



ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALAWI STRATEGY

2018-2023

A POLICY REVIEW



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite Malawi having a robust ECM Strategy, there has been a spike in child marriage cases and more so during the global pandemic. This policy brief therefore seeks to review the Ending Child Marriage Strategy, specifically looking at the current ECM Strategy for Malawi, the feedback from the ECM Symposium that was facilitated by the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, Malawi and to share recommendations on how to strengthen the ECM Strategy and coordination of efforts in the fight against CM

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Malawi has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with approximately 42 percent of girls married before the age of 18 and 9 percent married below the age of 15.

Malawi has the fourth-highest child marriage rate in East and Southern Africa (ESAR), as shown in Figure 1. Approximately 7 percent of boys marry before the age of 18.

Within the country, there are noteworthy disparities in child marriage rates. Child marriage is higher in rural than urban areas, although there are huge variations within rural areas.

Tackling child marriage is not only a legal obligation, but it is also smart economics and a strategy for achieving Malawi's vision for inclusive and sustainable development.

Malawi has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with approximately 42 percent of girls married before the age of 18, and 9 percent below the age of 15. Some boys, too, are involved in child marriage.

A recent study by the University of Zurich et al. (2018) found an estimated 1 percent of boys marry before the age of 15 and 6 percent below the age of 18. If not addressed, child marriage has severe social, economic, and political consequences.

Malawi launched the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (ECM) in 2018, and the purpose of the strategy was to assist the Government of Malawi to accelerate efforts to end child marriage.

The strategy was from 2018 to 2023.

In 2020, the world experienced the onset and course of a global pandemic, Covid 19. With it, came several challenges and regression in terms of the progress that had been made across various sectors. Child marriage in Malawi was no exception.

Some of the causes of this were reduced family protection of children, reduced household income and/or reliance on outsiders to transport goods and services to the community, girls' gender-imposed household responsibilities such as caring for family members or doing chores as well as increased obstacles to reporting incidents and seeking medical treatment or other support.

The reality on the ground was that despite Malawi having a robust ECM Strategy, there has been a spike in child marriage cases and more so during the global pandemic. In November 2021, the Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare, through the Protection Cluster, led an ECM Symposium. The objective of the symposium was to review the current ECM Strategy and make recommendations in order to ensure the ECM Strategy is responsive to the true needs and realities on the ground in Malawi. For Equality, through the support of The Commonwealth Foundation joined the Malawi Protection Cluster, through the Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare, to review the ECM policy.

THE NATIONAL STRATEGY ON ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Malawi's ECM Strategy was developed within the context of the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS III) and is aimed at operationalizing some of the policy provisions of the National Gender Policy. It is also linked to the country's regional and global commitments including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Union Charter, and other relevant national and international policy and legal documents.

Vision: A Malawi free of Child Marriage.

Goal: To reduce the prevalence of child marriage in Malawi by 20% by 2022

There are six strategic objectives outlined in the strategy and these are:

- To facilitate a positive change in the cultural norms, attitudes, behavior, beliefs and practices that support and promote child marriage;
- To increase access to quality, equitable and relevant education;
- To increase access to comprehensive sexuality education and SRH information and services for adolescent girls and boys;
- To strengthen incomes of girls, families and communities with provision of economic and other livelihood opportunities for the benefit of girls and their families;
- To foster an enabling legal and policy framework which is fully enforced to end child marriage; and
- To strengthen multi-sectoral implementation and coordination mechanisms and monitoring and evaluation structures for ending child marriage.



THE FOCUS AREAS

The ECM Strategy also has six strategic areas of focus and these are:

1. Transformation of Social and Cultural Practices that Promote Child Marriage

- Social norms and practices are key drivers of child marriages and are therefore influenced by attitudes of parents and other family and community members. In most communities, the opinion of families and elders with regards to girls' education, domestic roles, safety, religious practice, sexual relationships, and place in society determine the timing and nature of marriages.

2. Increasing Access to Quality, Equitable, and Relevant Girls' Education

- Programs that provide or increase access to education for girls are crucial to delaying marriage. Girls with more years of schooling are less likely to marry early. Some literature has shown that, in the developing world, a girl who receives seven or more years of education marries on average four years later. Girls with more years of schooling are not only more likely to question the reason.

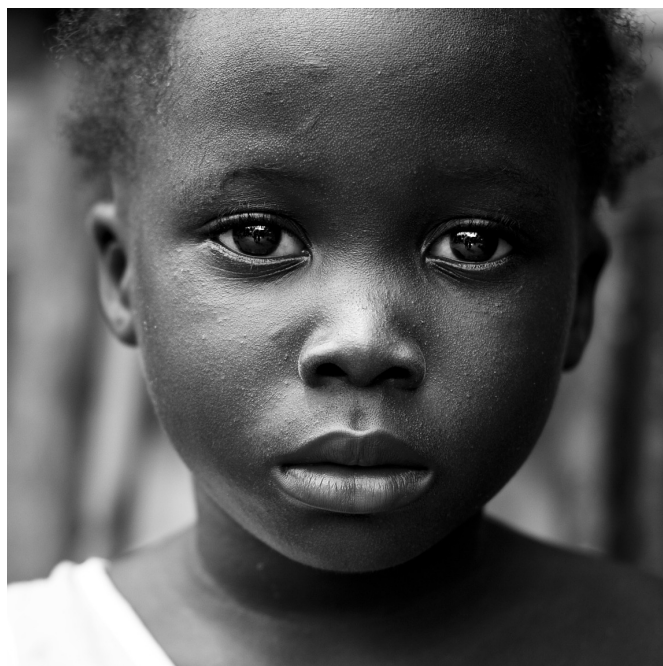
3. Access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education and SRH Information and Services for Adolescent Girls and Boys

- it is important that young people are able to find accurate information about their health and rights and have access to services needed to protect their health. This Strategy, therefore, aims at ensuring that adolescent boys and girls (including child brides) are provided with access to comprehensive sexuality education; services to prevent, diagnose and treat STIs; and counseling on family planning.

4. Economic and Livelihood Empowerment for Girls

- Child marriage is inextricably linked to poverty both as a cause and a consequence⁴³. Child brides are cut off from educational and economic opportunities and are more likely to be poor and remain poor, leaving them dependent on their older partners

- This Strategy focuses on providing girls at risk of child marriage (or their families) with economic incentives to delay marriage and remain in school and support married girls to go back to school. The incentives include opportunities such as entrepreneurial and business skills training, microcredit or savings clubs, support networks, and jobs and job placement services. Expanding opportunities for girls and young women can increase the opportunity cost for child marriages, helping to change social norms that perceive marriage as an easy option



5. Enforcement of Relevant Legislation and Policies to end Child Marriage

- The legal and policy environment is instrumental in changing individual behavior and can signal or even foster shifts in norms away from child marriage. Currently, Malawi has laws prohibiting the practice of child marriages. In addition to having a minimum age of matrimony, the country also has other laws and policies that are directly relevant to safeguarding the rights of girls and women including the right to enter into and dissolve marriage unions freely; the protection from violence in all public and private spaces; and the right to access justice on an equal basis with males, etc.,

6. Strong Coordination Mechanisms

- Integrated, multi-sectoral responses are needed to end child marriage. Coordination, collaboration and communication among different sectors at national and the sub-national level are therefore critical.

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE SYMPOSIUM FEEDBACK



The symposium brought together various stakeholders including young people, some of who are survivors of child marriage, civil society, development partners as well at the Government. What was clear was that despite Malawi having a seemingly excellent ECM strategy, there were some gaps and opportunities that were noted by the participants. This section will zone in to some of the challenges that were raised and thereafter, the recommendations to curb these challenges.

Poverty is one of the root causes of child marriage. Girls and boys often get into marriages because of poverty. Marriage is seen as a way out of a poor financial state. Older men offer financial support to families in exchange for their daughters' hand in marriage.

Parents also exert pressure to have grandchildren, forcing girls and boys into early sexual onset and ultimately, marriage. Child marriage also disrupts girls' and boys' education as many drop out of school. According to the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), sexual initiation is common in adolescence in Malawi where 59.7% of women 20–24 report having had sex by age 18, and 16.6% by age 15. About 1 in 3 ever-married girls in Nkhata Bay (35.7%) reported being forced into marriage by pregnancy. This represents a significant proportion of girls who report pregnancy influencing marriage timing and represents a difference in the antecedents of child marriage in Malawi compared to other high child marriage countries. For example, in Niger, 76% of women 20–24 report being married before age 18, and pregnancy almost always follows marriage: in an adolescent survey in 2017, we found that almost no reported pregnancies (0.6%) were to unmarried girls.

Chitomelo/Chibwenzi chachikulu- Kusungitsana, this phrase refers to a promising relationship, where boys and girls promise each other to someday marry. This has been one of the leading causes of child marriage, where young people find themselves in such relationships and choose to marry. While Chitomelo was meant to be a form of safekeeping/ betrothal which has been warped to be justification for child marriages

Child marriages also happen as a result of early/teenage pregnancies which further increases the financial burden on families, resulting in parents pushing for children to marry in order to reduce the financial burden. Child marriage contributes to the high population growth in Malawi. In 2020 alone, over 20 thousand unplanned pregnancies were recorded as a result of child marriage and abuse during the lockdown and school closures.

Barriers to reporting child marriage include fear from children to report because parents can sometimes be friendly with police, jeopardizing the cases.

Of the funds allocated to bettering the lives of girls, the majority of the national budget allocation is going to the construction of girls hostels and bursaries which goes to the Ministry Of Education, this means that there are very few resources going to the Ministry of Gender where the main issues and causes of child marriage are handled. This includes the inability of Government offices, i.e. the social welfare offices are unable to help girls and to enact and implement the ECM strategy due to the severe lack of funding.

Lack of harmonization of work on ECM amongst different stakeholders. Despite having a comprehensive ECM Strategy, the lack of coordinated efforts and coordinated strategy amongst stakeholders has often resulted in several stakeholders focusing on the same issue and neglecting others. At times, this also leads to stakeholders working in silos, making it difficult to track progress and make greater strides.

RECOMMENDATIONS MADE FOR REVISION OF THE ECM STRATEGY

National Budget Provisions

There is a need for more budget allocation towards comprehensive sexuality education that will outline expectations and responsibilities of both parents/guardians and young people. Malawi signed to the ESA Commitments and one of the action points in these commitments lies in ensuring comprehensive sexuality education; which will reduce cases of early child marriages.

There is a need for pro-activeness and coordination in response to ECM. Too many stakeholders are working in the same districts and on the same issue of ending child marriages. However, NGOs need to pool resources together and harmonize efforts. That way, NGOs working in the same area can then tackle the different pillars in the ECM strategies.

More investment is needed in child protection, particularly interventions on child neglect need to be strengthened. This ties in with lack of strategic investment in family planning, where parents are then faced with more children than they can take care of; which leads to other children being neglected and therefore vulnerable to child marriage.

The Government needs to strengthen and support initiatives that seek to empower the country economically. This will help in ending poverty which is one of the driving factors that lead to child marriage.

Strengthening Recommendations

Coordination

The Ministry of Gender must be the lead on the coordinating all NGOs and partners working on ECM and provide a platform for each to share their practices, identify what has worked and what has not worked. This will allow a space where partners identify best practices to adopt and adapt.

The Ministry of Gender must also influence donors to fund priority areas in the fight against ECM so that the available financial resources are spread out across all key intervention areas.



Recommendations from Young People

1. Economic Justice in Ending Child Marriage

Poverty has been identified as a risk factor for the rising cases of child marriages, therefore economic justice solutions can merely act as mitigating factors. There is need for a holistic approach to tackle structural causes (gender and power imbalance) and risk factors concurrently. Poverty needs to be tackled in all its dimensions at all levels; individual, household and nation.

- There's a need for an interconnected approach that is robustly funded by the government and for development partners to supplement
- Strengthened coordination amongst CSOs- joint planning for ECM strategies
- Expanding efforts on ECM to include macro-economic policy issues such as inflation and taxation, as key drivers of poverty, consequently child marriages.
- Taskforce on ECM to ensure ECM is prioritized in budgets- mobilization, allocation and utilization
- Reactivation of political and executive commitment through the rape and defilement committee to spearhead ECM resource mobilization
- Resource mobilization for CSE by the Min of health and MoGCDSW
- Models on economic strengthening need to be sustainable and should ensure social impact assessments of the interventions
- AGYW funding is key

2. Culture and Child Marriages

There's a need to strengthen dialogues with community key stakeholders and custodians of culture – power analysis to determine who is influential and at what level

- Understanding the laws is key- translation into local languages and bi-laws should be harmonized and speak to national laws.
- Initiation ceremony- messaging should be deconstructed to ensure they are not harmful
- There is a need for culturally sensitive interventions that are tailor-made to respond to the cultural context of the different districts across Malawi.
- Various practices such as jando, nsondo, and chinamwali are originally meant to celebrate girls and boys becoming of age, however, there is a common tradition attached to them largely influenced by parents and chiefs, such as parents pushing for their children to marry right after these ceremonies are conducted.

3. Capacity Building in ECM

- Sustainability of projects- NGOs need to engage local structures on entry levels
- Financing – technical and logistical support should be interrogated to ensure sustainability – more resources for capacity building especially in the Victim Support Units
- Poverty remains a key factor- comprehensive strategy that addresses poverty at all levels
- Engaging key custodians of culture and religion – Strengthen the capacity of these structures
- Local structures and people affected should be at the forefront of advocacy and influencing change
- NRB, chiefs and health officials, and registry books- child registry should be a must upon birth as this will assist in tracking cases of child marriage.
- Annual review meetings for child-related laws and progress being made on initiatives
- Interventions should be in line with existing strategies and policies
- Awareness of existing child-related laws at community levels



4. Child Related Laws

- Implementation of Comprehensive Sex Education in ALL schools is key as this will contribute to the empowerment of young people to make better decisions about their bodies and to understand the responsibility of marriage and the importance of them staying in school.
- Capacity building for front-line protection workers- police, Social Welfare officers and schools
- Resource mobilization and allocation towards mobile courts and one stop centers
- Raise awareness on and disseminate child related laws – MoGCDSW has the awareness hand book on child related laws- both in English and Chichewa
- Strengthen coordination between police, judiciary and social welfare officers
- Legal aid should look at victims- psychosocial support
- End corruption, increase accountability

5. Media

There is a need for the safeguarding of victims/survivors by media- enforcing the media code of conduct, policy for the media,

- Strengthen capacity building for media practitioners to report on cases of ECM
- MACRA mandate should extend to ensure they are controlling media and the narrative used on ECM
- Media monitors should widen their space
- Formal media houses should be exemplary by abiding the code of conduct
- Usage of different channels of communication (radios and other online platform) needs to be encouraged as it has a multiplier effect
- Engaging mobile service providers to join hands in the dissemination of CM messages as a social responsibility
- Media should take part in sensitizing the masses on cyber security, online child reporting portal and other child protection legislative
- Media should strengthen sharing best practices on child protection issues to do with ECM
- Stakeholders should open up in sharing information to the media to promote evidence based reporting issues on ECM

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