



# FUTURES

THE ZIMBABWE EZEKIEL GUTI UNIVERSITY  
JOURNAL OF LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

ISSN 2954-8450 (Print)

Vol 1 Issues (1&2), 2022



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Published by the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Press  
Stand No. 1901 Barrassie Rd  
Off Shamva Road  
P.O. Box 350  
Bindura, Zimbabwe

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# MEASURES TO REDUCE SECONDARY SCHOOL HIGH DROPOUT RATE OF THE GIRL-CHILD IN MARGINALISED RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ZIMBABWE: THE CASE OF BINGA DISTRICT

EURITA NYAMANHARE, ROSEMARY MADZORE AND SYMPHOROSA REMBE

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## Abstract

This article explores and discusses measures to reduce the secondary school high dropout rate of the girl-child in marginalised rural communities of the Binga District in Zimbabwe. It plugs the gap in literature that, besides secondary education being a fundamental human right with far-reaching benefits for girls and women, its successful completion is one of the measures for quality learning which the study acknowledges. For methodology, the study engaged the qualitative approach. Data was collected using focus group discussions, individual key-informant interviews, observations, photographs, as well as documents and records. Six critical issues, long and daring walking distances; substandard school infrastructure and furniture; subject teacher profile and high turnover; cultural and religious practices; impoverished backgrounds and menstrual hygiene management, among other issues, were noted as deep-rooted barriers to girl child's successful completion of secondary education in Binga District. The study concluded that dropout threats that played havoc with girl child's successful completion of secondary education were historically institutionalised among the marginalised communities of Binga District. Thus, this study evokes all stakeholders' political will and review of policies, supported by beneficiary-originated targeted affirmative action mitigation measures, to effectively curb the girl child's institutionalised secondary school dropout rate in Binga District, Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** secondary education; threats to education

## INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, secondary school education is a four-year programme culminating in the Ordinary Level Certificate. Secondary education is stipulated as the minimum employment qualifications in any field of commerce and industry, whether in public or private enterprises. It forms the bedrock of all higher tertiary educational opportunities in public or private educational institutions (MoESAC, 2012b; MoPSE, 2013; 2014). Furthermore, the study recognises the high literacy ranking of Zimbabwe in Africa and beyond. Nonetheless, it is equally pertinent to acknowledge UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UNICEF, (2015, p.40) sentiments that "countries that are approaching universal access to education need to

focus, in general, on targeted responses that address the specific barriers faced by the most marginalised children.” Learning is the ultimate purpose of schooling for all children worldwide. Undeniably, low quality education, measured by low value and added to cognitive achievement, leads to a high secondary school dropout rate. Quality education is at the heart of goals set at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 as Goal 6 (UNESCO, 2014a). Subsequently, quality education is prioritised as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 tabled at the 70<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly held from the 25 to the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 whose aim is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, leading to the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNDP, 2015). Thus, the study endorses the view that quality education is “what students know or how well they perform on standardised tests” (Tembon, 2008: p.7). Evidence suggests that educational quality is directly related to school attainment in developing countries (Hanushek, 2008: p.27). Generally, quality education is closely aligned with the acquisition of basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills by learners. Though Grima (2008) admits that quality education is not an easy concept to qualify, this study, regulated by the principle of entitlement, maintains quality education translates into a range of personal, social and developmental benefits that guarantee lifelong educational trajectory underpinned by the attainment of an Ordinary Level Certificate, as a minimum measure. Quality education should allow a girl-child to reach her fullest potential in terms of cognitive, emotional and creative capacities. Thus, access to quality secondary education remains a fundamental determinant factor leading to learning with the end goal of attaining a minimum of five passes with Grade C or better in the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) Ordinary Level standardised examinations at the end of a four-year secondary education programme, in the case of Zimbabwe (MoPSE, 2013; 2014). For Zimbabwe to achieve access to basic quality education for all, there is need to curb the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate seemingly prevalent in marginalise rural communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Globally, children are reported to be at the risk of dropping out of school as they get older. Adolescents who generally constitute learners in the institutions of secondary education are said to be twice likely to be out of school as compared to children at the primary school level (UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UNICEF, 2015). “If I have seen further, it is standing on ye shoulders of giants” is an adage attributed to Isaac Newton which he wrote in a letter to his friend, Robert Hooke (Schreiber and Asner-Self, 2011: p.32). Thus, it is prudent for the study to capture what others have already known and gathered on secondary school dropout threats faced by the girl-child as she strives to access quality education, particularly in marginalised rural communities. Inevitably, knowledge accumulates as researchers learn from and build on what others would have done. Thus,

using terms borrowed from Swart (1988), the study unpacks ‘push-out/throwaway’ threats that lead to ‘runaway’ inclinations by a girl-child, culminating in unprecedented high secondary school dropout rates in marginalised rural communities such as Binga District, in Zimbabwe.

Focusing on a nine-year compulsory education cycle in two rural communities in North China, research conducted by Lui (2004) sought to find out whether basic education was a legal obligation or an individual choice. The study revealed that while at the primary level, nearly 100% enrolment and completion rates were achievable at the secondary level dropouts constituted a serious problem rendering the nine-year compulsory schooling an unfinished cycle (*ibid.*). Using the rational choice theory as a theoretical framework, 30 families of secondary school dropouts were interviewed, leading to the conclusion that the rural schooling landscape was underpinned by local people’s rational choices, rather than the compulsory education law. Consequently, due to a lack of educational law enforcement, the rural communities of China disregarded rural secondary schooling in direct contrast to the country’s statutory obligations. In the Zimbabwean context, the basic education cycle stretches from pre-school (Zero Grade) up to Form 4, stretching for a period of 12 years (Dokora, 2015). The Zimbabwe Education Act Chapter 25:04 deems basic education compulsory for all learners (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006). The study concedes that despite having compulsory laws or statutory instruments in place, the prevalence of unprecedented girl-child high secondary school dropout rates in marginalised rural communities of Zimbabwe retards the attainment of inclusive and equitable quality education.

Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) (2011) reports on studies conducted by the PASEC/CONFEMEN and University of Witwatersrand/SACMEQ research teams which focused on the quality of learning and female disadvantages in several French and English-speaking African countries whose findings have implications on secondary schools. Using a quantitative approach, data gathered from national evaluations highlighted that a girl-child faced disadvantages when compared to a boy-child as also collaborated by Kiragu (2012), UNESCO (2014b), Bethell (2016) and Warrington. Differences in average literacy and mathematics test scores became more gender-pronounced as children progressed through primary education. The study concluded that factors such as teacher absenteeism, large class sizes, not speaking the language of instruction at home, parents’ literacy levels and living in a rural area negatively impacted the academic success of a girl-child. It was unfortunate that these learning inequalities also surfaced through school extracurricular-related activities. Some of the teachers, mainly the unqualified ones, were failing to provide an appropriate conducive learning environment, compromising access to quality education for a girl-child. Thus, the study highlights the grounding



of disparities in accessing quality schooling that become more distinct at the secondary school level as cases of subjects to school dropout become more apparent. Among other issues, the study evokes a range of explanations and policies aimed at countering gender gaps that perpetuate the underperformance of a girl-child in many countries, including Zimbabwe an observation supported by Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango (2009).

Michelle Obama, in her then capacity as the First Lady of the United States of America (USA), travelled to Africa, particularly to Liberia and Morocco (Obama, 2016). Embarking on her 'We Will Rise' girl-child advancement project, the former First Lady captured a variety of issues that worked as 'push-out or throwaway' ingredients that included 'runaway' factors that finally saw a girl-child dropping out of school. Sub-Saharan Africa is described as a region known to have countries with the lowest female literacy rate and lowest gender parity index for enrolment in formal schooling (UNESCO, 2012; World Bank, 2012;). Financial hardships, long walking distances to get to the nearest school, risking physical abuse and kidnapping as the girl-child walked to school on a daily basis, inadequate and inappropriate bathrooms which pushed her out of school when having her menstrual cycle leading to her falling behind in class are captured as undeniable barriers that lead to a girl child's subsequent dropping out of school, (Nyamanhindi, 2013; Jewitt and Ryley, 2014; Tshering, 2014; Obama, 2016). Furthermore, during her visit to sub-Saharan Africa, Obama, noted that girl-child education was also about attitudes and beliefs to do with a girl-child being valued for her body more than her mind; a girl-child not being worthy of an education for her best chance in life was to be married off when barely a teenager at times and then having children. Particularly, in Morocco, as the girl-child reached puberty, the former First Lady noted that lack of resources combined with socio-cultural barriers such as child marriage and early motherhood led to high rates of school dropouts. Thus, deep-rooted socio-cultural norms are not likely to change rapidly across sub-Saharan Africa. Using Tanzania as an example, the United Nations (2009, p.209) reported;

Women in Tanzania, like women elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, are oriented towards motherhood. Traditionally a woman is expected to marry early and give birth to many children. Girls are socialised early in their lives into key roles as mothers, housekeepers and producers. A women's status is measured largely by her capacity to reproduce and maintain children. Young girls learn early in life to look after their siblings and to trade and farm like their mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmothers.

A girl-child faces intersecting reasons for dropping out of school ranging from "increased household responsibilities, family preference for educating sons when limited funds are available for school fees, the pressure to get married, premarital pregnancy and parental concerns about school safety (Sommer, 2010, p.523). Though Zimbabwe's high literacy rate is recognised internationally, there seem to be pockets of marginalised rural communities

where ills that bedevil the girl child's successful completion of secondary education are also in existence signifying shared concerns with the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

In trying to understand girls' absence from school, Mohanraj (2010) investigated why girls of school-going age in rural Madhya Pradesh, India, were not in school despite incentives and targeted interventions. The interview accounts of participants who included the out-of-school girls, parents of out-of-school girls, schoolteachers and administrators of the education department who operated at different levels, pointed out the ineffectiveness of the incentives provided by the education department to bring all girls into schools which were viewed as "not robust enough to act as encouragement" Mohanraj (2010: p.2). Affirmed by other researchers, conclusions reached indicated that the societal standing of girls and their apparent future roles as mothers and home-makers, the cultural marriage system, community traditional pressures and the perceived usefulness of the girl-child had detrimental consequences for girl-child education (Mohanraj, 2010; Rembe, Chabaya, Wadesango and Muhuro, 2011). The way teachers and the education administrators operated seemed to exacerbate the girl child's predicament. Thus, incentives and targeted interventions for the girl-child to take advantage of the offered school educational opportunities were undermined by the absence of contextualised targeted interventions and worsened by the insensitivity of the learning environments.

Universally, attaining secondary education is considered an empowering tool for girls and women. Regrettably, the study registers, with great concern, studies that reveal that going to a secondary school and being in school perpetuate huge risks that threaten a girl child's successful completion of secondary education. Coming back home, a study done in Zimbabwe revealed that "girls face sexual harassment and violence both from male students and teachers" (UNAIDS/WHO, 2004, p.13). Similar findings were reported in Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland and Zambia from other studies. In Binga District, some teachers have been accused of impregnating secondary-school-going girls in the communities where they work resulting in an unprecedentedly high percentage of school dropout rate in the district (Masara, 2016). Captured in a local newspaper, Ward 9 community, also known as Siansundu, was reported to have been up in arms with local teachers who had impregnated school-going-girl-children following the failure of senior education officials to make them accountable for their involvement in improper association with learners. Troubled, Chief Saba, a local community leader, is cited as having voiced his concerns and asserted

that community leaders were deeply concerned by the unbecoming behaviour of teachers in the secondary schools deployed in Binga District. In *The Chronicle* of the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2016, reporter Whinsley Masara captured Chief Saba alleging that:

Every year, we're about 30 school dropouts in each of our schools, which is very sad because it means we're still far from having female graduates in our wards. What's most saddening is that teachers are contributing to these dropouts. In many instances, we've taken the matter to our district education offices and police but the cases always die a natural death within the courts.

In the report, Siansundu Secondary School, which caters for learners from more than four ward communities, was mentioned as contributing to girl-child high dropout rate due to male teachers' failure to act in loco parentis and preying on vulnerable children.

For the study, defining this girl-child threatened with a high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District, Zimbabwe is key. Generally, when a girl-child enrolls for secondary school education she would be in the adolescence stage, a period of an identity crisis and also associated with heightened 'storm and stress' (de Beeck, 2009). Adolescence is a term constructed by Stanley Hall in 1904 to describe the period between childhood and adulthood (Chiweshe, 2012; UNICEF-Zambia, 2014). Michelle Obama defines adolescence as a period when a girl-child first experiences being the subject of cultural values and practices that define what it means to be a woman in one's society (Dews, 2014). Bringing more clarity, the United Nations Interagency Task Force on Adolescent Girls (UNITFAG) (2009) precisely states that adolescence is a period between the ages of 10 to 19 years. "As a transition towards adulthood, adolescence is very important as it shapes adulthood," (UNICEF- Zambia, 2014, p.15). Calder and Huda (2013, p.1) assert that adolescence is a critical period, "which profoundly influences girls' future potential". Key transitions from girlhood to womanhood, from primary to secondary education, from education to work and family life, add to the complexities of adolescence. More often, the complexities of key transitions have been observed to go wrong, "with high dropout rates from secondary school; early and forced marriage; exposure to violence, abuse and HIV infection; and high maternal mortality" (*ibid.*). Adolescence is, thus, a transition into new dominions of discrimination, vulnerability and risks as the girl-child transforms into adulthood (UNITFAG, 2009). Nevertheless, with appropriate educational support, the girl-child can open up new opportunities for communities and nations. How communities treat the adolescent girl child's issues determine not only her future, but also the future of her family, community and the

nation. Thus, the study recognises that girl-child secondary education takes place during this unescapable adolescence period which, potentially, contributes to a high secondary school dropout rate if significant measures are not put in place to curb her dropping out from school.

### **CONTEXTUALISING BINGA DISTRICT EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT**

Binga District, home to the marginalised Tonga Tribe, is one of 63 administrative educational districts located in 10 provinces of Zimbabwe (MoPSE, 2014). Geographically, Binga District is known to be inaccessible due to poor road networks, (ZESN, 2009; Basilwizi Trust Semi-Annual Report, 2011; Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011b; Langa, 2014). Bridges get washed away during rainy seasons, hence vehicles sometimes cross flooded rivers (Machakaire, 2012). Historically, the Tonga people used to live along the Zambezi River with their livelihoods depending mainly on fishing and called themselves “People of the Great River” due to their domination along the Zambezi valley before they were relocated away from the river in the 1950s, paving way for the construction of the Kariba Dam (Basilwizi, 2015, p.1). Langa (2014), in one of his reports, alleges that Binga District ranks least on the Zimbabwe development index, notwithstanding its vast natural resources that hold great tourism potential. The district has unexploited natural resources and is dominated by the most impoverished rural communities in Zimbabwe (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011a; 2011b). Profiling the two constituencies, Binga North and South, the Parliament of Zimbabwe Research Department portrays the whole of Binga District as an area with its share of problems that impinge directly on girl child’s access to quality secondary education. The Member of Parliament for Binga North Constituency, Honourable Prince Sibanda was concerned that, generally, what used to happen before independence was still happening after independence. “We do not have a single high school that offers science subjects in the whole of the constituency and that automatically limits Binga North students in terms of career choices” he alleged (Langa, 2014, p.5). Furthermore, through its Research Department, the Zimbabwe body of legislators, concluded that the number of secondary schools in the whole of Binga District fell “far below the number of primary schools” (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011a, p.6). Also painting a dire educational environment of Binga District, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) (2009, p.219) concedes that “infrastructure is poor, with very few schools and poor roads”. Thus, the Binga District operating environment reveals a grim picture that demands the study to unpack issues leading to a girl-child high secondary school dropout rate.

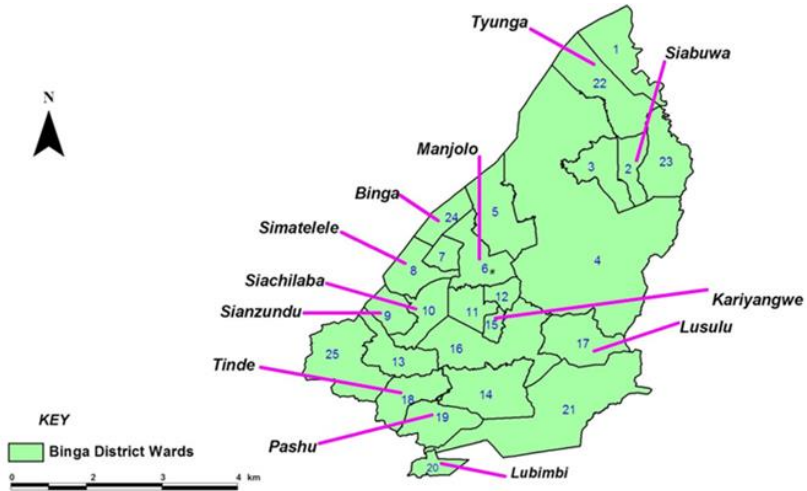
#### THE GENERAL PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN BINGA DISTRICT

Binga District has the highest population of 139 092, made up of 75 356 females and 63 736 males, compared to the other six Matabeleland North Province education administrative districts (ZIMSTAT, 2012). In its 15 wards for Binga North and 10 for Binga South Constituencies, charged with the responsibility of influencing pertinent political decisions with far-reaching bearing on girl child's retention in a secondary school, disenfranchised "women outnumber men" (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011b, p.3). Women in the district are known for not participating in local governance, hence, are described as "not yet empowered" (*ibid.*, p.12). There had never been a female councillor in any of its 25 wards before the 2013 national harmonised election (ZESN, 2013). Social exclusion dating back to colonial days, seems to have persisted to the post-colonial era preventing women in Binga District from fully participating in the educational, economic, social and political life of Tonga communities in the district as confirmed by Parliament of Zimbabwe (2011b).

#### SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN BINGA DISTRICT

It is most prudent to briefly enlighten readers on the existence of primary schools that feed learners into secondary schools in Binga District. Putting 2012 into perspective, *Binga District's 2012 Annual Report* reports that Binga District had a total of 57 registered and 49 satellite primary schools, making a total of 106 primary schools servicing the whole of Binga District (MoESAC, 2012a). The unregistered 49 satellite primary schools were established to mitigate the long walking distances by primary learners. With great concern, the study registers the non-existence of secondary schools during the colonial period for Binga District until 1983 when the first two were established (Binga and Kariangwe) heralding the commencement of secondary education in the marginalised rural district.

Whilst pointing to serious marginalisation of Binga District, an unfavourable protracted and staggered establishment of secondary schools commenced with the founding of Binga and Kariangwe in 1983. According to the Binga Rural District Council files, between 1983 and 2001, a total of only 10 secondary schools had been officially established.. The number remained stagnant until mid-2015, when two more schools were added, Simatelele and Siachilaba. Captured below is the Binga District map of ward locations of registered secondary schools by mid-2015.



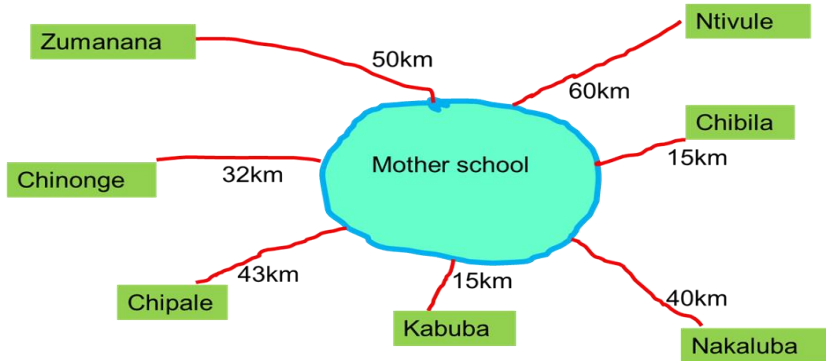
Compiled by Chidawanyika S. Zimstat Cartographer 2015 for Eurita Nyamanhare's PhD Research Study  
**Figure 1:** Binga District Registered Secondary Schools by September 2015

Also, by mid-2015, the 27 satellite secondary schools had more than doubled the registered secondary schools. Furthermore, in line with government policy, satellite establishments are not recognised as ‘schools’ by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE). According to the *Zimbabwe Education Act Chapter 25:04* Part I Section 2, a ‘school’ “means an institution ... recognised by the Ministry, which provides school education” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006b, p.619). Thus, all the 27-satellite secondary ‘schools’ in Binga District fell under the jurisdiction of particular mega schools and though named, did not appear in the MoPSE record of schools in 2015, a common practice throughout Zimbabwe. It is, also, important to note that since satellite secondary schools are unregistered with the Government of Zimbabwe, they are undoubtedly prone to remote administration by substantive heads and deputy deads stationed at ‘mother’ schools. The officially registered secondary schools in Binga District have the responsibility of running the affairs of unregistered secondary schools as their annexes. Distribution is not evenly done for their administration is determined by their proximity to registered secondary schools as can be appreciated in the Table 1 showing the situation that prevailed in September 2015.

**Table 1:** Registered secondary schools and the number of annexes attached to them by 2015 (*Documents from PED's Office and field notes*)

Lusulu	Manjolo	Pashu	Siansundu	Siabuwa	Kariangwe	Tyunga	Lubimbi	Tinde
7	4	4	3	3	2	2	1	1

An illustration of the biggest secondary school spreading its administrative responsibility is captured in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** An illustration of a registered secondary school and its annexes. (*Construction based on documents and field notes gathered in 2015*)

The establishment and running of satellite secondary schools in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District signify interconnected ‘pushout/throwaway’ excruciating impediments, consequently leading to a girl-child high secondary school dropout rate.

#### STAFFING AND PERFORMANCE OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BINGA DISTRICT

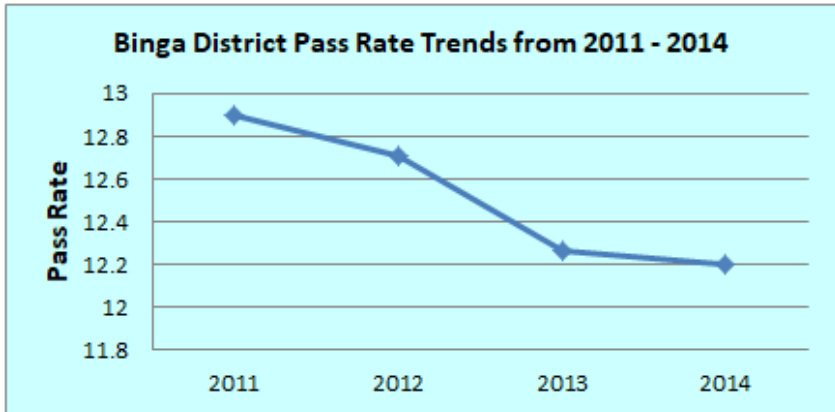
Binga District is known to have the highest number of satellite secondary schools, the highest number of unqualified teachers, the highest percentage of teacher turnover and holding the lowest pass rate among the seven Matabeleland North Province educational districts (MoPSE, 2014). Vacant teaching posts in both primary and secondary schools came up to 71.6% of the total teacher establishment during the second term of 2012. Rightly so, Binga District Education Officer then, bemoaned, “this is quite disturbing since service delivery is compromised by the big number of untrained teachers’ (MoESAC, 2012a, p.14). Table 2 depicts 2012 secondary school teacher profiling, as captured in the *Binga District Annual Report 2012* which is considered historically significant in the study for it has a bearing on the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District today.

**Table 2:** Secondary teachers by qualifications and gender in 2012. (*Binga District Annual Report, MoESAC, 2012a:13*)

Qualifications of Teachers	Males	Females
Master of Education Degree	1	1
Certificated University Graduate	7	3
Uncertificated University Graduate	6	3
Certificated Diploma Holders	125	38
T3/T4/PtI/Pth	1	0
A' Level Temporary Teachers	170	50
O' Level Temporary Teachers	11	5
Relief Teachers	7	2
<b>Total Trained and Temporary Teachers</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>102</b>

Universally, the quality of teachers manning secondary schools at any given time impacts either positively or negatively on keeping a girl-child in school and her future socio-economic prospects. Regarding the foregoing, it is clear that a girl-child in Binga District faces serious secondary school dropout threats impinging on her educational advancement. Consequently, the study is calling for intervention measures informed by empirical evidence. Quality secondary education seemed elusive, with the girl-child on the receiving end. The above 2012 teacher profiles remained partly responsible for the generally bad state of 2011 to 2014 Ordinary Level ZIMSEC attainment for Binga District captured in the Figure 3. The graphic picture presents trends that, undoubtedly, destroy learners' transitional prospects, particularly the girl-child, whose pass rate is fixed at the bottom of the ladder (MoPSE, 2015).





**Figure 3:** Binga District Ordinary Level Pass Rate Trends 2011 to 2014. (*Binga District Education Office Reports 2012 to 2015*)

As portrayed in Figure 3, the generally unwarranted trend seemed to persist without any envisaged hope for the future if drastic solutions to turn around the prevailing situation were not mooted. Justifiably, this state of affairs demanded evidence-based findings that would lead to action-driven policies to work as tools to reverse negative secondary education trends that include the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate currently prevailing in Binga District.

#### THE TONGA LANGUAGE QUESTION IN BINGA DISTRICT SCHOOLS

The *NewsDay* of 8 September 2014 carries an article that claimed that successive governments in Zimbabwe neglected quality educational development in Binga District which led to the district being “marginalised for a very long time with pupils being forced to learn other languages while neglecting their native Tonga” (*NewsDay*, Muponde, September, 2014: p.3). Thus, rebellious tendencies captured through print media carried fiery headlines such as, “Binga bans the teaching of Ndebele” (*ibid.*). ChiTonga was first examined only at the Grade Seven Level in October 2011, as a curriculum development that reflects the power struggles which characterise all societies. Following this development, Pinos Buligwamanu, a member of the Tonga Language and Cultural Committee remarked, “Teaching of Tonga language and getting it examined at Grade Seven is like a dream come true for us the Tonga people after a long struggle that dates back to 1976 when the effort to get Tonga language taught in school began” (ActionAid, 2012). Muponde (*ibid.*) confirms that a major milestone was indeed achieved in 2011 “when Tonga was officially tested in the Grade 7 examinations for the first time”. Further on, Tonga language development registered a landmark claim to its constitutional right in September 2014, when a full council

meeting, which was dominated by Tonga-speaking members, banned the teaching of Ndebele in all primary schools in Binga District, (*ibid.*). This 2014 drastic action interrogates the impact of the education system among marginalised ethnic community groups, particularly on the observed girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District. Undoubtedly, having ChiTonga Secondary School Syllabus in place by 2012, restored the cultural rights, pride and dignity of the Tonga communities as equal citizens of Zimbabwe as enshrined in the 2013 Zimbabwe Constitution.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative research approach underpinned by a naturalistic approach was adopted to investigate secondary school ‘push-out/throwaway’ dropout threats that led to unprecedented girl-child ‘runaway’ inclinations that could only be understood by sharing participants’ frames of reference. To propose measures that could curb the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District, an interpretive investigation that typically involved a “sustained and intensive experience with participants,” (Creswell 2014, p.187), got underway. Thus, the study recognises the importance of the primacy of subjective consciousness which is active and meaning-bestowing and dependent on key informants’ lived experiences centred on the girl-child secondary school high dropout rate within the marginalised rural communities of Binga District.

Data were typically collected in the most densely populated ward communities of Binga District (Wards 14, 17 and 21) where three secondary schools, used as study sites, were located. At each of the three study sites, pseudonyms were attached to focus group discussion (FGD) participants, composed of eight school-going girl-children who included head girls, prefects and class monitors, drawn from Form 1 to Form 4 (coded FGDG1-3) and eight senior secondary school teachers of equal gender (coded FGDT1-3). Among the key informants, who also shared their views and opinions regarding girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District, were school administrators and representatives of responsible authorities (coded SSEA1-6); Binga District local leaders who included two Chiefs, two Members of Parliament and three ward councillors (coded LL1-7); and representatives of civil society (coded SC1-4).

Semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions were triangulated to bring forth the trustworthiness of the findings. Supported by Silverman (2010, p.133), the triangulated data from different participants gave a “true” state of affairs regarding girl-child education in Binga District. By examining where different data intersected, a full picture was cumulatively drawn, bringing to the fore, the environment under which a

girl-child recorded a high secondary school dropout rate in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District, Zimbabwe.

### EVIDENCE FROM THE GROUND

A general picture of over-aged girl children in the secondary schools of the marginalised rural communities of Binga District, spreading across all forms, was painted. Contrary to the MoPSE (2014) prescribed secondary-school-going age range of 13 to 16 for Forms 1 to 4, respectively, Table 3 captures a depiction of age disparities that existed in Binga District as represented by the 24 secondary-school-going girl children who shared their views and opinions regarding girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District in 2015.

**Table 3:** Age of girls who participated in FGDs at three study sites (*24 girl-children participants in focus group discussions, September 2015*)

Age Range →	13 yrs.	14 yrs.	15 yrs.	16 yrs.	17 yrs.	Above 17 yrs.
Level						
Form 1	0	3	2	1		
Form 2	0	1	4	1		
Form 3	0	0	3	1	1	1
Form 4	0	0	0	4	1	1
TOTAL	0	4	9	7	2	2

Age analysis of the 24 girl-children study participants reveals that only eight were appropriately placed according to the MoPSE’s age prescription and 16 could be described as over-aged for their levels. Thus, in Binga District, it was not a misnomer to find a 16-year-old girl-child in Form 1. During an interview with CS4 on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, it was indicated that at times girls as old as 22 years would be in Form 4 at some of the secondary schools in Binga District. Consequently, the over-age would have commenced at the primary school level. A girl-child was reported to be facing intersected dropout threats within the secondary schools of Binga District, some of which could have been exacerbated by being over-aged.

Excerpts captured from individual interviews with civil society representatives coded (coded CSI-4), local leaders (coded LL1-7), secondary school education administrators (code SSEA1-6) as well as from focus group discussions with girl children themselves (coded FGDG1-3) and senior teachers (coded FGDT1-3) reveal multifaceted dropout threats faced by a girl-child in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District. Transitioning to secondary school after Grade 7 marks a girl child’s high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District as she is told “You have finished school”. Daring, long walking distances to get to the nearest school;

age vulnerability compounded by bad practices; intersecting poverty-related challenges; child-pregnancy and/or marriage-induced threats, among other intersecting ‘push-out/throwaway’ ills compounded by ‘runaway’ inclinations, were noted to exacerbate girl-child high secondary dropout rate in Binga District. As a means of presenting a condensed mass of “given” data that revealed circumstances leading to girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District, a pictorial “visual format” display, is used to facilitate easy communication of findings, as suggested by (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, pp. 60;108). Thus, narrative descriptions, capturing participants’ categorised excerpts present persuasive evidence that justifies the crafting of measures that could curb girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District and beyond.

Pictorial visual display of findings on girl-child high secondary school dropout rate in Binga District

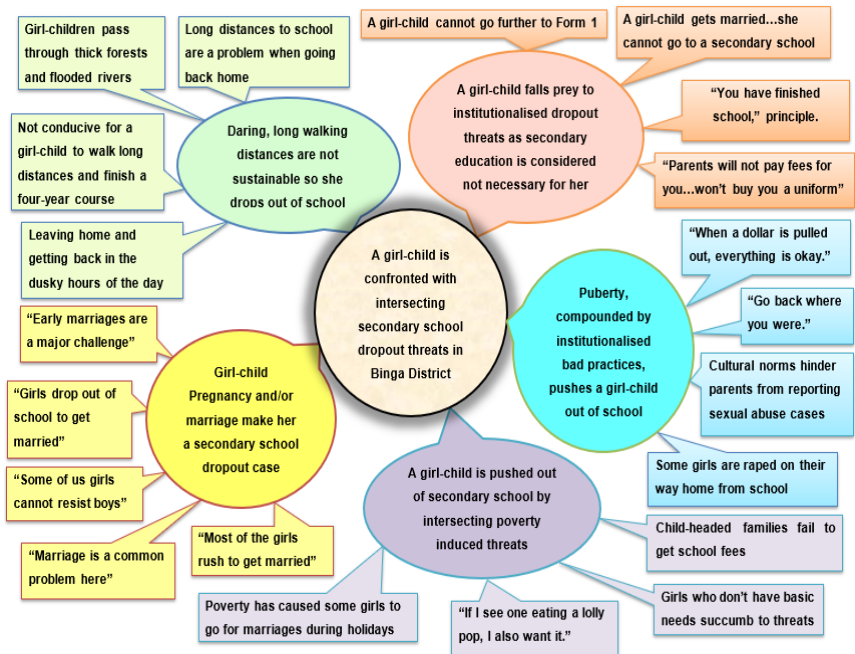


Figure 4: School is finished at the Grade Seven level

*LL1: THERE ARE QUITE A SEVERAL DROPOUTS WHO WILL JUST GO UP TO GRADE 7. THEY CANNOT GO FURTHER TO FORM 1.*

FGDG2: Some parents hold a principle that when a girl-child finishes Grade 7 she will not go for secondary education. They say, “You have finished school.” If you force your way to proceed to secondary, they will not support you financially.

*FGDG1: SOME PARENTS SAY A GIRL-CHILD GETS MARRIED AND IN THAT CASE, SHE CANNOT GO FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION.*

FGDG2 No: Such parents will not pay school fees for you and most of the time you will be sent back home to get the fees. No books for you. They won't buy you even a uniform (*others say “Yes” in agreement*). They say, “What you are doing is useless. It's not necessary” (*group laughs*).

LL7: Here in Binga, communities still have the belief that a girl-child should not go further with her education. Also, generally, the girl-child tends to end her education at the Grade 7 level, find a suitor, get married and settle down as a housewife at a young age. So, it's like if you go to our district hospital there, I think you will find all the data that indicates that a girl-child at the age of 13 years is giving birth to a child. It, therefore, means that girls still have a big disadvantage. It's all suffering. There is nothing. What will a girl-child wait for whilst at home after Grade 7 except to get married? These are the challenges faced by girl-children.

CS3: There are also issues of poverty levels of the family and some practices within the communities that may or may not promote girl-child education as general culture in some communities

#### DARING AND LONG JOURNEYS TO GET TO THE NEAREST SECONDARY SCHOOL

CS1: The long distance of about 20km that our children walk daily is also a threat, they pass through thick bushes and flooded rivers. This increases the vulnerability of the child because she has to wake up very early, maybe at 4 am, walk in the early hours of the morning to go to school and when they dismiss, she walks the same distance and reaches home when it is dark. Such situations are not safe for girl-children.

FGDG2: several girls walk together passing through the thick forest on their way to school to be safe.

FGDT1: I found out that form 2 girls who got married was a result of the narrow bushy pathways like Gwangwaliba which feed Lusulu, which become conducive to girl-child sexual abuse on the way. Some learners were found hiding in the bush. I think that it is dangerous for a girl-child to travel on such paths alone.

FGDG3 six children in ward 14 confessed that they knew some girls who had been raped on their way home from school.

LL1: The effects of long distance are dropout, level of understanding and participation in class is reduced since they wake up around 4 am, to meet the 7 am commencement of lessons. I have discovered that in my community, 50% of the children who walk very long distances to school don't finish the four-year course. Thus, distance has become the major factor of school dropouts.

LL6: It's a bit difficult for a girl-child to walk long distances pursuing secondary education due to rape cases thus, there are fewer girls than boys that are going to school in some areas.

FGDT3: Some girls are walking to school from areas which are 15km away. (FGDT3 Mr Johnson gives examples of Malubale, Siampora and Singwazi that range from 13 to 15 kilometres away, as areas where some of the girls wake up as early as 3 am or 4 am to get to the nearest secondary school on time).

#### CHILD PREGNANCY AND/OR MARRIAGE INDUCED SCHOOL-DROPOUT THREATS

LL5: Early marriages are a major challenge as shown by records of the whole district that, in a term, twenty or thirty girls drop out of school because of early marriages, pregnancy and rape cases.

LL1: Statistics from Kariangwe School show that dropouts for 2014 and 2015, had 13 girls dropping out because of pregnancies, of which five of them were below the age of 15 and nine girls who got married, of which two are below the age of 15, respectively.

FGDT3: Some parents send their children to grow and when they find some boys to marry, they leave school. Girls' first preference is marriage and to be able to write. (*Members laugh and all agree with Ms Shoko*).

FGDG2: Marriage is a common problem here and we have dropouts in all forms and the process is on-going due to pregnancies (*Reflecting on her Form level*). There are some girls we know who have come back this term but are pregnant and we know that in the days to come they will drop out of school, (*Group laughs*). (*In agreement that at every Form level, girls were dropping out due to falling pregnant or getting married in 2015, two girls in Form 1, two in Form 2, three Form 3 and two Form 4*).

FGDG1: Reason many girls are dropping out of school before Form 4 is marriage.

FGDG2: Most of the girls rush to get married and fall pregnant before finishing school.

SSEA6: Despite positive attitude towards education, girls believe in getting married whilst they are still young as indicated by the dropout rates. To them marriage is very important, rather than education.

FGDT1: Sure, girls dropout of school to get married. I suggest they remain in school to get older then get married latter

LL2: A girl-child is affected by walking long distances to school even if she thinks of going to a boarding school the parents cannot afford to pay fees, she eventually drops out. Financial constrains have also caused some of the girls to miss school by a year and probably write the following year.

SSEA4: Unfortunately, girl-children succumb to pressures that surround them which result in early marriage.

#### INTERSECTING POVERTY-RELATED DROPOUT THREATS

FGDG3: Parents will not have fees for a girl-child and there would be a shortage of books. So, there will be no need to come to school and one thing left would be to get married.

FGDG3: Poverty has caused some girls to get married during school holidays. Most of the girls are facing early marriages at any level (*They all laugh*).

AMIGA: Young mothers who are illiterate do not know how to look after their girl-child. She would rather encourage the girl-child to drop out of school and assist her to look for food.

LL4: Girls who don't have basic needs, succumb to threats very easily and eventually fail to complete their secondary education. So, it really depends on how well looked after they are and secondly, those that are from strong parent are resilient. But those that are orphans and perhaps looked after by stepmothers and stepfather, are those susceptible to threats. The majority are struggling; they are scrounging to make ends meet.

FGDT1: Some are coming from child-headed families and they dropout of school because they would have failed to get school fees.

#### PUBERTY: AGE OF VULNERABILITY COMPOUNDED BY INSTITUTIONALISED BAD PRACTICES

FGDG3: Some of us girls cannot resist boys when we see them. Many girls seek boys' attention by enticing them so that they can come, (*Froup laughs. She goes on to share how poverty leads to girl-child vulnerability at puberty*). You know, girls have a problem. If I see someone eating a lolly pop,

I also want it, yet my parents can't afford that. *(The researcher inquired about the price of a lolly pop and all girls replied, "One Rand" laughing).*

FGDG3: I cut short my uniform and it will be like this *(she demonstrates)*, then I cut it to become so short to attract boys. Again, some girls are so weak that they cannot even say "No" when they are proposed to by boys *(group laughs)*. If the boy says let's have sex, they can't say "No". Some don't say "Yes" but will be keeping quiet and shy as the boy does what he wants *(in agreement, they all laugh)*. Many of the girls who are even at this school may not come back here in January next year *(2016)*, *(they all laugh)* especially after the *(2015)* December holidays. December is a problem month. Some would be overjoyed then get pregnant and so it will not be possible to come back *(Yeolyser says this amid laughter by all)*.

CS4: Girl children fall pregnant and drop out of school and get married due to misbehaviour, mostly those at puberty, 14, or 15-year-olds even though parents do not encourage their children to get married.

FGDG3: There is also child abuse at home *(said with a very muted voice)*.

FGDG3 Yolanda *(Further probing on "child abuse at home: Your parents tell you that when the sun sets you must be home, then you go and meet your boyfriend and come back home late, they will say, "Go back where you were," (all girls laugh). (All agreed that such things were happening. The girl-child would then reluctantly go to the boy's home resulting in her dropping out of school)*.

FGDG3: *(Highlighting girl-child vulnerability)* Girls are fond of money. *(The researcher inquired if this involved boys in the school or the villages or the teachers and the girls responded by saying "All of them". Further probing revealed that at this site some male teachers were sleeping around with schoolgirls and some culprits were known to the girls in FGDG3. Amongst the teaching staff, as of 15 September 2015, FGDG3 reported that some teachers were having love affairs with some girls at the school)*.

SSEA2: Mostly the girl child does not know what will be happening since by the end of the day you realise that the girl may not be married to the person she may be in love with. It's someone who has his wife. That's where the danger is. She may be in love with a schoolmate who has nothing at all.

LL3: The major threats include culture which says that a girl-child can get married at 16 'akura' (she is old enough). Therefore, there is entirely nothing in our culture that stops a girl who sees herself as having 'some breasts playing around' saying, "Now I want to get married." So, in the context of that culture, it then reduces the priority of excellent performance



in school. It becomes secondary for her top priority become, “Well I can establish myself a home.”

FGDT2: The problem here is caused by school leavers and this place is dominated by those illegal border jumpers who go to South Africa. So, they lure those girls giving them goodies, buying them some biscuits, some ‘*stumbos*’ (*round sweets on a stick*). Now, they don’t concentrate on schoolwork, instead, they go and get married or fall pregnant.

CS4: Cultural norms hinder the parents from reporting sexually abusive cases. The parents look at the consequences of reporting such cases thinking, “If I report to the police and the person responsible for the pregnancy gets arrested, tomorrow what will happen to my daughter? She won’t find anyone to marry her in future,” and so the case is not reported.

## DISCUSSION

Dropping out of school before finishing secondary education is considered a serious threat to girl-child secondary education attainment in the study. Thus, for a girl-child, successful completion of secondary education is one of the measures of quality learning. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, educationists, naturally, get concerned when a girl child’s school’s successful completion is threatened. Nonetheless, dropping out of secondary school tends to be institutionalised within particular areas, associated with a particular gender, affecting a particular age and more apparent at particular institutions of learning. Findings presented in the study indicate that the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate is a common feature in Binga District due to intersecting barriers. For a girl-child, her transitioning to secondary school is riddled by an underlying commonly shared principle, “You have finished school,” and so “when a girl-child finishes Grade 7, she will not go for secondary education...If you force your way to proceed to secondary school, they will not support you financially,” (FGDG2 Faith). Whilst perpetuating gender inequalities, inherently, the “You have finished school” stance to a girl-child as opposed to a boy-child, subsequently, triggers a girl-child high secondary school dropout. Thus, as also observed by renowned authorities, (FAWE, 2011; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012; UNESCO, 2014b; Bethell, 2016), it is apparent that in marginalised rural communities, such as Binga District, girl-child education is undervalued. Consequently, quality learning by a girl-child becomes very remote under circumstances described by FGDG2 Faith. Furthermore, FGDG2 Sihle gives an account of ‘institutionalised’ girl-child dropout lived experiences.

In Form 1, we were quite many, but come Form 4 examination registration time, we were only a handful. Most of the girls dropped out to the extent that less than half the original number remains. Whilst in Form 1 they dropped out, in Form 2 they dropped out, in Form 3 they kept on dropping out and now in Form 4, they are still dropping out. Term after term girls drop out; year after year they drop

out. This year (2015) first term girls dropped out, in the second term they dropped out and this term some of them have already dropped out.

Concerns surrounding girl-child secondary school dropout trends have also been highlighted by various authorities (Calder & Huda, 2013; Nyamanhindi, 2013; Masara, 2016; Obama, 2016). Their sentiments affirm the existence of an unacceptable practice that denies a girl-child successful completion of secondary education in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District.

On a continuum with two extreme ends, findings indicated that girl-child pregnancies and/or marriages could be equated to an unprecedented girl-child high secondary school dropout predisposition. Sentiments such as "...early marriages are a major challenge. We have got a record of the whole district. Maybe in a term, 20 or 30 girls drop out of school because of early marriages, pregnancy..." (LL5) and "Many girls here drop out of school to get married before finishing Form 4." (FGDG1 Yvonne), portray an institutionalised cultural practice that undermines international bodies' commitment to a contemporary broader vision of basic education for everyone (World Bank, 2012; UNESCO, 2014a; UNDP, 2015; UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UNICEF, 2015). It is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century misnomer to deny a girl-child her fundamental right to quality education by preferring girl-child marriage to education, a retrogressive disempowering cultural practice that must be curbed (Mohanraj, 2010; Rembe *et al.*, 2011; Calder & Huda, 2013; Obama, 2016).

The sparsity of secondary schools in Binga District alludes to the fact that in some rural communities, secondary schools are non-existent (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011a; 2011b; ZESN, 2009). Even with the establishment of satellite secondary schools that more than doubled the number of registered ones in 2015, unsustainable daily daring and long walking distances to access the nearest secondary schools have remained a major threat that 'push-out or throwaway' a girl-child out of school in the marginalised rural communities of Binga District. LL1 shares intersecting impediments that lead to girl-child discontinuing secondary school education, among other predicaments:

Distance does not only affect children by their dropping out, it also compromises their level of understanding and participation in class because some of these children wake up around 4 am, walking to meet the 7 am school time. Two hours of running, not walking, so, what do you expect the girl-child to do? So, distance doesn't only bring or increase dropouts, but it even compromises the level of class participation. From what I have seen from schools that are in my community, most children that walk very long distances to school don't finish the four-year course. Maybe 50% would be complete. So, I think distance becomes a very big factor that affects girl-children.

Submissions made by various authorities also point to daring, long walking distances that intersect with other obstacles leading to girl-child high secondary school dropout rate, particularly in marginalised rural communities (Jewitt and Ryley, Nyamanhindi, 2013; 2014; Obama, 2016; Tshering, 2014). A girl child's vulnerability is at its peak at puberty as she is perceived as a 'ripe woman' ready for marriage. Culturally, girl-children get married with the blessing of their parents and guardians and, at times, some community leaders request to preside over such marriages. Nonetheless, such practices are tantamount to institutionalised girl-child sexual abuse which is made difficult to detect as it happens under the cover of acceptable cultural practices and is considered an 'achievement' as alluded to by LL3 who says:

The major threats include culture which says that a girl-child can get married at 16 "akura" (she is ripe). Therefore, there is entirely nothing in our culture that stops a girl who sees herself as having 'some breasts playing around' saying, "Now I want to get married." So, in the context of that culture, it then reduces the priority of excellent performance in school. It becomes secondary for her top priority become, "Well I can establish myself a home."

Getting married "whilst they are still young" (SSEA6) triggers the high dropout rates by girl child's preference for marriage to education, a culturally acceptable phenomenon. Girl-child bride is a harmful practice perpetuated by an immature girl-child who seems blinded by her conscience and behaviour. On the other hand, parents and guardians take advantage of the girl child's vulnerability by marrying her off to enjoy the dowry. Highlighting cultural complexities that make an adolescent girl-child vulnerable, FGDG3 Yeolysyer dramatises how it happens.

I cut short my uniform and it will be like this, (she demonstrates) then I cut it to become so short to attract boys. Again, some girls are so weak that they cannot even say "No", when they are proposed to by boys. If the boy says let's have sex they can't say "No." Some don't say "Yes," but will be keeping quiet and shy as the boy does what he wants (in agreement they all laugh). Many of the girls who are even at this school may not come back here in January next year (2016), especially after the (2015) December holidays. December is a problem month. Some would be overjoyed then get pregnant and so it will not be possible to come back.

Getting married is a deep-rooted culturally acceptable achievement for a girl-child and her family (Mohanraj, 2010; Rembe *et al.*, 2011; Calder & Huda, 2013; Obama, 2016;). SSEA6 insinuates that most girl-children in Binga District "believe in getting married whilst they are still young. If you look at the drop-out rates that we are having, you can tell that to them what is very important is marriage, rather than education".

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Successful completion of secondary education is a fundamental empowering tool that shields girls and women from self-depreciation as it forms the transitional bridge to higher transitional prospects endowed with socio-

economic gains. Regrettably, an unprecedented girl-child high dropout rate plays havoc with the successful completion of secondary education in marginalised rural communities, rendering girl child's access to quality secondary education very remote despite the high ranking of Zimbabwe's literacy rate. Marginalised rural communities could be serving as the epitome of a deep-rooted retrogressive and disempowering culture of girl-child high secondary school dropout rate. Complex intersecting obstacles entangle a school-going girl-child until she unceremoniously drops out of secondary school, particularly in marginalised rural communities such as Binga District.

Measures that could be used to curb challenges that undermine the girl child's successful completion of secondary education in marginalised rural communities such as Binga District demand individual girl-child personal will, all-inclusive civil society unreserved participation, community members cultural transformation and all stakeholders, including the Government of Zimbabwe.

Local leadership, composed of highly honoured community leaders who include Chiefs, Members of Parliament and Ward Councillors, the major task is to work in collaboration to change retrogressive social norms and values of communities to curb the girl-child high secondary school dropout rate within their communities. The major thrust for local leadership should be to eliminate negative cultural practices such as girl-child marriages by ensuring that perpetrators are exposed and brought to the book.

Whilst parents should be willing and committed to sending their girl-child to school by providing school fees and adequate learning materials, a girl-child needs to show commitment and determination no matter her circumstances. Life is not easy and does not spare a girl-child for who she is. She has got to take up the challenge and toughen up to make it in life. A girl-child needs to accept the environment in which she finds herself so that she navigates the terrain with caution to achieve whatever she wants to achieve. It is no longer a time for self-pity in this 21<sup>st</sup> century when girl-child support is abundantly available in various forms and from various directions.

The concept of bringing schools to communities by the Government of Zimbabwe remains a priority but is guided by research-based evidence of the neediest areas. Satellite secondary schools to operate within a regulated timeframe whilst their upgrading, pending their formal registration, is closely monitored by the responsible authorities in partnership with appropriate government institutions.

MAKE SURE THAT IN-TEXT CITATION APPEAR HERE IN THE REFERENCES LIST AND VICE VERSA. FOR STYLE REFER TO GUIDELINES OR IN THIS ISSUE SEE ARTICLES BY Chingwanana or Mapuranga *et al.*

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