Reporting child marriages in Zimbabwe

A practical guide for journalists

A few facts on child marriages

• 4% of girls are married by the age of 15 while 34% will be married by the time they turn 16.¹
• Girls living in poverty and in rural areas are the most affected by child marriages.
• Religion and local traditional culture are among the major drivers of child marriages in Zimbabwe
• 18 years is the legal minimum age for marriage as recognized by the Constitutional Court in January 2016
• The Marriage Act allows girls aged 16 to be married while the minimum age for boys is 18
• The Customary Marriage Act does not specify a minimum age for marriage

Who is a child?

Every boy and girl under the age of eighteen years (Section 3 (81), Constitution of Zimbabwe)

Defining child marriage

Child marriage refers to a marital union where either spouse is below 18 years of age. It is a reality for both boys and girls, although girls are disproportionately the most affected. Child marriage is widespread and can lead to a lifetime of

¹ http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/zimbabwe/
disadvantage and deprivation. In recent years, child marriage has gained increasing prominence on international and national development agendas.

Where are child marriages prevalent in Zimbabwe?

While child marriages are common throughout Zimbabwe, they are more prevalent in:

- Mining Towns
- Farming Towns
- Border Towns

UNICEF identified the following communities as hot zones for child marriages

- Beitbridge
- Bindura
- Bulilima
- Centenary
- Chipinge
- Gwanda
- Makoni
- Mzingwane

Why are child marriages bad?

- Child marriage is a violation of children’s human rights and are prohibited by international law.
- It robs millions of girls under 18 around the world of their childhood.
- It denies girls their right to make vital decisions about their sexual health and well-being.
- It forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death.

Zimbabwe’s position on child marriages

Zimbabwe has taken a position that child marriages are illegal and various campaigns have been launched to end child marriage. On July 31, 2015, Zimbabwe launched the African Union Campaign on Ending Child Marriages under the theme: “We Are Girls, Not Brides”. A ruling by the Constitutional Court on 20 on January 2016 declared the practice of child marriages unconstitutional.

Child marriage and journalism practice

What should be considered before writing a story on child marriages?

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Respect

- Journalists should treat children in child marriage situations with respect.
- The issue of child marriages is a delicate one which therefore requires a sensitive approach since the child involved could be suffering from trauma.

Consent

- In cases of child marriage, journalists face the dilemma of whom to seek consent from to interview the child especially when the parents or guardian could be complicit in setting up the marriage. In such a scenario, journalists should practice due diligence in seeking INFORMED consent. The person (Usually a relative) approached to give consent should have been cleared from being part of arranging the marriage.
- Even if a guardian consents to disclosure of the identity of a child, a journalist must exercise a cautious discretion, as it may nevertheless be harmful to the child to publish the identity.
- In cases where no consent is given, the journalist can write the story substituting the child’s name with a pseudonym. Nonetheless, comment should be sought from official sources, like hospitals, the police and traditional or community leaders for corroboration. Caution should be exercised so as not to leak details that will violate the privacy of the child.
- Before publishing or broadcasting a story on child marriages a journalist should, ensure it meets the highest journalistic standards of balance, objectivity, accuracy and sensitivity such that no child involved in child marriage or parents/ guardians regret sharing their story.

What to consider when gathering news on cases of child marriages

Privacy, confidentiality and dignity

- Journalists should preserve the privacy and confidentiality of children involved in cases of child marriages, remembering that they will have to live with a story or picture long after it has been published.
- Before an interview, a journalist should create an environment that is conducive for the child to be comfortable.
- Use fair, open and straight forward methods for obtaining pictures or carrying out an interview related to child marriages. Intrusive methods can ruin the interview.
- In case the child has a sad story to tell, do not openly show your sympathy during the interview as it may revive traumatic feelings of the past.
- Avoid questions, statements, opinions or comments that are; judgmental, insensitive to cultural values, expose a child to humiliation as this violates the dignity of the child.

What to consider when writing stories on child marriages

Evaluation

- Continuously evaluate the decision to name a child, always testing the value of the information against the harm caused to the child. Just because
a child’s name has already been reported is not an ironclad reason to continue reporting the name.

- Consider carefully the consequences of publication of any material concerning children and shall minimise harm to children.

**Language**

- Use language which does not stereotype minors involved child marriages for example not calling them “helpless”, “victims” or “child commercial sex workers”.
- Avoid using derogatory terms when reporting child marriage situations.

**Stereotyping**

- Always challenge negative tags and stereotypes affecting children involved in child marriage. The journalist should always seek to give due recognition to areas where child brides and grooms would have triumphed.
- Objectivity is important in reporting to ensure survivors of child marriages are not seen as ‘trouble inviters’ but conquerors of such a vice.

**Context**

- Journalists should use their stories to critique society on child marriages in order to induce self-introspection.
- Reports on child marriages should not be written in isolation, there is need to add background and to follow up on the stories in order to document the impact of this practice.
- Journalists should be knowledgeable about the key drivers of child marriages in the country.

**Sourcing**

- It is important for journalists to let girls or boys enduring child marriages speak, their plight should be the stories’ main focus.
- When reporting on married children, there is need to consult experts in the field, who can assist journalists with information and statistics.

**Specifics**

- Where the identity of a child is withheld, journalists should avoid leaking details that will expose the identity of the child, like the exact location, family name, school where the child learns as this will further traumatise the child.

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