



CULTURAL BELIEFS, GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND PATRIARCHAL PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILD MARRIAGE AND SECONDARY EDUCATION COMPLETION IN EPWORTH, HARARE, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

Early child marriage in Zimbabwe is commonly explained by household poverty, yet that account does not explain why scarcity is resolved at the expense of daughters rather than sons. This article analyses how cultural beliefs, gender expectations and patriarchal practices contributed to early child marriage and affected secondary education completion among girls in Epworth, a peri-urban settlement south-east of Harare in which material insecurity coexists with comparatively accessible schools. A convergent mixed-methods descriptive design was used. Structured questionnaires were administered to 10 women and girls who had entered a marital union before the age of 18, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 stakeholders: 10 parents or guardians, 5 secondary-school teachers, 5 community leaders and 5 representatives of non-governmental organisations. All 35 members of the accessible study population participated. Questionnaire responses were summarised as frequencies and interviews analysed thematically. All 10 respondents agreed that boys' education was valued more highly than girls' education, 7 strongly agreeing and 3 agreeing; all 10 agreed that bride price or material benefits encouraged early marriage; and all 10 reported limited influence over decisions concerning their own marriage, with 8 of 10 reporting no consent or only partial consent. Participants described fathers and older male relatives as controlling decisions about schooling and marriage with girls rarely consulted, and marriage as a normalised passage to womanhood. Three interlocking mechanisms operated before and after marriage: the gendered valuation of education, marriage as a gendered social destination, and patriarchal decision-making authority. Four of the 10 left school before marrying, none sat the Ordinary Level examinations and none returned and completed. Read through Radical Feminist Theory, gender expectations supplied the criterion by which scarce educational resources were allocated while economic

pressure supplied the occasion, so economic assistance alone is unlikely to suffice.

Keywords: cultural beliefs; gender expectations; patriarchy; early child marriage; girls' secondary education; bridewealth; radical feminist theory; peri-urban Zimbabwe; Epworth.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage before the age of 18 remains one of the most consequential constraints on adolescent girls' educational participation worldwide. UNICEF (2023) estimates that some 640 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood, approximately 12 million girls each year, and that sub-Saharan Africa now carries a rising share of the global burden. Modelling across 106 countries confirms that adolescent marriage and maternity remain tightly coupled with restricted access to education, and that the association has resisted the general expansion of schooling (Hailu & Beyene, 2025). Its persistence where schools exist and are attended indicates that the binding constraint is not always the supply of education.

Zimbabwe illustrates the distance between legal commitment and household practice with unusual clarity. Section 78 of the Constitution sets 18 as the minimum age of marriage (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013); the Constitutional Court affirmed that provision in *Mudzuru & Anor v Minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs N.O. & Ors* ([2016] ZWCC 12); the Marriages Act [Chapter 5:15] provides that no person under 18 may contract any form of marriage and criminalises promoting, coercing, aiding or abetting the marriage, betrothal or pledging of a child (Government of Zimbabwe, 2022); and section 68C of the Education Act, operative from March 2020, prohibits the exclusion of any pupil for non-payment of fees or on the basis of

pregnancy (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019). Despite this architecture, approximately one in three young Zimbabwean women were married or in union before their eighteenth birthday (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT] & UNICEF, 2019).

Persistence under a prohibitive legal regime directs analytical attention towards the household, and specifically towards the beliefs and authority relations governing decisions about girls. Decisions about which child continues in school and when and to whom a daughter will be married are taken by particular people occupying positions of recognised authority, applying criteria shaped by beliefs about what girls and boys are for. Where more importance is placed on a girl's future as a wife and mother than on her education, families may invest correspondingly less in her schooling, which reduces girls' opportunities and strengthens the expectation that their future lies mainly in marriage.

Zimbabwean evidence indicates that such decisions are gendered well before marriage becomes a proximate possibility. Participatory research with very young adolescents in four low-income peri-urban Harare settlements, including Epworth, found that under resource constraint both boys and girls endorsed prioritising boys' education, in some cases even where girls performed better academically, and that girls carried substantially heavier domestic workloads (Nyamwanza et al., 2025). Rural Zimbabwean evidence is convergent, documenting how norms treating puberty as a marker of readiness for marriage, combined with the endorsement of male authority figures, position early marriage as a legitimate trajectory (Ngidi et al., 2025). Marriage is therefore not only an event that interrupts schooling; the expectation of marriage is itself a determinant of how much schooling a girl receives.

The empirical setting is Epworth, a peri-urban settlement south-east of central Harare that combines features the child marriage literature usually treats separately: proximity to the capital, and therefore not rural in the sense assumed by much of the Zimbabwean evidence base, alongside informal housing, irregular livelihoods and constrained access to services. This separates two things rural studies frequently conflate physical distance from schooling institutions, and normative distance from the expectation that a girl will complete secondary education. Because schools are relatively accessible in Epworth, constraints on girls' progression are more legible as economic and normative rather than geographical, which offers analytical purchase on the question addressed here: not whether cultural beliefs, gender expectations and patriarchal practices are present, but how they operate on girls' schooling and marriage.

Statement of the Research Problem

The dominant explanatory frame for early child marriage in Zimbabwe is economic: households under financial stress are described as withdrawing children from school and treating a daughter's marriage as a means of reducing consumption requirements or attracting transfers. Recent evidence supports the general direction of this claim. In

the rural district of Chiredzi, food insecurity dominated community narratives about youth marriage, with parents described as pressing daughters into marriage to relieve household burdens (Gambir et al., 2024), and the only prior published study conducted in Epworth identified economic hardship and joblessness as the principal causes reported by survivors (Muchawaya et al., 2023). Economic explanation is therefore neither wrong nor dispensable.

It is, however, incomplete in a way that has practical consequences. Scarcity is experienced by households, but it is resolved through decisions falling unequally on sons and daughters. A purely economic model cannot explain why, when a household cannot meet fees for all its children, it is characteristically the daughter's schooling that is discontinued. Three features of that decision require attention the economic frame does not give them: the criterion of allocation, and whether a household applies a gender-neutral rule or one anticipating a daughter's departure into another family; the locus of authority, and whether such decisions are taken collectively or by persons whose entitlement rests on their position as senior male kin; and the girl's own standing, including whether she is consulted and what alternatives exist if she withholds assent. These are questions about cultural belief, gender expectation and patriarchal practice, and cannot be answered by measuring household income.

A further limitation attends the conventional framing of marriage and schooling. Early marriage is ordinarily positioned as the cause of school dropout, with education as the outcome and marriage as the shock. Yet where normative and material pressures are already operating, girls may leave school before any marriage takes place. If this sequencing is common, interventions triggered by the event of marriage arrive after the decisive educational loss, and estimates attributing educational deficits to marriage will absorb attrition that preceded it. Therefore, the study analysed how cultural beliefs, gender expectations and patriarchal practices contributed to early child marriages and affected secondary education completion in Epworth, Harare, Zimbabwe.

Research Gap

The gap addressed here is specific to the mechanism named in the objective and is defined along four dimensions.

Contextual gap

Zimbabwean research on child marriage has concentrated on rural districts or relied on national survey data in which peri-urban informal settlements are not separately visible (Gambir et al., 2024; Ngidi et al., 2025; Sayi & Sibanda, 2018). The single published study located in Epworth examined 36 survivors and concentrated on economic causes, psychological consequences and coping strategies rather than on the cultural and patriarchal mechanisms through which schooling and marriage decisions were made (Muchawaya et al., 2023), while the peri-urban study that does address gender norms in

Epworth worked with very young adolescents not yet of an age at which marriage decisions are taken (Nyamwanza et al., 2025). Evidence on how these mechanisms operated in the lives of women who actually married before 18 in a peri-urban Harare settlement therefore remains thin, and mechanisms documented in rural districts cannot be assumed to operate identically where schools are close at hand.

Analytical gap. Much of the literature treats economic hardship and cultural expectation as parallel and separable drivers rather than examining how they interact — specifically, how gendered expectations condition the way material scarcity is translated into decisions about particular children. Bengesai et al. (2021), applying propensity score methods to Zimbabwean survey data, establish robustly that girl child marriage reduces the probability of completing the first cycle of secondary education. That design is well suited to estimating the association and is not intended to illuminate the household reasoning producing it, so the question of how a general condition of scarcity becomes a specific decision about a specific daughter is left open.

Mechanism gap. Existing work insufficiently specifies how gendered expectations translate into concrete household decisions. Studies establish that norms favouring boys' education exist (Nartey et al., 2025; Nyamwanza et al., 2025) and that early marriage depresses attainment (Bengesai et al., 2021; Hailu & Beyene, 2025), but the intervening steps — when the criterion is applied, who applies it, and the position the girl occupies within that decision are rarely documented. Without this it cannot be established whether the gendered outcome is produced by attitudes amenable to information, or by an allocation rule that reproduces itself whenever scarcity recurs.

Experiential gap. Studies frequently document prevalence and correlates while giving limited space to the accounts of those affected alongside those of the actors who decide on their behalf, so claims about decisional authority rest on one side of the relationship only. This article draws on both. The claim is not that no relevant research exists, but that the mechanism connecting gender expectations to educational outcomes here remains insufficiently specified.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to analyse how cultural beliefs, gender expectations and patriarchal practices contributed to early child marriages and affected secondary education completion in Epworth, Harare, Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Beliefs and Early Child Marriage

Cultural beliefs concern what girls and boys are understood to be and to become; cultural expectations translate those beliefs into prescriptions about the life course; and practices enact those expectations. The analytical work is done at the second level, where beliefs

about girls' futures become criteria for decisions taken in the present. *Kuzvarira*, the pledging of a girl for future marriage, and *kuripa ngozi*, in which a girl may be given in marriage as restitution for a family's wrongdoing, are documented in Zimbabwe as justifications for marrying young girls without their consent (Bengesai et al., 2021; Chitakure, 2016), and the Marriages Act now criminalises the pledging and betrothal of children (Government of Zimbabwe, 2022). They are not the modal route into early marriage in contemporary peri-urban Zimbabwe, and treating them as such would misrepresent the phenomenon. Their significance is that they express, in concentrated form, a more diffuse assumption: that a girl's marital future is a matter about which her family, and specifically its senior male members, may legitimately decide. Ngidi et al. (2025) describe that diffuse form directly, finding that rural Zimbabwean girls positioned early marriage as an option made available by the convergence of material constraint and sociocultural norms; where readiness for marriage is assessed by physical development rather than a girl's own preparedness, the timing falls in the years during which secondary schooling would be completed. Bicchieri (2017) explains why such expectations prove durable even when privately doubted: a norm persists where individuals believe that others conform and expect conformity of them, so a parent may value a daughter's schooling and nonetheless withdraw her because the anticipated social cost of deviation is judged too high. This predicts that private persuasion will underperform relative to public commitments that shift what people expect of one another.

Gender Expectations and the Gendered Valuation of Girls' Education

The association between early marriage and truncated schooling is well established. Delprato et al. (2015) estimate schooling losses across sub-Saharan Africa and South West Asia; Hailu and Beyene (2025) find adolescent marriage and maternity persistently associated with restricted educational access across 106 countries; Bengesai et al. (2021) find that girl child marriage substantially reduces the probability of completing the first cycle of secondary education in Zimbabwe; and Mozambican girls describe marriage and early maternity as terminating rather than interrupting their schooling (Nhampoca & Maritz, 2024). The mechanism is nonetheless underspecified. The implicit model is displacement marriage introduces responsibilities that crowd out schooling which treats a girl's pre-marital trajectory as unproblematic. A complementary mechanism operates through anticipation: where girls are expected to marry and join another household, families may place less value on investing in their education because the returns are expected to accrue elsewhere. Distinguishing the two determines when an intervention must be timed.

Evidence from Zimbabwe's peri-urban settlements supports the anticipatory mechanism directly. Nyamwanza et al. (2025), working in Churu Farm, Epworth, Hopley and Ushewekunze, found the

prioritisation of boys' education endorsed by adolescents of both sexes under resource constraint, alongside a markedly gendered allocation of domestic time. Ghanaian evidence identifies the same reasoning in parental belief: families calculate returns on educational investment differently by sex, prioritising sons on the expectation of continuing household contribution while treating daughters' domestic competence as the more relevant preparation (Nartey et al., 2025). Mohammed's (2024) study of pandemic-related school closures in northern Ghana shows how quickly this ordering becomes operative: when schooling was interrupted and income fell, girls were the children whose return was not resumed. Murphy-Graham (2024) draws the implication, arguing that expanding access has not delivered its anticipated returns because access has been treated as a technical problem while the gender structure within which schooling is valued has been left intact.

Patriarchal Decision-Making and Girls' Agency

Feminist scholarship supplies the apparatus for analysing who decides. Millett (1970), in *Sexual Politics*, argued that relations between women and men constitute a political relationship of dominance and subordination sustained not principally by force but through the internalisation of gender ideology. Walby (1990) disaggregated patriarchy into distinct structures household production, paid work, the state, violence, sexuality and culture enabling identification of which sites are operative, while Connell (1987) specified the gender order as a structured but historically variable set of relations of power, production and emotional attachment. Applied to marriage and schooling, the relevant question is not whether a girl "chose" to marry but what the structure of the decision was: who initiated it, whose consent was necessary, what alternatives existed, and what refusal would have cost. Kabeer (1999), formulating empowerment as resources, agency and achievements, insists that an outcome be read alongside the conditions of choice, since a decision taken in the absence of alternatives is not equivalent to one taken among them. Recent work bears out the emphasis on decision-makers: a prospective study in a low-income African setting found child marriage risk shaped substantially by actors external to the girl herself (Kidman et al., 2024), while Malhotra and Elnakib's (2021) systematic review finds that programmes have been assessed overwhelmingly for their effects on girls rather than on those who determine their trajectories.

Bridewealth and the Materialisation of Gendered Expectations

Bride wealth (*roora* or *lobola*) occupies a contested position. Akurugu et al. (2022) argue that its two standard readings hold simultaneously: it secures the standing of a bride and her children within the marital family while also underwriting normative restrictions on her decision-making. For Zimbabwe, Chisango et al. (2022), surveying 437 respondents, found endorsement of *lobola* associated with acceptance of paternalistic control over women, mediated by benevolent sexism; the practice need not be

experienced as coercive in order to legitimate restrictions on autonomy. The evidence nonetheless counsels against a simple causal reading of bridewealth and marriage timing, since Ashraf et al. (2020) find that groups practising bride price responded to increased school availability with larger increases in girls' education than groups without it, payments rising with a bride's schooling. The defensible claim is narrower: where households face material insecurity, and a daughter's future is already understood in terms of marriage, the prospect of marriage-related transfers introduces an economic consideration that reinforces the existing expectation. The transfer does not create the expectation; it renders it economically legible at the moment when educational decisions are made.

Cultural and Gender Mechanisms Linking Early Marriage to Educational Non-Completion

If gendered expectations operate before marriage, they also operate after it. Gendered domestic obligation is the most immediate constraint: where a married girl is expected to assume responsibility for household labour, and frequently for a child, the time and standing required for attendance are withdrawn irrespective of fees, while financial dependence on a husband converts educational continuation into a matter requiring another person's permission. A third mechanism operates within the school. Zimbabwe's framework prohibits exclusion on grounds of pregnancy or fee arrears (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019), but entitlement and practice diverge: surveying 384 parents in Bulawayo, Kurevakwesu et al. (2023) found that 68 per cent held negative perceptions of the re-entry of pregnant learners and teenage mothers, citing sociocultural beliefs and fear of family humiliation, so that the expectations shaping the original withdrawal are reproduced in the community to which she would return. Muzingili (2025), studying 377 re-integrated teenage mothers, found emotional wellbeing, coping strategies, institutional support and time out of school to be the predictors of resilience, indicating that successful re-entry depends on conditions well beyond removal of the formal prohibition. The literature thus establishes that early marriage is associated with reduced completion, that material stress raises the risk of both, and that gender norms mediate how that stress is distributed among children (Gambir et al., 2024; Muchawaya et al., 2023); what it leaves unspecified is how these operate together in a peri-urban setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Radical Feminist Theory

Radical Feminist Theory is adopted as the analytical framework. The tradition developed during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, and Kate Millett was among its major proponents; in *Sexual Politics*, Millett (1970) examined how patriarchy shapes relations between women and men, arguing that women's unequal position is a structural feature of social organisation rather than an aggregate of individual prejudices. Elaborated by Connell (1987) and Walby (1990), the core proposition is that gender inequality is reproduced through the distribution

of authority within households and communities and legitimated by beliefs about the proper roles of women and men. In relation to early child marriage, expectations assigning girls subordinate and domestic roles may reduce the value placed on their education and raise the importance of marriage and family responsibilities. Patriarchy is therefore a system of relations rather than a description of attitudes: it specifies who is entitled to decide, whose interests are authoritative when claims compete, and which positions carry the obligations that make the arrangement workable.

Four elements carry particular weight here. The first is the location of patriarchal authority within the household; fathers and senior male kin as those entitled to determine matters affecting dependants, including a daughter's schooling and marriage; Millett's (1970) argument that patriarchy operates through consent rather than compulsion predicts that such authority will be exercised without evident coercion. The second is the differential social valuation of women and men, manifest in the allocation of educational investment; Walby's (1990) disaggregation identifies which structures are operative, so that where the mechanism runs through household production and the cultural meaning assigned to sons and daughters, the site of intervention is correspondingly specified. The third is control over women's sexuality: where the response to a daughter's pregnancy is her marriage, the regulation of conduct and of marital timing is governed by a single authority structure. The fourth is the constitution of gendered obligation, which Connell's (1987) gender order locates within the same frame as decisional authority, and which operates as a claim on girls' time before marriage and as a structural condition after it.

Application of the Theory to the Study

The theory is used not as a normative position but as a set of expectations testable against participants' accounts. If patriarchal structuring is operating as described, one should expect decisional authority concentrated in senior male household members; differential valuation of sons' and daughters' education becoming operative when resources are insufficient for both; limited participation by girls in decisions materially affecting them, with non-consultation rather than overruled dissent as the characteristic form; marital timing regulated in response to concerns about girls' sexual conduct; and a gendered allocation of domestic obligation constraining schooling before and after marriage. Each could in principle have been disconfirmed by the data. Two qualifications govern the application. Oyěwùmí (1997) and Tamale (2020) caution against importing Western gender categories without examining local systems of seniority and lineage,

so the configuration of authority is treated as an empirical finding and the analysis is explicit where the observed authority was simultaneously gendered and generational. Following Kabeer (1999), agency is treated as a variable rather than as uniformly absent, so that partial assent is read as accommodation within a constrained option set.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Setting

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods descriptive design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same fieldwork period, analysed separately, and compared at interpretation. The design was selected because the objective concerns both the distribution of experiences among women who married as children and the reasoning through which the decisions were made. Its descriptive orientation bounds the claims the study can support: no counterfactual is available, and the analysis identifies patterns and participant-reported mechanisms rather than estimating causal effects. Epworth was selected purposively as a setting in which material insecurity, gendered cultural expectations and documented early marriage co-occur, and in which their relationship to secondary education completion could be examined in a non-rural context.

Participants and Sampling

The estimated target population was approximately 300 individuals, derived from the 2024 caseload report of a local organisation working on gender-based violence and child protection in Epworth. It comprised women and girls who had experienced marriage before the age of 18, parents or guardians of affected girls, secondary-school teachers, community leaders, and representatives of non-governmental organisations working on child protection, gender equality and girls' education.

Because early marriage is sensitive and partly concealed, no complete sampling frame was available. Purposive sampling identified participants with direct experience of, or professional knowledge about, early marriage and secondary education in Epworth, and snowball referral was used where eligible participants were difficult to locate. Of the estimated target population, 35 individuals could be identified, were eligible and were accessible during the data-collection period; all were invited and all participated, yielding a census of the accessible study population rather than a sample drawn from it (Table 1). No statistical sample-size calculation was applied, and the design does not support probabilistic inference to the target population or to Epworth as a whole.

Table 1. Composition of the accessible study population

Participant category	n	Sampling method	Instrument
Women and girls married before age 18	10	Purposive and snowball	Structured questionnaire
Parents and guardians	10	Purposive	Semi-structured interview
Secondary-school teachers	5	Purposive	Key informant interview
Community leaders	5	Purposive and snowball	Key informant interview
NGO representatives	5	Purposive	Key informant interview
Total	35		

All 35 completed the relevant instrument, a response rate of 100 per cent within the accessible population. All questionnaire respondents were adults at the time of data collection: 7 aged 18–20 years, 2 aged 21–24 and 1 aged 25. All 10 had entered a marital union before 18 — 1 at 15, 3 at 16 and 6 at 17.

Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire administered in person to the 10 women and girls who had married before 18, comprising predominantly closed-ended multiple-choice and five-point Likert-scale items derived from the research objectives. Those bearing on this analysis concern the relative valuation of boys' and girls' education, the role of bride price or material benefits, the respondent's influence over decisions concerning her own marriage, the level of consent given, the principal influence on the marriage decision, the timing of school-leaving relative to marriage, and the interference of domestic duties, pregnancy or childcare with schooling. The qualitative instrument was a semi-structured interview guide asking which cultural beliefs and gender expectations contribute to early marriage; who makes decisions about a girl's education and marriage and how much influence she has; and how gendered expectations affect girls' schooling and their capacity to return to it. Interviews were conducted in locations agreed with participants, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed. Both instruments were pilot-tested with 10 participants in Masvingo — 3 secondary-school teachers, 2 non-governmental organisation employees, 2 education officers and 3 young women who had married before 18 — none of whom took part in the main study. The pilot identified the absence of a clear distinction between girls who left school before marriage and those who left afterwards; the educational-history section was accordingly expanded to capture the highest form completed, Ordinary Level participation, age at leaving school, and whether school-leaving occurred before or after marriage.

Questionnaire responses were checked for completeness and consistency, coded and entered into SPSS Version 25. Analysis was restricted to descriptive statistics. Because the component comprised only 10 respondents, findings are reported using the number of respondents together with the corresponding proportion rather than percentages alone, and no significance tests, correlation coefficients, regression models or effect estimates were computed or are reported. Interview transcripts were checked against

the recordings and field notes and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes against coded extracts and full transcripts, defining and naming themes, and reporting. The themes relevant here were the gendered valuation of education; marriage as an expected female social role; male control over marriage and educational decisions; bride price and material incentives; gendered domestic obligation; and the interaction between gendered expectations and material scarcity in producing educational exclusion. The two datasets were compared at interpretation. This article analyses the subset of data relevant specifically to cultural beliefs, gender expectations and patriarchal practices; findings relating to the study's other objectives are reported elsewhere.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained from the university prior to data collection, and permission was sought from the relevant local authorities and institutions in Epworth; community gatekeepers, school representatives and non-governmental organisations assisted in identifying eligible participants. All participants received information about the study's purpose, confidentiality and the right to withdraw, and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could decline any question or withdraw without penalty. Interviews were audio-recorded only with explicit consent, and codes were used instead of names, participants being identified in reporting by category and number only. All participants in the quantitative component were aged 18 or over at the time of data collection, notwithstanding that the experiences reported occurred during childhood. This article draws on data collected for the first author's master's thesis (Makusha, 2026).

FINDINGS

Agreement was complete on all three Likert items bearing on the objective: the relative valuation of boys' and girls' education, the role of bride price, and the respondent's influence over her own marriage. The interviews supplied the reasoning behind these distributions and located the authority through which decisions were made. The two datasets converged on substance and complemented one another on mechanism, the questionnaire establishing distributions and the interviews the reasoning behind them.

Gendered Valuation of Education

All 10 questionnaire respondents agreed that boys' education was valued more highly than girls' education; 7

strongly agreed and 3 agreed. No respondent was undecided, disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire responses on cultural, gender and patriarchal factors (n = 10)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total agreeing
Boys' education was valued more highly than girls' education	7	3	0	0	0	10 of 10
Bride price or material benefits encouraged early marriage	†	†	0	0	0	10 of 10
I had limited influence over decisions about my marriage	†	†	0	0	0	10 of 10

Note. † Complete agreement was reported on these two items; the distribution between "strongly agree" and "agree" was not separately disaggregated in the source study.

Parents and community leaders explained that some families expected boys to become future heads of households while girls were expected to marry and join another family, and that when household resources were limited this belief could lead families to give priority to boys' education. The expectation operated as an allocation rule:

"Most girls leave before marriage because they have already dropped out due to fees. If things become difficult, the family chooses to take the boys to school rather than the girls." (Participant 2)

The account is significant in two respects. It locates the decision at the point of economic stress rather than at marriage: the girl leaves school because of fees, and marriage follows. It also identifies the criterion by which the shortfall is resolved. The constraint is material; the rule of allocation is gendered. Scarcity determines that some child's schooling will be discontinued; the gendered valuation of education determines which child, and only the second is specific to daughters. The finding reflects participants' perceptions and accounts, and does not establish prevalence across Epworth households.

Cultural Expectations of Marriage and Womanhood

Interview participants described marriage and motherhood as the anticipated destination of girlhood, with domestic competence as the relevant preparation:

"Cultural expectations prioritise domestic roles and normalise early marriage as a passage to womanhood." (Participant 5)

The formulation indicates that marriage was understood not as one option among several but as a transition constitutive of adult female status, so that schooling and marriage do not merely compete for a girl's time: one is the destination, the other an interlude. A parent connected the expectation explicitly to withdrawal from school:

"The belief that a girl's main role is to become a wife prompts the decision to remove her from school when things become difficult economically." (Participant 3)

The conditional clause is the operative element: the belief does not by itself produce withdrawal, but becomes decisive when economic difficulty forces a choice

between children. The expectation supplies the criterion and the constraint the occasion. The questionnaire evidence is consistent with a life course in which marriage arrived at the point of educational transition. All 10 respondents married between 15 and 17 — 1 at 15, 3 at 16 and 6 at 17 — in the years immediately preceding the Ordinary Level examinations. Eight had completed Form Three, one Form Two and one reached Form Four, and none sat the examinations, which in this study were the requirement for completion.

Patriarchal Decision-Making and Girls' Constrained Agency

All 10 respondents reported having had limited influence over decisions concerning their own marriage. The evidence on consent is consistent: 4 stated that they did not freely agree, 4 agreed only partly and 2 agreed — 8 of 10 therefore experiencing no consent or only partial consent, so that entering marriage did not always mean the girl had made a free and informed choice.

Participants reported that fathers and older male relatives often had greater control over decisions concerning education and marriage, and that girls were not always consulted:

"The father or oldest male in the family makes the decisions, and the girl is not consulted." (Participant 6)

Two elements merit attention. The decision-maker is identified not as "the family" but as a specific position within it, the father, or in his absence the senior male relative. And the girl's position is one of non-consultation rather than overruled dissent, indicating that she was not constituted as a participant in the decision at all. Participants further reported that pregnancy could result in pressure to marry or to elope, which is analytically continuous, since girls' sexual conduct and marital timing were regulated through the same authority structure. Questionnaire responses on the principal influence over the marriage decision showed no single dominant route: pregnancy circumstances were cited by 5 respondents, religious leaders by 3, and parents or guardians and husbands or partners each once. No respondent identified herself as the principal influence on her own marriage.

Read alongside the finding that all 10 reported limited influence, this indicates that routes into marriage were heterogeneous while the girl's structural position within the decision was consistent.

Bride Price and Material Considerations

All 10 respondents agreed that bride price or material benefits encouraged early marriage. The item concerns their perception of an operative influence in their communities rather than a record of transfers received in their own cases. A representative of a non-governmental organisation described the mechanism as it appeared in casework:

"With limited access to resources, families keep girls out of school; they are then married for money, or they become pregnant and are married." (Participant 9)

The account specifies a sequence rather than a single cause. Resource constraint produces educational exclusion; the girl, now out of school, occupies a position in which marriage becomes the available trajectory; and marriage may then carry material transfer. Bride price appears not as the initiating cause but as the point at which a daughter's marriage acquires explicit economic value within a household already operating with a gendered conception of her future, so that economic reasoning and normative expectation pointed in the same direction.

Cultural and Patriarchal Mechanisms and Secondary Education Non-Completion

The relationship between early marriage and school completion was not one-directional. Of the 10 respondents, 4 left school before marriage, 4 at approximately the same time as marriage and 2 after; the order was not the same for every respondent. The most frequently cited principal reason for leaving was school fees or learning materials, given by 4 respondents; marriage, pregnancy and religious expectation were each cited by 2 (Table 3).

Table 3. Educational trajectory of the questionnaire respondents (n = 10)

Indicator	Category	n
Timing of school-leaving relative to marriage	Before marriage	4
	At approximately the same time	4
	After marriage	2
Principal reason for leaving school	School fees or learning materials	4
	Marriage	2
	Pregnancy	2
	Religious expectations	2
Highest form completed	Form Two	1
	Form Three	8

Indicator	Category	n
	Form Four	1
Sat Ordinary Level examinations	Yes	0
	No	10
Outcome of attempted return to school	Attempted but could not return	5
	Returned but subsequently left again	2
	Did not attempt to return	3
	Returned and completed	0

Note. Counts refer to the 10 questionnaire respondents and do not establish prevalence in Epworth.

This distribution is inconsistent with a model in which cultural and patriarchal factors bear on education only through the marital event. In at least 4 of 10 cases educational exclusion preceded marriage, and marriage then made returning even more difficult. The mechanisms reported above remain relevant to those cases, because they operated on the prior decision — whose schooling would be discontinued when fees could not be met. Participant 2 attributes pre-marital withdrawal directly to that gendered valuation.

After marriage a different configuration operated. Nine of the 10 agreed that domestic duties, pregnancy or childcare had interfered with schooling, with 1 undecided. Outcomes of attempted return were uniformly negative: 5 attempted to return but could not, 2 returned but later dropped out, and 3 did not attempt. None returned and continued to completion, and 9 of 10 agreed that stigma made returning difficult. The problem was not a lack of willingness; household duties, dependence on husbands or families, limited support and stigma all stood in the way. A community leader described the institutional dimension:

"Married girls are considered a bad influence, and teachers and pupils do not create an environment in which they can learn freely." (Community leader 1)

The expectations that shaped the original withdrawal were thus reproduced in the institution to which return would have to be made. A teacher located the deficiency institutionally:

"The retention policy should not remain on paper; schools need resources and staff training to support young mothers." (Teacher 2)

Together these findings support a two-phase account (Figure 1). Before marriage, the gendered valuation of education and the expectation of a marital destination determined which child's schooling was protected when resources were insufficient, producing interruption

independently of marriage. After marriage, gendered domestic obligation, financial dependence and institutional stigma obstructed re-entry, converting interruption into non-completion. Early marriage occupied an intermediate position: for some it followed educational exclusion, and for all of them it made that exclusion harder to reverse.

DISCUSSION

Patriarchy as a System of Allocation Rather Than of Attitudes

The finding that all 10 respondents perceived boys' education to be more highly valued, together with the household reasoning reported in interviews, supports an interpretation of patriarchy as a system of resource allocation rather than solely of attitudes. The Epworth evidence shows material scarcity and gender expectations working together: when resources were limited, beliefs about the different roles of boys and girls influenced whose education received greater support. Were unequal valuation principally attitudinal, awareness-raising would be an adequate remedy; as an allocation rule applied under scarcity, it will continue to produce unequal outcomes for as long as scarcity recurs.

The evidence converges with Nyamwanza et al. (2025), who found both boys and girls in four peri-urban Harare settlements, Epworth among them, endorsing the prioritisation of boys' education under resource constraint. Because the studies differ in population and method, the appearance of the same allocation rule in both suggests it is a stable feature of the setting rather than an artefact of either design, and that it is already internalised by children of both sexes which complicates interventions premised on informing parents. Ghanaian evidence points the same way (Nartey et al., 2025). In Walby's (1990) terms the mechanism operates through household production and the cultural structure assigning meaning to sons and daughters rather than through the state or violence, identifying the household as the site of intervention while locating the sustaining norms at community level (Bicchieri, 2017).

Cultural Expectations and the Construction of Girls' Futures

Participant 5's characterisation of early marriage as normalised "as a passage to womanhood" describes a life-course model in which girlhood culminates in marriage rather than educational completion. This is not opposition to girls' education but a claim about how education was positioned within an anticipated biography — instrumentally valuable if affordable, but not constitutive of adult female identity as marriage and motherhood were. The consequence follows from the anticipated distribution of returns: where a daughter is expected to marry into another household, the household bearing the cost of her education does not expect to capture its benefits. This anticipatory mechanism operates before any marriage occurs and is consistent with the finding that 4 of 10 left school before marrying.

The findings are similar to those of Chitakure (2016) and Bengesai et al. (2021), who link early marriage with patriarchal expectations, bride price, control over girls' sexuality and unequal investment in girls' education. The extension offered here is that the effect on completion is not exhausted by the marital event: part is realised earlier, so a design measuring the effect of marriage will attribute to it some part of what is attributable to the expectation of marriage. Read through Kabeer's (1999) framework, the relevant deprivation is not only the observed outcome but the contraction of the option set within which it was selected.

Patriarchal Authority and Girls' Constrained Agency

That all 10 respondents reported limited influence over decisions concerning their own marriage, and that 8 of 10 gave no consent or only partial consent, is the study's most direct evidence on agency. Participant 6's account of non-consultation locates the mechanism precisely, and its form is the one Radical Feminist Theory anticipates: authority attached to a position rather than exercised episodically, and a subject not constituted as a participant rather than one whose objection is overridden. Applying Kabeer's (1999) distinction, the observable achievement is common across respondents while the conditions of choice varied; what was invariant was the girl's structural position. The object of intervention is therefore not the individual decision but the structure determining who participates in making it — consistent with Kidman et al.'s (2024) finding that the determinants of risk lie substantially outside the girl's own characteristics, and with Malhotra and Elnakib's (2021) observation that intervention evidence has concentrated on girls rather than on those who decide for them.

Oyèwùmí (1997) and Tamale (2020) caution against reading all age- and kin-based authority as reducible to gender, and the authority described here combined seniority with gender in ways this evidence cannot fully disentangle. What supports a specifically gendered reading is the asymmetry of the outcome: the decisions concerned daughters' marriage and daughters' schooling, and the differential valuation of sons' and daughters' education indicates that the criterion applied was gendered even where the authority applying it was also generational.

Bride Price and the Materialisation of Gendered Expectation

The unanimous agreement that bride price encouraged early marriage requires an interpretation neither dismissive nor overstated. What the Epworth accounts describe is not bridewealth driving marriage but bridewealth rendering an already gendered valuation economically explicit at a moment of household pressure, with the transfer entering at the end of a sequence rather than its beginning (NGO worker 4). This reading is consistent with the finding that endorsement of *lobola* is associated with acceptance of paternalistic control over women without the practice being experienced as exploitative (Chisango et al., 2022), and with evidence that bride price can raise rather than depress parental

investment in daughters' schooling (Ashraf et al., 2020). Interventions targeting bridewealth as such are therefore likely to be ineffective and may be counterproductive, since the practice carries meanings of alliance and recognition that participants value (Akurugu et al., 2022); those addressing the conditions under which it becomes salient in a decision about a fifteen-year-old engage the mechanism the evidence identifies.

Early Marriage as Both Consequence and Cause of Educational Exclusion

Four respondents had already left school before marriage, 4 left at approximately the same time and 2 after; afterwards return became more difficult because of domestic responsibilities, dependence on husbands, stigma and reduced family support. Early marriage could therefore follow an earlier interruption and also make it more permanent. With 10 respondents these counts cannot establish the distribution of sequences in Epworth, but they establish that the sequence was not uniform and that the model in which marriage causes dropout does not describe all of these cases. If these mechanisms bore on education only through marriage, pre-marital school-leaving would be attributable to material factors alone, but Parent 2 attributes it directly to gendered prioritisation under economic stress.

This is consistent in outcome with Bengesai et al. (2021), Delprato et al. (2015) and Hailu and Beyene (2025), but it specifies a temporal structure those designs are not positioned to reveal: they estimate the association between marriage and completion, whereas the present design captures the ordering of events within individual trajectories. The association they estimate therefore likely embeds prior gendered attrition occurring before marriage, and programmes responding only after a girl has married may reach some too late.

The obstruction of return deserves emphasis, because it is where the legal framework and household practice diverge most visibly. Section 68C of the Education Act prohibits exclusion on grounds of pregnancy or fee arrears (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019), yet no respondent returned and completed. Kurevakwesu et al. (2023) supply the proximate explanation from the community side, and Muzingili (2025) identifies what successful return requires beyond removal of the prohibition; Community leader 1 and Teacher 2 describe those conditions from within Epworth. The Epworth accounts also differ in emphasis from rural Zimbabwean evidence, foregrounding allocation decisions by senior kin rather than the girl-initiated survival strategies reported under acute food insecurity (Gambir et al., 2024; Ngidi et al., 2025) plausibly a function of setting, and a comparison that should not be over-read.

Radical Feminist Theory Assessed Against the Evidence

The findings support Radical Feminist Theory because they show that unequal power between women and men affected decisions about girls' education and marriage, and that men had greater control over household resources

and over those decisions. Each of the theory's expectations was met: decisional authority concentrated in fathers and senior male relatives (Participant 6); educational value differentially assigned by sex; minimal participation by girls in decisions materially affecting them; marital timing regulated in response to pregnancy; and domestic obligation gendered in a way that constrained schooling. In each case the data could have disconfirmed the expectation and did not.

The theory's limits are equally identifiable. It does not adequately account for material scarcity as an independent condition, since the gendered rule became operative principally when resources were insufficient. It under-specifies variation between households, and a design recruiting women who married early cannot illuminate those that retained their daughters. It accommodates girls' own agency awkwardly, since 2 respondents agreed to the marriage and 4 agreed partly; Kabeer's (1999) framing handles this better because it retains agency as a variable. It gives limited purchase on institutional factors, since the obstruction of return described by Community leader 1 operated through schools rather than household authority. And the qualification raised by Oy w m  (1997) and Tamale (2020) applies throughout. These limits do not defeat the theory; they indicate that it functions best as an account of the criterion by which household decisions were made, requiring supplementation by analysis of the conditions under which those decisions arose and of the barriers to their reversal.

Policy and Practical Implications

Six implications follow. **Families:** because the allocation rule is applied within households and is already internalised by children of both sexes (Nyamwanza et al., 2025), programmes should address unequal decision-making within families and make the returns to a daughter's completed education explicit. **Fathers and senior male relatives:** the authority described was attached to a position rather than exercised episodically, so those occupying it must be involved in the decisions themselves (Malhotra & Elnakib, 2021). **Schools:** because gendered attrition began before marriage in at least 4 of 10 cases, schools should operate sex-disaggregated early warning on absence and fee arrears, and monitor progression to Form Four and Ordinary Level entry rather than enrolment alone. **Community leaders:** since non-consultation of girls was treated as unremarkable (Participant 6), public collective statements should outperform private persuasion (Bicchieri, 2017). **Gender-transformative programming:** interventions confined to assisting girls leave the decision structure intact, whereas approaches targeting male decision-making authority and household norms about the worth of sons' and daughters' education engage the mechanisms documented here (Murphy-Graham, 2024). **Government:** section 68C of the Education Act prohibits exclusion for fee arrears or pregnancy (Government of Zimbabwe, 2019), and that no respondent returned and completed indicates that implementation requires resourcing rather than promulgation alone.

LIMITATIONS

The quantitative component comprised 10 respondents, which supports descriptive frequencies only; no inferential claim is made, and the findings do not establish prevalence in Epworth. Purposive and snowball sampling means participants were, by construction, those identifiable, accessible and willing to discuss a stigmatised experience, so socially isolated women were less likely to be reached and referral may have produced participants sharing networks and therefore experiences. All 35 members of the accessible population participated, but this is a census of that population, not of the estimated target population of approximately 300. Social desirability may have shaped responses, and marriage and school-leaving were recalled retrospectively, so sequence and motive are subject to reconstruction. The design is descriptive and cross-sectional at a single site, cannot establish causal effects, and cannot separate gendered from generational authority. It did not reach households that retained daughters in school, whose reasoning would materially inform the analysis; findings should therefore not be generalised beyond the participants. These constraints bound the study's claims without vitiating them: convergence between two structurally independent sources is the principal warrant for the findings.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from Epworth shows that cultural beliefs and patriarchal decision-making substantially shaped girls' education and marriage outcomes among the participants in this study. All 10 questionnaire respondents felt that boys' education was given more value than girls'; all 10 linked bride price or material gain to early marriage; and all 10 reported little influence over decisions about their own marriages, 8 of 10 reporting no consent or only partial consent. Interview participants reported that fathers and older male relatives commonly controlled decisions about education and marriage while girls were rarely consulted and described marriage as the expected passage to womanhood.

These factors operated as interlocking mechanisms rather than as separate variables. The unequal valuation of boys' and girls' education, the expectation that girls should become wives and mothers, bride-price considerations and male control over household decisions together reduced girls' ability to remain in school and to make free decisions about marriage. The belief that a girl's future lies in marriage supplied the criterion by which scarce educational resources were allocated; patriarchal authority determined who applied that criterion and whether the girl participated; and bride price rendered the valuation economically explicit. Material scarcity and patriarchy therefore interacted: when resources were limited, families often prioritised boys' education because boys were viewed as future heads of households, and girls were withdrawn because they were expected to marry.

The mechanisms operated in both phases of the trajectory. Before marriage they governed which child's schooling was discontinued when fees could not be met; 4 of the 10 had already left school before marrying. After marriage,

gendered domestic obligation, financial dependence and institutional stigma obstructed return: none sat the Ordinary Level examinations, and none returned and completed. Early child marriage was thus, for these participants, both a consequence of prior gendered educational exclusion and a barrier to its reversal. These conclusions describe the participants' experiences and do not establish causal effects or prevalence. Within those bounds, economic interventions that do not address gendered power relations within the household are unlikely to be sufficient: transforming the gender norms and patriarchal decision structures surrounding girls' education and marriage is a condition of the effectiveness of material assistance rather than an adjunct to it.

Contribution to Knowledge

The article provides participant-grounded evidence on cultural, gender and patriarchal mechanisms from Epworth, a peri-urban settlement under-represented in a Zimbabwean literature concentrated on rural districts and national survey data. It extends the single prior Epworth study (Muchawaya et al., 2023) by specifying the normative and decisional mechanisms that study did not address, and corroborates in an adult population the gendered educational prioritisation Nyamwanza et al. (2025) identified among very young adolescents in the same settlements. Conceptually, it specifies three interlocking mechanisms; the gendered valuation of education, marriage as a gendered social destination, and patriarchal decision-making authority, and shows how they combine with material transfer, so that normative expectation supplies the criterion for allocation and material pressure the occasion for its application. By documenting that 4 of 10 left school before marriage, it shows that these mechanisms bear on completion both before and after marriage. Theoretically, it applies Radical Feminist Theory as a set of testable expectations rather than an interpretive gloss; methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating small-n questionnaire evidence with multi-stakeholder qualitative accounts, including where the qualitative material constrains rather than amplifies the quantitative pattern.

Recommendations

1. **Engage fathers and senior male relatives as decision-makers in families.** Participants reported that fathers and older male relatives commonly controlled decisions about education and marriage. Men and boys should be included in community discussions on gender equality and girls' education, and interventions should recruit senior male kin as participants rather than audiences.
2. **Establish girls' participation in decisions affecting their schooling and marriage.** All 10 reported limited influence over decisions concerning their own marriage and 8 of 10 reported no consent or only partial consent. Family- and community-level mechanisms should make consultation of the girls an expected step, since non-consultation rather than overruled dissent was the characteristic form of exclusion.

3. Strengthen support for girls affected by gendered household decisions. No respondent returned and completed secondary education; 9 of 10 reported that domestic duties, pregnancy or childcare interfered with schooling and that stigma made returning difficult. Re-entry support should combine assistance with childcare, flexible learning, counselling and referral, with teacher training on non-discrimination, since these barriers were reported concurrently.

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