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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A "Girl" or a "Child"? Examining the "Rights-Based" Approach to Child Marriage in Malawi Through an African Feminist Lens

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a persistent human rights concern in Malawi, where nearly half of girls marry before age 18 despite ongoing legal reforms. This article analyzes the rights-based frameworks that shape national and international responses, focusing on the tensions between child-centered approaches rooted in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and women-centered approaches grounded in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Drawing on qualitative data, the study demonstrates how these frameworks, while valuable, often create fragmented strategies that overlook the cultural beliefs and practices such as poverty-driven exchanges, initiation rites, and families falsifying girls' ages that sustain child marriage. To address these gaps, the article introduces an African feminist lens, which emphasizes cultural embeddedness, collective rights, and community well-being as central to protecting children and advancing gender justice. This perspective highlights the limitations of universal rights-based frameworks that marginalize cultural context and reveal opportunities for culturally grounded, community-driven approaches to ending child marriage. Findings also draw attention to the limited evaluation of Malawi's earlier National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2018–2023) and underscore the importance of assessing the newly launched 2024–2030 strategy, which sets ambitious goals of reducing prevalence from 37.7% to 20% by 2030. The article concludes by arguing that integrating African feminist perspectives into social work policy practice can strengthen collaboration, bridge fragmented frameworks, and promote more effective, culturally responsive strategies to end child marriage in Malawi.

Keywords Child marriage · African feminism · Social work policy · Human rights frameworks · Malawi

The question "Who is a child?" elicits diverse responses depending on context. While many countries adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition of anyone under 18, definitions often vary with culture, social norms, religion, and tradition (Sayi & Sibanda, 2018). In many African settings, for example, puberty or rites of passage are seen as the transition to adulthood, even when these occur as early as age eight (Sifuna et al., 2016).

Violence targeting girls is widespread across continents, social classes, governments, and religions (Rafferty, 2013). Being born female exposes many girls to lifelong disadvantages associated with discrimination and violence, particularly during the transition to adulthood (Diamond-Smith et al., 2008). Child marriage has long been one of the most pervasive forms of violence against girls (Rafferty, 2013), yet the lack of consensus on how to define "child" continues to hinder global efforts to eliminate the practice. In Malawi, where this study is situated, child marriage remains both prevalent and culturally embedded: an estimated 38% of women aged 20–24 were married before 18, compared

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with 7% of men, with higher rates in rural areas (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2005). Key drivers include poverty, initiation rites and entrenched social norms, adolescent pregnancy, weak enforcement of protective laws, and age falsification to evade legal restrictions (Kidman et al., 2024; Psaki et al., 2021). Despite legal reforms establishing 18 as the minimum age of marriage through the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act (2015) and a 2017 constitutional amendment, the practice persists due to these structural and cultural factors and uneven enforcement (Government of Malawi et al., 2024; Juma et al., 2017; Kidman et al., 2024).

Within social work discourse, research on girls has too often been subsumed under work on women, overlooking how gender and age intersect to shape girls' experiences (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2015). Since the early 1980s, feminist scholarship has increasingly recognized girls as a distinct focus of study, separate from women and boys (Croll, 2006; Krumer-Nevo et al., 2015). Scholars and activists have highlighted how age, race, ethnicity, class, ability, faith, and gender intersect to marginalize girls and intensify vulnerability (Di Cesare, 2014; Kearney, 2009). Although fields such as sociology, education, and psychology have engaged in this work (Kearney, 2009), social work scholarship remains limited. Given the profession's commitment to equity, social work must address girls' specific challenges to advance gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Pandey, 2017).

Accordingly, this study examines the frameworks, theories, and lenses that stakeholders in Malawi use to implement interventions to end child marriage, with particular attention to the challenges of multisectoral collaboration. It explores rights-based approaches through an African feminist lens, focusing on how child marriage positions girls at the margins of gender, age, and culture. Recognition of women's and girls' rights remains an evolving global process. This article argues for joint analysis of child and women's rights frameworks to show how age and gender intersect to marginalize girls, and how these frameworks can be strengthened by incorporating cultural and collective dimensions. Building on evidence that the "right not to witness violence" remains unrealized for many girls (Rafferty, 2013), the paper situates child marriage within both human rights and African feminist thought, contributing to social work's role in countering gender bias and adult dominance in policy and implementation.

Child Marriage Overview

Defined by UNICEF (2015) as a formal marriage or informal union before age 18, child marriage is recognized in international human rights accords as a discriminatory global practice that violates children's rights to health, education, and safety and carries severe, lifelong risks of poverty and violence for girls and their children (Adedokun et al., 2017; Arthur et al., 2018; Sekine & Hodgkin, 2017). Despite gendered differences in risks and consequences, child marriage violates the rights of all children (Gastón et al., 2019). However, child marriage is less common among boys and does not entail the health risks from early pregnancy and childbirth borne by girls (Godha et al., 2013; Raj et al., 2010). For this reason, this paper centers child marriage on the experience of girls.

Child marriage, particularly when the girl is younger than fifteen, has wide-ranging, harmful effects on girls' health and life chances and, by extension, on their children, communities, and countries (Raji & Boehmer, 2013; Kyari & Ayodele, 2014; Nour, 2009). Child marriage is linked to girls' poorer health, lower educational attainment, greater risks of violence and abuse, persistent poverty, heightened mental health needs, and lost opportunities for equality and rights (Bartels et al., 2018; Efevbera et al., 2019; Nasrullah et al., 2014). Compared with their unmarried peers or older women, child brides are more likely to experience unintended pregnancies, sexual and reproductive health morbidities, and maternal mortality (Nasrullah et al., 2014; Neal et al., 2012). They also typically marry older husbands with more education, financial resources, and life experience, reinforcing power imbalances within the union (Falb et al., 2015; Nayak, 2013).

As of 2018, UNICEF estimated that 640 million women and girls worldwide had married before their 18th birthday, and roughly one in five women aged 20–24 were married before 18 (UNICEF, 2018). South Asia bears nearly half of the global burden, with India alone accounting for roughly one-third; India's latest NFHS-5 shows 23.3% of women ages 20–24 were married before 18 (Hazra, et al., 2025.) In sub-Saharan Africa, at least 40% of girls marry before age 18, and the region accounts for 15 of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence (UNICEF, 2014). With 38% of girls in Malawi marrying before age 18, the policy response has progressed from legal reform to strategic coordination. The government first established 18 as the legal minimum age and then adopted the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2018–2023), followed by the 2024–2030 strategy, which prioritizes multisectoral coordination, cultural transformation, school retention, expanded sexual and reproductive health services, stronger child protection systems, and the engagement of both girls and boys (Government of Malawi et al., 2024). Together, these measures frame child marriage as both a rights violation and a culturally embedded practice requiring coordinated, community-driven interventions.

Overview of the Global Child and Women's Rights Movements

The child rights movement has evolved over time, particularly with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Bendo, 2020). Adopted in 1989, the UNCRC is now the most widely ratified human rights treaty, with 196 States parties; the United States remains the only UN member that has not ratified it (Libal et al., 2011; Mbise, 2017; Quennerstedt et al., 2018).

In Africa, the movement advanced through the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1990 (Kaime, 2009). Because African countries were underrepresented during the UNCRC's drafting, the treaty omitted explicit references to child marriage and other violations prevalent among African children (Vincent, 2008). In response, the complementary regional instrument, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity, 1990), urges an end to child marriage, sets 18 as the minimum marriage age, and requires compulsory marriage registration (San Martano, 2018; Sillah & Chibanda, 2013; Vincent, 2008). As of 2025, 51 of the 55 African Union member states have ratified the ACRWC; Morocco, Somalia, South Sudan, and Tunisia have not (ACHPR, 2025). Both the UNCRC and ACRWC largely use gender-neutral language that emphasizes age rather than gender, which can obscure girls' specific vulnerabilities (Sloth-Nielsen, 2015).

In addition to the child-rights frame, the women's-rights framework also helps explain child marriage. CEDAW, the second most widely ratified human rights treaty after the UNCRC, does not explicitly define "woman" but is generally interpreted to include girls (Goonesekere, 2014; Vincent, 2008). Article 16(2) declares child marriage unlawful and calls for enabling legislation and compulsory registration of all marriages, and CEDAW more broadly urges reform of discriminatory social and cultural practices (Och, 2018; Vincent, 2008). A frequently noted limitation is CEDAW's early underemphasis on violence against women in addressing girls' needs; the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) helped fill this gap by defining gender-based violence and highlighting vulnerable groups, including female children (Homan et al., 2018; Kitchen, 2016; Popoola, 2014; Taefi, 2009). Even so, these instruments center gender more than age, which can obscure girls' age-specific vulnerabilities (Croll, 2006).

To accelerate progress on ending child marriage, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (adopted in 2015) includes Target 5.3 to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (Judiasih et al., 2020; Tseng & Chiang, 2017). In 2016, UNFPA and UNICEF launched the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage (Sayi & Sibanda, 2018). On the continent, Agenda 2063 prioritizes ending child marriage, and the African Union's 2015 End Child Marriage Campaign seeks to raise the legal marriage age to 18 (African Union, 2015). Achieving SDG 5.3 will require progress roughly 12 times faster than in the last decade (UNICEF, 2018).

Alongside these international and regional frameworks, African feminist scholarship offers a culturally grounded lens that engages collective responsibilities and community ties. Concepts such as *Stiwanism* and *Motherism* emphasize relationality, caregiving, and community transformation, positioning culture not only as a site of challenge but also as a resource for solutions (Acholonu, 1995; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). For example, *Motherism* foregrounds mothers and caregivers as agents who can sustain and reshape practices, suggesting that strategies must involve parents, faith leaders, and elders in addition to supporting girls individually (Acholonu, 1995). Embedding these perspectives alongside the UNCRC and CEDAW helps situate child marriage as both an individual rights violation and a community practice, guiding approaches that enlist parents, elders, faith leaders, and boys as allies while centering girls' rights (Acholonu, 1995; Coetzee, 2018; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

Guiding Frameworks for Study Design and Analysis

This study drew on three complementary frameworks: a human rights–based approach, African feminism, and an implementation science lens, to guide both design and analysis. The human rights approach frames child marriage as a violation of children's and women's rights and clarifies the obligations of duty bearers (states) and entitlements of rights holders (children and women), grounded in universality, nondiscrimination, participation, and accountability (OHCHR, 2006; CEDAW & CRC, 2014). African feminism offers a culturally grounded perspective that attends to how gender, age, class, and community shape girls' experiences. Within this tradition, Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994) and Motherism (Acholonu, 1995) emphasize relationality, caregiving, and cultural embeddedness as pathways for social transformation; allied strands such as nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) and Oyěwùmí's critique of exporting Western gender categories (1997) underscore negotiated, context-specific change. Implementation science provides tools for understanding how interventions are adopted, adapted, and sustained in real-world

settings, illuminating determinants of success and failure (Damschroder et al., 2009; Nilsen, 2015; Proctor et al., 2011).

These frameworks informed the study's design by shaping stakeholder sampling, the interview guide, and the inclusion of policy and archival materials, and they structured the analysis. Human rights and African feminist lenses guided the codebook and the interpretation of themes related to culture, collaboration, and the inclusion of boys, while implementation science concepts supported assessments of alignment with national strategy, cross-sector coordination, and implementation barriers and facilitators (Hull et al., 2019; Tabak et al., 2012). Together, these perspectives enabled an examination of child marriage interventions as rights grounded, culturally embedded practices that demand flexible, coordinated action.

Research Context

This study was conducted in Malawi, in southeastern Africa, where 38% of girls marry before age 18, with reports of cases as young as nine or ten (Malawi Human Rights Watch, 2014). Malawi ranks 12th globally in child-marriage prevalence and is among the highest in the SADC region (UNICEF, 2018). Since ratifying the UNCRC in 1991, the country has pursued legal reform, including the Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act of 2015, which set 18 as the minimum marriage age, and a 2017 constitutional amendment reinforcing that provision (Juma et al., 2017).

The government's National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2018–2023) sought a 20% reduction by 2023 (MoGCDSW, 2018), but alignment was uneven and overall progress remained slow (Bantwana World Education Initiative, 2019). In October 2024, Malawi adopted a new National Strategy (2024–2030) emphasizing multisectoral coordination, accountability, engagement of community and faith leaders, inclusion of boys alongside girls, and closer alignment of donor agendas with national priorities. This updated policy context reflects recognition that sustainable progress requires culturally grounded, community-driven action within a rights-based framework.

Methods

Ethical Considerations

Participants' safety was prioritized across study design, data collection, analysis, and data management. The protocol was approved by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board. Although risks were minimal, data collection occurred during COVID-19 and procedures complied with legal requirements and social work ethics. Participation was voluntary, and participants could choose whether interviews were audio recorded. Confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. All materials, including transcripts, were stored on a password-protected drive.

Study Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling to reach key informants involved in efforts to end child marriage in Malawi. The sample included government officials, staff from NGOs and civil society, local and faith leaders, media professionals, human rights and gender activists, legal counsel, and child marriage/protection specialists. Candidates were identified through national networks and coalitions leading child-marriage campaigns, with assistance from the Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare (MGCDSW). Eligibility focused on stakeholders responsible for intervention design or funding decisions to capture the frameworks guiding their work. Because English is the official language in Malawi, proficiency in English was required. In total, 22 participants were interviewed.

Procedures

This qualitative study drew on 22 semi-structured interviews, 18 archival documents, and post-interview field notes. Thirteen interviews were conducted in person and nine via Zoom or telephone due to COVID-19. Participants also shared 25 documents; 18 met inclusion criteria and were analyzed as archival data to complement and triangulate interview findings and deepen insight into child marriage (Glasgow et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2016). Documents were reviewed to extract the intervention and implementation strategies referenced by participants. To enrich context, field notes were recorded immediately after each interview, and a reflexive journal captured same-day analytic impressions of the interview process (Creswell, 2013; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis with constant comparison, deriving core concepts and iteratively comparing transcripts to build meaningful categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Tabak et al., 2012). Transcripts were then imported into Dedoose and coded alongside paper-based notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview guide informed a preliminary code and category list, and an initial parent–child codebook was developed from two randomly selected transcripts. Guided by the study's lenses, the codebook also included deductive

nodes reflecting collective and cultural dimensions (e.g., collective decision-making, parental and elder authority, rites of passage/initiation, community norm enforcement, age falsification, inclusion of boys, donor alignment, and coordination with national strategy), alongside inductive codes emerging from the data. Building on this codebook, we compared themes across organizations, stakeholder groups, and interviews to identify core patterns, their relationships, and the overarching analytic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final step refined themes by clarifying each theme's central meaning and specifying the facet of the data it captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kane et al., 2016). Because theoretical frameworks typically guide implementation science (Tabak et al., 2012), a human rights–based approach and African feminism informed data organization and interpretation, illuminating how stakeholders implemented interventions to end child marriage in Malawi and why particular strategies were selected (Hull et al., 2019). In addition to the interviews, post-interview field notes were thematically analyzed and subjected to meaning condensation, generating subthemes that aligned with and extended interview findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, archival materials were analyzed with a blend of content and thematic approaches to supplement the interview data.

Results

The findings shed light on the overarching research question: what frameworks, theories, or lenses are being used to prevent child marriage in Malawi, as perceived through the perspectives of child rights activists, women's rights activists, and those working within government or organizational frameworks. The findings also revealed whether reliance on different frameworks shaped collaboration among stakeholders. Most stakeholders reported relying on two overarching categories of frameworks: (1) human rights–based frameworks and (2) government and organizational strategies. Perspectives on collaboration were mixed. Some participants believed the use of different frameworks had little or no impact on working relationships, while others argued that such differences shaped interactions in important ways.

Frameworks or Lenses Used by Stakeholders Implementing Interventions on Ending Child Marriage

Human Rights–Based Framework

Three main rights–based frameworks were identified as central to intervention efforts: (1) the child rights framework, (2) the women's rights or gender framework, and (3) a combined child and women's rights framework.

Child Rights Framework Three participants described operating solely through a child rights lens as child-focused organizations. Media Personnel TR explained that the UNCRC and the ACRWC served as guiding frameworks:

> For us, I think we operate under child rights as an organization. So, we talk about the convention on the rights of the child yeah. So mostly our implementations are centered on a child and so I think that makes it easier for us to not leave out one gender. Yeah. That's what we believe in. So, I think our framework, I know other people have chosen another part, but our framework is centered on child rights. (Media Personnel TR)

Similarly, UN Official JR reported, "we perceive everything under 'the best interest of the child' lens." Child Marriage Expert SC also emphasized that, although their organization sometimes drew on other frameworks such as CEDAW, their implementation strategies were primarily guided by child rights instruments. For example, they referenced the Malawi Constitution, noting the provisions that "a child shall be a person under the age of eighteen years" and that "No persons over the age of 18 shall be prevented from entering into marriage" (Government of Malawi, 2017).

Another participant explained how anchoring their work in child rights helped them include both boys and girls:

> So, our organization is purely a child focused organization and the UNCRC is like our bible and I would say it drives most of our operations. For sure we view child marriage from the child rights or child focused perspective. I understand that each organization usually would apply to the charter that has been internationally or globally agreed upon inter. And as I said, initially that, we, ascribe to all these international, agreed upon policies. Yeah. And, we are loyal to them. Mm. But then when it comes to implementing now in the local context, sometimes you find the need of other charters to come to play, I think maybe we need to be flexible a little. (Child Protection Expert NM)

These accounts underscore the strong influence of child rights instruments in shaping Malawi's interventions, while also pointing to the need for flexibility in adapting them to local contexts.

Women's Rights Framework Only one participant, Gender Specialist FJ, described operating primarily through a

women's rights framework. This perspective framed girls as women and therefore emphasized gender rights:

> For us? We as an organization follow mainly on women's rights and we look at girls as women. So, in that way, we follow that gender rights, the women's rights as well. So, as we are working, we coordinate with other stakeholders as well. And we are a member of the technical working group for the gender technical working group, as well as the child protection technical working group in the Ministry of Gender here in Malawi. And because of that, whatever policy that is coming out in terms of gender-related work, as well as child protection work, we are there too. (Gender Specialist FJ)

Another participant, a Reproductive Health Advocate, reflected on the need to broaden their approach by being more inclusive of both girls and boys:

> I think even though we focus on gender as a women's rights activist organization, we are realizing that now we need to be gender sensitive in the sense that we look at both girls and boys. You know we should be balancing those areas. It's still a challenge, because the focus is more on the girl because we know she's the one who is more vulnerable and more disadvantaged when it comes to statistics as to who is experiencing what in the meantime, but we need to empower both. (Reproductive Health Advocate CM)

Participants also highlighted community reactions to interventions that exclusively targeted girls. For example, Child Protection Officer DZ explained:

> The boys often ask us, why should it always be about a girl child? Okay. Then they'll even make efforts to just disturb this girl, child. yeah. These are real life stories. Okay. I have moved around; we've done a number of focus group discussions. I have personally met boys complaining about this. You guys, you come into the villages, you are always talking about the girls. Why is it that, you know, you are not helping us? (Child Protection Officer DZ)

Child Marriage Practitioner DL echoed this concern, describing how a boy resisted support given only to his sister:

> I met a certain, a certain young boy who openly told me that he actually had to tear some notebooks that a certain NGO had given his own sister in the same family. You know, were both poor, both me and my sister are poor. I also don't have books for my school. Why should they only give my sister books? So I tear them so that we both do not have, okay. We are targeting women and girls, you know while sidelining these boys. And, you know, even where we are busy, even educating the girl child, we shouldn't forget that it is these men that would marry these girls. (Child Marriage Practitioner DL)

These accounts suggest that while a woman's rights lens brings necessary attention to girls' vulnerability, it can also produce unintended consequences, including resentment among boys and men when they feel excluded from programming.

Both Child and Women's Rights Frameworks Ten participants reported using both child and women's rights lenses when developing and implementing interventions to end child marriage. Many explained that although their organizations were originally child-focused and guided primarily by the UNCRC, they began incorporating a gender lens in recent years to better address issues such as violence prevention and child marriage. For example, Child Marriage Expert SC noted that their organization had integrated the Gender Equality Act into programming to strengthen attention to these concerns.

Several participants emphasized that adopting both child- and gender-focused lenses allowed them to expand programming to include boys, who are often overlooked in interventions. Health Expert CM, for instance, described how their organization incorporated Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) to ensure that boys are active participants in efforts to end child marriage. Similarly, within the education sector, programs had begun involving boys in peer discussions, though not yet at a large scale:

> We wouldn't even say that child marriage is only child's right. First of all, we are not a woman's rights organization either. I think that should be clear. But we look at both. Okay. Sometimes even when we're conducting the peer chats, we include the boys just to tell them that, you know what they're doing is wrong, instead they should support girls to finish school, but then it's very few times. (Education Specialist MB)

A recurring theme was the recognition of child-to-child marriages. Participants observed that although child marriage is often discussed in terms of older men marrying girls, there are increasing cases of boys marrying girls of the same age, making boys victims of the practice as well. Advocacy Specialist MJ reflected on this trend:

> Yeah. Cause that's very interesting, especially on the child-to-child marriage, because most of the time we've looked at this issue as if there is a grown-up somewhere who is marrying the child. But not these days. So now we are looking at the boy child as well, which means our interventions have to go the other direction. Yes. And for us, we have taken deliberate efforts, you know, to bring the boy child into our intervention. Okay. But of course, while parting ourselves on the back, I can comfortably say there's still more that can be done. I'm saying there's still more that can be done as far as the co-opting the boy child interventions are concerned. (Advocacy Specialist MJ)

Child Protection Officer DZ added that interventions have often focused on girls as victims while neglecting boys as potential perpetrators:

> Yes. But the issue of ending marriage also involves the boy. So usually we address the perpetrated and leave out the perpetrator. So okay. So, there has been much on the girl child rather than the boy. Behavior wise, if the boy changes and realizes the harms of child marriage will not deliberately put a lady into going into marriage. (Child Protection Officer DZ)

Despite this growing recognition, participants explained that funding for child marriage interventions overwhelmingly prioritizes girls, with limited resources available to address boys' needs. Child Protection Expert NM described how this has created frustration among boys in some communities:

> So, you see, now there's this boy child. But now where would you get funding where we're saying for us, we want to concentrate on the boy child? Most of the time it's the girl child. But we know the reason. The chances of girls getting married before the age of 18 is seven times higher than that of boys. We have seen now voices too coming out and saying, we need to focus on both. Even in our earlier programs, because we are child-focused, we noted that there are still some boys who have gotten married before the age of 18. But the cry has now been loud where they say we will be impregnating the girls since you're biased towards them. To an extent, now we are saying, we need to be gender-sensitive in the sense that we are child-focused. You know we should be balancing those areas. (Child Protection Expert NM)

Faith Leader PS described a broader, more holistic perspective that incorporated child rights, women's rights, and parental rights, stressing the role of families and moral values in shaping child marriage:

> I think we look at this issue holistically. We don't only base on one point of view like, okay, Child rights no-no. We can talk about parental rights; we can talk about doing women's rights. So how this has affected the moral decay, all those things. (Faith Leader PS)

Government and Organizational Strategies

Government and organizational strategies emerged as the second framework used by stakeholders in Malawi to implement interventions aimed at ending child marriage. Through the Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare (MGCDSW), the Government of Malawi first launched the *National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2018–2023)*, which sought to provide leadership, guidance, and oversight in national efforts. While participants in this study noted gaps in alignment with the 2018–2023 strategy, Malawi has since adopted a new *National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2024–2030)*. This revised framework builds on lessons from the earlier plan and aims to reduce child marriage prevalence from 37.7% to 20% by 2030.

The 2024–2030 strategy sets out eight key result areas:

1. Deconstructing harmful cultural practices and strengthening positive norms.
2. Ensuring both boys and girls remain in school.
3. Promoting economic empowerment and livelihoods for girls and families.
4. Expanding access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services.
5. Strengthening the legal and policy framework.
6. Improving child protection services and response mechanisms.
7. Enhancing coordination, monitoring, and evidence-based learning.
8. Mobilizing adequate financial and human resources to sustain progress.

Participants reflected on the importance of implementing such a unifying national strategy, while also acknowledging the persistent challenge of organizations pursuing independent donor-driven agendas. Government Official SR explained:

> In 2018, we coordinated the development of our national strategy for ending child marriages. It runs up to 2023. Mm. So from that time to date partners that are intervening on issues of child marriages have to refer to that framework in terms of the nature of the interventions and also, the targets that

> we are trying to reach out. But now you see other organizations championing alliances have their own theory of change different from the strategy. This is a challenge because now what it means is all the partners that are in that alliance buy into their thinking and theory of change. (Government Official SR)

To concur with his colleague, Government Officer JT emphasized that different partners must align with the government's framework to avoid duplication and disjointed efforts:

> If we continue to have different frameworks and so on everyone developing their own plans and so on, we will continue to be disorganized and disconnected in a way because everyone is pushing their own agenda. For example, when you go on the ground, sometimes we are disappointed to see where are these interventions coming from? Is this part of the national strategy? You will find that there is a disconnect in terms of what is being implemented on the ground vis-à-vis what is in the national strategy. So, I think going forward we need to encourage our partners that they should be embracing the national strategy. Starting from the development process, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. (Government Officer JT)

Child Marriage Practitioner DL similarly observed that many organizations often fail to align with government strategies, a problem that has persisted into the new strategy period:

> For ending child marriage, the strategy does decide. But the problem comes on us implementers, are we implementing in line with the Strategy? I don't think so. The government has the strategies, but you know, most organizations have got their own things like their own theory of change that they have. That's it. Some have something different driven by their own donors. Instead of marketing the national strategy, that one is not happening. The document was well written, but we are not implementing it. And I don't think there is any activity from there that we are implementing apart from commemorations of international events. (Child Marriage Practitioner DL)

The introduction of the 2024–2030 strategy represents an attempt to overcome these very challenges, with an explicit emphasis on coordination, cultural transformation, and accountability. Whether these new commitments will succeed in bridging the fragmentation identified by participants remains an important question for future evaluation.

Working Relationships Among Stakeholders Using Different Frameworks or Lenses

Working Relationships Not Being Affected by Different Frameworks or Lenses

When asked whether different philosophies affected collaboration among stakeholders, five participants reported having no difficulties working with others who used different approaches. As Media Personnel TR explained:

> I do not have problems with them. We all choose which direction to center our visions and missions, and yes, there is a huge gap in how men and women are treated in our society. We cannot deny that part. (Media Personnel TR)

Other participants emphasized that the specific lens or framework mattered less than an organization's commitment to addressing child marriage within its area of focus. However, some noted that merging different perspectives into one unified framework was challenging. According to Child Marriage Expert SC, what may be needed is flexibility to adapt frameworks as new issues emerge, particularly those requiring multi-sectoral approaches, rather than rigidly adhering to a single framework.

Participants also observed that relationships often depended on how organizations framed or communicated their work. Tensions were more likely to surface when child marriage was portrayed solely as either a child rights or a gender rights issue, instead of being recognized more broadly as a human rights violation. Government Official SR offered an example:

> Like when you look at what is happening under the Spotlight Initiative is twofold. You have organizations that are child-focused, and other organizations that are gender-focused. Yes. But at the end of the day, the question is how do we look at child marriage? Do we look at it as a child rights violation? Do we look at it as a human rights violation? So, if first and foremost, we look at it as a human rights violation, then it doesn't matter which lenses you are using. But if you only look at it as a child rights violation and not a human rights violation, then there will be conflict. Yeah. So, it's a question of now when you are in that, that partnership with others, are we looking at this issue because it is just an issue for the child or are we looking at this issue because it is an issue that is evolving issues of gender inequalities? (Government Official SR)

Working Relationships Affected by Different Frameworks or Lenses

In contrast to those who felt frameworks did not affect collaboration, most participants reported that differences in guiding philosophies did, in fact, strain working relationships. For example, Child Protection Officer DZ described how organizational loyalty to international charters such as the UNCRC and CEDAW shaped implementation approaches, often making collaboration difficult even among organizations working in the same geographic areas. Participants noted that instead of joining forces, many organizations preferred to operate independently according to the charter or framework they prioritized.

Advocacy Specialist MJ explained how this dynamic sometimes created divisions and disjointed efforts:

> I was saying that actually it partly falls under some of the fights that I mentioned. Some people say, no, this is not concerning us, we are women-oriented, I would say, feminizing child marriage or equating child marriage to issues of females. But another gap that this fight is facing, but lately, you see you have NGO X, which is so much concerned with women and girls then, already you know that we are somehow divided into this child marriage fight because their intervention, in any case, they would leave the boy child aside. So, that's also another conduit, you know, for gender-based violence. So that is also a contributing factor towards, you know, the fight of not being successful. So, if only we can coordinate. (Advocacy Specialist MJ)

Gender Specialist FJ added that framing child marriage primarily as a women's issue limited coordination and progress:

> That is really another coordination gap, where we have some organizations with the female face pursuing issues about females, and then disassociating themselves about issues of child marriages. Cause child, marriage is very Holistic. You cannot just you know, give it a female face. Okay. So those are also some gaps that are making us not to not to progress. (Gender Specialist FJ)

Participants also observed how these divides were reflected in public events, such as the Day of the African Child, the International Day of the Girl Child, and the 16 Days of Activism. Government Officer JT pointed out that organizations tended to participate selectively, depending on whether the event aligned with their framework:

> You see others coming for the day of the African child, others they go full throttle for the international day of the girl child, but I think we need to move towards having everyone embracing the national framework. (Government Officer JT)

Education Specialist MB confirmed these differences, explaining:

> Because I've seen in some organizations, we are doing all these commemorations. Some are just present during the 'Day of the African Child' or 'International Day the girl child' they'll come out. But during the 16 days of activism, they don't show up? You ask why? You find that maybe they are thinking, these are just women's issues, whereas others are saying, no, it's not just women, but it's also girls. So, at the end of the day, it's also dependent on how the organization is set up and how much they want to benefit from all these platforms that are there. (Education Specialist MB)

Summary of Results

Participants described smooth collaboration despite differing analytical lenses, while others reported strained relationships when frameworks hardened into silos. Overall, multiple entry points yielded momentum but also fragmentation without alignment under a common framework, a pattern the 2024–2030 Strategy explicitly seeks to correct through coordination, cultural engagement, and inclusion of stakeholders which relied on two main approaches: rights-based frameworks (child, women, or both) and government or organizational strategies. Many increasingly blended child and women's rights to address rising child-to-child marriages and to engage boys, while government and NGO informants pointed to the 2018–2023 National Strategy as the intended anchor for implementation. In practice, donor-driven theories of change often pulled projects off-strategy, producing coordination gaps, duplication, and visible divides in participation. Some participants reported boys.

Discussion

This study examined how stakeholders in Malawi approach child marriage through different frameworks, particularly child rights and women's rights, and how these approaches shape collaboration. A few participants reported no difficulties working across ideological lines, but most described challenges, especially when organizations aligned themselves with different international charters such as the UNCRC and CEDAW. The findings suggest that these frameworks, while valuable, can generate fragmented strategies for ending child marriage.

A central contribution of this study is the use of an African feminist lens. African feminism emphasizes relationality, community, and cultural embeddedness rather than relying solely on individual rights claims (Coetzee, 2018). Strands such as Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994) and Motherism (Acholonu, 1995) promote social transformation that includes women, children, and community well-being, challenging narrow Western constructs of feminism. Applied to child marriage in Malawi, this perspective underscores the need to engage families, faith and local leaders, and community structures, rather than focusing only on individual girls. It also helps explain why the CRC and CEDAW, despite their influence, can fall short in local contexts since they prioritize individual rights while underemphasizing collective identities and cultural obligations that shape marriage practices.

The issue of culture and collective rights emerged strongly in both this study and prior literature (Ajaib, 2014; Babbie, 2020). While international treaties tend to portray culture as uniformly harmful or "abysmal," participants in this study described how traditions and parental authority often drive decisions about girls' marriages. Practices such as rites of passage, age falsification by parents, and community expectations demonstrate that marriage is not just an individual decision but a deeply collective one. This helps explain why allegiance to international charters sometimes constrained collaboration, as organizations rigidly aligned to either CRC or CEDAW often overlooked these cultural realities. An African feminist perspective reframes culture not as something to be discarded, but as a critical arena of engagement, one where harmful practices must be challenged, and where community values can also be mobilized to protect children.

In Malawi, the findings highlight tensions between international commitments and local realities. The country ratified the UNCRC in 1991 and adopted a National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage from 2018 to 2023 that aimed to reduce prevalence by 20%. Yet many organizations pursued donor-driven theories of change rather than aligning with the national framework, producing disjointed implementation, a pattern consistent with implementation research showing that misalignment and weak coordination undermine outcomes (Hull et al., 2019; Tabak et al., 2012). This siloing appeared in selective participation in commemorative events, such as engaging in the International Day of the Girl Child but not the Day of the African Child. The rise of child-to-child marriages and the neglect of boys in programming also mirror wider evidence that excluding boys can prompt backlash and limit impact, even as girls face the greatest risks (Makwemba et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2018).

In response, the Government of Malawi launched the National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage for 2024 to 2030, which sets a goal of reducing prevalence from 37.7% to 20% by 2030 and identifies eight priority areas, including addressing harmful cultural practices, keeping children in school, expanding sexual and reproductive health services, and strengthening child protection systems. This direction aligns with prior research emphasizing culturally grounded, multisectoral approaches and school retention as protective against early marriage (UNICEF, 2018; Arthur et al., 2018). The strategy's inclusion of boys and engagement of community and faith leaders reflects evidence that community-owned approaches improve uptake and sustainability of interventions on ending child marriage (Hull et al., 2019; Tabak et al., 2012). Whether these ambitions translate into practice remains an open question. Experience with the 2018 to 2023 plan and broader implementation literature suggests that without clear accountability, donor coordination, and local ownership, national strategies risk remaining aspirational (Hull et al., 2019; Tabak et al., 2012). Ongoing evaluation will be essential to assess coordination, alignment with government priorities, and the extent to which programs integrate African feminist insights into design and delivery.

Overall, the findings point to the need for flexible, multidisciplinary approaches that integrate child rights, women's rights, and African feminist perspectives. Such approaches protect individual rights while engaging the collective cultural contexts in which marriage decisions occur, and they require involving boys, parents, and communities as active partners. Without this integration, efforts risk remaining fragmented, leaving girls and boys vulnerable to the continued practice of child marriage.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Theory

Two implications emerge. First, social work should recognize child marriage as gender-based violence and a critical human rights issue. Girls face distinct vulnerabilities such as early pregnancy, health risks, and educational disruption that require action to advance gender equality and SDG 5.3. Because these harms are shaped by family, community, and cultural dynamics, for example, falsifying ages, social workers must engage not only individual girls but also their families and communities.

Second, the study underscores the value of applying multiple frameworks including child rights, women's rights, and African feminist perspectives when designing interventions. While the UNCRC and CEDAW offer essential legal foundations, their impact in Malawi has been limited where cultural norms and collective identities are central. African feminist lenses such as Stiwanism and Motherism emphasize relationality, community, and culturally grounded change, highlighting that child marriage is both an individual rights violation and a community practice requiring culturally responsive, community-driven strategies.

For practice, social workers should adopt interdisciplinary and multisectoral approaches with health, education, legal, and faith partners. The 2024–2030 National Strategy's focus

on coordination and cultural transformation is a timely opportunity to align advocacy and services across state, community, and international frameworks. For theory, the field should move beyond strictly Western-centric models and integrate African feminist insights into scholarship and training to better address the intersections of age, gender, and culture and ensure interventions are both rights-based and culturally resonant.

Study Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's small sample size was deliberate, as this was an exploratory qualitative study with a limited scope and a highly targeted audience. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques ensured participation from key actors with knowledge of child marriage interventions, but the findings are not generalizable. Instead, the value lies in the depth of insights and the transferability of themes across similar contexts.

Second, data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which created logistical challenges. Some interviews had to be canceled or conducted by phone or Zoom due to participants falling ill or travel restrictions. While telephone interviews allowed some participants to feel more comfortable discussing sensitive issues, the lack of face-to-face interaction may have limited rapport and the researcher's ability to observe nonverbal cues. This could have constrained the depth of data in some cases.

Third, the study was conducted under the 2018 to 2023 National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage, just before the 2024 to 2030 strategy launched; findings therefore reflect the earlier framework. The new strategy targets a prevalence of 20% by 2030 and sets eight priority areas, including addressing harmful norms, expanding sexual and reproductive health services, and strengthening multisectoral coordination. These priorities respond to concerns participants raised, including cultural engagement, accountability, and the inclusion of both girls and boys.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should broaden the participant base and triangulate perspectives across levels of society by including girls, families, and community leaders to capture how interventions are negotiated in households and villages, aligning with African feminism's emphasis on relationality and community-based solutions. Rigorous evaluation is needed for both Malawi's 2018–2023 strategy and the new 2024–2030 framework, which targets a reduction in child-marriage prevalence from 37.7% to 20% across eight priority areas; looking ahead, future research should examine how the 2024–2030 strategy is implemented in practice, whether it reduces fragmentation, and how well it incorporates African feminist perspectives and community-based approaches. Research should further test how collective-rights approaches from African feminist thought, including Stiwanism and Motherism, can be operationalized to mobilize families, faith leaders, and communities alongside girls and boys in program implementation. Finally, comparative studies across African contexts are needed to determine whether the challenges observed in Malawi reflect broader regional patterns or uniquely Malawian dynamics, thereby strengthening the evidence base for multisectoral collaboration and guiding policy reform.

Conclusion

Interventions to end child marriage in Malawi have been shaped by child rights, women's rights, and donor agendas that often fragment collaboration. Using an African feminist lens underscores the need for cultural embeddedness, relationality, and collective rights in both analysis and practice. While the 2018 to 2023 strategy offered a policy anchor, implementation was uneven; the 2024 to 2030 strategy renews commitments to coordination, accountability, and cultural transformation. Going forward, progress depends on monitoring this new framework and integrating African feminist and community-driven approaches that engage families and include both girls and boys, bridging individual rights with collective cultural realities to advance toward the (Braun, and Clarke, 2030) goal.

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Data Availability The data supporting the findings of this study are qualitative interview data and are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and the need to protect participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts are included in the manuscript. Additional information may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to ethical approval.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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