

Psychological distress among married and unmarried Female Teenagers in Mt Darwin District in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Background: The psychological distress is one of the leading silent causes of mental illnesses particularly in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Most communities in the Sub-Sahara Africa relate mental illnesses to witchcrafting or avenging spirits for wrongdoing, without considering the human environments. In Zimbabwe, early marriage, as one of the causes of mental illnesses has not been much researched and documented. The empirical evidence is key in enhancing understanding of psychological distress as one of negative impacts of early marriages. This study is meant to increase evidence of the effects of early marriage through comparing married and non-married female teenagers in line with the likelihood of developing the psychological distress. The study sought to answer the following questions: (a) Does early marriage expose female teenagers to psychological distress? (b) How prevalent is psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers? (c) Are levels psychological distress significantly different among married and unmarried female teenagers? Findings might be helpful to inform interventions for minimizing and/ or curbing the languishing of female teenagers in marriage by pointing to effective social support systems.

Materials and Methods: In this study, the researchers randomly selected 192 married and 192 unmarried female teenager respondents within 16 to 19 year age range. All respondents were drawn from purposively selected eight wards with high prevalence of early marriage in Mount (Mt) Darwin District of Zimbabwe. A modified Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K (10) was used to determine the level of likelihood of developing psychological distress in married and unmarried female teenagers.

Results: More married female teenagers were likely to develop psychological distress when compared with the unmarried female teenagers. Psychological distress was most prevalent among married female teenagers within the 16 to 17 year age range probably due to swift changes in roles from parent-dependent to self/husband dependent young adults and immaturity to handle roles and responsibilities of marriage. The unmarried female teenagers who were orphans, with primary education and belonging either to Apostolic Sects of African Traditional Religion reported psychological distress.

Conclusion: The study established that the married female teenagers were more likely to develop psychological distress than their unmarried female teenager counterparts. In Mt Darwin District there are many adolescent females who are already married and are experiencing challenges in their marriages. Those unmarried female adolescents who have not yet experienced early marriage challenges would in the long run be victims. A dual approach, emphasising prevention of anticipated problems and amelioration of already existing problems should be adopted in Mt Darwin.

Key Words: Psychological Distress, Female teenager, early marriage; Mount Darwin.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Early marriage impacts female teenagers emotionally, economically, physically, psychologically and socially (Ahmed, 2013; Banerjee et al., 2009; Girls Not Brides, 2015; Goli et al., 2015; Montazeri et al., 2016; Santhya, 2011). According to UN (2016), early marriages are not only a disrespect to the dignity and well-being of individual girls/teenagers, but they also deprive nations of the social and economic benefits that derive from an educated and skilled female population. More bluntly, these marriages rob the female teenagers and short-change them of the contributions they could have made as women in their future life. In fact, UNICEF (2014) concludes that female teenager marriage is one of the most destructive demonstrations of inequality and power imbalance between women and men.

Early marriage is a worldwide social phenomenon though it is more dominant in developing countries (Harper et al., 2014). African Union (2015) confirms that high prevalence rates of female teenager marriages persist throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa despite legislative efforts to prevent the practice. In concurrence, UNICEF (2014) reports that 39 percent of women are married before the age of 18 years in Sub-Saharan Africa. These marriages are associated with several challenges. A study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2013) reveals that female teenagers in marriage are denied the right to freely express their views and to be defended against devastating traditional practices. Other similar studies claim that married female teenagers are confined to the grooms' households and prevented from visiting former families and friends and frequently report social isolation (Nour, 2009; Parsons et al., 2015; UNFPA, 2012). Contemporary studies have acknowledged that married teenagers are more isolated, rarely attend school, have less decision-making power over their own lives, and are subjected to more frequent sex than their unmarried peers (Presler-Marshall & Jones, 2012; Walker, 2017). Social interaction restriction triggers suicidal ideations and suicide attempts among married female teenagers (Phillips et al., 2002). Other problems experienced by pre-mature female teenagers in marriage include psychological and emotional traumas, severe violence, denial of social services and reproductive health problems (Mengistu, 2015). These problems are confirmed by a study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2013) which reveals a higher risk for psychological and psychiatric disorders among married female teenagers than among their unmarried counterparts. Due to problems associated with early marriages two-thirds of women who marry while in their teens are more likely to divorce within 15 years of their wedding compared with women who postpone marriages (Dahl, 2015). It is evident that female teenager marriages violate the girls' rights and if nothing is done to curb these early marriages female teenagers in marriage will continue to suffer from psychological distress.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This comparative study was carried out on married and unmarried female teenager in Mt Darwin District of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. The study was conducted from September 2019 to January 2020. A total 384 respondents (both married and unmarried) within the age range 16 to 19 years were part of the study.

Research design: The study utilised a quantitative approach to investigate psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers. Specifically, a comparative approach informed by positivist philosophy was adopted for this study whose focus was on collecting numerical evidence on psychological distress among the Zimbabwean sample of female teenagers.

Study Location: The study was carried in Mount Darwin District in Mashonaland Province of Zimbabwe.

Study Duration: September 2019 to March 2020.

Sample size: 384 married and unmarried female teenagers.

Sample size calculation: The study used a Raosoft calculator to determine the sample size of 192 from an estimated 380 married female teenagers drawn from eight wards in Mt Darwin district at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. In each ward, 24 respondents were randomly selected. 30% of the 640 unmarried female teenagers within the age range 16 to 19 years were similarly drawn from the sampled wards. Therefore, a total of 384 respondents were included in this quantitative research in all eight wards.

Subjects and selection method: The study respondents comprised 384 female teenagers who were randomly sampled from Mt Darwin district, 192 of them were in marriage while another 192 were out of marriage. Their ages ranged from 16-19 years. Female teenagers who had been in or out of marriage for more than six months were selected. 384 married and unmarried female teenagers responded to a structured self-administered demographic questionnaire (A) and Kessler's Depression Scale K (10) (B) questionnaire. Subjects who were illiterate were assisted to complete the two questionnaires.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Married female teenagers living in the eight sampled wards in Mt Darwin District
2. Female Teenagers only
3. Aged between 16 and 19 years only
4. Living with or without disability

Exclusion criteria:

1. Married less than six months
2. Divorced more than six months
3. Outside the 16-19 years of age
4. Living outside the sampled eight wards

Procedure methodology

In the study, the Provincial Development Coordinator's Office granted a permission to carry out the study through a written letter. Further permission was sought and granted from the District Administrator and Community stakeholders. Before the study commenced, respondents received detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, risks and benefits including the rights of the respondent and contact information of the researchers. Each participating respondent signed a consent form prior to data collection. Kessler Distress Scale K (10) administration was scheduled for a time when the respondents felt comfortable to complete them. The use of a procedure in which the illiterate respondents were assisted by the researchers to fill in the required information ensured that everyone in the sample answered the same questions thereby enabling researchers to obtain a high response rate (Constantinos et al., 2011). A modified Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K (10) questionnaire with a Cronbach's α value above the 0.70 (Field, 2009) was used to collect for the study. The reliability and validity of the instrument was ascertained through continuous expert consultation and pre-testing with respondents in the research population who did not participate in the actual research.

Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 was used to analyse data collected for the purpose of the study. Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies and percentages) provided a condensed description of the relationship between independent and dependent variables, which were identified for the purpose of the study. Inferential statistics (i.e., Cramer's V, independent t-test and Levene test) enabled the researchers either confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis that there was no significant difference between psychological distress among married and unmarried teenagers. International Standards for computing and interpreting Kessler levels of test scores were adopted.

III. RESULT

The Kessler Distress Scale was administered to 384 respondents. Of these 192 were unmarried teenagers and another 192 were married teenagers. The respondents' ages ranged from 16 years to 19 years. 69 respondents belonged to mainline churches, 123 to Apostolic Sects, 29 to African Traditional Religion. 115 respondents had Zimbabwe secondary school education, 73 had Zimbabwe primary education while four (4) had never been to school. As shown by Table 1 below, the response rate for Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) was 100% and all questionnaires were returned in a usable state because respondents were assisted to complete the questionnaires by research assistants.

Table 1: Responses for the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

Respondents	Total questionnaires administered	Number of questionnaire returned	Response rate (%)
Married Teenagers	192	192	100
Unmarried Teenagers	192	192	100
Total	384	384	100

Prevalence of Psychological Distress among married and unmarried Female Teenagers

Figure 1 below gives a graphic representation (Bar charts A and B) of psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers who were included in this study. It is evident that unmarried female teenagers were less likely to develop mild to severe psychological distress when compared with married female teenagers.

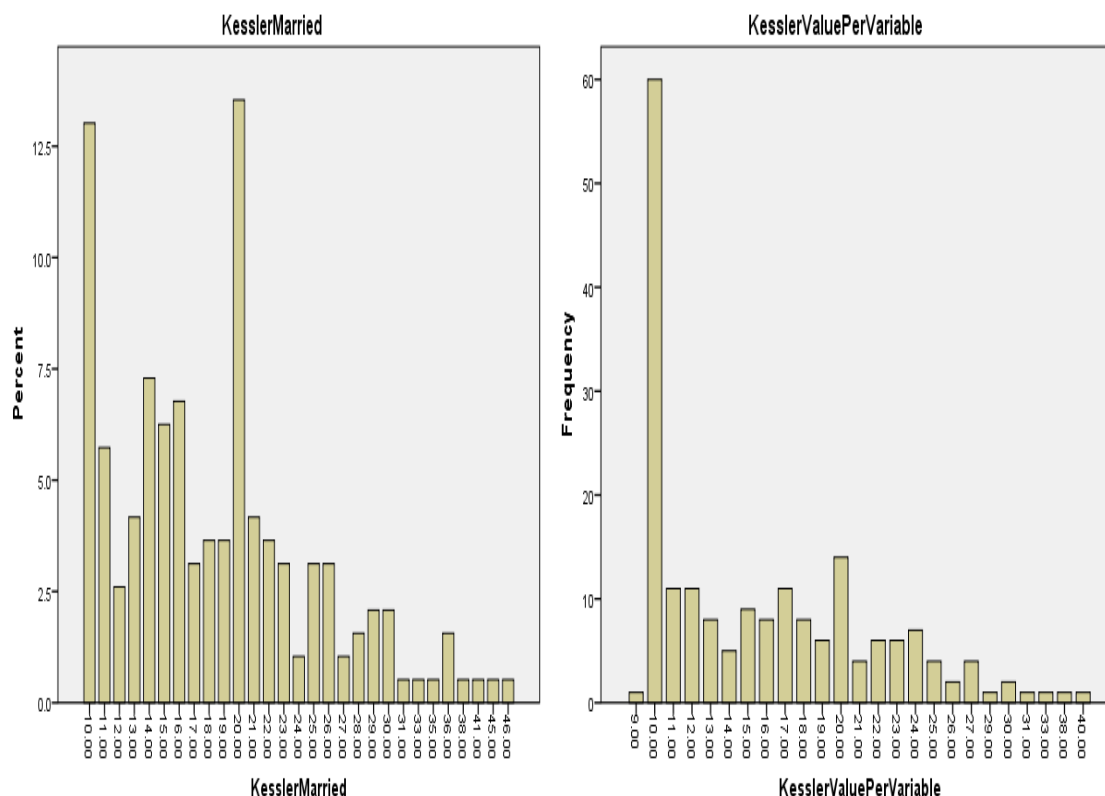


Figure 1: Graphic representation of Psychological Distress among married and unmarried Female Teenagers Table 2 below provides statistical information about prevalence of psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers. Table 1 shows that 138 (71.88%) unmarried female teenagers compared to 108 (56.25%) married female teenagers reported no psychological distress. Mild psychological distress was reported by 49 (25.52%) married female teenagers compared to 37 (19.27%) unmarried female teenagers. Moderate psychological distress was reported by 21 (10.93%) married female teenagers while 11 (5.72%) unmarried female teenagers reported moderate psychological distress. Fourteen (7.29%) of married female teenagers had likelihood to develop severe psychological distress as compared to 6 (3.13%) unmarried female teenagers. The interpretation could be that the unmarried female teenagers had no family pressures and marriage responsibilities and had nothing to worry about since their parents provided everything for them. The few married female teenagers who reported no psychological distress could have been in monogamous marriages, staying alone with their husbands, facing no verbal and physical abuses and threats of divorce, cared for and married to husbands who loved them.

Table 2
Prevalence of Psychological Distress among married and unmarried Female Teenagers

Category	No Distress	Mild Distress	Moderate Distress	Severe Distress
Married Female Teenagers	108 (56.25%)	49 (25.52%)	21 (10.93%)	14 (7.29%)
Unmarried Teenagers	138 (71.88%)	37 (19.27%)	11 (5.72%)	6 (3.13%)

Prevalence of psychological distress by age of respondent

Table 3 below shows that 6 (3.13%) married female teenagers aged 17 years and 3 (1.56%) married female teenagers aged 16 and 18 years respectively reported severe psychological distress. In contrast, only 3 (1.56%) unmarried female teenagers aged 18 years reported severe psychological distress. Overall, married female teenagers in the 16 to 17 years age group were most likely to develop psychological distress. The results in the Table 3 show that, at a 5% level of significance (i.e. $\alpha = 0.05$), both the unmarried and married teenagers results show that the respondent age is significantly associated with the Kessler score with a Cramer's V of $V_c = 0.558$ and $V_c = 0.550$, as well as a p-value of $p = 0.001$ and $p = 0.000$ respectively. The interpretation could be that the 16 to 17 year old female teenagers in marriage face a plethora of marriage related problems they cannot manage due to their tender ages. For example, those in monogamous marriages, stay with their in-laws and depend on them for survival while those in polygamous marriages often quarrel with the other wives.

Table 3
Distribution of psychological distress by respondent age

Respondent Age (in years)	MEASUREABLES									
	Married Female Teenagers (MFTs) (A)					Unmarried Female Teenagers (UFTs) (B)				
	K-Score Frequencies					K-Score Frequencies				
	10-19	20-24	25-29	30-50	Total	10-19	20-24	25-29	30-50	Total
16	13	13	3	3	32	63	16	2	1	82
17	23	12	4	6	45	49	10	2	1	62
18	26	8	4	3	41	12	3	2	3	20
19	46	16	10	2	74	14	8	5	1	28
Grand Total	108	49	21	14	192	138	37	11	6	192

Source: Author’s initiative

Interpretation of K-Score Frequencies

- Likely to be well 10-19
- Likely to have a mild psychological distress 20-24
- Likely to have a moderate psychological distress 25-29
- Likely to have a severe psychological distress 30-50

Other important findings

Nine married female teenagers from Apostolic Sects, with secondary school level education and living with parents reported severe psychological distress. In contrast, four (4) orphaned unmarried female teenagers within the age 18 to 19 years who either belonged to Apostolic Sets or African Traditional Religion acknowledged having experienced severe psychological distress. In the African culture orphans above 18 years have pressure to marry while Apostolic sects expects teenagers to marry early and those go beyond 18 years without entering marriage are viewed negatively and could develop psychological distress.

Significant difference between psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers

There was also need to establish which group between the married and unmarried teenagers was most susceptible to psychological distress. In order to confirm or disconfirm the difference hypothesis, a Kessler score was computed using SPSS 21.0 and then an independent *t*-test was conducted based on the marital status of the teenagers (i.e. married or unmarried). This was done so that the mean scores could be compared. Table 4 below shows that the married teenagers were more likely to experience psychological distress (M = 18.57, SE = .51327) than unmarried teenagers (M = 15.82, SE = .44545).

Table 4
Independent *t*-test for the married and unmarried teenagers

Group Statistics					
	Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Kessler Score	No	192	15.82	6.17	.45
	Yes	192	18.57	7.11	.51

Results of the independent *t*-test were further evaluated using the Levene’s test to establish whether the group variances were significantly different so that the assumption of homogeneity of variances could be disconfirmed. As shown in Table 5, the observed difference was significant $t(382) = -4.046, p < .05$; however, it did represent a very small effect $r = .20$ based on Cohen (1988) recommendations of effect size. Thus, for the proposed hypothesis there was a statistically significant difference between married and unmarried female teenager on likelihood to develop psychological distress. The confidence interval for the difference between the means was 2.50 to 3.50 indicating that the difference could be around two and a half points in some instances, which is considered to be quite significant considering the nature of the issue under investigation. Any increase in the amount of distress is equally damaging therefore even if effect size may be perceived to be in the small range, in the context of the issue under investigation, it remains large. Thus, the proposed hypothesis is accepted and we conclude that the married female teenagers were more likely to develop psychological distress than their unmarried female teenagers counterparts were.

Table 5
Independent sample tests for married and unmarried teenagers

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Kessler Score	Equal variances assumed	.96	.32	-4.04	382	.000	-2.75	.68
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.05	374.57	.000	-2.75	.68

IV. DISCUSSION

According to the study results, more married female teenagers reported psychological distress ranging from mild to severe as compared to their married counterparts in line with Ahmed et al. (2014) and Shaud and Asad (2018) who found that mental distress and depressive symptoms were more common among married female teenagers. In fact, research revealed that teenage mothers experienced higher levels of depression than other young women who had children later if at all. Falci and Mortimer (as cited in Mollborn & Morningstar, 2009; Kalil & Kunz, 2000). Studies conducted in Bangladesh and Pakistan have put the prevalence of depression among unmarried female teenagers at 60% and that of married female teenagers at 80%. A recent study conducted in Ethiopia concluded that early marriage is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, psychological well-being, vitality and general health. Married female teenagers self-perceived to be unwell because they had household duties and responsibilities to execute day-in-day-out as a way of catering for their new families (Neetu, Edmeades & Murithi, 2017). Increased psychological distress (emanating from unfulfilled marriages and marriage requests) among married female teenagers often led to suicidality (Gage, 2013; Neetu, Edmeades & Murithi, 2017).

V. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that both married and unmarried female teenagers experience psychological distress. However, psychological distress was more prevalent among married female teenagers. The unmarried female teenagers who experienced psychological distress were orphans and those who belonged to Apostolic Sects and African Traditional Religions. Psychological distress among married and unmarried female teenagers were significantly different. Therefore, early marriage has a significant negative impact on female teenagers. While it is clearly important to take a preventive approach to early marriage, many adolescent females in Mt Darwin District are already married and have needs that should not to be disregarded. Due to the social and physical isolation these married young females experience, they need support services (including mental health services) to help them cope with psychological distress.

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