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Beyond Congregations: Impacts of Apostolic Concentration on Non-Apostolic Child Marriage Rates in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The proliferation of Christian apostolic groups, commonly known as Masowe or African Initiated Churches (AIC) in Zimbabwe threatens girls' rights through religiously imposed marriages. Using data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from 2005, 2010, and 2015, I investigate the relationship between residing in areas with high concentrations of apostolic religious groups and the prevalence of non-apostolic child marriage. My results, which control for regional fixed effects, show a significant effect of living in regions with high apostolic concentrations on child marriage rates for non-apostolics. The findings suggest that child marriage is rooted in not only economic deprivation but also in religious proximity. To reduce child marriage, policies should be aimed at developing rural communities where child marriage is prevalent.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Child Marriage, Religious groups, Peer effects, Neighborhood effects

1. Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone below the age of eighteen unless the child receives majority through some other method. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines early marriage as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years before the girl is physically and psychologically ready to handle the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing” (UNFPA 2006). In Zimbabwe, child marriage rates are primarily concentrated in rural and apostolic communities. The Zimbabwe apostolic movement traces its origins to the Johanne Marange and Johanne Masowe Apostolic groups, established in the early 1930s in the Marange and Makoni areas (Mukonyora 1998). Since then, they have grown into over 160 apostolic groups, constituting approximately 37% of the Zimbabwean population (UNICEF 2020). A UNICEF report from 2011 highlighted that Zimbabwean ultraconservative apostolic groups prioritize prophetic revelations from God and upholding the patriarchy.

As a result, the existence of apostolic groups has been associated with a lag in the decline of child marriages in Zimbabwe as compared to other Sub-Saharan countries. In a study by Arijit Nandi et al. (2017), they found a decrease in underage marriage rates in most countries, but in Zimbabwe, a third of the women were married before the age of eighteen. Social norms theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the persistence of harmful cultural and religious gender-based practices such as child marriage. Maguranyanga (2011) highlights the significant influence of norms within apostolic groups, particularly on the behavior of women and female adolescents, often discouraging them from accessing modern services due to entrenched doctrinal beliefs.

Numerous studies have shown that girls belonging to the apostolic sect in Zimbabwe have a higher chance of getting married early. Yet, there is neither an empirical study on the impacts of living in communities regionally closer to apostolic groups nor the driving forces for the regional difference in child marriage in Zimbabwe. This paper addresses a critical gap frequently overlooked in previous research. By leveraging geographical data, the study aims to explore the intricate interplay between religion and norms, recognizing that individuals’ beliefs can significantly shape the overarching norms within a community. My panel regression method uses DHS data across all Zimbabwean provinces to identify the impacts of living in a region with apostolics on non-apostolic child marriages. My panel regression method enables me to control for specific factors like wealth, time, and rural fixed effects, reducing the risk of omitted variable bias. My results show that from the DHS data in 2005, 2010, and 2015, higher apostolic concentrations were associated with higher underage marriage in non-apostolic groups. This higher apostolic concentration was also associated with lower educational outcomes in non-apostolic groups.

The rest of the paper proceeds with Section 2, which provides a background on child marriage in Zimbabwe and related local and international laws. In Section 3, I discuss the relevant literature on the norms of child marriage in Zimbabwe and other developing countries. I base my analysis on empirical analysis and introduce my theory of change. Section 4 presents the empirical methodology and the data. In Section 5, I present the study’s results, and in Section 6, I discuss the results. The paper concludes with Section 7.

2. Background on Child Marriage in Zimbabwe

In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) under Article 1 defined a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” However, the CRC also established Article 30, which recognized the rights of minority and indigenous children to maintain their culture, religion, and language. This created a loophole in that children could maintain their religious cultures irrespective of harmful practices. In 2015, Zimbabwe, alongside other Sub-Saharan countries, committed to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be fulfilled by 2030. By signing to support SDG 5.3, Zimbabwe pledged to “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.” Zimbabwe also signed SDG 4.2, which seeks to ensure that all girls and boys complete primary and secondary education. For a localized policy, Zimbabwe raised the legal age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls through the Marriage Amendment Act in 2016. However, according to a multiple indicator cluster survey, 34% of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 and 5% before the age of 15 (ZIMSTAT and UNICEF 2019).

The prevalence of child marriage is associated with religious beliefs. Approximately 37% of Zimbabwe's population belongs to the Apostolic sect, the country's largest religious group, which shows its influence on social norms (Zimbabwe 2020 International Religious Freedom Report 2021). The Eastern provinces of Zimbabwe, Manicaland, and Mashonaland Central are home to many Apostolic communities due to their proximity to the land of their founders. In addition, these districts are primarily rural, with agro-based and extractive economic systems. Low economic prospects and religious beliefs are two primary drivers of underage marriage in these communities. When investigating the leading causes of child marriage in Zimbabwe in the Mashonaland province, which houses a substantial apostolic population, Dzimiri et al. (2017) found religious beliefs and practices as the highest cause. Makusha et al. (2013) attribute the high child marriage rates in the Eastern provinces to the influence of religious leaders and the belief that early marriage is a religious duty. Mukonyora (2001) concurs with this perspective, asserting that women within Zimbabwean society are frequently drawn to apostolic teachings as they perceive themselves as "foreigners," seeking solace and belonging in the religious community. Consequently, marriage is often perceived as a religious obligation, even at a young age. In transmitting religious beliefs and practices, women play a central role, passing down these traditions to their daughters.

Additionally, child marriages and polygamy can also be perpetuated by older men who can afford to pay the bride price. Because the husband pays a hefty dowry, the underage girl also has immediate pressure to prove her fertility and, as a result, suffers the health effects of early pregnancies (Nawal 2006). The impact of apostolic groups on non-apostolic child marriage has not been researched extensively. However, studies from other developing nations point to higher child marriage rates in areas of solid religious conservatism (Jones 2001; Winnifred 2022; Field 2005). To end underage marriage, addressing its underlying causes is critical to establishing effective policies. The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) identified poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, insecurity in the face of war and conflict, and the force of custom and tradition as the four leading causes of the practice of child marriage across the globe.

3. Literature Review and Theory of Change

The concepts of peer effects and neighborhood effects are highly applicable when examining the influence of apostolic concentration on the behavioral shifts observed among young girls. In a study conducted by Chamisa et al. (2019), it was demonstrated that children frequently inherit their religious affiliations from their parents, who often share similar religious backgrounds with their social circles, including friends. This intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs significantly shapes individuals' adherence to social norms as children grow up with similar religious beliefs. Moreover, peer effects theories suggest that individuals tend to form friendships with those residing in close geographic proximity, implying the potential influence of parental friendships on children's decisions regarding marriage.

Additionally, friendships among girls can have spillover effects or peer effects in determining the timing of early marriages for young girls. Nazio et al. (2003) explored the impact of social modeling among peers on cohabitation and marriage decisions. They concluded that individuals are primarily influenced by the direct social modeling of peers within their network. In my hypothesis, the decisions of apostolic peers regarding marriage timing can shape the social beliefs of their non-apostolic friends. Moreover, Nazio et al. (2003) also suggested that individuals may be positively influenced by their friends' marital choices due to the network externalities generated and the social influence mechanisms that prompt conformity. This social influence operates through social comparison, social pressure, and fear of a shrinking population of suitors.

Most importantly, this paper formulates a framework based on a study of neighborhood effects in shaping social norms by Gavin W. Jones in Indonesia. Jones (2001) explored the influence of neighborhood effects, religion, educational attainment, and migration on child marriage in Indonesia. The findings indicated that between 1980 and 1990, the age of first marriage increased in West Java primarily due to an influx of Muslims from regions with a tradition of marrying late. This suggests that regional influences affect marriage practices and contribute to the homogenization of marriage ages.

Lastly, a study by Balbo et al. (2013) investigates the social interaction effects of peers and friends on the entry into marriage and parenthood during the transition to adulthood in the U.S. They emphasize the importance of social learning, social influence, cost-sharing dynamics, and network externalities in understanding the influence of social interactions on demographic behaviors. The findings suggest that friends' behavior primarily influences the decision to become a parent, while contextual factors and social pressure play a role in marriage choices.

This literature motivates my hypothesis that the intersection of religion, norms, and geography leads to a spillover effect of child marriage among young women. This is especially relevant for girls who might see child marriage as the norm. Thus, I anticipate that the higher the number of friends who marry young in an individual's cluster, the higher the likelihood of an individual's entry into marriage.

4. Data and Empirical Model

This study used the 2005, 2010, and 2015 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from Zimbabwe, which contained data from 28,033 females aged 15-49 sampled from 1,200 clusters. The large sample size increases statistical power, thereby reducing the chances of false negatives.

For this study, I identified the age of first marriage for all individuals, including older individuals, allowing me to track the trend of child marriage in the clusters. I rely on the religion identifier to identify the religious affiliation, categorizing the apostolic groups separately from other Christian groups. This is important for this study as the apostolic groups in Zimbabwe are the only religious Christian groups that condone child marriage. I use cluster identifiers and weights to measure my main independent variable, apostolic concentration. Cluster weights give the weighted value of each individual within a cluster, while cluster identifiers place an individual in precisely one cluster at a time. For my dependent variable, the non-apostolic underage marriage rate, I assume that apostolics have been apostolic since they were born or since they entered their first marriage. Also, this dataset only measures apostolic concentration based on women, i.e., the dataset does not include any men in these clusters.

The theoretical framework is based on the hypothesis that religious affiliation and apostolic concentration in a cluster can affect the prevalence of child marriage for non-apostolic girls and women in Zimbabwe. The null hypothesis is that a higher apostolic concentration has no effect on the age at which non-apostolic girls marry. The primary outcome variable for this study is underage marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18. My second outcome variable is the total years of education. Other notable control variables were wealth and locality. All my variables are summarized in Table 1.

My regression model of interest is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AC_{it} + \beta_2 R_{it} + \beta_3 W_{it} + \theta_t + \delta_r + \lambda_w + \epsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} is the outcome variable, which is underage marriage, and AC is the apostolic concentration for observation i at time t . β_0 is the intercept term, θ_t represents time fixed effects, capturing time-specific factors that may affect underage marriage, δ_r represents rural fixed effects, capturing rural-specific factors that may affect underage marriage, λ_w represents wealth fixed effects, capturing any wealth-specific factors that may affect underage marriage and ϵ_{it} being the error term. I control for time fixed effects, rural fixed effects, and wealth fixed effects to address unobserved heterogeneity between clusters. Moreover, the data is clustered for within-cluster correlation of the error terms. I also control for locality and wealth using R_{it} and W_{it} respectively. This is mainly motivated by previous research, which has shown that child marriages are prevalent among rural and lower-income communities as access to resources can determine whether one marries early or not (Banderi et al. 2015; Bengesai et al. 2021 & Field et al. 2018). The regression models include time fixed effects to control for time-specific factors that may affect underage marriage rates and education levels. The R-squared values indicate the proportion of the variation in underage marriage explained by the included variables, with higher R-squared values indicating a better fit of the model to the data.

VARIABLES	(1) N	(2) Mean	(3) SD	(4) Min	(5) Max
(Mean) Apostolic Concentration	28,033	0.353	0.213	0	1
Wealth Index Factor Score (5 decimals)	28,033	0.539	5.847	-16.39	32.46
Underage Marriage	28,033	0.273	0.445	0	1
Locality: Rural	28,033	0.602	0.490	0	1
Total Years of Education	28,031	8.806	3.008	0	21

Notes: The summary statistics were computed using the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) in Zimbabwe in 2005, 2010 and 2015. The data was restricted to only women surveyed.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

5. Results

In this section, I present the findings of my regression analysis investigating the impact of apostolic concentration on the non-apostolic underage marriage rate.

VARIABLES	(1) Non-apostolic underage marriage	(2) Non-apostolic underage marriage	(3) Non-apostolic underage marriage
(Mean) Apostolic Concentration	0.314*** (0.0239)	0.156*** (0.0272)	0.134*** (0.0272)
Rural		0.115*** (0.0102)	0.0838*** (0.0110)
Wealth Index Factor Score (5 decimals)			(0.00551)*** (0.000827)
R-Squared	0.021	0.035	0.039
Time FE	YES	YES	YES
Clustered	YES	YES	YES
Rural FE		YES	
Wealth FE			YES

Table 2: Underage Marriage

Notes: The regression results were computed to show the impact of apostolic concentration in the cluster, controlling for time fixed effects, type of location, domestic violence in the maiden home, and wealth factor score of the family. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The asterisks show the significance level with * showing significance at the 10% level, ** showing significance at the 5% level, and *** showing significance at the 1% level. The data was from the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) in Zimbabwe in 2005, 2010 and 2015.

Table 2 presents regression analysis results examining the relationship between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic child marriage rates, controlling for additional factors and fixed effects. My findings show a positive relationship between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic marriages for girls under the age of 18, which is statistically significant at the 1% level. When controlling for locality, an increase in apostolic concentration is associated with a higher probability of non-apostolic underage marriage in rural areas as compared to those in urban areas, and this is significant at the 1% level. When controlling for wealth, higher incomes are associated with a lower chance of getting married early on average, and this is significant at the 1% level.

VARIABLES	(1) Total Years of Education	(2) Total Years of Education	(3) Total Years of Education
(Mean) Apostolic Concentration	-4.189*** (0.246)	-1.663*** (0.272)	-1.201*** (0.262)
Rural		-1.832*** (0.095)	-1.182*** (0.100)
Wealth Index Factor Score (5 decimals)			0.116*** (0.0067)
R-Squared	0.128	0.191	0.219
Time FE	YES	YES	YES
Clustered	YES	YES	YES
Rural FE		YES	
Wealth FE			YES

Table 3: Educational Outcomes

Notes: The regression results were computed to show the impact of apostolic concentration in clusters controlling for time fixed effects, type of location, domestic violence in the maiden home, and wealth factor score of the family. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. The asterisks show the significance level with * showing significance at the 10% level, ** showing significance at the 5% level, and *** showing significance at the 1% level. The data used was from the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) in Zimbabwe in 2005, 2010 and 2015.

Table 3 shows the impact of apostolic concentration on the total years of education attained. A 1% increase in apostolic concentration is associated with a 4.189-year reduction in total years of education and is significant at the 1% level. This suggests that higher levels of apostolic concentration are associated with lower education levels. When controlling for locality, individuals residing in rural areas have, on average, an education level of 1.832 years lower compared to those in urban areas. When controlling for wealth-fixed effects, apostolic concentration has a more minor yet significant negative effect on education. The lower education level suggests that wealth plays a role in educational outcomes, and part of the initial strong negative relationship between apostolic concentration and education may be due to underlying wealth disparities.

6. Discussion

The regression results show a statistically significant positive relationship between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic child marriage rates among girls under the age of 18. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the relationship between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic underage marriage rates in Zimbabwe. The positive relationship observed between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic underage marriage rates supports the hypothesis that the intersection of religion, norms, and geography leads to spillover effects of underage marriage among women. The influence of social norms and cultural beliefs associated with

apostolic sects may create social pressures that extend beyond the sect itself, affecting non-apostolic youth who may feel compelled to conform to these marriage practices.

As the study shows, higher concentrations of apostolic religious beliefs and practices can be associated with higher rates of non-apostolic child marriages, which are often associated with lower educational attainment and decreased upward mobility of girls.

To explain these results, I hypothesize my viewpoints into three buckets: peer effects, parental effects, and norms. Peer effects could form from the child's perspective. Younger adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure. In research on student behaviors at Dartmouth, Sacerdote (2001) found that peers impact decisions to join social groups. These decisions were largely based on the impact of social networks. If we consider girls in highly apostolically concentrated areas to possess similar social networks, their behavior can also be shaped by the social networks they belong to. If apostolic friends in their cluster marry, then it is likely that the desire to maintain a similar social network may push them to behave that way. Parental effects are significant because children typically need parental consent for many decisions. The parental effects can also emerge from social networks. Kandpal et al. (2019) discovered that Indian female autonomy was impacted by their mothers' social networks, revealing their influence on chores and investments undertaken for the child. This could lead to parental pressure to marry children young and potentially to forced marriages because of what would be practiced in their social networks. Lastly, norms factor here in several ways. This can either be by observation or by inherited practices. When parents themselves marry early, there could be a possibility that their children marry early as well. However, in Dzimiri et al.'s (2017) study, they found that some mothers, regardless of their beliefs, would be eager to have their children continue in school and delay marriage. Thus, this may need further investigation. The interaction between apostolic and non-apostolic communities may exacerbate this trend, mainly because of the emphasis on community in most rural areas.

In educational outcomes, the reduction in years of schooling is much higher than what has been researched in the past, suggesting that underage marriage, apostolic concentration, and educational attainment are related, as shown by Mukonyora's (2001) findings. Mukonyora (2001) found that female students from rural Marange had a reduced presence in school due to their participation in womanhood initiation ceremonies between the ages of 12-13, which is when menarche typically begins. Based on the assumption that those in the same cluster would attend the same schools, we can relate this to non-apostolic girls as they would also reduce their years of education if they observed their peers' behaviors. Some cultural norms may be formed in an apostolic community, where eight years of schooling is naturally followed by work in the home or industrial areas for men. In these communities, education is not viewed as necessary. Additionally, small businesses in these communities do not require extensive education, which may be attractive to young women seeking eligible suitors seeking higher living standards.

This analysis has several limitations that may lead to an underestimation of the effect of apostolic concentration. The linear regression model used in this study has a few potential limitations. Firstly, the model may suffer from omitted variable bias, as it may not account for all the confounding factors that could influence the relationship between apostolic religious groups and underage marriage rates other than wealth and geographic location. Other socioeconomic, cultural, or political factors may not be captured in the analysis, leading to biased estimates of the effect. Secondly, the relationship between the concentration of apostolic religious groups and underage marriage rates may not be linear, and a linear regression model may not be able to capture nonlinear or threshold effects, which could be significant in understanding the dynamics of this phenomenon. Additionally, there may be issues of endogeneity, where the presence of apostolic religious groups and underage marriage rates influence each other, leading to biased estimates of the effect. Regarding the dataset used, this analysis only considers the concentration of apostolic women within a cluster and does not account for the potential impact of men. Also, this analysis is based on survey data, which may be subject to bias. Lastly, the paper only studies this using current cluster information and does not account for the migration of women after marriage. For further research, it would be beneficial to use data from surveys that identify which apostolic group one identifies with, as sub-conservative and ultraconservative apostolic groups have some differing opinions on underage marriages.

Policies that increase economic opportunities and decrease poverty in rural areas with high apostolic concentration could reduce underage marriage rates among both apostolic and non-apostolic communities. Most interventions in

Zimbabwe target apostolic homesteads with little emphasis on non-apostolic homesteads. Governments and NGOs could also divert their focus towards providing incentives to continue education in highly apostolically concentrated areas. Also, community-based programs could be implemented that foster peer and parental networks that focus on educating the tradeoffs of both underage marriage and low levels of education.

7. Conclusion

Legislation alone has proven ineffective in combating underage marriage, as evident from the findings of this research study. The study provides compelling evidence of a significant positive relationship between apostolic concentration and non-apostolic underage marriage rates in Zimbabwe. These findings underscore the influence of cultural norms and geographic location on early marriage decisions, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in regions with high apostolic concentrations. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of implementing economic policies that foster economic opportunities and alleviate poverty in rural areas. Addressing these underlying factors can contribute to reducing underage marriage rates and mitigating the far-reaching consequences of early marriage on the population. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the study's design and data sources as they rely on past data, which may impact the reliability of the findings. Future research should delve into exploring the intervening variables to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding child marriage. This study's significance lies in its contribution to the existing body of knowledge on child marriage, particularly in Zimbabwe and beyond. It underscores the urgency for continued research to address the identified limitations and inform evidence-based policy interventions.

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