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CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of Malawi

February 2021



Iris Group

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This report was prepared by Iris Group with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation under Investment ID #005233. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Iris Group would like to thank Mary Beth Hastings for conceptualizing and overseeing this analysis and for writing this report, as well as Aishwarya Nagar for providing research support. The author recognizes her status as a privileged Western outsider applying her lens of analysis on the political and economic conditions within another country and that this status may influence the report’s findings and recommendations. We would also like to thank Aditi Krishna of Iris Group, and Suzanne Petroni of Gender Equality Solutions, for their technical and editorial input. Iris Group is deeply grateful for the guidance and technical support provided by Yvette Efevbera, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, throughout the preparation of this analysis and report. This report would not be possible without the generous input of numerous key informants.

Preferred Citation: Iris Group. 2021. Political Economy Analysis of Child, Early, and Forced Marriage in Malawi. Chapel Hill, USA

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in Malawi to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium¹ and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. Through a desk review and key informant interviews, this analysis found the following:

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
Foundational Factors <i>(e.g., embedded structures, such as geography, class, ethnicity)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differences in child marriage rates among the three regions are slight Urban/rural differences are notable Poverty is regularly cited as a driver; only wealthiest quintile has a large difference in average age at first marriage It is unclear whether religion drives child marriage; ethnicity shapes the particular customs, but not overall rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of regional variation in rates does not imply that programs should be uniform, but some drivers (i.e., poverty) appear to be common across cultures Rural areas should be particular focus, with economic interventions
Rules of the Game <i>(e.g. laws, international commitments, policies, social norms)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malawi law (2015) bans under-18 marriage and no longer allows exceptions for parental consent, as of constitutional change in 2017. International agreements helped spur legal reform. Law guaranteeing girls' right to return to school post-pregnancy also contributes to legal protections affecting child marriage Initiation practices, "cleansing," and traditions surrounding patriarchal control over sexuality and marriage contribute to child marriage in some areas Social norms stigmatizing girls' sexuality and premarital pregnancy appear stronger than those encouraging child marriage itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International and domestic advocacy resulted in strong and consistent laws that offer a strong point of leverage for grassroots protection Social sanctions may not perpetuate child marriage throughout Malawi; gender norms on adolescent sexuality and family planning are more universal and increase the risk of pregnancy and social pressure to marry Programs should address traditional practices as regionally important, and gender norms related to girls' sexuality and pregnancy country wide
Here and Now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government has shown commitment to addressing child marriage through legal change, constitutional change, national strategic plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National Strategy can help implementers coordinate programming in the field; ensure support from ministries and districts

¹ The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium was convened to facilitate coordinated action and learning among seven research, advocacy, and implementation-oriented partners. The Consortium includes: The GIRL Center at the Population Council, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, Iris Group, Fraym, the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health, and Unchained At Last.

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<i>(e.g., current events and circumstances)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have extensive history working on child marriage, primarily through social norms, sexual and reproductive health, education • Traditional leaders – including outspoken chiefs – have played an important role both locally and nationally • COVID-19 and climate change may contribute to increases in child marriage, going against trend of decline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy and programming benefit from a large and experienced civil society network and collaborative environment among CSOs, INGOs and government • To reduce child marriage rates, communities must be able to resist external shocks
Dynamics <i>(e.g., interplay among the other pillars)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress: Advocacy has helped get legal reform passed, local officials committed to change, and traditional leaders speaking out against child marriage; Evaluations have provided additional information from a variety of sources about local success; Programs are robust, dealing with social norms, education, SRH • Obstacles: National advocacy efforts need more champions beyond gender ministry; Data management is poor, research isn't presented in digestible way; Programs need more emphasis on poverty alleviation, better coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National-level advocacy efforts should focus on building accountability for actions by ministries other than the Ministry of Gender • Stakeholders can better leverage strong civil society networks to share easily understood findings from emerging research and coordinate interventions; donor coordination can help facilitate this process • Interventions should shift away from messaging about the harms of child marriage and toward offering meaningful alternatives to teen pregnancy and marriage

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

Case for Investment

- **Malawi presents fertile ground for progress on child marriage.** Among high-prevalence countries, Malawi lacks some of factors that make child marriage rates difficult to move in other countries (e.g., economic value for younger brides) and has several characteristics that facilitate further reductions.
- **Malawi can become a model for addressing child marriage driven by poverty and pregnancy.** By providing access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, changing norms on adolescents' use of contraceptives, and economic empowerment opportunities linked with education and/or livelihoods programs for girls, investments could make sizable headway.
- **Expanding child marriage efforts can build on previous investments.** Investments in projects to decrease child marriage, as well as those for gender equality and on the health of adolescent girls and young women more broadly, are synergistic with an increased investment to further reduce child marriage.

Key Points of Leverage in Malawi on CEFM

- **Strong and experienced civil society, including youth-led and women-led groups, are capable of sustained child marriage efforts.** Malawi's CSOs working on child marriage are experienced and engaged, and in many cases, they have worked on this issue for decades, giving them needed authenticity for working at the community level.
- **Coordination can build on National Strategy and positive relationships between civil society and government.** The National Strategy needs more specific benchmarks, but it provides a useful initial organizing tool for coordinated programming, as well as an ambitious reduction target of 20 percent by 2023.
- **Traditional leaders can be an engine of change, even in the absence of child marriage programming.** If chiefs lead on norms around adolescent sexuality, it may be of tremendous benefit to normalizing youth-friendly contraceptive access.

Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Economic empowerment interventions – intertwined with youth-friendly SRH – need an external boost.** With half of Malawi's population living in poverty, and girls seeing little future outside of pregnancy and marriage, sparking economic possibilities is critical.
- **With prolific programming, improved coordination and communication is essential.** Donors and international organizations should make sure their approaches are both informed by grassroots groups and coordinated, to ensure synergistic efforts.
- **Gender-transformative approaches are essential, and men and boys must be engaged to ensure buy-in.** The emphasis on adolescent girls and young women is critical for disrupting patriarchal norms, but perceptions that boys and men are left out of this programming threaten to undermine success.

II. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In 2021, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in Malawi to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium² and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to provide macro-level context for the findings from learning consortium investments.

Iris Group adapted an existing framework for applied political economy analysis from the 2018 USAID PEA Guide for Practitioners (Menocal et al., 2018) to identify the underlying context for CEFM. The team performed a desk review of grey and peer-reviewed literature and conducted six semi-structured interviews with 7 key informants on the topic. This PEA was gender-intentional, examining how Malawian society understands and enforces male and female roles and responsibilities, and how its political dynamics have shaped the narrative around the equal rights of women and girls. This gender intentional focus was incorporated into our interview guide for key informants and our analysis of the findings.

Iris Group assessed the findings using four angles of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

This report presents the CEFM context in Malawi, summarizes the findings within each pillar of analysis from the desk review and interviews, and provides recommendations based on these findings for potential responses to CEFM in Malawi.

² The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium was convened to facilitate coordinated action and learning among seven research, advocacy, and implementation-oriented partners. The Consortium includes: The GIRL Center at the Population Council, UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, Iris Group, Fraym, the University of California San Diego's Center on Gender Equity and Health, and Unchained At Last.

III. CONTEXT

Landlocked in southern Africa, Malawi has achieved economic stability, albeit with high poverty and vulnerability to environmental disruptions due to climate change and its dependence on agriculture (World Bank, 2020). In the two years prior to COVID-19, economic growth was healthy, even as the country recovered from Cyclone Idai (African Development Bank, 2019). Although extreme poverty has declined over time, over half of Malawi's population lived in poverty as of 2016 (World Bank, 2020). Analysts expect COVID-19 to have a significant impact on Malawi's economy (World Bank, 2020).

Malawi has largely avoided political violence since its independence in 1964, with regular multiparty elections since 1993 (World Bank, 2020). President Lazarus Chakwera was elected in June 2020, after the May 2019 elections were nullified by the Constitutional Court due to irregularities (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020). The process was a notable win for political stability, as peaceful protests by civil society organizations and an independent judiciary prevented an unpopular incumbent from staying in office (Dionne & Dulani, 2020).

One of President Chakwera's campaign pledges was to pursue gender equality in Malawi. Since election, he has increased the number of women in ministerial roles, although fallen just short of his commitment to appointing a cabinet with 40 percent women (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020). Almost 1 in 3 government officials at the local level are women, and a woman is Speaker of the House for the first time (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020). Malawi passed a Gender Equality Act in 2013 outlawing sex-based discrimination and sexual harassment (Government of Malawi, 2013). However, according to UN Women, "Women still fare worse than their male counterparts on most social and economic indicators, including political participation, violence and economic empowerment" (UN Women Africa, n.d.). Less than 30% of the indicators needed to monitor gender performance toward the Sustainable Development Goals are available, with either no data available or inconsistent methodologies for measuring gender gaps (UN Women Africa, n.d.). Malawi ranks among the top 20 countries with the highest rates of intimate partner violence (UNICEF Malawi, 2020).

Among East and Southern African countries, Malawi's child marriage rate is the fourth highest (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). Child marriage has declined in Malawi in recent years, falling among women 20-24 from 50 percent in 2010 to 42 percent in 2015 (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016). Nine percent of girls marry before 15 (Ibid.) Although median age at first marriage is five years older for men (18 for women, 23 for men), Malawi is in the top 20 countries worldwide in terms of boys' early marriage, with 7 percent marrying before 18 (Gastón et al., 2019).

IV. FINDINGS

A. Foundational Factors

This section explores embedded or fixed structures that affect CEFM. Embedded structures are those that do not quickly change, and should be considered as constants in any CEFM strategy. The table below summarizes the key findings that are explored in this section, and implications of these findings for CEFM strategy.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Differences in child marriage rates among the three regions are slight• Urban/rural differences are significant• Poverty is regularly cited as a driver; only wealthiest quintile has a large difference in average age of first marriage• It is unclear whether religion drives child marriage; ethnicity shapes the particular customs, but not overall rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of regional variation in rates does not imply that programs should be uniform, but some drivers (i.e. (poverty) appear to be common across cultures• Rural areas should be particular focus, with economic interventions

Child marriage is prevalent throughout Malawi, and influenced somewhat by geographic differences. The average age of first marriage in the Central Region is 18.7, slightly lower in the Northern Region (18.2), and lower still in the Southern Region (17.9) (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016). A study by UN Women identified child marriage hotspots in Katonga district in the Northern Region, and Mangochi, Mulange, Machimba, and Zomba in the Southern Region (UN Women, 2018). According to the 2014 Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), the Pholombe district in the Southern Region has the highest rate in the country, at 68 percent (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). Marriage before 15 is more prevalent in the Southern Region, as are traditional initiation rites (discussed below), including in the child marriage hotspot districts of Mangochi and Mulange (Makwemba et al., 2019). Average age at first sex for girls is also lowest in the Southern Region, at 16.4, compared to 17 in the Northern Region and 17.7 in the Central Region (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016). Young women in the South “tend to have poorer sexual and reproductive health outcomes than those in the rest of the country” (Digitale et al., 2017).



Child marriage is common across ethnic groups, but “prevalence is higher among matrilineal groups,” which are mainly in the Southern Region (Makwemba et al., 2019). However, these regional variations “are consistent with other development indicators such as poverty,” and may not be due to ethnicity-based cultural differences (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). Surveys show that poverty was a more important named factor in marriage in the South than in the other two regions (Makwemba et al., 2019). Some ethnic groups typically arrange marriages to cement family alliances (CIVICUS, 2020). One informant noted, “The extent to which it happens is based on the traditional authority leaders. It exists across villages” (Interview, 1/7). There is mixed evidence about whether religion drives differences in child marriage; a baseline study in southeast Malawi found no variation by religion (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018), though some informants have found slight differences in prevalence of child marriage by religion (Interview, 1/7).

Girls from urban areas marry at an average age of 19.7 years, nearly two years later than their rural counterparts (18 years) (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016).

Still, one in three urban women are married by the time they are 18 (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019) One informant noted that while “gender equality and balance are more accepted” in urban areas than rural areas, they found that child marriage is “rampant due to economic contributors” in cities (Interview, 1/4).

Economic class is protective against child marriage in Malawi, but primarily among those in the uppermost economic quintile. The lowest four economic quintiles have an average age of first marriage at or very close to 18 (lowest to highest: 18, 17.9, 17.8, 18), while those in highest quintile marry at an average age of 19.6 (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016). The districts with the highest child marriage rates (Phalombe, Mulanje, and Machinga, at 68, 62, and 60 percent respectively) are among the five districts with the highest percentage of poor children (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). A mixed method study in Machinga District found that marriage was seen as a solution to the economic burden of supporting girls (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018). A study associated with the ENGAGE project found that 78% of adult decision-makers in two districts reported that child marriage is largely due to a lack of education and job opportunities (Steinhaus et al., 2019). Girls are sometimes used as repayment for loans, or in exchange for livestock to support their brothers’ payments of bride price (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019).

In Malawi, as elsewhere, gender inequality is foundational to the practice of child marriage. In particular, the restriction of women’s economic rights have limited their perceived and actual

economic value, as they have historically had “less access to land, property, livestock, and paid work” (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020). UN Women notes that “Gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls manifested in power imbalances, unequal access to opportunities, and lack of respect of women and girls’ integrity and bodily autonomy, are the main underlying cause of child marriage” (UN Women, 2018).

B. Rules of the Game

This section explores Malawi’s formal and informal rules regulating individual, community, and government actions related to CEFM, which include national laws and policies, international commitments, and social norms. Key findings explored in this section and their implications for CEFM strategy are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malawi law (2015) bans under 18 marriage and no longer allows exceptions for parental consent, as of constitutional change in 2017. International agreements helped spur legal reform. Law guaranteeing girls’ right to return to school post-pregnancy also contributes to legal protections affecting child marriage Initiation practices, “cleansing,” and traditions surrounding patriarchal control over sexuality and marriage contribute to child marriage in some areas Social norms stigmatizing girls’ sexuality and premarital pregnancy appear stronger than those encouraging child marriage itself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International and domestic advocacy resulted in strong and consistent laws that offer a strong point of leverage for grassroots protection Social sanctions may not perpetuate child marriage throughout Malawi; gender norms on adolescent sexuality and family planning are more universal and increase the risk of pregnancy and social pressure to marry Programs should address traditional practices as regionally important, and gender norms related to girls’ sexuality and pregnancy country wide

Malawi changed the legal age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls in 2015 through the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill, and in 2017, amended the Constitution to eliminate parental consent exceptions to the law (A. Melnikas et al., 2019). The penalty for child marriage is annulment, and potential punishment for up to 10 years in prison. In addition to national laws, community by-laws created by chiefs and communities can reinforce human rights protections (Kachika, 2020). To improve the ability to enforce the child marriage law, the government has been improving the birth registration process (UN Women, 2018).

This legal reform process has been accompanied by efforts to educate Malawians about the minimum age (Interview, 1/20). One study in the Machinga District found that 70 percent of respondents knew the legal age of marriage (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018). Another study found that enforcing marriage laws unintentionally drove marriages underground and held parents responsible for child marriages even though they don’t usually control the decision (A. J. Melnikas, Mulauzi, et al., 2021). While parents and other adults view withdrawals as an acceptable resolution of a problematic child marriage, girls noted many drawbacks for

withdrawn girls such as stigma and limited education and livelihood opportunities once withdrawn. Implementation challenges include a culture of protecting perpetrators, failure to protect witnesses, limited knowledge of the law by parents, and inadequate sanctions imposed (JK Consultants, 2020).

Over the past decades, Malawi signed on to several international instruments protecting the rights of girls. Malawi co-sponsored the 2013 and 2018 resolutions on child marriage in the UN General Assembly (Girls Not Brides, n.d.), and is a signatory to both the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage (UN Women, 2018) and the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child, which sets 18 as the age of adulthood (Mwambene & Mawodza, 2017). The Committee on the Rights of the Child identified child marriage as an urgent issue in its 2017 observations to the government (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2017). With international and domestic advocacy, these commitments successfully translated into domestic reform (UN Women, 2018).

While social norms contribute to child marriage in Malawi, recent research suggests that this contribution is through the stigmatization of girls' sexuality and extramarital pregnancy, rather than a value placed on younger brides (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018; Steinhaus et al., 2019). This stigmatization is as prevalent in matrilineal areas as patrilineal, suggesting that patriarchal values are strongly influential regardless of how property is inherited (Makwemba et al., 2019). A study in two districts of Southern Malawi found high empirical expectations of girls marrying before 18, but much more variation and lower agreement that families would be sanctioned if girls were not married before 18 (Steinhaus et al., 2019). Respondents in these communities were almost unanimous in opposing child marriage, and agreed that lack of education/job opportunities, financial distress, and pregnancy were the reasons for most early marriages (Steinhaus et al., 2019). The Yes I Do baseline study in the Machinga district, also in the Southern Region, found that 89% of respondents could not name advantages of child marriage, and most young women and men said it was their choice to get married (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018).

“Marriage before 18 is seen as bad, and that message has reached everywhere. There isn't disagreement with that.”

– Interview, 1/7

As noted by the literature and key informants, pregnancy is a main driver of child marriage in Malawi, yet traditional practices encourage sexual debut (Girls Not Brides, n.d.). Premarital sex is relatively common in Malawi, occurring on average 1.4 years before marriage for females and 4.5 years earlier for males (National Statistical Office (NSO) & ICF, 2016). Relevant norms, beliefs, and traditions surrounding sexuality and marriage include:

- **Initiation ceremonies** – These include rite-of-passage camps, with curricula for girls ranging from hygiene and household skills to instruction about how to sexually please a partner (Makwemba et al., 2019). While one informant said that initiation rites have “fallen out of style,” others said that girls they work with report that it is still common (Interviews 1/7, 1/28). As noted above, these rites are more common in the (predominantly matrilineal) Southern Region.

- **Sexual cleansing** – *Fisi*, or sexual “cleansing” of girls after initiation, is when a man is sent to a girl “to test whether they have learned to please a man” (Interview, 1/28). It is difficult to know how common this is as it is not widely reported, which may be due to social desirability bias (Makwemba et al., 2019).
- **Lobola (bride price)** – Practiced primarily in the patrilineal Northern Region, “lobola” is the practice of cattle or cash paid by the male partner to the family of the girl or woman (Bertrand-Dansereau & Clark, 2016)
- **Exchange of gifts and sex** – Transactional sexual relationships are common, including relationships between young people and between a girl/young woman and older benefactor (Bertrand-Dansereau & Clark, 2016; MacPherson, 2012; Poulin, 2008) (Interview, 1/4)
- **Stigmatization of premarital pregnancy** – The ENGAGE project baseline found that 93% of respondents view girls as “naughty” if they become pregnant before marriage, and 80% believe access to contraception “makes girls promiscuous” (Hinson & Steinhaus, 2017). One informant said that as opposed to other countries, “It’s not fear of pregnancy” that drives child marriage, but pregnancy itself, which another respondent noted is seen as a family disgrace (Interviews 1/7, 1/20).

One informant said that social norms about the value of educating girls is changing as more girls stay in school and return as teachers or nurses. “The more girls stay in school, the more they show their value” (Interview, 1/28).

C. Here and Now

This section examines the current state of affairs surrounding CEFM in Malawi, describing stakeholders, assessing strategic links to related issues, and gauging the impact of COVID-19. The most relevant factors in the *here and now*, and their implications for CEFM strategy, are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government has shown commitment to addressing child marriage through legal change, constitutional change, national strategic plan • Civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have extensive history working on child marriage, primarily through social norms, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and education • Traditional leaders – including outspoken chiefs – have played an important role both locally and nationally • COVID-19 and climate change may contribute to increases in child marriage, going against the trend of decline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Strategy can help implementers coordinate programming in the field; ensure support from ministries and districts • Advocacy and programming benefit from a large and experienced civil society network and collaborative environment among CSOs, INGOs and government • To reduce child marriage rates, communities must be able to resist external shocks

CEFM Stakeholders

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) is the ministerial lead on child marriage; developed and launched the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage in 2018 “to provide a framework for interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence of child marriage in Malawi by 20% by 2023” (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019); has consulted and collaborated extensively with civil society (Interviews 1/4, 1/20, 1/27, 1/28); End Child Marriage Taskforce coordinates efforts and includes ministries, NGOs, UNICEF, UN Women, and UNFPA (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019) In addition to MoGCDSW, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; Ministry of Health and Population; and Ministry of Labour, Youth, Sports, and Manpower Development are core to the Adolescent Girls and Young Women strategy, also launched in 2018 (UN Women, 2018) President Chakwera’s cabinet includes several ministers with a background on women’s rights and gender equality (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020) Former First Lady Gertrude Maseko promoted ending child marriage as part of maternal health in her role in a First Ladies Association against HIV/AIDS (UN Women, 2018) On World Children’s Day 2020, President Chakwera announced a mass birth and child registration campaign in 2021, to ensure protection from child marriage and other issues (Chakwera, Dr. Lazarus McCarthy, 2020)
Province/Local Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child Protection Committees include local government officials, police, teachers and parents and take action against child marriage; not always functional (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019) Social Welfare Officers at the local level have the mandate to work on gender-based violence (GBV), but they are overburdened and lack resources (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020) CSOs in the ENGAGE project worked with district officials during implementation; some officials provided constructive feedback on plans; turnover is an issue (Interview, 1/27)
Private, Bilateral and Multilateral Donors (partial list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ENGAGE child marriage project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was a collaboration between Rise Up, GENET, and ICRW in Southern Malawi; Included girls’ empowerment, civil society engagement, SMS/Radio, evaluation (Rise Up, 2017) UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP have all supported child marriage work, including the development of the National Action Plan UNICEF partners with government in the Safe Schools Programme and Children’s Corners; with traditional and religious leaders on social norms; and with police and judiciary to build child-friendly justice systems (UNICEF, 2018) EU and UN Women collaborate on Spotlight Initiative, which includes child marriage within an anti-GBV program; trains girls and faith leaders (Spotlight Initiative, n.d.) UK Aid funds Tithetse Nkhanza GBV intervention, 2018-2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Netherlands funds More Than Brides Alliance

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tithetse Nkhanza analysis found “donors tend to focus on global development agendas, international conventions and protocols, propagate particular world views and seek credit and recognition for the results achieved” (2020). • The US government’s PEPFAR DREAMS initiative includes an aim of ending child marriage in Malawi and invests significantly in adolescent girls’ empowerment and education in Zomba and Machinga Districts (Fleischman & Peck, 2017)
International Non-Governmental Organizations (partial list)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan International has had significant presence on issue through Yes I Do, 18+, and Because I am a Girl campaigns; includes focus on sexual and reproductive health and education (UN Women, 2018) • More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) implements Marriage: No Child’s Play intervention • ActionAid supports women’s forums to identify child marriages; World Vision works with faith leaders around child protection • CSOs reported a collaborative environment; “working coordination between INGOs and CSOs and the people working on the ground – the chiefs” (Interview, 1/27) • Tithetse Nkhanza analysis found perceptions that INGOs’ focus is “testing models and theories of change” and “maintaining funding to sustain jobs” (2020) • CAMFED and FHI360 support educational projects
Civil Society Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls Not Brides Malawi includes 93 members and coordinates programmatic and advocacy efforts among CSOs (Interview, 1/4); started as coalition in 2012 and became official Girls Not Brides partnership in 2017 (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019) • Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) has been working since 2008 on child marriage, education, sexual and reproductive health, entrepreneurship, GBV (Interview, 1/28) • Centre for Social Concern and Development (CESOCODE) has been working on child marriage since its founding in 2009; YONECO is active on issue through mass media • Women’s Manifesto Movement is a group of women’s rights organizations that work together on advocacy (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020) • Child marriage advocacy includes disability advocates, including Federation of Disability Organizations in Malawi (FEDOMA) (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019)
Traditional Leaders (Chiefs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of chiefs is defined in law; allows them to carry out policies and make by-laws, as long as they are consistent with national laws (Cammack, Kayongolo & O’Neill, 2009) • Some chiefs have taken an active role against child marriage, setting by-laws with higher ages of marriage and breaking up child marriages (Steinhaus et al., 2019) • Chief Theresa Kachindamoto has been a prominent leader against child marriage, annulled 2500 marriages, helped get 2015 legal change passed (Julien, 2019) • Some chiefs are resistant to change; one threatened that the girls involved in GENET will be impregnated by the boys in their villages (Interview, 1/28)
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil society has used media to highlight their work, but “we need to go beyond that so the media themselves can generate content” (Interview, 1/28)

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Radio shows in urban and rural areas across Malawi have inspired many young Malawians to seek support, dissolve their marriages, and learn about alternatives to child marriage (Pensulo, 2021).
Individual Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GENET engages girls as change agents, works with initiation counselors to modify girls' initiation rites (Interview, 1/28) Some stakeholders said that boys need to be engaged as well to advance gender equality as benefiting both (Interview, 1/28)

Strategic Links with Other Issues

A mapping of child marriage spending in Malawi by the MoGCDSW and UNICEF in 2019 found the vast majority (86 percent in 2018-19) of government spending on the issue focused on the education sector to keep girls in school, including construction of hostels for girls near secondary schools (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). Most INGO and CSO programs are multisectoral, so it is more difficult to break down into different types of programs, but the report estimated that 23 percent of funding supported at-risk or married girls, with empowerment programs and coordinated advocacy efforts (such as coalition participation) each consuming 19 percent of overall NGO/CSO spending. Although the unconditional arm of the Zomba Cash Transfer Program (2008-2009) successfully decreased child marriage and teen pregnancy, its impact on girls' well-being was short-term, and similar cash transfer programs have not been repeated in Malawi (Özler, 2017). However, the MTBA intervention in Southern Malawi includes a livelihoods component, which was too recent to show an impact by the midline assessment (A. Melnikas et al., 2019).

	Opportunities	Challenges
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary education is associated with lower rates of child marriage Laws are protective of girls returning to school after pregnancy; ENGAGE helped create welcoming environment in schools for returning girls (Interview, 1/27) Projects to support girls' schooling with scholarships, menstrual products, infrastructure (Interview, 1/4) MTBA project increased school retention rates, reading/writing outcomes (A. Melnikas et al., 2019; A. J. Melnikas, Saul, et al., 2021) USAID is funding school construction (Interview, 1/20) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased enrollment has led to decreased quality due to staffing, infrastructure problems (Psaki et al., 2017) Teen pregnancies are more common reason for drop out than early marriage in some communities (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018) Girls may not return to school after pregnancy due to stigma, costs Families may not see value of educating girls because there are few employment options after graduation Girls who have "given up" on school do not have alternatives (Interview, 1/20)

	Opportunities	Challenges
Economic Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zomba Cash Transfer Program directed to families and girls successfully reduced marriages and pregnancy (Baird, Chirwa, et al., 2016) • Youth-headed households need economic support to be able to attend school and support siblings (Interview, 1/20) • After annulment of marriages, families need economic support to take in daughters and any grandchildren (Julien, 2019) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term evaluation of the unconditional and conditional Zomba cash transfer found many outcomes from the unconditional transfers were short-term, and there were marriage and pregnancy “booms” when support ended (Özler, 2017) • National-level conditional cash transfer to heads of households did not impact transitions to adulthood (Dake et al., 2018)
Gender Norms and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriarchal norms shape girls’ vulnerability to early sex and marriage (Interview, 1/4) • The 2019 national movement against rape has sparked community activism on anti-GBV work (Interview, 1/28) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempts to empower girls are criticized by some as leaving out boys, “disempowering men” (Interview, 1/28)
Sexual and reproductive health (SRH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes I Do baseline found that child marriages and teen pregnancies were “mutually reinforcing” with similar causes and consequences (KIT Royal Tropical Institute, 2018); MTBA found teen pregnancy is higher in Malawi than in other intervention countries (A. Melnikas et al., 2019) • SRH knowledge is high among adolescents, and more youth-friendly services may be able to capitalize on this knowledge (A. Melnikas et al., 2019) • Knowledge of HIV is high; has reached even youngest girls (Interview, 1/7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls may see pregnancy and marriage as valid choice for transitioning to adulthood, given few other options for continued education or employment (Interview, 1/7) • Sexual and reproductive health services are available, but “contraceptive use by younger women is unlikely to rise without changes in cultural norms” (Digitale et al., 2017) • There has been stigmatization of condom use as something only for sex workers (Interview, 1/7) • Initiation camps reinforce harmful norms around sexuality
Child Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Protection Committees bring government and civil society together to identify and pursue cases of child marriage • Children’s Corners at community level provide services to support children and prevent child marriage. • Enforcement has built support for the age of marriage; has support of chiefs and local government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-annulment pathways for girls are not clear; sent back to parents without economic or educational prospects • Child Protection Committees don’t always have the resources or training to carry out work effectively • Chiefs that are not opposed to child marriage may be unreliable allies for child protection efforts

Effects of COVID-19 and Recent Events on CEFM

Stakeholders agree that COVID-19 is likely leading to increases in child marriages due to the economic impact and lower access to sexual and reproductive health services (Interviews 1/20, 1/4). The MoGCDSW commissioned a study which found high numbers of child marriages in select districts, but it was difficult to assess increases because data from previous years was not reliable enough for comparison (JK Consultants, 2020). The study found that local Child Protection Committees and other local resources had limited protective equipment, and were not fully functional. A review of GBV resources by Tithetse Nkhanza found “reduced court and police capacity” and limited flow of information about protective resources (Tithetse Nkhanza, 2020). As a result of the courts’ reduced capacity, study participants suggested that child marriages would be pushed back to families in order to lighten court loads. Chief Theresa Kachindamoto put out an order to lower chiefs that they should annul child marriages that happened during the pandemic (Pensulo, 2020).

There were similar reports of increases in child marriage after Cyclone Idai in 2019, which caused massive flooding and displacement. Programs working in the displacement camps reported that girls were getting married frequently, and suggested that climate change will bring an increase in child marriage overall (Higgins, 2020).

D. Dynamics

This section analyzes the interactions among the previous three pillars of PEA analysis (Foundational Factors, Rules of the Game, and Here and Now). In the areas of **advocacy, research, and programming**, we assess where and how progress on CEFM in Malawi has evolved, and where the literature and informants identified threats and obstacles to progress.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress: Advocacy has helped get legal reform passed, local officials committed to change, and traditional leaders speaking out against child marriage; Evaluations have provided additional information from a variety of sources about local success; Programs are robust, dealing with social norms, education, SRH • Obstacles: National advocacy efforts need more champions beyond gender ministry; Data management is poor, research isn’t presented in digestible way; Programs need more emphasis on poverty alleviation, better coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National-level advocacy efforts should focus on building accountability for actions by ministries other than the Ministry of Gender • Stakeholders can better leverage strong civil society networks to share easily understood findings from emerging research and coordinate interventions; donor coordination can help facilitate this process • Interventions should shift away from messaging about the harms of child marriage and toward offering meaningful alternatives to teen pregnancy and marriage

Areas of Progress

Years of effective **advocacy** from civil society and international bodies have generated meaningful progress on legal and policy reform at the national and local levels. The marriage law in 2015 and the closing of parental consent loopholes in 2017 have created a consistent

nationwide legal framework, seemingly embraced by most courts, traditional leaders, and religious authorities (Interview, 1/4). The costed National Strategy includes an ambitious 20% reduction goal by 2020, and the MoGCDSW works closely with civil society and UN bodies on its implementation. The budget mapping by the government and UNICEF identifies shortfalls to achieving the National Strategy by sector, and can serve as a meaningful tool for advocates to shape government and donor investment in CEFM programs. National government commitment appears to transcend political parties, as the recent change in government has not adversely affected policy implementation. National-level laws and policies have made it much easier for advocates at the local level. Organizations working on the ENGAGE project report generally positive reception for their efforts from district level officials, receiving constructive feedback on how to best approach policy reform in their communities (Interview, 1/27). One informant commented that they feared incoming local officials would not support their efforts, “but the district commissioner has been really supportive, very much interested in what we are doing” (Interview, 1/27). Buy-in from local chiefs has been particularly important. As one advocate said, “There are champions without NGOs in the communities” (Interview, 1/27). The ENGAGE project’s work to empower a new generation of girl advocates in Southern Malawi is particularly promising for future advocacy efforts.

Research efforts woven into programs are increasingly identifying regional and subregional variations driving child marriages to help refine programmatic approaches. The Yes I Do mixed methods baseline and the More Than Brides Alliance baseline and midline reports have connected critical dots related to child marriage in Malawi, particularly on its relationship with sexual and reproductive health for adolescent girls. The ENGAGE project also includes an evaluation component (Rise Up, 2017). Social norms research in Malawi has teased out the seeming paradox between widespread understanding of the harms of child marriage and its continued practice (Steinhaus et al., 2019). A post-intervention evaluation of the Zomba cash transfer program revealed important structural barriers to sustained success in improving the lives of adolescent girls, even where their marriages are delayed (Baird, McIntosh, et al., 2016). As mentioned above, the extensive work done to map current spending on child marriage provides important insights for donors, implementing partners, and the government.

Programs in Malawi have employed multisectoral efforts to address child marriage, including empowerment, schooling, sexual and reproductive health, and norms change (including through community engagement and mass media). International NGOs and CSOs appear to collaborate well in programmatic approaches. Initial findings from the MTBA midline has shown significant declines in child marriage in the target area of intervention, based on its approach to presenting alternative pathways to marriage (A. Melnikas et al., 2019). The Girls Not Brides – Malawi network, including several community-based organizations, helps members coordinate approaches and share information about successes and challenges (Interview, 1/4). Programs have successfully conveyed the harms of child marriage, and can build on public understanding with more sophisticated and targeted approaches.

Obstacles to Progress

Despite rapid policy progress due to **advocacy** efforts, national political will to address child marriage needs to extend beyond the actors who are already engaged. While child marriage is seen as a threat in terms of health and gender equality, national leaders do not discuss it in terms of its impact on economic development (MoGCDSW & WEI/B, 2019). Health and education ministries should also be more engaged, as youth-friendly health services and improved school infrastructure are both fundamental to alternative pathways to marriage. The National Strategy lays out roles for these and other ministries, but does not include specific benchmarks for their actions (MoGCDSW 2018). Budget advocacy needs to increase significantly, as the budget mapping reveals major spending gaps between the strategy's desired outcomes and what is budgeted, as well as poor coordination on spending decisions between NGOs and the government (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). Advocacy efforts face local-level obstacles, as CSOs are new to advocacy and may not have the capacity to expand (Interview, 1/26). One informant said that once advocacy organizations leave a community, advocacy by girls on child marriage is very difficult to sustain (Interview, 1/26). Although district officials have been receptive to child marriage advocacy efforts, turnover makes it more difficult to hold incoming leaders accountable for past commitments (Interview, 1/26). The budget mapping reflects that almost no money is dedicated by the national government to district-level government child marriage response (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019).

While **research** is providing more answers about what works to reduce child marriage in Malawi, poor understanding of research results and lack of data management hinder access to these answers. "What we are basing our programming on is anecdotal data, not evidence," one informant said, adding that this leads to programming based on outdated methodologies (Interview, 1/20). Making research findings more digestible to the wide range of actors implementing child marriage interventions is an important step. More frequent data collection in between Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) is also urgently needed to capture the impact of climate change events and other crises, such as COVID-19. Social norm research should focus on social and gender norms around sexuality and contraceptive use, as communities shift away from seeing child marriage as a social good.

Programs on child marriage are so plentiful that several informants complained of lack of coordination, giving examples of working in communities that have already had similar interventions. One assessment found that government and NGO implementer "not only duplicate activities and services provided, but also ran parallel to each other often in a rather conflicting manner," with some using a punitive approach and others rehabilitative (JK Consultants, 2020). At the same time, program investments are not tracking with the needs identified in the National Strategy, with a shortfall of 88 percent for "coordination, monitoring and evaluation" and 71 percent for economic empowerment (UNICEF Malawi & MoGCDSW, 2019). "Marriage busting," also referred to as "withdrawal," is a popular method of intervention and receives a lot of media attention, yet often does not come with mechanisms to address these girls' needs once they return home (Interview, 1/7). "Pregnancy and lack of

opportunities are the biggest drivers, but neither are addressed through withdrawal,” said one informant (Interview, 1/7). Another pointed out that these girls may bring home children after annulment, adding to their parents’ economic burden (Interview, 1/20). Despite the success of an unconditional cash transfer program in reducing child marriage, economic approaches are not central within most interventions (Interview, 1/28). Informants also noted the importance of incorporating boys into programming, and having longer time frames for project implementation (Interviews 1/27, 1/28).

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

A. What is the case for investment in CEFM in Malawi?

- **Malawi presents fertile ground for significant progress on child marriage.** Among high-prevalence countries, Malawi fortunately lacks some of factors that make child marriage rates difficult to move in other countries. There is no political or religious movement to defend child marriage, no widespread social value to marrying younger girls, no perceived protective benefit from child marriage, and no conflict that generates instability and violence (other than shocks driven by climate change). Malawi benefits from several characteristics that facilitate further reductions, including strong programming infrastructure at the community level, with community-based organizations, traditional leaders, and local officials amenable to advancing change.
- **Malawi can become a model for addressing child marriage driven by poverty and pregnancy.** There is strong consensus that child marriage in Malawi is driven by poverty and premarital pregnancy. There is also emerging evidence that many of these pregnancies are due to the lack of alternative paths to adulthood for girls. Neither issue is easy to resolve, but by providing access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, changing norms on adolescents' use of contraceptives, and economic empowerment opportunities linked with education and/or livelihoods programs for girls, investments could make sizable headway.
- **Expanding child marriage efforts can build on previous investments.** Investments in CEFM projects, as well as those for gender equality and on the health of adolescent girls and young women more broadly, are synergistic with an increased investment to further reduce child marriage. The DREAMS project's focus on the structural drivers of HIV risk among adolescents could be of particular relevance in building community support for girls' empowerment.

B. Where are the key points of leverage on CEFM in Malawi?

- **Strong and experienced civil society, including youth-led and women-led groups, are capable of sustained child marriage efforts.** Malawi's CSOs working on child marriage are experienced and engaged, and in many cases, they have worked on this issue for decades, giving them needed authenticity for working at the community level. In partnership with donors and INGOs, their commitment, knowledge and skill can be leveraged to introduce new approaches for advocacy, programming, and research. Investing in greater sustainability for adolescent-led feminist groups can expand the impact of young leaders.
- **Coordination can build on National Strategy and positive relationships between civil society and government.** Consultations between the government and civil society on child marriage have continued even with a change of presidency, and the new president has pledged an ongoing commitment to gender equality. The National Strategy needs more specific benchmarks, but it provides a useful initial organizing tool for coordinated programming, as well as an ambitious reduction target of 20 percent by 2023. The budget

mapping is thorough and calls out critical funding gaps, and should be used by donors, the government and CSOs to ensure investments more closely track to defined needs.

- **Traditional leaders can be an engine of change, even in the absence of child marriage programming.** Civil society has invested a great deal in engaging traditional leaders, to important effect, and UNICEF is doing some work along these lines as well. Chiefs have proven valuable allies in annulling marriages and working with NGOs to strengthen community bylaws. If they are able to similarly lead on norms around adolescent sexuality, it may be of tremendous benefit to normalizing youth-friendly contraceptive access.

C. Where can investment/influence turn gaps into opportunities?

- **Economic empowerment interventions – intertwined with youth-friendly SRH – need an external boost.** With half of Malawi’s population living in poverty, and girls seeing little future outside of pregnancy and marriage, sparking economic possibilities in rural communities is critical. Unconditional cash transfers have shown promise, but require sizable and sustained investment. Evidence about other livelihood approaches will be emerging soon from MTBA, and should provide clues on how to balance cost-effectiveness and sustainability. Any economic approach should be paired with norms change and service delivery around youth SRH so that girls have viable options to parenthood and marriage.
- **With prolific programming, improved coordination and communication is essential.** Malawi benefits from many actors engaged in child marriage programming, but that can lead to dissonance and inefficiency. Donors and international organizations should make sure their approaches are both informed by grassroots groups and coordinated, to ensure synergistic efforts.
- **Gender-transformative approaches are essential, and men and boys must be engaged to ensure buy-in.** The emphasis on adolescent girls and young women is critical for disrupting patriarchal norms, but perceptions that boys and men are left out of this programming threaten to undermine success. When modifying sexual initiation curricula, for example, programs should also address boys’ transition to adulthood to instill understanding of the benefits of gender equality, later marriage, and positive masculinity.

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APPENDIX A. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

KII Interview Guide – Malawi

Introduction: *Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. Iris Group is conducting Political Economy Analyses on Child, Early and Forced Marriage. Our purpose is to develop a high-level analysis of the CEFM context in each of eight countries. You have been recommended as an expert in Malawi on this issue, and we greatly appreciate your input in this process. Your responses will help shape a contextual understanding of CEFM in Malawi, which in turn will contribute to recommended responses. Your specific responses will not be attributed to you without your consent. We are very grateful for your honest responses.*

First, can you give me a brief summary of your work in Malawi related to CEFM?

Foundational Factors

From what you know based on your work or experiences, what are the most important factors driving **regional differences** in CEFM in Malawi? (probe for geographical, environmental differences)

In what ways, if any, does **economic class** influence CEFM rates and practices in Malawi?

How have **ethnic differences** shaped CM and other gender issues in Malawi? Do different regions track to different cultural values and/or ethnicities?

How has historical gender inequality affected CEFM?

Rules of the Game

How does Malawi law affect CEFM?

How do international commitments affect laws or policy in Malawi on CEFM?

What are the most common social norms related to CEFM? How much do these differ among different ethnic groups?

Have there been **any recent norms changes** related to gender, fertility desires, familial responsibility and sexual debut? Have these been reflected in CM rates?

Here and Now

Who are the **key stakeholders and actors on CEFM**? (probe for donors, CSOs, policymakers, advocates)? Are there any outstanding champions on this?

What role do women's rights and youth groups play on the issue in Malawi?

What influence do **international NGOs, institutions and donors** have on CEFM in Malawi?

What are the limitations of their influence?

Is CEFM progress **driven mainly by actors outside Malawi or inside Malawi**? Is there tension between external and internal actors? Do communities see it as a domestically-driven issue?

What role does **media** in Malawi play in CEFM?

Is CEFM linked with other issues at the national level (e.g. education, economics, sexual rights and reproductive health, HIV, HTP etc.) or addressed as a separate issue? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working on CEFM through these lenses?

How do you think **COVID-19** affects CEFM and efforts to combat it?

What **global, regional or national events** have been important to CEFM in Malawi in the past couple years?

Dynamics

Where are the gaps (in programming, research, advocacy)? Where can these gaps be converted into opportunities?

What **progress** has been made on CEFM in Malawi? (*probe for programmatic, research, advocacy*)

What and who are the **biggest obstacles** for current CEFM efforts in Malawi? (*probe for programmatic, research and advocacy challenges*) Have these changed over time?

Is there anyone else you think it's important for me to speak to about this issue? Are there any materials you can share that might help us understand these contextual issues better?