



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of Malawi

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Stock Photo, Malawi

In 2020-21, Iris Group conducted a series of gender-intentional political economy analyses (PEA) on the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in eight countries. This brief is a summary of the full PEA report on CEFM in Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Landlocked in southern Africa, Malawi has achieved economic stability, albeit with high poverty and vulnerability to environmental disruptions due to climate change and its dependence on agriculture.¹ Though Malawi passed a Gender Equality Act outlawing sex-based discrimination and sexual harassment,² women “still fare worse than their male counterparts on most social and economic indicators, including political participation, violence and economic empowerment.”³

Malawi’s child marriage prevalence rate is the fourth highest among East and Southern African countries.⁴ It has declined in recent years; among women aged 20-24 years, it fell from 50% in 2010 to 42% in 2015.⁵ Although median age at first marriage is five years older for men (23 years), Malawi is among the top 20 countries with high rates of boys’ early marriage, with 7% marrying before age 18.⁶

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Malawi consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews, with findings within the following four pillars of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

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FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- Differences in child marriage prevalence rates between regions are slight and are often driven by poverty instead of ethnicity-based cultural differences.⁴ The average age of first marriage and first sex for girls is lowest in the Southern Region,⁵ and child marriage hotspots exist in the Northern and Southern Regions.^{7,8}
- Girls from urban areas marry nearly two years later than their rural counterparts,⁵ though 1 in 3 urban women are still married by the time they are 18 years old.⁹
- Poverty drives child marriage in Malawi. Districts with the highest child marriage rates also have the highest proportion of poor children.⁴ Adult decision-makers reported that child marriage is largely due to a lack of education and job opportunities.¹⁰
- Gender inequality is foundational to the practice of child marriage, as it drives power imbalances that perpetuate CEFM.⁷

Rules of the Game

- The 2015 Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill bans under-18 marriage and the 2017 Constitution amendment eliminates parental consent exceptions to the law,¹¹ though implementation challenges persist.^{12,13} International commitments have translated to domestic legal reform.⁷
- Social norms stigmatize girls' sexuality and premarital pregnancy, which is a main driver of child marriage, yet traditional practices encourage early sexual debut.^{10,14,15} Contraception is believed to make girls more promiscuous and premarital pregnancies are seen as a family disgrace.¹⁰
- In some areas, sexual initiation ceremonies, forceful "sexual cleansing" by men, transactional sex between older benefactors and young people, bride price, and other traditions enforcing patriarchal control over sexuality and marriage contribute to child marriage.^{8,16-18}

Here and Now

- The Government has shown commitment to addressing child marriage through legal change, constitutional change, and a National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage.
- Traditional leaders and chiefs play an important role in the fight against child marriage both locally and nationally. Some chiefs have taken an active role against child marriage, setting by-laws with higher ages of marriage and breaking up child marriages.(Steinhaus et al., 2019)
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have extensive history working on child marriage, primarily through programs that focus on social norms, sexual and reproductive health, and education.
- COVID-19 and the impacts of climate change, such as hurricanes, may contribute to increases in child marriage and undo the current trend of declining rates.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - Years of effective advocacy from civil society and international bodies have generated meaningful progress on legal and policy reform at the national and local levels.
 - Evaluations of child marriage-related programs have provided valuable learnings about what works on a local level.
 - Programs have employed multisectoral efforts to address child marriage, including empowerment, schooling, sexual and reproductive health, and norms change.
- **Obstacles:**
 - National advocacy efforts need more champions beyond just the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability & Social Welfare.
 - Poor understanding of research results and lack of data management hinder understanding of child marriage research.
 - There is a lack of coordination between child marriage programs in Malawi.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Kenya's Malawi presents productive ground for progress on child marriage.** Among high-prevalence countries, Malawi lacks some of factors that make child marriage rates difficult to move in other countries (e.g., economic value for younger brides) and has several characteristics that facilitate further reductions.
- **Malawi can become a model for addressing child marriage driven by poverty and pregnancy.** By providing access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, changing norms on adolescents' use of contraceptives, and economic empowerment opportunities linked with education and/or livelihoods programs for girls, investments could make sizable headway.
- **Expanding child marriage efforts can build on previous investments.** Investments in projects to decrease child marriage, as well as those for gender equality and on the health of adolescent girls and young women more broadly, are synergistic with an increased investment to further reduce child marriage.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **Strong and experienced civil society, including youth-led and women-led groups, are capable of sustained child marriage efforts.** Malawi's CSOs working on child marriage are experienced and engaged, and in many cases, they have worked on this issue for decades, giving them needed authenticity for working at the community level.

- **Coordination can build on National Strategy and positive relationships between civil society and government.** The National Strategy needs more specific benchmarks, but it provides a useful initial organizing tool for coordinated programming, as well as an ambitious reduction target of 20% by 2023.
- **Traditional leaders can be an engine of change, even in the absence of child marriage programming.** If chiefs lead on norms around adolescent sexuality, it may be of tremendous benefit to normalizing youth-friendly contraceptive access.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Economic empowerment interventions – intertwined with youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health – need an external boost.** With half of Malawi's population living in poverty, and girls seeing little future outside of pregnancy and marriage, sparking economic possibilities is critical.
- **With prolific programming, improved coordination and communication is essential.** Donors and international organizations should make sure their approaches are both informed by grassroots groups and coordinated, to ensure synergistic efforts.
- **Gender-transformative approaches are essential, and men and boys must be engaged to ensure buy-in.** The emphasis on adolescent girls and young women is critical for disrupting patriarchal norms, but perceptions that boys and men are left out of this programming threaten to undermine success.

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