

Education and empowerment over marriage

Key drivers of Child Marriage in Eastern and Western Provinces in Zambia, and how they can be addressed

Introduction

Zambia has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world (1). Reasons for child marriage are multifaceted, complex and interrelated, firmly embedded in the social and cultural context of different geographies and regions (2). However, the child marriage rates vary between provinces, with Eastern province having a significantly higher child marriage rate than Western province in spite of having a lower poverty rate and similar teenage pregnancy rate, as shown in figure 1 (3).

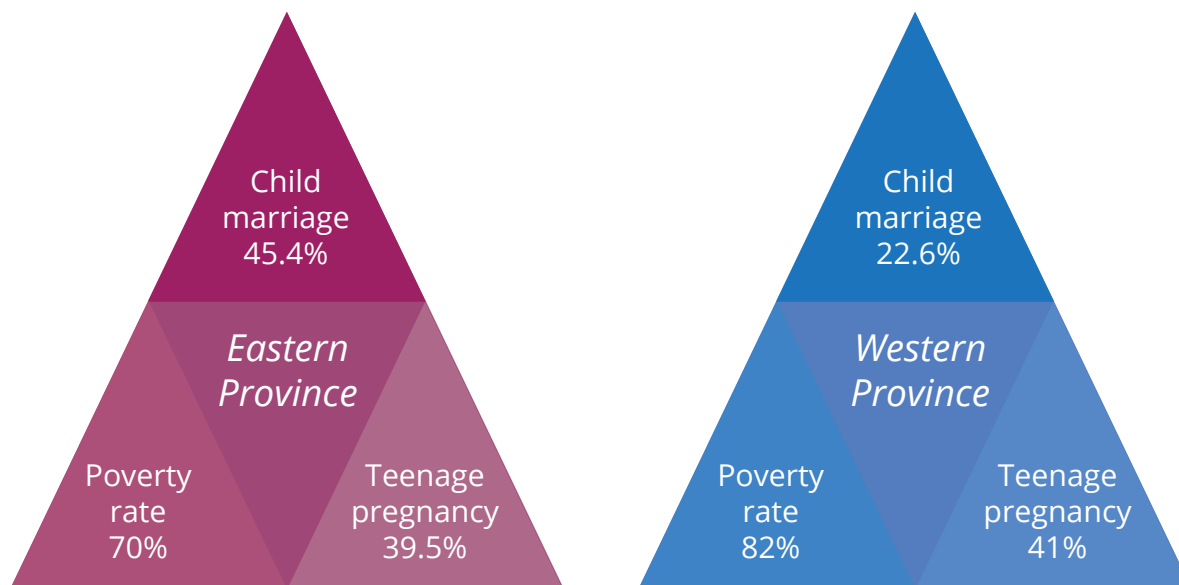


Figure 1: Higher child marriage rate in Eastern than in Western province in spite of lower poverty and similar teenage pregnancy rates. Source: Zambia DHS 2018 (3).

This brief describes and analyses the key drivers behind the (differences in) child marriage rates in those two provinces, and provides information about evidence-informed interventions that can address the key drivers.

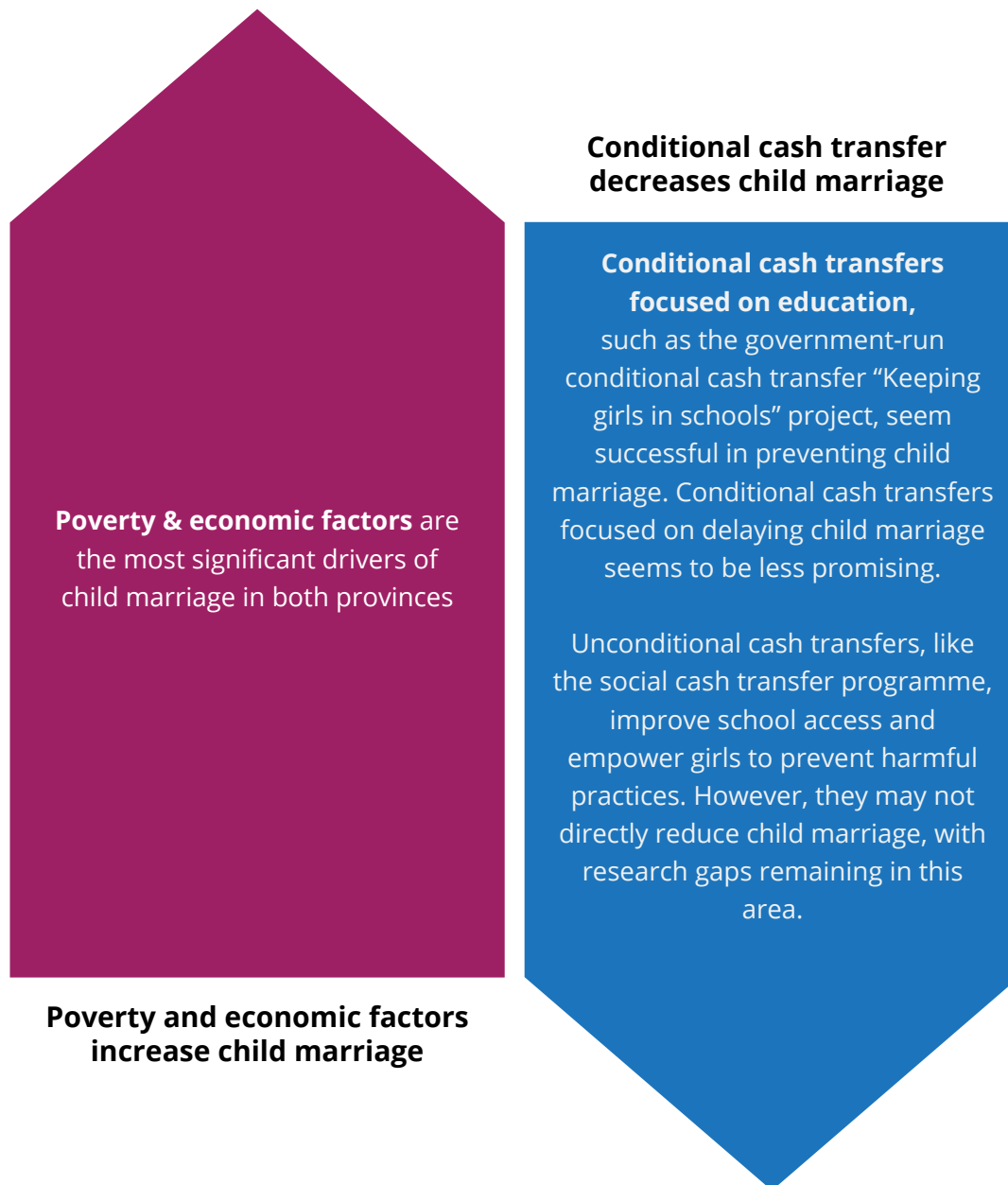
Methodology

At the request of The Break Free! partners¹, a research team from KIT Royal Tropical Institute and the University of Zambia undertook, guided by a conceptual framework on drivers of child marriage by Psaki et al. (4), a rapid review of 35 peer-reviewed scientific articles and 26 other documents and reports. The synthesized information was consequently discussed, validated and complemented with 66 stakeholders in Eastern (Chipata and Chadiza) and Western (Mongu) provinces.

¹ The Break Free! partners consist of SRHR Africa Trust, Plan Zambia and Forum for African Women Educationalists Zambia (FAWZA).

Key findings

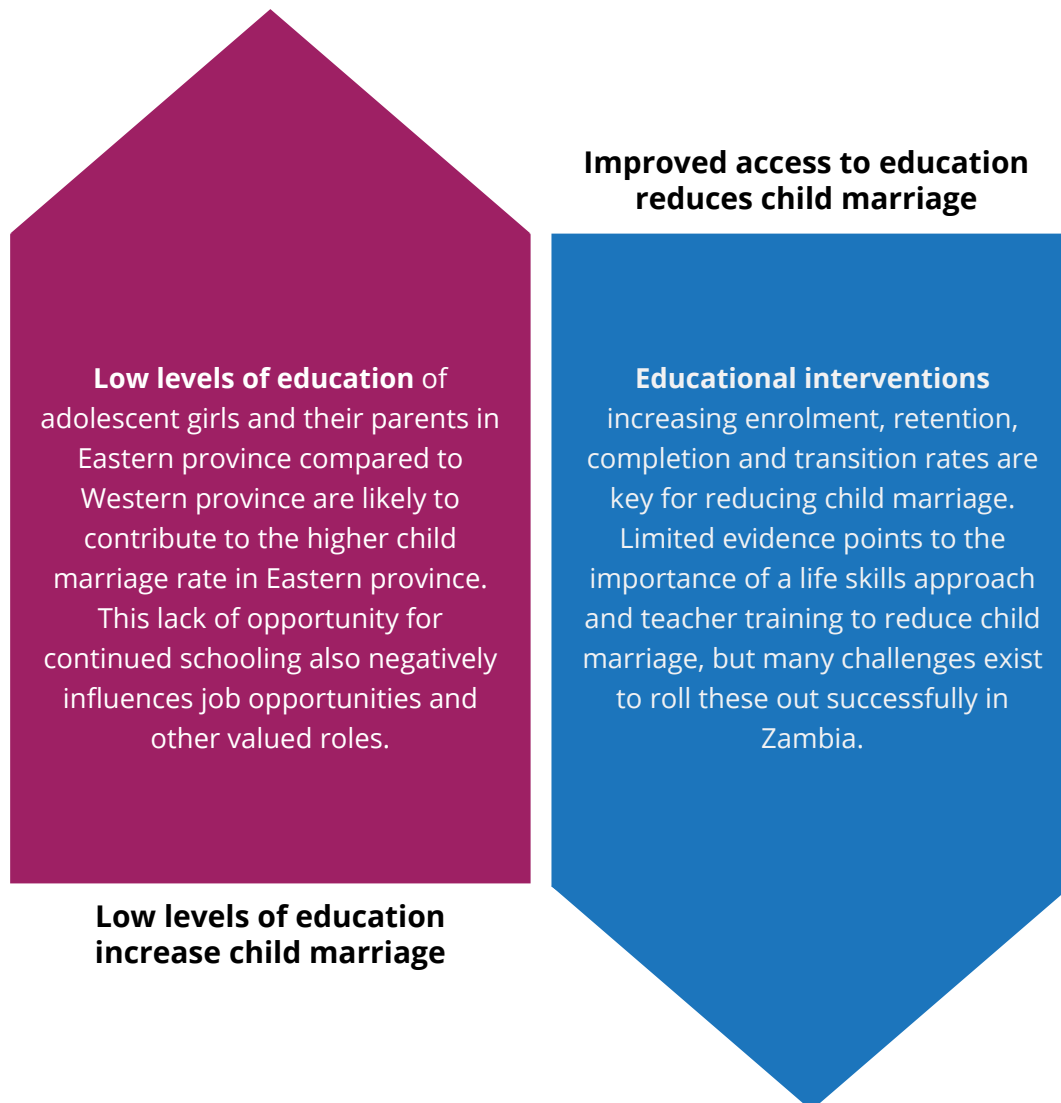
1. Poverty as a key driver of child marriage



Conclusion:

Conditional cash transfers like "Keeping girls in school" may address economic drivers of child marriage, but research gaps exist regarding their direct impact on preventing child marriage in Zambia.

2. Lack of (education) opportunity as a key driver of child marriage



Conclusion:

Based on the association of education with child marriage rates, there is a need to address attitudes towards education, especially in the Eastern province, to improve school infrastructure and human resource (affecting education quality), and to combat school-related gender-based violence.

3. Socio-cultural norms and related taboo on girls' sexuality as key drivers of child marriage

Initiation ceremonies and notions of maturity at puberty

are socio-cultural factors that contribute to child marriage in both provinces. In Eastern province, child marriage is seen as a preferable alternative to **pregnancy outside of marriage** and as a way to reduce related shame. In Western province, this shame associated with teenage pregnancy can be reduced through initiation ceremonies, without this necessarily be followed by child marriage. Peer, social and self-pressure to marry early and keep a man satisfied influence child marriage in both provinces. A lack of supervision, social support, recreational activities, and alcohol/substance abuse further contribute to child marriage in the two provinces.

Shame in case of pregnancy outside of marriage & the underlying taboo concerning girls' sexuality contributes to child marriage

Girls' empowerment reduces child marriage

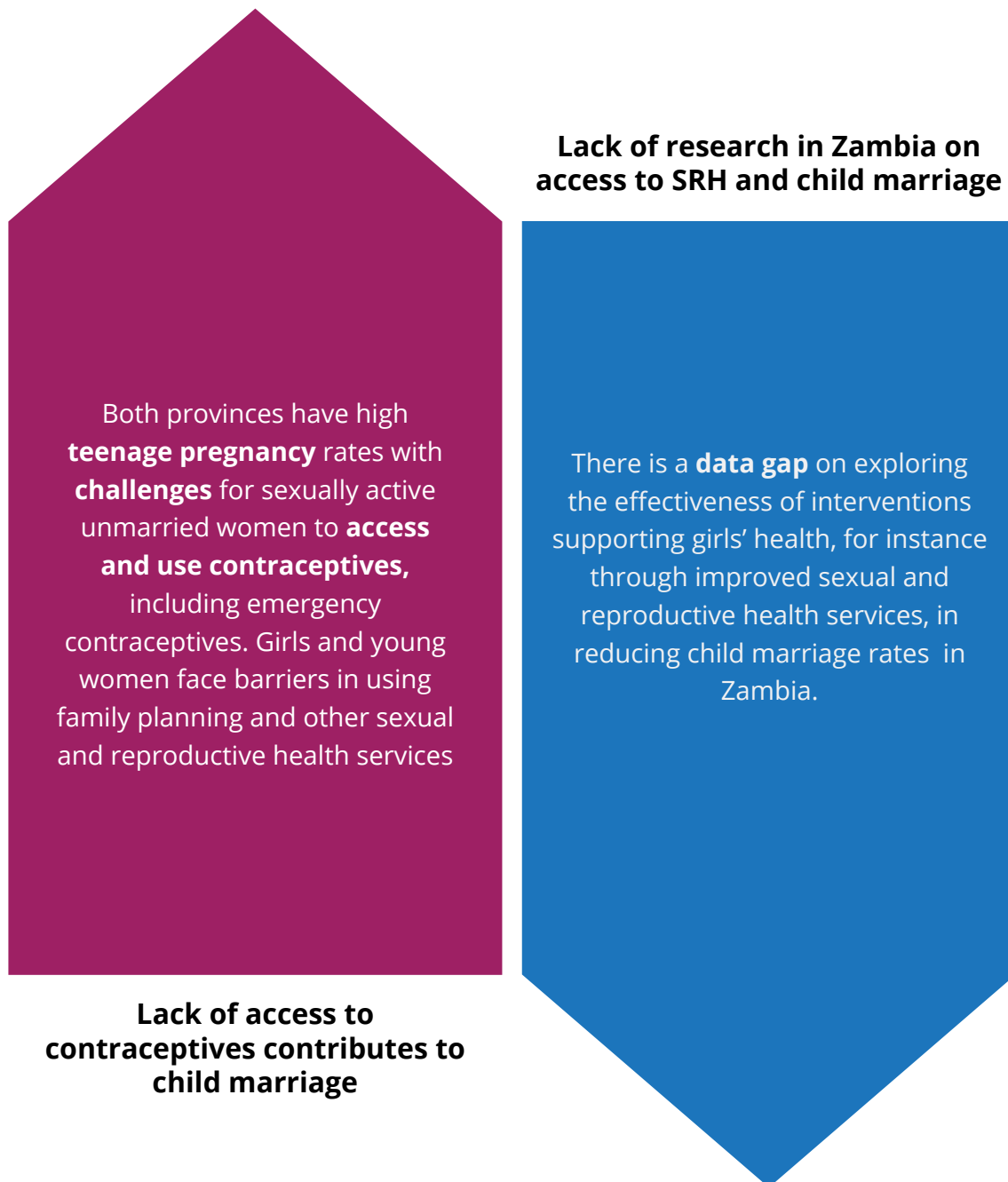
Girls' empowerment interventions can significantly delay pregnancy and therewith prevent child marriage, but intergenerational conflict and challenges around implementing gender transformative approaches remain. Involving traditional leaders in child marriage prevention is promising but lacks substantial evidence. While community dialogues with parents promote communication about sexual and reproductive health with children, their direct impact on preventing child marriage remains unclear.

Conclusion:

Different practices related to shame in case of teenage pregnancy drive differences in child marriage rates between Eastern and Western provinces. Child marriage programmes should empower girls and also work towards addressing structural root causes of social and gender inequalities.

More efforts to include boys, young men and religious leaders in child marriage interventions; and more scientific data to support promising practices around community (leaders') involvement are needed.

4. (Fear of) girls' sexuality and pregnancy outside of marriage driving child marriage



Conclusion:

The link between pregnancy and child marriage requires more programmatic action and research in Zambia. Activities focusing on prevention of teenage pregnancy, including increasing access to contraceptives, require efforts to be more informed by youth perspectives. Gendered notions around sexuality, shame and the consequences of teenage pregnancy are also identified as crucial aspects that need attention in preventing child marriage.

References

1. UNICEF. Child marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice - UNICEF DATA [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 May 3]. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-eastern-and-southern-africa-a-statistical-overview-and-reflections-on-ending-the-practice/>
2. Malhotra A, Elnakib S. Evolution in the evidence base on child marriage 2000-2019. 2021
3. Zambia Statistics Agency. Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2018 [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2023 May 10]. Available from: www.DHSprogram.com.
4. Psaki SR, Melnikas AJ, Haque E, Saul G, Misunas C, Patel SK, et al. What Are the Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs. *J Adolesc Heal*. 2021 Dec 1;69(6):S13–22.

See full synthesis brief for more information

Kabelka, H, Zulu, J, Baatsen, P and Kok, M. Drivers of Child Marriage in Eastern and Western Provinces in Zambia and effective preventive interventions. Insights from the literature and stakeholders in Eastern and Western provinces. KIT Royal Tropical Institute: Amsterdam. 2023