The Effects of Cultural Practices on Educational Attainment of Rural Girls in Zambia

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Abstract
As in any country, girls' education is highly relevant for Zambia. Girls especially those living in the rural areas of Zambia have encountered challenges in completing their education probably because of the prevailing cultural practices as well as gender and social norms. This article therefore, explores the experiences of rural girls in Zambia who drop out of school due to cultural practices including early-child marriages, stereotyping and initiation ceremonies. These practices have for so long been practiced mostly in the rural areas of the country and to some extent are considered acceptable cultural customs. This consequently curtails girls' opportunities to advancement and realizing their full potential. Subsequently, leading to a perpetual under-representation of women in workplaces as well as positions of influence and thereby making their dreams far-fetched. In this article, I argue that society in general and men in particular decide the future of girls' education, and these decision-making processes on girls' access to and completion of their education in the rural areas of Zambia affect their life. This is because men in Zambia are the sole decision makers within their household welfares, including educating their children. As such, this may directly or indirectly contribute to high dropout rates of girls in schools.

Key words: Cultural Practices, Rural Girls, Educational Attainment, Zambia

Introduction
Cultural practice generally refers to the broad range of traditional and customary activities manifested in behaviors and standards of a particular ethnic group (Taylor, 2006). These practices vary widely around the world and from one ethnic group to another. They cover many aspects of individuals' daily life including the entire society and this is where the aspect of people's identity is established. In Zambia, initiation ceremonies, early-child-marriages, stereotyping including dancing, music, art, sculpture and beadwork are practices deeply ingrained into the Zambian culture. Of these cultural practices initiation ceremonies, early child marriages and stereotyping are intrinsically linked, harmful practices and main challenges of education for girls living in the rural areas of Zambia. The practices are harmful

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because they are committed primarily against girls' right to education, good life, freedom of speech, good health and employment. Moreover, they have for so long been carried out in Zambian communities and are considered or at times been presented by perpetrators as part of accepted cultural practices. Consequently, there are high dropout rates among girls in rural areas of Zambia, curtailing their opportunities and full potential. School dropout rates in Zambia have failed steadily, but it has continued to be higher among girls than boys (Economic and Social Council [ESC], 1991), notably among those living in the rural areas of Zambia. According to CAMFED report, out of the 98.5% total number of girls who enrolled in rural primary schools in 2015, 27% have dropped out of school as compared to 18% of the boys. This situation is troubling because it shatters the expansion of educational opportunities for such girls. When girls miss their educational opportunities, they increase the figures of illiterate women within their communities, carry on the cycle of poverty and eventually increase their chances of being dependent on men. Although there have been deliberate policies put up by the Zambian government to increase enrolment rates for girls using various means such as facilitating the re-admission of girls, the high dropout rates for rural girls have continued. Kelly (1994) asserts, even though girls and boys are enrolled almost at parity at primary school level, the gender disparity, particularly in the rural areas of Zambia between the two sexes becomes progressively more pronounced as such children progress in education. The Zambian Ministry of Gender and Child Development [MoGCD] (2014) reported that in 2012 the enrolment for girls in rural areas was 29.3% while for boys was 26.8% respectively. Meaning that 2.5% more females were enrolled in primary schools than boys. However, the enrolment pattern changes as the pupils' progress towards higher grades, the gender gap widens in favor of boys. The widening of the gender gap as affirmed by MoGCD reveals that, from Grade 10-12, out of the 29.3% rural girls who enrolled in 2012, 16.1% had dropped out of school whereas, for boy of the same grade, 6.2% dropout was recorded out of 26.8% who were enrolled. As noted in the Project Luangwa report (2014), cultural practices coupled with poverty levels among rural families have proven to be key contributors to the high dropout rates among girls.

All children have the right to quality education and realizing this right for girls goes particularly a long way. This is because education is the fundamental development and growth of every child, girls in particular. It empowers them with the necessary knowledge, values and skills to effectively compete in the labor market; learn the socio-emotional and life skills necessary to navigate and adapt to the changing world. It further helps girls to make decisions about their own lives; and contribute positively to their families, communities and the nation at large. However, access to and completion of education among girls especially those living in the rural areas of Zambia has remained a huge challenge due to cultural practices.

In Zambia, there are limited platforms where women's voices are heard on gender equality including girls' education. As such, this work adds to the body of literature on how cultural practices relegate rural girls in Zambia from completing their education and its subsequent impact on their advancement to influential positions. With this being said, this study argues equal gender participation to education because it leads to balanced representation in society

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and workplaces. This study could also provide follow-up mechanisms which tend to be absent on school dropout rates among rural girls in the country.

Zambia's Education System

55 years has passed since Zambia got its independence from Britain, but the country still uses the colonial education system. The early missionaries, in particular, laid the foundation of primary and secondary education in Zambia. However, at independence, Zambian education lagged behind in development as its schools lacked adequate funding, qualified teachers and significant learning facilities. For effective delivery of education to its citizens, the Zambian government in 1966 integrated the First National Development Plan which turned out to be the foundation of the current education system the country follows, a 7-5-4 educational structure. The 7 years to be spent at primary school, 2 and 3 years (totaling up to 5 years) at junior and higher secondary schools respectively, and 4 years at university for undergraduate degree. Transitional selection examinations were also setup to progress from primary school to junior secondary and then to university. Accordingly, students are required to meet the standard requirements for admission. The Zambian education system, as I experienced it, prepares an individual to take examinations, but there is very little practical work involved. While the cardinal intention is that education be mandatory for all Zambians, excruciatingly, many socially disadvantaged children, rural girls in particular, dropout along the way. As such, there would be a continued vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty because such girls would be deprived of economic opportunities that lift them and their families from poverty (UNFPA, 2017).

Cultural practices and girls' education in Zambia

Throughout the African continent, girls go through some form of initiation, but its nature varies from country to country and tribe to tribe. In Zambia, the rural communities historically have been celebrating initiation ceremonies mostly for girls though some tribes have similar ceremonies for boys. The initiation ceremony entails the rite of passage of a child into adulthood. Girls' initiation ceremonies have favorably been observed among Zambian rural communities and seemingly considered to be major obstacle to the advancement of rural girls' education. There could be many reasons for this. Initiation ceremonies generally take place when a girl reaches the age of twelve to fifteen years old. This time is often the puberty stage, a period when a girl starts her menstrual cycle, transforming from childhood to adulthood. During this time rural girls are usually subjected to an intensive training given by selected senior women of the community called 'alangise', meaning instructors. The girls as Monzonde (2010) asserts would be confined to training into their relative's house for six to eight weeks. It could be argued that the training timeframe is too long considering the days they miss from school. Some parents even ended up withdrawing their girl children from schools to undergo the initiation ceremonies (Mulenga: 2000). Besides, it is worth mentioning that senior women entirely control the girl's education during initiation, and they teach them issues which comprise the scope of physiological education (teaching the knowledge of the procreation process and health sex habits), social education (teaching the rights and obligation of women in relation to the whole community) and moral education (teaching the art of self-

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discipline, control, trial of courage and domestic chores). Even though these forms of education are offered to girls on a surface level, it prepares such girls for marriage. A ceremony is carried out at the end of an initiation training to commemorate the event. In most instances, after the ceremony, some girls are soon married-off instead of continuing their education; this issue is discussed in detail below.

The impact of initiation ceremonies in Zambia has not been often taken up in the public or political discourse. This allows the continuation of harsh reality for many school going girls. UNFPA (2017) noted that southern, eastern, northern and Copperbelt provinces are hotspots of initiation ceremonies. I argue that this is because men as household heads are complicit and enforcing such initiation. Therefore, in order to accord a rural girl an opportunity to complete education, men must work in collaboration with women to revise the duration and content of the initiation training offered to girls. The starting point would be at the household level. Of course, cultural practices and beliefs define one's roots, but it is also important to identify the good and bad cultural practices (Taylor, 2006). It is also important that families should align the initiation trainings at a time that does not conflict with the academic education of the girls. Moreover, the training should be assessed and incorporated to the school curriculum if it is found to be significant.

Stereotyping is another cultural practice that impedes girls especially those living in rural areas of Zambia from completing their education. It is a well-known fact that girls and boys are biologically different from each other. Culture and society also shape and strengthen gender roles assigning girls to household works and men as the head of the family. Traditionally, as rural boys grow up, they are oriented and considered to be more aggressive, leaders, providers and decision makers to their family and community while girls are groomed for marriage to bear and rear children (Taylor, 2006). The household daily chores which are non-wage works for instance, have been poorly documented. However, girls work longer hours than boys, roughly between 50% and 75% more hours than boys (Kane, 2004). This has special relevance for girls because the long hours spent performing household daily chores are not merely lost opportunity cost for parents but are a loss of energy which as Nyagura (1995) suggested, could be devoted by the child to schoolwork. Girls are expected by their families to carry out the household daily chores without complaint. Coupled with this is the practice of preferences of who to educate within poor families in rural areas. Within rural poor households, fathers would prefer sending their sons to school instead of a girl. The practice of son preference to education at the expense of girls is enshrined in the value systems of the Zambian culture. This may also mean that girls from birth are disadvantaged and this may determine the quality and quantity of parental care as well as the extent of investment in their academic development. This form of discrimination has far-reaching implications for girls who will among other things be denied good health, right to choose her partner, education, recreation and economic opportunities.

While child marriage can happen to both boys and girls, in many places around the world like Zambia, the practice mostly affects girls. This is another leading cause of girls' dropout rate in

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rural schools. Research conducted on early-child marriage in Zambia by UNFPA, World Vision Zambia, Population Council and Panos Institute of Southern Africa affirm child marriage as one of the leading causes of girls' dropout in 'rural' schools. Unfortunately, there is scanty literature available on the subject matter. However, statistics reviewed by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Zambia Ministry of Health and ICF International (2015) show that child marriage is more common among girls than boys: 16.5% of 15-19-year-old rural girls in 2015 were married compared to only 1% of rural boys of the same age group. Furthermore, Population Council report (2004) indicated that, about eight percent of Zambian girls are married off by the age of 15 while 42 % are married by the age of 18 years. Parents or guardians are mostly the ones who decide upon this kind of marriage. Zambia as reported by World Vision Zambia (2015) is considered one of the countries with the highest child-marriage rates in the world with 42% of its girls (young women) aged 20-24 years declaring to have been married by the age of 18 as compared with only 2.2% of boys of the same age. A typical example of this practice is drawn from the Times of Zambia Newspaper (2010) which attested that a 15-year-old girl who returned to her village after completing seventh grade found that her wedding ceremony had been organized by her family. This is just one example of the plenty "forced marriages" conducted in Zambia.

As a girl grows old, her family especially parents or guardians start getting concerned about the possibilities of her getting pregnant outside wedlock and having a child before marriage (Nyagura, 1995). Such concerns mostly force parents in rural areas to marry off their daughters while they are young. This often implies that; the family cannot demand a high bridal price if their girl falls pregnant before getting married. Girls who are exposed to early marriage are mostly deprived of their educational opportunities, realizing their full potential and enjoying their human rights as established in various international treaties. Early child marriage, thus, stands in the way of ensuring girls 'completion of education. Moreover, child marriage deprives girls the right to their sexual reproductive health as such girls start childbearing at a tender age as what the Zambian Ministry of Gender (2015) calls teenage pregnancy. They are also prone to HIV/AIDS prevalence and other sexually transmitted diseases. The severe problem to teenage pregnancy for both the adolescent mother and her child include malnutrition, stunted children and high mortality rates. Teenage pregnancy is not the scope of this paper but it could well be a subject for another paper. With that said, Taylor (2006) affirms that girls are actually married younger than boys, and many become mothers at around 15 years of age and this is one way of manifesting how young girls end up being regarded as subordinate partners. Such girls become fully dependant on their husbands for their survival including that of their children. However, the Zambia Demographic Health Survey as reported in the Zambia's seventh National Development Plan (2017) states that child marriage rates have declined from 42% in 2002 to 31% in 2014. Interestingly, even though statistics show a decline in the prevalence of child marriage, the practice is still high due to high poverty levels among rural families in Zambia. Although Article 2666 of the Zambian Constitution defines a child as "a person who has attained or is below the age of eighteen years" while an adult as "a person who is above the age of eighteen years" (Population Council, UNFPA and Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2017), eighteen

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years is still a small age for marriage considering many girls start school late and are forced to marry giving up their education (The Zambian Ministry of Gender, 2015). Owing to the previous fact, it can be deduced that girls who are married off below 18 years are still in a tender age and might not complete their senior high school education. This is of course without considering the possibility of pregnancy soon after their marriage. It should be argued that early child marriage is one of the detriments to girls' development and a major impediment to their realization of human rights to education. In such situations, men should stand up to speak about the girl's benefits of full education and advocate for the abolition of early child marriage practices. This is because men's voices would easily be heard as they are viewed as key decision makers at all levels within the Zambian tradition. Therefore, the message men should spearhead in educating their communities is about the benefits of educating a girl.

As already mentioned, high poverty rates among rural families in Zambia mainly drives such families to engage into early child marriage and this has numerous negative effects on girls' completion of education and their health. As estimated by Seventh National Development Plan (2017) reports, poverty levels in Zambia's rural areas stands at 76.6%. Such poverty levels exacerbate/intensify early child marriages. In instances where there are financial constraints due to poverty, most rural households are faced with the challenging task of allocating the meager resources to the numerous facets of their livelihoods. Nyagura (1995) asserts that parents may choose to marry their daughter in order to use the bride price (dowry) they receive to send her siblings to school, alleviate the family from poverty or to reduce the parent's from having to support too many children. In the Zambian culture, it is the man's family who pay dowry for the groom to the bride's family. Nyagura further argues that, such parents believe that they benefit more in controlling the family income by educating their sons than daughters who end up getting married and leaving with their husbands. This, coupled with the beliefs that view girls as care-givers, mothers, brides and household laborers, greatly limits girls' opportunity to access or complete their education. Considering the health welfare, child marriage increases the risk for cervical cancer, malaria, death during childbirth and obstetric fistulas. Despite all these issues, most men who are heads of their households prioritize boys' access to education at the expense of girls (Mulenga, 2000). This decision is to some extent taken out of desperation by poor families to seek a bride price or dowry by forcing their girls into early marriage. Such parents thus, look for little income in form of bridal price, locally known as 'lobola'. Going by this, it can be argued that parents, sometimes view their girls as an investment thereby marrying them off at exorbitant prices (lobola). Such a practice deprives their daughters from completing their education. This idea is supported by Centre for Public Education and Information on Polygamy (2002) which asserts that early child marriage relegates girls in completing their education. This is so common if both parents, fathers (men) in particular, of the girl have very little education or did not go to school at all. Generally, a man who has been to school is likely to have a more open mind to realities surrounding his household and community, including girls' access to education (UNESCO, 2011). Going by this, it can be thus expected that girls with educated parents or fathers are likely to have higher chances of accessing education than those with

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uneducated parents or fathers. This is argued so because fathers who have very little or no education at all see no value in educating their girl-child, instead they prefer to marry them off.

It is worth mentioning that the Education Act (part IV, section 18) provides offences against any person who marries a student or takes a child out of school to be married (Ministry of Gender: 2015). I argue that, this statutory act is most likely not known by Zambians especially those in rural areas. In most cases customary law is the one used in many rural areas. Under customary law, the appropriate age for marriage is lower than what is stated in the marriage act or the constitution. In 2013, the Ministry of Gender together with its partnering stakeholders launched a program aimed to end child marriages. In spite of this effort, and many similar campaigns, not much has been achieved. Therefore, a new strategy that could better help to curb the problem of early child marriages should be designed and implemented in collaboration with gender ministerial officials, representatives from civil society, involved donors, traditional chiefs and community members. Community members especially men can help in providing educational awareness campaigns regarding the dangers of early child marriage and benefits of educating a girl child. Such a collective action of community sensitization would surely encourage girls to successfully complete their education.

Educating girls and its advantages

A common African proverb says, "If we educate a boy, we educate one person…if we educate a girl, we educate a family and the whole nation". This suggests that girls' education can be described as the 'silver bullet' considering what it can achieve. It would yield high rates of return when invested in: thus, accelerating economic development, breaking the cycle of poverty within families, reducing girls' risks to violence, reducing child and maternal mortality, minimizing health risks and helping communities to deal with climate change. Educating a girl would actually be the starting point for social change because it translates into a range of national, household and family benefits emanating from the acquired skills, information, self-efficacy and self-confidence that girls get in school. Considering gender disparities in completing education in particular would be reduced if girls are encouraged to stay in school. Conversely, Samoff and Bidemi (2007) argues that, even though education system seemingly narrows the gender inequalities and injustices of the societies, it has remained the breeding ground of gender inequality. As stressed by Buras and Apple (2006), education is connected to social, cultural and political sectors. These facts lead to the conclusion that without education, girls' chances and opportunities to better living and reaching positions of influence within Zambia would be narrowed and remain dwindling. This in the long run would lead to exclusion and underrepresentation of women in workplaces and influential positions.

When girls are educated, doors to advancement in their career are opened and they are able to participate in professional works as men do. When women are given equal opportunities as men to influential positions through gender mainstreaming in workplaces, it better reflects

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and responds to the diverse needs and rights of the entire population they serve. Unfortunately, because most rural girls are forced to quit their education, this tend to contribute towards the challenge of underrepresentation of women in Zambia's workplace. This has been so prominent to a point where international bodies in the 21st century intervened and supported the 30% threshold of women representation in influential positions (UN, 2010). This percentage is a ceiling and not the minimum. Despite this threshold, women underrepresentation in influential positions still seems to be experienced probably because girls are faced with cultural and other challenges. This is a depiction of how women are marginalized, and it evidently stems from the 'Zambian cultural system' which places women in subordinate positions and men in dominating positions. This cultural system is continuously constructed in such a way that it mostly excludes women's expertise and experiences, leaving them in the fringe. Dean et. al (2009) contend that, women are placed in subordinate positions in workplaces probably because of the hiring and promotion criteria. This significantly creates a huge roadblock that prevents women from advancing to influential positions. As Burke (2015) noted, lack of women's access to 'workplaces' or work institutions leads to their underrepresentation, thereby creating a gender gap at these areas of work. The gender gap has brought profound challenges to the nature, control and values of work institutions in Zambia and worldwide.

Across countries, there is a consensus that educating a woman influences her reproductive health outcomes which include fertility, number of children to have, birth spacing and contraceptive usage. With regards to fertility, when a woman is empowered with education, she has more say in the fertility decision which in turn increases the opportunity cost of childbearing and spacing. I would argue that, most times, wives and husbands have different preferences over the number of children they desire to have as a couple. However, if the woman is educated, she tends to have fewer children and in a widely spaced manner, and inevitably has a positive effect on a woman's fertility (World Bank, 1993). Overall, 29% or adolescent girls aged 15-19 years as noted by CSO, MOH and ICF International (2015) are already mothers or pregnant with their first child. Thus, girls with no education begins childbearing early compared to those who are educated and this in turn determines the family size. The Zambian 2013-14 Demographic and Health Survey report notes that women with no education have 4.2 children more than women with education. With this in mind, children of educated women are less likely to die before their first birthday. This evidences my previous argument: if we educate a girl, we educate a family and a whole nation. This is because an educated girl is more likely to marry an educated husband and support her husband in raising their family. Accordingly, she is less likely to contract HIV/AIDS and thus, is less likely to pass it onto her children. This is because an educated girl will ensure to acquire the necessary knowledge needed for a healthy, hygienic and good life.

Men: 'Critical Ingredient' Towards Prevention of School Dropouts

As stated earlier, men (fathers) in Zambia are culturally the key decision makers within their households. In such situations, if men stand up to speak for the girl child's benefits of full education and advocate for the abolition of early child marriage practices, restructuring the

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way initiation ceremonies are conducted and deconstruct the stereotyping practices, it would probably encourage girls to successfully complete their education. Moreover, if men and women can work together in supporting, encouraging and helping their girl-children to do their academic homework, girls would surely complete their education and contribute to the reduction of poverty not only within their families but nationwide as well.

UNESCO (2011) has affirmed that an educated man is more likely to be open minded to realities surrounding educating a girl-child. Those men with no or lower educational background might devalue the importance of educating their girl-child, instead they see her as a child bearer who has to be married off while young at exorbitant bridal price. However, I argue that, men need to work and collaborate with women to attain successful completion of girls' education. This collaboration could be in the form of community sensitization on the importance of educating girls. In fact, this could be done even when a girl's parents themselves are uneducated. They just need to be willing to support their children and stop forcing them to be married while they are young. Of course, this might need community sensitization and training where men and women of various levels could work together to enable their children choose their destiny. For example, this could be done by empowering and training chiefs and their subordinates on the benefits of educating a girl. These would then disseminate what they learned within their communities. Such training could include helping girls do their homework, providing them with individual attention and raising the compulsory school attendance age.

Through school and community collaboration and fundraising, girls' dropout could be prevented or minimized to the lowest level. It would be important to involve educated women during these campaigns as they can serve as role models to the girls. Despite my hope and vision, I am not naïve to expect the problem of girls' education within rural areas of Zambia to be solved in a short period of time because it has been an issue for as long as there have been schools in Zambia. This problem is chronic and deep-rooted within the Zambian culture and patriarchal society, and yes it has bedeviled rural schools within the country. However, it is better to start the journey today and eventually remove the barriers for girls' education in the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no doubt that education is a life-changing experience for women, in particular, as it helps them to develop to their full potential and putting them on a path for success in their life. Thus, the skills, creativity and research development that an individual acquires through education are a major factor in any society's success in creating jobs, advancing prosperity, expanding opportunity and promoting social justice. Specifically, educating a girl has intergenerational benefits to society: an educated girl tend to be healthier, participate more in formal labor market, earn higher income, and if they choose to be mothers have fewer children, marry at a later age, and enable health care and education for their children (Tembon & Fort, 2008). However, to be successful, girls need the support of men and the community in general. Girls would successfully complete their education when men are involved and work together with women. In addition, community awareness of the benefits of

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girls' education should be advanced through different training programs. All these factors combined lift households, communities and nations out of poverty. Poverty lies at the heart of many of the challenges that hinder girls' access to, and experience of education. These activities have resulted into high levels of school dropouts. Once the benefits of educating a girl child especially in the rural areas of Zambia are recognized, the investment in education could result into high returns. Overall, it can be deduced that cultural practices are main barriers towards girls' successful education in the rural schools of Zambia.

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