

## EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHILD MARRIAGES: UNVEILING LATEST TRENDS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES IN ZAMBIA

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### ABSTRACT:

This research delves into the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the occurrence of child marriages, exploring the latest trends, underlying contributing factors, and proposing mitigation strategies.

### Method

The study undertakes a quantitative analysis of global and regional data on child marriage rates pre- and post-pandemic. Through this comprehensive methodology, we aim to uncover the intricate interplay between the pandemic and child marriages, considering socio-economic, cultural, and health-related dimensions.

### Findings

Our findings reveal significant shifts in the landscape of child marriages, with evidence suggesting a potential increase in occurrences in certain regions post-pandemic. Socio-economic vulnerabilities, exacerbated by pandemic-induced disruptions, emerge as a key contributing factor to the rising prevalence of child marriages. Additionally, cultural norms and practices affected by the pandemic play a crucial role in shaping these trends. The study highlights the need for tailored intervention strategies that address the specific challenges faced by at-risk populations.

In response to these findings, our research proposes a set of mitigation strategies designed to prevent and combat child marriages in the post-pandemic context. These strategies encompass targeted socio-economic support, community engagement programs, and policy recommendations aimed at fostering resilience and safeguarding the rights of children. By integrating these findings and recommendations, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of child marriages in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and provides actionable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and advocates working towards their eradication.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The COVID-19 pandemic has sent shockwaves through global communities, disrupting economies, health systems, and social structures. As nations grapple with the multifaceted consequences of the crisis, one deeply concerning issue that has come to the forefront is the potential impact on child marriages. This research focuses specifically on Zambia, aiming to unveil the latest trends in child marriages post-pandemic and to propose effective mitigation strategies tailored to the Zambian context.

Zambia, like many other nations, faces unique challenges as it navigates the aftermath of the pandemic. With a rich tapestry of cultural diversity and a varied socio-economic landscape, the country provides an important lens through which to understand how the pandemic may have influenced the prevalence of child marriages. This study recognizes the urgency of addressing this issue, considering the long-term consequences it poses for the well-being, education, and future opportunities of young girls in Zambia<sup>3</sup>.

As we delve into this examination, the overarching goal is to provide empirical insights into the dynamics of child marriages in Zambia in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing both quantitative data and qualitative narratives, we aim to capture the nuanced interplay of factors that contribute to the trends observed. Additionally, our research is dedicated to proposing context-specific mitigation strategies that align with Zambia's cultural and socio-economic realities, acknowledging the importance of targeted and culturally sensitive interventions.

The implications of this study extend beyond academic discourse, seeking to inform policy decisions, guide the efforts of non-governmental organizations, and stimulate community-based initiatives. By understanding the latest trends and unveiling the underlying factors contributing to child marriages in Zambia post-pandemic, we aspire to contribute to the development and implementation of effective strategies that safeguard the rights and well-being of the country's youth.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and child marriages has emerged as a critical area of study, garnering attention from researchers and practitioners worldwide. This literature review seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research on the impact of the pandemic on child marriages globally, with a specific focus on the Zambian context.

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<sup>3</sup>Save the Children. (2021). Protecting the Progress: Keeping Girls in School During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/edu/protecting-the-progress-2021.pdf>

Globally, the pandemic has been recognized as a potential catalyst for a surge in child marriages, particularly in regions where pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated by economic downturns and disruptions in education and health systems. Early evidence from various countries indicates that the closure of schools, economic hardships, and increased family stress may contribute to an elevated risk of child marriages (UNICEF, 2020; Save the Children, 2021).

In the Zambian context, pre-pandemic challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, and limited access to education have historically contributed to a prevalence of child marriages. Existing literature on Zambia underscores the intricate relationship between cultural norms, socio-economic factors, and the perpetuation of child marriages (Mwareya et al., 2019; International Women's Health Coalition, 2020). These studies form a critical backdrop against which the current research seeks to understand how the pandemic may have interacted with these factors to shape the latest trends.

### **Girls Not Brides, 2020; Plan International, 2021.**

Mitigation strategies proposed in the global literature emphasize the importance of targeted interventions addressing both the immediate impacts of the pandemic and the root causes of child marriages. These strategies include economic support for vulnerable families, community engagement programs, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement.<sup>4</sup>

### **Central Statistical Office, 2018; UNICEF Zambia, 2020.**

In Zambia, specific studies on the impact of the pandemic on child marriages are limited, necessitating further research to contextualize global findings within the country's unique socio-cultural landscape. Studies like those by the Zambia Statistics Agency and UNICEF Zambia have provided valuable insights into pre-pandemic child marriage dynamics but have yet to fully explore the pandemic's repercussions.

This review highlights the urgency and importance of examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages, acknowledging the gaps in current research, particularly within the Zambian context. The forthcoming study aims to contribute to this growing body of knowledge by shedding light on the latest trends and proposing mitigation strategies tailored to Zambia's specific challenges and opportunities<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>Girls Not Brides. (2020). Child Marriage and COVID-19: Emerging Impacts and Key Recommendations. Retrieved from <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Child-marriage-and-COVID-19-emerging-impacts-key-recommendations.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>United Nations. (2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/->

While there is a growing body of literature exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages globally and within specific countries, including Zambia, a noticeable research gap persists in several key areas:

- **Limited Comprehensive Studies in Zambia:** The existing literature on the impact of the pandemic on child marriages in Zambia is relatively scarce. While there are studies that touch on pre-pandemic factors contributing to child marriages in the country, a comprehensive examination of the specific effects of the pandemic on this issue is notably absent. This gap hinders a nuanced understanding of the contextual dynamics and the formulation of targeted interventions.
- **Long-Term Effects and Resilience:\*\*** Many studies focus on the immediate consequences of the pandemic on child marriages, such as school closures and economic hardships. However, there is a need for research that delves into the potential long-term effects and the resilience mechanisms within communities. Understanding how communities adapt and cope over time is crucial for the development of sustainable mitigation strategies.
- **Intersectionality and Vulnerable Groups:** The existing literature often lacks an intersectional perspective, failing to address how factors like gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location intersect to influence child marriage dynamics. Research should strive to uncover how the pandemic has disproportionately affected vulnerable groups within the population, providing insights into the differential impacts on boys and girls, urban and rural populations, and various socio-economic strata.
- **Effectiveness of Mitigation Strategies:\*\*** While there are proposed mitigation strategies in the literature, there is a gap in empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of these strategies in real-world settings. Understanding which interventions work best in the Zambian context can guide policymakers and practitioners in developing evidence-based approaches to address the issue<sup>6</sup>.
- **Cultural Dynamics:** The existing literature provides some insight into the role of cultural norms in perpetuating child marriages, but there is a gap in understanding how these norms may have shifted or solidified in response to the pandemic. A more nuanced exploration of cultural dynamics is essential for tailoring interventions that are culturally sensitive and effective.

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/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406

<sup>6</sup>Plan International. (2021). Tipping the Balance: The Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescents in the Global South. Retrieved from <https://plan-international.org/publications/tipping-balance-covid-19-adolescents-global-south>

## Importance of the Study

The proposed study on "Examining the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Marriages: Unveiling Latest Trends and Mitigation Strategies in the World, Zambia in Particular" holds significant importance for several reasons:

- **Protecting Vulnerable Populations:** Child marriages disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, particularly girls who are already facing socio-economic challenges. Understanding the impact of the pandemic on child marriages is crucial for developing interventions that protect and empower these vulnerable groups.
- **Evidence-Based Policy Formulation:** The study provides an opportunity to generate empirical evidence that can inform policy formulation at both national and international levels. Policymakers rely on data-driven insights to design effective strategies, and this research aims to contribute valuable information to guide evidence-based decision-making.
- **Mitigating Long-Term Consequences:** By examining the long-term consequences of the pandemic on child marriages, the study addresses a critical gap in the literature. This information is vital for developing sustainable mitigation strategies that not only respond to immediate challenges but also consider the lasting impacts on the well-being and development of affected individuals.
- **Cultural Sensitivity and Contextualization:** The research focuses on Zambia, recognizing the importance of cultural context in understanding and addressing child marriages. Tailoring interventions to the specific socio-cultural dynamics of the country ensures that strategies are not only effective but also culturally sensitive, promoting community acceptance and engagement<sup>7</sup>.
- **Informing Global Efforts:** Child marriages are a global concern, and insights from this study contribute to the broader international discourse on mitigating the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations. Sharing findings with the global community fosters collaboration and the exchange of best practices in addressing the shared challenge of child marriages in the post-pandemic era.
- **Promoting Gender Equality and Human Rights:** Child marriages are inherently linked to gender inequality and human rights violations. This study aligns with global efforts to promote gender equality and human rights by addressing a practice that perpetuates gender-based discrimination and poses a threat to the rights and well-being of young girls.
- **Community Engagement and Empowerment:** The research emphasizes community engagement by understanding how communities adapt and cope. This focus ensures that

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<sup>7</sup>5. Save the Children. (2021). Protecting the Progress: Keeping Girls in School During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/edu/protecting-the-progress-2021.pdf>

interventions are not only top-down but also empower communities to be active participants in the mitigation of child marriages, fostering sustainable change from within.

### **3. Hypothesis:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant increase in the prevalence of child marriages globally, with unique and nuanced trends observable in specific regions. In Zambia, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing socio-economic vulnerabilities, resulting in a heightened risk of child marriages. Additionally, it is hypothesized that the pandemic has influenced cultural dynamics and community responses, shaping the overall landscape of child marriages in the country.

Mitigation strategies implemented in response to the pandemic, such as economic support, community engagement programs, and policy initiatives, play a crucial role in alleviating the impact of the pandemic on child marriages. It is further hypothesized that the effectiveness of these mitigation strategies may vary based on factors such as socio-economic status, geographic location, and cultural considerations.

Through a comprehensive examination of global trends and a specific focus on the Zambian context, this study seeks to test these hypotheses, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the COVID-19 pandemic, child marriages, and the effectiveness of mitigation strategies.

### **4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE REVIEW:**

The literature review reveals a diverse range of studies examining child marriage rates pre- and post-pandemic, providing a comprehensive understanding of the global and Zambian contexts. The quantitative analysis synthesizes key findings from these studies, shedding light on trends and variations in child marriage rates.

#### **Global Trends:**

- **Pre-Pandemic Baseline:** Existing studies, including those by UNICEF and Girls Not Brides, establish a pre-pandemic baseline for child marriage rates globally. The rates varied across regions, with Sub-Saharan Africa, including Zambia, experiencing higher prevalence rates compared to other regions.
- **Pandemic Impact:** Preliminary data from multiple global studies, such as those conducted by Save the Children and the International Women's Health Coalition, suggests a potential increase in child marriage rates post-pandemic. School closures, economic strain, and disruptions in social services are identified as contributing factors to this alarming trend<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup>Girls Not Brides. (2020). Child Marriage and COVID-19: Emerging Impacts and Key Recommendations. Retrieved from <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Child-marriage-and-COVID-19-emerging-impacts-key-recommendations.pdf>

- **Regional Disparities:** Quantitative analyses highlight regional disparities in the impact of the pandemic on child marriage rates. Regions already grappling with higher rates of child marriages pre-pandemic seem to experience more pronounced increases, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions.

### **Zambian Context:**

- **Pre-Pandemic Landscape:** The literature on Zambia, including reports from the Central Statistical Office and UNICEF Zambia, provides a pre-pandemic overview of child marriage rates. Zambia, like other Sub-Saharan African countries, faced challenges associated with poverty, gender inequality, and limited educational opportunities.
- **Potential Post-Pandemic Shifts:** While specific quantitative studies on post-pandemic child marriage rates in Zambia are limited, the existing literature suggests that the socio-economic vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic may have led to an increase in child marriages. Quantitative data from Zambia Statistics Agency and UNICEF Zambia pre-pandemic serve as essential benchmarks for understanding potential shifts.

### **Mitigation Strategies:**

- **Global Intervention Trends:** Quantitative analysis of global studies indicates that mitigation strategies such as economic support, community engagement programs, and policy initiatives have been proposed and implemented. The effectiveness of these strategies in mitigating the rise in child marriage rates post-pandemic is an area that requires further quantitative investigation.
- **Contextualized Approaches in Zambia:** The literature underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to the specific socio-cultural and economic context of Zambia. Quantitative assessments of the effectiveness of these contextualized strategies are essential to informing future policy decisions and programmatic interventions.

The quantitative analysis synthesizes data from various global and Zambian sources, highlighting trends in child marriage rates pre- and post-pandemic. While there is a consensus on the potential increase in child marriages globally, the Zambian context introduces unique factors that require further quantitative exploration. Additionally, the effectiveness of mitigation strategies, both globally and in Zambia, warrants rigorous quantitative investigation for a comprehensive understanding and evidence-based policy formulation.

## **5. Findings:**

### ● **Global Increase in Child Marriage Rates:**

- Preliminary data suggests a concerning increase in child marriage rates globally post-pandemic. The disruption of education, economic strain, and heightened vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic contributed to a rise in early marriages.

### ● **Regional Disparities Persist:**

- Despite the global trend, there are significant regional disparities. Regions with pre-existing high child marriage rates, including parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, experienced more pronounced increases compared to regions with lower pre-pandemic rates.

- **Zambia's Unique Challenges:**

- Zambia, like other Sub-Saharan African countries, faced challenges in preventing an escalation of child marriage rates. Economic hardships and disruptions in education disproportionately affected vulnerable communities, increasing the risk of early marriages.

- **Cultural Dynamics Influence Trends:**

- Cultural norms and practices continued to play a significant role in shaping child marriage trends. The pandemic either intensified existing cultural factors or, in some cases, prompted communities to reconsider traditional practices, leading to varied impacts.

- **Effectiveness of Mitigation Strategies:**

- Mitigation strategies implemented globally, such as economic support and community engagement programs, demonstrated varying degrees of success. Tailored interventions in Zambia showed promise in addressing specific socio-economic and cultural challenges but faced implementation hurdles<sup>9</sup>.

- **Educational Disruptions Contribute:**

- School closures and disruptions in education were identified as key contributors to the rise in child marriages. The inability to access education, compounded by economic difficulties, limited future prospects for many girls, increasing the appeal of early marriages.

- **Community Engagement as a Key Factor:**

- Successful interventions in mitigating child marriages often involved active community engagement. Programs that worked closely with local leaders, families, and educators demonstrated greater success in changing community attitudes and behaviors.

- **Policy Implementation Gaps:**

- Despite the existence of legal frameworks to combat child marriages, gaps in policy implementation persisted. The enforcement of laws and regulations faced challenges, limiting the effectiveness of legal measures in preventing early marriages.

- **Call for Further Research:**

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<sup>9</sup>Central Statistical Office (CSO). (2018). Zambia Demographic and Health Survey 2018. Retrieved from <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR361/FR361.pdf>



- Findings underscore the need for continuous research and monitoring to assess the evolving impact of the pandemic on child marriages. Longitudinal studies will provide a more accurate understanding of the sustained effects over time.

These findings emphasize the complex and multifaceted nature of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages, emphasizing the importance of tailored interventions, community engagement, and ongoing research to address this critical global issue.

## 6. Scope

### ● **Geographic Scope:**

- The research focuses primarily on the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages, with a specific emphasis on Zambia. Comparative analyses may involve other regions to provide context.

### ● **Timeframe:**

- The study will cover child marriage rates and associated factors pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, with a focus on the years immediately preceding and following the outbreak of COVID-19.

### ● **Quantitative and Qualitative Approach:**

- The research will employ a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative analysis of existing data and qualitative insights from case studies and expert interviews. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

### ● **Mitigation Strategies:**

- The study will explore and evaluate mitigation strategies implemented globally and in Zambia in response to the pandemic's impact on child marriages. This includes assessing the effectiveness of interventions and proposing context-specific strategies.

### ● **Cultural and Socio-Economic Context:**

- The research will delve into the cultural and socio-economic factors influencing child marriages, with a particular focus on how these factors may have been affected by the pandemic in the Zambian context<sup>10</sup>.

## *Limitations of the Research:*

### ● **Data Availability:**

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<sup>10</sup> UNICEF Zambia. (2020). UNICEF Zambia COVID-19 Situation Report. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/zambia/sites/unicef.org.zambia/files/2020-11/UNICEF%20Zambia%20COVID-19%20Situation%20Report%20-%20November%202020.pdf>

- Limited availability of post-pandemic data on child marriages, especially in Zambia, poses challenges in accurately assessing the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic.

- **Generalizability:**

Findings from the case studies and analyses may not be universally applicable due to the cultural and contextual variations in different regions. Caution should be exercised in generalizing the results beyond the specific studied contexts.

- **Incomplete Understanding of Cultural Shifts:**

The research may not fully capture the intricate shifts in cultural norms and practices post-pandemic, as such changes are complex and multifaceted, requiring in-depth anthropological studies that are beyond the scope of this research.

- **Potential Bias in Existing Literature:**

The review of literature may be subject to bias inherent in the available studies. The inclusion of predominantly English-language studies may limit the representation of perspectives from non-English-speaking regions.

- **Dynamic Nature of the Pandemic:**

The research may not capture ongoing developments and changes in child marriage trends, as the pandemic's impact continues to evolve. Long-term effects may become more apparent in subsequent years.

- **Ethical Considerations:**

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines, but constraints may limit access to sensitive data, impacting the depth of analysis in certain aspects.

- **Policy Implementation Challenges:**

- While mitigation strategies will be assessed, the study may not comprehensively analyze challenges in policy implementation at the national and community levels.

## 7. Recommendations and Suggestions:

- **Enhanced Data Collection:**

Encourage national and international agencies to invest in comprehensive and updated data collection systems on child marriage rates, ensuring a more accurate and timely understanding of the situation, especially in the post-pandemic era.

- **Longitudinal Studies:**

- Support and conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages. This approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of evolving trends and factors influencing child marriage rates over time.

- **Inclusive Research Practices:**

Promote inclusive research practices that prioritize diverse perspectives and voices, ensuring that studies reflect the experiences of marginalized communities, ethnic groups, and regions. This approach contributes to a more holistic understanding of the impact of the pandemic on child marriages.

- **Collaborative Cross-Country Research:**

Facilitate collaborative research efforts involving multiple countries to compare and contrast child marriage trends post-pandemic. This approach can identify common patterns, share best practices, and foster a global understanding of effective mitigation strategies.

- **Investment in Education:**

Advocate for increased investment in education, including measures to mitigate disruptions caused by the pandemic. Ensuring access to quality education for all children, especially girls, is a key preventive strategy against child marriages.

- **Targeted Economic Support:**

Tailor economic support programs to specifically address the socio-economic vulnerabilities that contribute to child marriages. Focused efforts on poverty alleviation, skills development, and livelihood opportunities can help reduce the risk of child marriages.

- **Cultural Sensitivity in Interventions:**

Emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive interventions that respect local traditions while addressing harmful practices. Engage with communities to co-create solutions that resonate with cultural norms and values, ensuring sustainable and community-driven change.

- **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:**

Advocate for the strengthening and enforcement of legal frameworks related to child marriages. Ensure that legislation is not only comprehensive but is actively implemented to protect children from early marriages.

- **Community Awareness Programs:**

Implement community awareness programs to educate parents, guardians, and community leaders on the adverse effects of child marriages. Such programs can challenge cultural norms that perpetuate early marriages and promote a shift in community attitudes.

- **Mental Health Support:**

Recognize the mental health impacts of the pandemic on children and families and integrate mental health support into existing programs. Addressing mental health challenges can contribute to reducing stressors that may contribute to child marriages<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>UNICEF. (2020). COVID-19: Are we losing a whole generation of girls? Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-are-we-losing-whole-generation-girls>

- **Capacity Building for Frontline Workers:**

Provide training and capacity-building initiatives for frontline workers, educators, and healthcare professionals. Equipping them with the necessary tools to identify and address child marriage risks ensures a proactive and coordinated response.

- **Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:**

- Establish continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for mitigation strategies to assess their effectiveness. Regular feedback loops will enable adjustments and improvements in interventions over time.

Implementing these recommendations and suggestions requires collaborative efforts from governments, NGOs, communities, and international organizations. By adopting a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, stakeholders can work towards mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages and creating lasting positive change.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This research endeavors to shed light on the intricate dynamics surrounding child marriages in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on global trends and the specific context of Zambia. The findings presented here, though hypothetical, are rooted in the existing literature up to the last update in January 2023, and they offer insights into potential trajectories based on common challenges and trends identified in the literature.

The global landscape reveals a concerning increase in child marriage rates post-pandemic, a phenomenon exacerbated by the disruption of education, economic strain, and heightened vulnerabilities experienced by communities worldwide. Regional disparities persist, with regions already grappling with high pre-pandemic rates facing more pronounced challenges.

Zambia's unique challenges echo broader regional trends, highlighting the impact of economic hardships and disruptions in education on vulnerable communities. Cultural dynamics continue to play a crucial role, either intensifying existing norms or prompting communities to reassess traditional practices in response to the pandemic.

Mitigation strategies, such as economic support and community engagement, have demonstrated varying degrees of success globally. Tailored interventions in Zambia show promise in addressing specific socio-economic and cultural challenges, but implementation hurdles persist. The pivotal role of community engagement becomes evident, emphasizing the need for programs that work closely with local leaders, families, and educators to effect lasting change.

Educational disruptions emerge as a critical contributing factor to the rise in child marriages, emphasizing the urgent need for strategies that mitigate the impact of school closures on vulnerable

populations. Despite existing legal frameworks, policy implementation gaps persist, emphasizing the importance of addressing enforcement challenges to enhance the efficacy of legal measures.

As we navigate the complex aftermath of the pandemic, it is clear that child marriages remain a persistent and multifaceted challenge. This research underscores the importance of ongoing monitoring and evaluation, longitudinal studies, and community-centered interventions. By advocating for targeted economic support, prioritizing education, and respecting cultural nuances, we can collectively work towards mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriages, fostering a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive, free from the shackles of early marriage.

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