexperience and lack of stable upbringing did not produce stable marriages. One teacher in Kalulushi detailed the complexities that surround marriage and divorce among young people in her community:

“Divorce among young marriages is common, very much common. As I said, we have seen many are raised by single mothers. Like the girl who got married at 14 and divorced later,

the one you talked to, I know the situation. I have been there from the beginning up to where she is. This mother, the father, they are both alive, so they separated at first and then later on divorced. So the man went and married someone else, moved out of here and went and settled in a different town. The woman also married someone else. Now, the one she married was quite responsible for the children. So he is the one who managed to send them back to school until they qualified to Grade 8. He did everything, unfortunately, he passed away ... that's how the girl got married and now she is divorced for the second time." (KAL STK: teacher, Kalulushi)

Community members, adult parents and service providers also emphasised the suffering that divorce brought to the young children of a marriage. Those most likely to step in and provide support in these cases are the parents to the divorced girl or young woman. In the vast majority of cases, these households were already struggling to meet their basic needs and the requirement to support the divorcée and her child (or 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. Those who wish to return to school often cannot do so because of the necessity to ration family resources among an even bigger household. Most of those who manage to re-enrol were said to eventually drop out again due to economic pressures. Girls and young women in these circumstances were said to be especially vulnerable to engaging in sexual relationships with young and older men for economic survival and to support their children. This behaviour also puts them at risk of getting pregnant and acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Others end up remarrying to escape their challenging circumstances; sometimes these desperate measures lead them into abusive and violent marriages, struggling in poverty, thus restarting the whole cycle all over again.

2.5. Future plans and hopes

For many of the children and young men and women in this study, the power to act to change one's own circumstances was felt to be an unattainable and unrealistic dream. While many had tried over time to grasp opportunities and experiences, life was described as a series of events that had happened to them. By 'God's will' or otherwise, they had been or were not able to go to school, and to get or not get paid work or some other means of supporting themselves or their families. Very few appeared angry when describing how things had not unfolded the way that they had hoped. Most appeared dispassionate; there was a sense of inevitability in the way they described their lives and circumstances. Many were regretful, most often because their schooling had been curtailed. There was a sense of resignation among many young men and women regarding the situations they found themselves in.

Despite this apparent acquiescence, the young people in this study did exercise their agency whenever possible, constrained as it may have been. Both girls and boys grew up with hopes and aspirations and tried as best as possible to hold on to these, even in the most trying of circumstances. Whether single, divorced or married, they expressed a number of hopes for their future. Some had ideas and plans for how to realise them. These included going back to school, engaging in economic activities to improve their own and their families' well-being, and improving their children's future.

Going back to school

By far the most commonly articulated aspiration of married girls and boys and young people in this study was the desire to re-enrol in school and complete their secondary education. They hoped that doing so would give them a chance to overcome their economic and social problems and help others in their families, especially their children. Many hoped to find benefactors to pay

their school fees because the prevailing circumstances made enrolment and retention impossible. Girls and young women in all three communities shared this view:

“I just hope to go back to school once I give birth. That is the only thing on my mind. I would love to find a sponsor who can take me back to school since next month I will give birth. So I am thinking of 2019, I need to go back to school. By then the baby will have grown a bit. The only plan I have is going back to school.” (KAL MG 06: married girl, Kalulushi, 17; became pregnant and married at 16)

“I think if in the coming years if I can go back to school that would have a great benefit ... I would like to be enrolled in school.” (KAT MG 03: married girl, Katete, 18)

“I still want to go to school. If I can find someone who can help me, I can go so that I find a better future for my children, unlike having more children, it will just be like increasing problems when I am failing to take care of these two.” (MBK DIV G 03: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 22; became pregnant and married at 16)

Boys and young men also echoed these sentiments. Most pointed out that going to school was the only way to get a good job, support their families and secure their future.

“It is just education, because without school I can’t succeed and if you don’t find a job, others just steal at the mines and go to jail. I need to raise money for school, even for night school.” (KAL NM B 01: never married boy, Kalulushi, 24; became a father at 16)

“I am admiring those that are going back to school, if I would have such an opportunity I would also go, if I get educated I can also help my children and family ... I need financial assistance to enable me to go back to school. If only I can find that help and go back to school.” (KAT MB 01: married young man, Katete, 22)

Economic activities to improve well-being

Young people also dreamed of improving their general economic well-being and that of their families. In the urban and peri-urban contexts of Kalulushi and Mazabuka, they articulated intentions to start small businesses or to find jobs.

“I want to do business selling vegetables, tomatoes and maize; when I start selling, I want the child to go to school.” (MBK DIV G 01: divorced young woman, Mazabuka, 19; married at 16)

“My plan is business; selling second-hand clothes, running a stationery and owning land for the purpose of constructing rental houses.” (KAL SP B 02: married boy, Kalulushi, 24; married at 20 to an 18 year old whom he had impregnated two years earlier)

The type of businesses males and females wished to engage in reflected the dominant gender roles in their communities. Girls more often tried to sell small cooked items, such as popcorn or maize. Boys and young men were more likely to state their desire to work in formal employment, which is common practice in the sugar plantations of Southern Province and mining in the Copperbelt. Their hope was that finding a job would provide them not only with financial independence but also enable them to leave their parents’ homes to stay on their own.

“What I hope to do is to move away from my parents’ place. I need to leave them once I start a job. I am just pushing for a job and if my parents help me find a job, I will leave.” (KAL MB 01: married young man, Kalulushi, 20)

“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 to stay away from my parents’ home, this would make me more responsible and not dependent ... you know that even if you are a parent yourself, when you are with your own parents you behave childishly.” (MBK MB 03: married young man, Mazabuka, 21; married at 19, became a father at 17 to the same young woman he married)

Rural young people's aspirations and future plans also reflected the social and economic context in terms of what they imagined to be possible given their situation and exposure. In Katete, both young males and females articulated a desire to engage in farming. Some spoke of wanting to own property, including cattle, and to live in decent housing. One young man in Katete was clear: "I want to enrol my children in school ... so that if I die I will leave a better foundation for their future" (KAT SP B 02: married young man, Katete, 24; married at 20 to a 17-year-old girl).

Improving their children's future

Some young parents focused their hopes on improving their children's future. Both sexes voiced their intentions to ensure their child has access to education and the basic needs for living. Girls and young women were particularly clear in their assertion of the importance of education as a means of reducing the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

"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 start trading then my child would not suffer, he will go to school." (KAL DIV G 02: divorced girl, Kalulushi, 21; married at 17)

"I don't want my child to pass through the life I have passed through. Since I want to go back to school, I have plans for my child. By the time my child is 4 years old, I will have been done with school and doing something else so that I can educate my child." (KAL MG 06: married girl, Kalulushi, 17; became pregnant and married at 16)

"I have plans for my child, if I happen to finish school, I educate her, she can't pass what I went through, and at least it should be opposite." (MBK NM G 03: never-married young woman, Mazabuka, 21; became pregnant at 17)

Young men and boys were also heavily invested in the view that education was the only means of ensuring that their children will not be trapped in poverty.

"I am planning to enrol my child in school so that she learns and completes school. I just need to work hard and find a place for us to live so that even if I died they won't be left stranded." (KAL MB 03: married boy, Kalulushi, 18; married at 17, dropped out of school in Grade 6)

"I would want her to grow well ... she should even start school so that when she grows up she should help me." (MBK NM B 03: never-married boy, Mazabuka, 19; became a father at 18)

These comments and the narratives provided by many other young people in the three communities clearly demonstrate how young people's aspirations and future plans reflect and are limited by the worlds in which they live, where poverty is widespread and deep and where education is understood to be the key to a better life. The development agenda of the Government of Zambia and its partners needs to pay particular attention to enhancing young people's ability to achieve these hopes, through the provision of more accessible and higher quality schooling and other services. However, perhaps as much attention is needed to the circumstances that inhibit young men and women from imagining a future in which a variety of aspirations – and lives very different to their own – could be achieved.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the past few years, several studies have identified the drivers of marriage and pregnancy among adolescents and young people in Zambia. None that we know of has explored the perspectives and experiences of girls and young women and boys and young men who are married or live together, or are divorced, or are single parents. Yet evidence from a variety of sources – both qualitative and quantitative – suggest that these experiences are common but often unrecognised features of adolescence in Zambia and elsewhere. Understanding more about the social norms that inform contradictory messages about sex, and about how young people in these circumstances make sense of and realise their roles as children and children-in-law, spouses, parents, friends and community members is crucial to the design and implementation of policies and programmes to meet their needs and those of their sons, daughters and families.

How a young person fares in marriage depends to a large extent on whether they chose to marry of their own volition, why they did so, and the circumstances surrounding their union. Although material and financial hardship is a reality for all children and young people who participated in this study, those marriages that are established on the basis of mutual love and respect, with familial support and encouragement, are undoubtedly the most successful. (These types of marriage were rare among the study sample). Less positive and lasting are those in which one or both spouses feels pressured or forced to marry, often to someone whom they do not know well, or do not like or respect. Those couples that live independent of their parents and parents-in-law enjoy a greater sense of freedom to make their own decisions about domestic matters and child rearing than those who reside as dependents, but may also face greater financial hardship. Relationships characterised by lack of opportunity, unemployment, spousal conflict and mistrust are unvaryingly unhappy. Alcohol abuse and violence by the male partners are alarmingly common in such situations and often lead to separation and divorce. In addition, married girls and young women take on the vast amount of the work required for subsistence and family and household functioning. 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. As both a woman and a child, they often find themselves with very little decision-making power.

These findings suggest that many of the problems young couples face in marriage are not different from those experienced by people who marry at older ages. This fact alone is noteworthy as it highlights the need to broaden the scope of understanding of what are considered to be ‘children’s’, as opposed to ‘adults’, issues: typically, children are seen as a category of individuals in need of care and protection and not as focal points of webs of relationships in which they are intimately connected to others, not only as offspring but also as parents, spouses, children and children-in-law. Seeing things in this way means envisioning support to children and young people in new ways, including, for example, providing information and support on sexual and reproductive health, basic child care and early childhood development, conflict resolution, and relationship counselling.

None of this, however, is currently available to young people in these situations. The vast majority of the young people who participated in this study had limited information on sex and pregnancy prevention and little access to contraception and reproductive health services. Health clinics were said to be unfriendly to teenagers and to stigmatise those who wanted information on sexual health. In fact, most of the information children and young people had on pregnancy prevention was made available to them after they had become pregnant or after their baby had been born.

One meaningful difference in the experience of young and older couples is that married boys and girls and young people occupy a liminal position that is unique to them. As married parents, they are responsible for themselves, their spouse and their child(ren). But because pregnancy preceded marriage in nearly all cases, and was usually unintentional, few interviewed for this study felt that their circumstances were the result of 'free' choice and were instead a mere reflection of their need to make the best of the challenging situation they found themselves in. As a result, many felt conflicted about their responsibilities and constrained by their role as spouse and parent, particularly when it meant deferring their aspirations to complete school or to imagine an easier, more carefree future. At the same time, most voiced concerns that they did not have the maturity or experience to manage their problems effectively, and thus were required to rely on their parents or other family members to support them to meet their own and their family's basic needs. This dependence left young men, in particular, feeling as though they were incapable not only of living free of these responsibilities but also of competently performing their role as provider. Girls were less conflicted but equally overwhelmed at times by the sheer responsibility they had come to assume in such a short period of time.

Such overpowering sentiments were equally prevalent among those young mothers and fathers who had never married or established a household with the parent of their child, or who had been divorced. However, it is striking that those in these circumstances tended to have more support from a wider network of people than those who were married, particularly from parents and friends. Certainly, those girls and young women who lived in abject poverty with parents and other family members struggled enormously to provide for their children; the need to do so augmented unmarried and divorced girls' vulnerability to engaging in sexual activity for survival, especially for those who were not enrolled in school. Doing so increased the likelihood that they would become pregnant with another child and start the cycle all over again. Never-married and divorced boys and young men in similar economic and material circumstances also faced pressure to contribute money or food to their household but were more likely to re-enrol in school than were divorced girls, in large part because they were not residing with their child, or if they were, their mother was the one providing direct care.

For those whose marriages ended because of violence or the inability of a young man to meet his family's basic needs, divorce was often understood as a reasonable and acceptable outcome and girls and young women were usually provided with support in such instances. Among those girls and boys and young people who were unmarried parents, the majority had families who accepted what had happened and opened their household and family to include the child and grandchild. However, some families that struggled with economic survival confronted a challenging dilemma in terms of whether to support their daughter's divorce when her marriage was a source of livelihood for the family. Those who supported their daughters in these situations often faced not only an increase in household expenditure (because of the increase in household size) but a reduced capacity to meet their basic needs, in situations where resources were already very constrained.

Ultimately, this study has revealed the complex and varied experiences of young married, divorced and single mothers and fathers in Zambia. It has highlighted the inseparability of pregnancy and marriage in this context and the need to conceptualise both issues as overlapping and interconnected. A combination of economic hardship, insufficient formal education and lack of information and sexual and reproductive health services, together with the personal, familial and social expectations of the roles and responsibilities of children as they grow older, adolescents' growing desire for personal autonomy and growing awareness of their own and others' sexuality, creates a perfect storm that has the potential not only to thwart their own hopes for the future, but also to threaten that of their children.

Recommendations¹⁹

- 1. Recognise that despite the law against child marriage, many young people are driven into such unions by a combination of poverty and other factors.**
- 2. Improve access to quality and affordable education and provide children, young people and their families with incentives for enrolling and staying in school.** Many children and young people are already out of school when they get pregnant and marry. Despite the National Re-entry to School Policy, those who drop out to give birth or care for a child are usually unable to pay the fees needed to re-enrol.
- 3. Provide safe, appropriate, targeted economic support and opportunities for adolescent girls and boys and for their families.** The greater the hardship and the fewer the resources, the higher the likelihood that girls and young women engage in transactional sex to acquire the necessities for survival.
- 4. Improve and expand sexual and reproductive health services, including access to contraception and abortion services, and ensure that young unmarried women and men are able to access services and information about sexual and reproductive health and rights.** The vast majority of pregnancies appear to result from a lack of information and services and not from a desire to become a parent.
- 5. Provide social support for single parents and separated and divorced children and young people.** Children of single parents or without parents appear especially vulnerable to marriage and parenthood at a young age.
- 6. Engage men and boys to understand how notions of masculinity, sexuality and power are learnt and how they can be transformed so that they can strengthen gender equality, including through reducing violence against women and girls. Involve young women in these discussions as well.** Coercive sex and violence against women and girls appears to be a regular feature of everyday married life among children and young people.
- 7. Provide targeted support and enhanced services to girls and young women who are sexually active, pregnant, married, cohabitating, and single mothers.** Girls and young women generally undertake the majority of the negative consequences of marriage, divorce and parenthood.
- 8. Provide 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.** Violence within marriage is often tolerated when the perpetrator is the breadwinner or contributing to the economic sustainability of in-laws.
- 9. Improve the evidence base on young people who marry or cohabit or become parents before the age of 18.** Despite laudable and important efforts to reduce the numbers of girls and boys who marry below the age of 18, there remains a sizeable population of adolescents and young people who are married and divorced and parenting small children. Those in these circumstances need support to thrive; better understanding of their circumstances and experiences is a crucial first step in the design of targeted and appropriate policies and services to meet their needs.

19 Many of these recommendations overlap with emerging learning from other studies outlined in Child Frontiers (2018) New Evidence on Child Marriage, prepared for the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage.

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**YOUNG
MARRIAGE
AND
PARENTHOOD
STUDY**



Young Lives
Oxford Department of International Development (ODID)
3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK
www.younglives.org.uk
Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk
Twitter: @yloxford and @yMAPStudy