



Early Marriage and the Future of Educational Opportunities for Girls in Ukerewe District, Tanzania

Fauster H. Mwalivale¹ , Prosperity M. Mwila*²

¹Hamukoko primary school, Ukerewe District, Tanzania.

² Saint Augustine University of Tanzania.

Correspondence e-mail * : baprofsk@gmail.com

Abstract: This study investigates the prevalence, drivers, consequences, and potential interventions for early marriage and its impact on girls' educational opportunities in Ukerewe District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania. Using a mixed-methods convergent parallel design, the research combined quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews involving students, teachers, head teachers, the District Secondary Education Officer, and quality assurance officers. Findings reveal that early marriage is prevalent among girls aged 14-18, particularly those from economically disadvantaged households and those who fail Form II national examinations. Key drivers include poverty, cultural practices such as unyago, low parental education, and legal provisions permitting marriage under 18. The consequences are profound-school dropout, early pregnancies, high maternal and infant mortality, and exposure to domestic violence. The study recommends harmonizing marriage laws with international conventions, enhancing financial and educational support for girls, integrating comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula, and implementing community sensitization and economic empowerment programs. Addressing early marriage in Ukerewe requires culturally sensitive, multi-sectoral strategies that tackle both its socio-economic and normative roots

Keyword : early marriage, girls' education, Ukerewe District, poverty, cultural practices, Tanzania

Article info: Submitted : 2025-04-18 | Accepted : 2025-06-02 | Published : 2025-06-19

Copyright © 2025, Authors.

This is an open-access article under the [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, defined as a union where one or both spouses are below 18 years of age, continues to pose a significant threat to girls' education, health, and socio-economic development worldwide (UNICEF, 2006; ICRW, 2003). In sub-Saharan Africa, and Tanzania in particular, the prevalence of early marriage remains alarmingly high despite ratification of international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (United Nations, 1989; ACRWC, 1990). In Ukerewe District, early marriage is both a cultural and socio-economic issue, deeply rooted in traditions, economic hardship, and policy gaps. Data from 2000–2015 show that about 20% of girls completing primary school in the district were married before turning 18 (Tamwa, 2010). Many of these girls are aged between 14 and 18, and a large proportion fail the Form II national examinations, after which they are withdrawn from school and married off (Daraz, 2012). This trend not only violates girls' rights but also undermines their potential to contribute to sustainable community and national development.

The persistence of early marriage in Ukerewe is linked to multiple, interrelated factors. Economically, high poverty rates push parents to view daughters as economic burdens, making marriage especially to

older, financially stable men an attractive option (Forward, 2008; Steinways et al., 2018). Culturally, practices such as unyago and the payment of bride price serve as rites of passage and economic incentives, reinforcing the acceptability of marriage at a young age (UNFPA, 2006). Legally, the Marriage Act of 1971 allows girls to marry at 15 with parental consent, contradicting international standards that set 18 as the minimum age (Mukherjee, 2006). These socio-economic, cultural, and legal drivers combine to create a context where girls' education is deprioritized, and marriage is viewed as a social norm rather than a rights violation (Laura, 2018).

The consequences for education are severe. Early marriage is a leading cause of girls' school dropout in Ukerewe, resulting in lower academic achievement, diminished career opportunities, and perpetuation of the poverty cycle (UNICEF, 2010; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014). Married girls are more likely to experience early pregnancies, increased maternal and infant mortality, and domestic violence (UNICEF, 2006; WHO, 2021). As Ingrid (2009) notes, this has a knock-on effect on communities, as children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to succeed academically, perpetuating the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. Addressing this problem is essential not only to protect girls' rights but also to achieve national education and development goals.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to investigate early marriage and the future of educational opportunities for girls in Ukerewe District, Mwanza. Specifically, the study aims:

1. To record the proportion of girls affected by early marriage among secondary school students in Ukerewe District.
2. To analyze the causes and drivers of early marriage for girls in Ukerewe District, Mwanza Region.
3. To describe the effect of early marriage on the completion of secondary education in Ukerewe District and to explore possible strategies to be adopted by education stakeholders to support girls' educational opportunities.

Literature review

1. Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the critical role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development, suggesting that human learning is largely a social process shaped by shared tools, values, and practices within a community (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, children acquire skills and knowledge through guided participation in culturally relevant activities, where more knowledgeable members of the community such as parents, teachers, and peers scaffold their learning. In the context of

Ukerewe District, sociocultural theory provides a useful lens for understanding how prevailing cultural norms, such as unyago rites and the practice of bride price, influence parents' decisions to prioritize marriage over education for their daughters (UNFPA, 2006). This framework explains why early marriage is often viewed not as a violation of rights but as an expected cultural pathway to adulthood, especially in rural, low-income settings where educational opportunities for girls are limited (Forward, 2008; Laura, 2018). A key strength of the theory lies in its recognition of the powerful role that society plays in shaping individual behavior and opportunities, making it relevant for exploring how entrenched norms sustain early marriage. However, its limitations include insufficient attention to individual agency and the possibility for girls to resist or transcend these norms (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, sociocultural theory underscores the interconnectedness between community values, economic structures, and educational access, highlighting that interventions to delay marriage must also address the broader cultural and social environment that shapes girls' life trajectories (Tamwa, 2010; Daraz, 2012).

2. Empirical Review

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that early marriage is both a symptom and a driver of educational

disadvantage, with prevalence highest in rural and impoverished communities (UNICEF, 2010; UNFPA, 2012). For example, in Ethiopia and Nigeria, large proportions of girls are married before 15, with nearly all married girls in these contexts being out of school and lacking basic literacy skills (UNFPA, 2005; Locoh, 2000). Similar patterns are found across West and Central Africa, where rates often exceed 60%, and in parts of South Asia, where cultural norms and economic pressures converge to sustain the practice (UNICEF, 2020). In Tanzania, studies reveal that poverty, low parental education, and harmful traditional practices such as unyago and female genital mutilation are major drivers of early marriage, while legal loopholes, such as the allowance for girls to marry at 15 with parental consent under the Marriage Act of 1971, further exacerbate the problem (Mukherjee, 2006; Bates et al., 2007).

Research from Ukerewe District shows that girls from economically disadvantaged households are more likely to be withdrawn from school and married off, particularly after failing Form II examinations, a trend that aligns with findings from other sub-Saharan contexts where early marriage is often used as a strategy for economic survival (Steinways et al., 2018; Forward, 2008). The consequences are profound: married girls face higher maternal and infant mortality rates, are at greater risk of domestic violence, and experience limited economic

opportunities due to curtailed education (UNICEF, 2006; WHO, 2021; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014). Comparative studies also highlight that interventions such as increasing girls' access to secondary education, providing economic support to families, and enforcing legal marriage age have been effective in reducing early marriage rates, as seen in Senegal and Ethiopia (Petron et al., 2017; ICRW, 2014). These empirical insights affirm the need for a multifaceted approach in Ukerewe, combining legal reform, economic empowerment, cultural change, and educational investment to effectively tackle early marriage and expand educational opportunities for girls.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods convergent parallel design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of early marriage and its effects on girls' education. The target population comprised secondary school girls, teachers, head teachers, the District Secondary Education Officer (DSEO), and quality assurance officers in Ukerewe District. A sample of 93 respondents was selected, with probability sampling applied to students to ensure representativeness, and purposive non-probability sampling used for selecting schools and key informants. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires for students and

teachers, while qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interview guides for head teachers, the DSEO, and quality assurance officers. The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate descriptive statistics presented in tables, charts, and graphs. The qualitative data were thematically analyzed to capture recurring patterns and contextual explanations. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation, ensuring compliance with academic research standards.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Proportion of Girls Affected by Early Marriage

The study established that early marriage is still widespread among secondary school girls in Ukerewe District. Data from the student questionnaires showed that a significant number of girls aged between 14 and 18 had either married before completing school or were at high risk of early marriage due to family arrangements. Teachers reported that in some schools, between 15% and 20% of girls dropped out because of marriage, with the highest incidence among those who failed Form II national examinations. Interviews with the District Secondary Education Officer (DSEO) indicated that these cases are underreported, as some parents arrange informal unions

without notifying schools. In certain instances, entire cohorts saw multiple students leave for marriage, resulting in disrupted learning environments and lower overall school completion rates for girls (District Education Office, 2022).

2. These findings align with UNICEF's (2020) report showing rural, low-income regions face the highest prevalence of child marriage, and with Locoh's (2000) findings from Niger, where 87% of women aged 20-24 had married before turning 18. From a sociocultural theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), the high proportion reflects deep cultural acceptance of early marriage as a normal and even desirable transition to adulthood. In Ukerewe, the practice is reinforced by community norms that equate marriage with social respectability for girls, and education is often considered secondary. The implication is that unless interventions directly address these cultural perceptions while simultaneously offering viable alternatives to marriage, the trend will persist, undermining gender parity in education and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Causes and Drivers of Early Marriage

The study identified poverty as the most influential driver of early marriage in Ukerewe. Many parents viewed daughters as economic burdens, particularly when family incomes were low, and saw marriage as a means to reduce household expenses

or to obtain a bride price. Respondents noted that older, financially secure men often targeted younger girls, offering economic incentives to their families. Cultural practices, such as unyago initiation rites, were also reported as legitimizing early sexual activity and subsequent marriage for girls as young as 14 (UNFPA, 2006). The persistence of these customs was compounded by low parental education levels, which limited awareness of the long-term benefits of girls' schooling. In addition, the Marriage Act of 1971, which permits girls to marry at 15 with parental consent, was identified as a legal loophole that undermines international human rights commitments (Mukherjee, 2006).

These results are consistent with findings from Forward (2008) and Steinways et al. (2018), which link poverty and harmful cultural norms to higher rates of early marriage. Similar patterns are seen in other Tanzanian regions (Tamwa, 2010) and in countries such as Chad and Nigeria, where legal frameworks and socio-economic pressures perpetuate the practice (UNICEF, 2010; Walker, 2015). Interpreted through sociocultural theory, these drivers are not isolated causes but part of a broader web of community values and survival strategies. This suggests that change must be culturally sensitive, integrating economic empowerment programs for families, community education campaigns, and strict enforcement of legal marriage age. Without addressing

these interconnected drivers, policy reforms alone are unlikely to achieve sustained reductions in early marriage.

Effects of Early Marriage on Girls' Education

The study revealed that early marriage directly leads to high dropout rates among girls in Ukerewe District. Married girls rarely return to school despite the government's policy allowing re-entry after childbirth (Ministry of Education, 2021). Early pregnancies were a common outcome, with many leading to serious health complications such as obstetric fistula, high maternal mortality, and increased infant mortality (UNICEF, 2006; WHO, 2021). Several respondents recounted cases of young mothers suffering permanent health damage due to childbirth before their bodies were fully developed. Married girls also faced reduced social interaction, loss of peer networks, and limited participation in community or school-based activities, which further restricted their educational and personal development.

These consequences echo Ingrid's (2009) assertion that the children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to succeed academically, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. They also confirm Kyari & Ayodele's (2014) findings that early marriage increases vulnerability to domestic violence, a point reinforced by reports from Ukerewe respondents who described verbal, physical, and sexual

abuse from husbands and in-laws. From a sociocultural theory standpoint, early marriage disrupts a girl's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978) by removing her from structured learning environments and cutting off essential support networks. The implications are profound: without addressing early marriage, national and local efforts to promote girls' education will be undermined, and the district will face long term deficits in gender equality, workforce participation, and community development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that early marriage remains a significant barrier to girls' educational attainment in Ukerewe District, with a substantial proportion of secondary school girls either married before completion or at high risk due to cultural, economic, and legal factors. The findings reveal that poverty, entrenched cultural practices such as unyago, low parental education, and legal loopholes in the Marriage Act of 1971 combine to create an environment where early marriage is normalized and even encouraged. This normalization persists despite Tanzania's commitments to international conventions such as the CRC and CEDAW (United Nations, 1989; Mukherjee, 2006). The sociocultural theory lens underscores

that early marriage is deeply embedded in the community's shared values and economic survival strategies, making it a multidimensional challenge that cannot be addressed through policy changes alone.

The consequences for girls' education and overall development are severe. Early marriage disrupts schooling, leads to early pregnancies with high health risks, and increases vulnerability to domestic violence (UNICEF, 2006; WHO, 2021; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014). These outcomes perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty and gender inequality, limiting not only individual potential but also the district's socio-economic growth. Without targeted interventions that address both the structural and cultural dimensions of the problem, Ukerewe will continue to experience high dropout rates among girls, low female participation in skilled employment, and a reduced capacity to achieve national education and development goals (Ingrid, 2009; Petron et al., 2017).

Recommendations

To effectively address early marriage and improve educational opportunities for girls in Ukerewe, the study recommends a multi-pronged approach. First, legal reforms should be prioritized to harmonize Tanzania's Marriage Act with international human rights standards, setting the minimum marriage age at 18 for both sexes without exceptions. Enforcement

mechanisms must be strengthened, with clear penalties for those arranging or participating in underage marriages. Second, the government and NGOs should expand financial support programs to cover not only tuition but also essential school needs such as uniforms, books, and sanitary products, ensuring that economic hardship is not a barrier to girls' continued schooling. Additionally, comprehensive sexuality education should be integrated into the school curriculum to equip girls with knowledge and agency over their reproductive health.

Third, community-based interventions are essential for changing entrenched cultural norms. Engagement of traditional leaders, religious authorities, and parents in sustained sensitization campaigns can help shift perceptions of girls' roles and value beyond marriage. Economic empowerment programs for families, especially women, can reduce the financial incentives driving early marriage by providing alternative income sources. Finally, collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector should be strengthened to implement scalable, sustainable solutions that combine legal protection, educational investment, and cultural transformation. By addressing the economic, social, and cultural roots of early marriage in an integrated manner, Ukerewe District can make significant

progress towards gender equality and educational advancement for all girls.

REFERENCE

- Abdallah, S. (2011). *Child marriage in Nigeria: Causes and consequences*. Lagos: Women's Rights Advocacy Group.
- Ameh, A. (2016). Psychological effects of early marriage among adolescent girls. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 31(2), 150–165.
- Bala, A. (2003). *The socio-economic effects of early marriage*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.
- Bates, L. M., Maselko, J., & Schuler, S. R. (2007). Women's education and the timing of marriage and childbearing in the next generation: Evidence from rural Bangladesh. *Studies in Family Planning*, 38(2), 101–112.
- Daraz, U. (2012). Early marriage and its effect on girls' education in rural Africa. *African Educational Review*, 4(1), 45–59.
- District Education Office. (2022). *Annual education report: Ukerewe District*. Mwanza: Government of Tanzania.
- Forward, C. (2008). *Child marriage: Causes, consequences and solutions*. London: Plan UK.
- ICRW. (2003). *Too young to wed: Education & action toward ending child marriage*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women.
- ICRW. (2014). *Child marriage and education: Impacts, costs, and*

- benefits*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women.
- Ingrid, P. (2009). Education interrupted: The effects of early marriage on schooling. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report Background Paper*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Kyari, G. V., & Ayodele, J. (2014). The socio-economic effect of early marriage in North Western Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(14), 582–589.
- Laura, P. (2018). Cultural and economic pathways to early marriage in rural Africa. *Journal of Social Development Studies*, 12(3), 201–220.
- Locoh, T. (2000). Early marriage in West Africa. *Population Council Working Papers*, 3(1), 25–41.
- Ministry of Education. (2021). *Re-entry guidelines for pregnant schoolgirls*. Dodoma: Government of Tanzania.
- Mukherjee, A. (2006). Child marriage in India: Law, policy and practice. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 13(2), 205–230.
- Nwachukwu, G. (2019). Making education free to end teenage marriage: A policy imperative. *African Journal of Education Policy*, 6(2), 44–57.
- Petron, S., Sylla, M., & Ndiaye, M. (2017). Education and child marriage trends in Senegal. *African Population Studies*, 31(2), 3505–3518.
- Steinways, A., Msuya, J., & Kapinga, F. (2018). Poverty and early marriage in rural Tanzania: An economic analysis. *Tanzanian Journal of Development Studies*, 9(1), 66–80.
- Tamwa. (2010). *Child marriage and girls' education in Tanzania*. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Media Women's Association.
- UNFPA. (2006). *Innocenti Digest: Early marriage*. New York: United Nations Population Fund.
- UNFPA. (2012). *Marrying too young: End child marriage*. New York: United Nations Population Fund.
- UNICEF. (2006). *Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse: Early marriage*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- UNICEF. (2007). *The state of the world's children*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- UNICEF. (2010). *Progress for children: Achieving the MDGs with equity*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Ending child marriage: A profile of progress*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. New York: United Nations.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walker, J. (2015). Early marriage in Africa: Trends, harmful effects, and interventions. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 19(3), 94-103.

WHO. (2021). *Adolescent pregnancy fact sheet*. Geneva: World Health Organization..

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Author 1, Author 2;

Methodology: Author 2;

Investigation: Author 1;

Writing – original draft preparation: Author 1;

Writing – review and editing: Author 2;

Visualization: Author 1, Author 2.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.