





The abuse of female children of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe – Assessing the perspectives of selected Social Service Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Religious organisations are known for providing solace to those going through various psycho-social and spiritual challenges. However, the experiences of female children fellowshipping in the Johanne Marange church continue to be characterized by abuse and subjugation. The article, using a qualitative approach with exploratory and descriptive designs, explored perceptions of 20 purposively selected participants, comprising social workers, counsellors, welfare officers, psychologists, and sociologists, who worked and living in the Masvingo district, regarding the abuses imposed on female children in the Johanne Marange Apostolic sect. The study adopted a thematic analysis that facilitated the identification of factors that contribute to child abuse; such as cultural practices, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, and harmful religious practices. The study recommends strict law enforcement, safe person training, hiring social workers to assist in advocacy and pragmatic interventions to combat abuse of female children, and instituting scholarships for females in apostolic sects. The study shares critical findings on the impact of religious practices, especially on the welfare and livelihoods of female children. Subsequently, it contributes to ongoing discourses on finding lasting solutions to address factors that hinder the achievement ofSDG 5 on gender equality in education and other spheres of life. The study also calls to action all likeminded organisations and practitioners to design strategies to curb the oppression of female children that continues to happen due to religion and culture.

Keywords: Child Marriages, Sexual Abuses, Sexual and Reproductive Health Services, Economic Empowerment, HIV/AIDS, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

This study interviewed social service professionals (social workers, counsellors, welfare officials, and sociologists) in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe, for their opinions on the various kinds of abuses meted out to female children below the age of 18 years within the Johanne Marange Apostolic church.

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Historically, the Johanne Marange Apostolic church was founded in 1932 by Johanne Marange, born Muchabaya Momberume, in the Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe.¹ Furthermore, Muchabaya Momberume, who is believed to have been the son of Fuleni Momberume, encountered the Holy Spirit at the age of five and was renamed Johanne the Baptist by the Holy Spirit. The surname Marange came after his father, who worked for Chief Marange, failed to pay the bride price for the Chief's daughter. Then, Johanne was adopted by Chief Marange as compensation for unpaid lobola. In particular, the Johanne Marange church is regarded as the first African-led church. It has spread to neighbouring and regional countries such as Botswana and the Democratic Republic of Congo, among others.² When Johanne passed on in 1963, he was replaced by his nephew, Abel (son of Arnold), and when Abel passed on in 1992, his younger brother Noah Taguta took over the church's leadership. Congregants believe that the founder's spirit, Johanne Marange, is upon Noah Taguta and is worshipped as Jesus Christ of the moment.³ In addition, whatever the priests say stands, as they are regarded as messengers from God. Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko revealed that due to the reverence given to the priests in Johanne Marange church, female children as young as 14 years old are involuntarily wedded off to older men after a proclamation that the Holy Spirit has sanctioned the marriage; thus, nobody disputes the marriage.⁴

In essence, the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church has been singled out as an institution that promotes risky sexual practices, as male members are allowed to marry as many wives as they want, most of whom are children or adolescents.⁵ This practice has been identified as a key factor in the ever-soaring HIV infection rate among young women aged 15 -25 years in Zimbabwe.⁶ According to the Ministry of Health and Child Care, Masvingo Province had an HIV prevalence of 14.9 %; Manicaland had an adult HIV prevalence of 11.4%; and Midlands had a prevalence of 14.1%. The increase in HIV infections in the District of Masvingo could be attributed to rampant intergenerational marriages or child marriages.⁷ Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko conducted a study on the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church and revealed that women's and female rights continue to be violated without any repercussions for the culprits.⁸ It is believed that all marriage arrangements are carried out under the doctrine of their church, providing a conducive environment for abuse under the guise of the 'sacredness' of the religious sect. In these marriage arrangements, females below the age of 18 years endure physical, emotional, sexual, and spiritual abuse as they are forced to skip crucial stages of physical and cognitive development to become wives and mothers, which compromises their social function and well-being.⁹

Paradoxically, religious organisations that are meant to protect and promote the well-being of their members are evidently and constantly causing physical and emotional harm to their members, particularly the female children. The Johanne Marange Apostolic church continues to involuntarily wed off minor females to older men within their circles in the name of religion and subject them to other perfidious and pernicious human rights violations, such as exchanging them for drought relief, curtailing their education, and denying them access to reproductive health services and care. This quagmire calls

¹ Julius Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-Based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 30, no. 2 (2017): 178–206, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2017/v30n2a8>.

² Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-Based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe."

³ Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-Based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe."

⁴ Cornelius Dudzai, Kwashirai Zvokuomba, and Tarisai Gracious Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 8, no. 4 (October 12, 2023): 376–88, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-023-00271-2>.

⁵ Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-Based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe."

⁶ Katherine Gambir et al., "Associations between Child Marriage and Food Insecurity in Zimbabwe: A Participatory Mixed Methods Study," *BMC Public Health* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17408-7>.

⁷ Ministry of Health and Child Care (MOHCC), *Zimbabwe Population-Based HIV Impact Assessment (ZIMPHIA) 2015-2016: Final Report* (Harare : MOHCC, 2019).

⁸ Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church."

⁹ E. Siziba, "Gender-Based Violence in Zimbabwe: A Critical Analysis of Institutional Responses" (University of Pretoria, 2020).

for social work interventions to effect social change and justice. Although the church operates as a closed system, the ordeals experienced by female children in the Johanne Marange Apostolic sect can never be concealed. Notably, the abuses contradict the Zimbabwean Constitution Act number 20 of 2013 (under Section 4.28), which stipulates that all customs, traditional practices, and cultural practices that violate the rights of women and female children should be repealed. Sadly, the culprits involved in the abuse of female children rarely face prosecution.

Based on this background, this paper seeks to stimulate robust interventions from social workers to address various kinds of harmful religious practices, such as forced marriages that undermine the rights of female children. This paper also explores the opinions of social service practitioners on the abuse meted out to the female children in the Johanne Marange apostolic sect to inform policymakers and other stakeholders interested in female empowerment. The study seeks to answer this question: Why do female children continue to face various kinds of abuse in the Johanne Marange apostolic church when laws have been amended to address such issues?

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of Abuse of Female Children

According to Makuyana, Mbulayi, and Kangethe, the country of Zimbabwe continues to register high cases of abuse that, among other things, include sexual abuse, forced marriage, curtailment of their education, and other perfidious and pernicious mistreatments, such as exchanging them for drought relief and other assets.¹⁰ In recent years, the state has recognized the problem of sexual abuse and child exploitation of the female child, such as forced marriage within the apostolic faith-based organizations, promising to step up its efforts to halt the practice. Siziba revealed the various forms of abuse and exploitation that women and females in the Johanne Marange church in Zimbabwe continue to be exposed to despite the country having adopted and instituted legislation and policies to curb gender-based violence (GBV) in all its forms (physical, emotional and sexual violence).¹¹ Westendorf and Searle further outline that sexual abuse includes sexual assault, rape, and other intrusions of a sexual nature.¹² The cases of sexual abuse of female children remain rampant despite the promise of dealing with the challenge.¹³ This raises questions about whether the government is committed to fighting the abuse of female children. In some instances, Addai revealed that the family institution is also responsible for some of the abuses experienced by female children, as some families facilitate child abuse.¹⁴ Notably, during famines in Zimbabwe, families often give away their female children to receive drought relief. According to Sibanda, the economic woes in Zimbabwe are also directly related to the revival of cultural practices that violate the basic rights of female children, such as the right to education, health care, and protection, among other provisions.¹⁵

Subsequently, radical feminists have directed their attention to the subordinate status of women and female children, criticizing the need for males to dominate females.¹⁶ Although the Zimbabwean state has shown a commitment to protecting children against sexual abuse by enacting laws that criminalize the participation of the female child in prostitution, incest, and incidences of rape, little has been done to ensure that forced and early marriages of the female child are curtailed.¹⁷ Child marriage

¹⁰ A. Makuyana, S.P. Mbulayi, and S.M. Kangethe, "Psychosocial Deficits Underpinning Child Headed Households (CHHs) in Mabyuku and Tafara Suburbs of Harare, Zimbabwe," *Children and Youth Services Review* 115 (August 2020): 105093, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105093>.

¹¹ Siziba, "Gender-Based Violence in Zimbabwe: A Critical Analysis of Institutional Responses."

¹² Jasmine-Kim Westendorf and Louise Searle, "Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Peace Operations: Trends, Policy Responses and Future Directions," *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (March 1, 2017): 365–87, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix001>.

¹³ Obdiah Mawodza, "The Impact of the Customary Practice of Chiramu (Sexual Dalliance) on the Rights of Girls in Zimbabwe," *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development* 12, no. 03 (2019): 19–26.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Adu Addai, "African Women/Girls and HIV/AIDS: The Issue of Justice," *African Journal of Gender and Women Studies* 5, no. 6 (2020): 1.

¹⁵ Maureen Sibanda, "Married Too Soon: Child Marriage in Zimbabwe," *Res Advocate Unit*, 2011, 1–22.

¹⁶ Conny Roggeband, Anna van der Vleuten, and Anouka van Eerdewijk, "Feminist Engagement with Gender Equality in Regional Governance," in *Rethinking Gender Equality in Global Governance: The Delusion of Norm Diffusion* (Springer, 2019), 71–95.

¹⁷ Roselyn Hanzi, "Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of the Girl Child through Cultural Practices in Zimbabwe: A Human Rights Perspective" (University of Pretoria (South Africa), 2006); Fennie Mantula and Haroon Saloojee, "Child Sexual Abuse in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 25, no. 8 (November 16, 2016): 866–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2016.1234533>; Leonard

is a union before the age of 18 and is considered a violation of human rights.¹⁸ Lami et al. revealed that approximately 21% of women worldwide marry before age 18. In particular, the phenomenon of early marriage among female children causes trauma and hinders their chances of achieving their dreams.¹⁹ This should be discouraged as it contradicts Sustainable Development Goal Number Five, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower women and females.²⁰

In the past five years, cases of child marriage in Zimbabwe have remained rampant. Bengesai Amusa and Makonye underscored that child marriage is a problem in the 10 Provinces of Zimbabwe, with an estimated prevalence rate of 33%, which is higher than the global average of 29%.²¹ This perhaps heralds the fact that the abolition of this occurrence by 2030 may be a mirage or a dream because its prevalence in the community has remained constantly stable. Lami et al. underscored that Africa shares the largest proportion of child marriage in the globe, with 54.0% of women in Africa experiencing child marriage.²² In the same vein, Addai asserts that the Sub-Saharan area has the highest number of child marriages.²³ Statistically, it is a refuge of 18 of the world's top 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. The country of Zimbabwe, despite the existence of legal provisions that safeguard the rights of female children, paradoxically tops these countries with inordinately large cases of child marriages. There is also evidence that more than half of the females in sub-Saharan Africa marry before their 18th birthday. This has posed a major social concern in recent years due to potentially harmful health implications, such as increased probability of contracting sexually transmitted infections, child malnutrition, teenage pregnancy, missed opportunities in education, school dropout, and maternal mortality.²⁴ This is a poignant violation of children's rights, whether social, economic, cultural, legal, or otherwise Sewpaul et al., and imposes a serious concern for social work in Zimbabwe.²⁵ This reveals a dire need for social worker intervention to safeguard and protect female children from harmful religious and cultural practices.

Legislative discrepancies and female children abuse

Legislative disparities across African countries are one of the causes of the perpetual abuse of female children.²⁶ The substantial disparities between realities of sexual debut among adolescents, national (statutory and customary) laws and policies on ages of consent to sex, marriage, and medical services, and international standards around these sexual and reproductive health issues contribute immensely to the ongoing child marriage conundrum. The issue of child motherhood remains a key challenge, especially in developing countries such as Zimbabwe. Despite the worst of its effects, Zimbabwe remains stagnant in finding a solution to this quagmire. The aftermath of the story of Memory Machaya, a 14-year-old female from rural Marange who died giving birth at a church shrine, should have been an

Agere, Tatenda Nhapi, and Joyleen Chingwara, "Child Brides, Health and Socio-Economic Challenges Conundrum-Perspectives from a Zimbabwean Rural District," *Child Abuse Research in South Africa* 19, no. 2 (2018): 62–73; Addai, "African Women/Girls and HIV/AIDS: The Issue of Justice."

¹⁸ Simon Murote Kang'ethe, "The Tensions between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 4 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.15270/59-4-1180>.

¹⁹ Magarsa Lami et al., "Prevalence of Child Marriage and Associated Factors among Reproductive Age Women in Harari Regional State, Eastern Ethiopia, 2022: A Community-Based Study," *BMC Women's Health* 23, no. 1 (May 16, 2023): 267, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02409-w>.

²⁰ Lami et al., "Prevalence of Child Marriage and Associated Factors among Reproductive Age Women in Harari Regional State, Eastern Ethiopia, 2022: A Community-Based Study."

²¹ Annah V. Bengesai, Lateef B. Amusa, and Felix Makonye, "The Impact of Girl Child Marriage on the Completion of the First Cycle of Secondary Education in Zimbabwe: A Propensity Score Analysis," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 6 (June 9, 2021): e0252413, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252413>.

²² Lami et al., "Prevalence of Child Marriage and Associated Factors among Reproductive Age Women in Harari Regional State, Eastern Ethiopia, 2022: A Community-Based Study."

²³ Addai, "African Women/Girls and HIV/AIDS: The Issue of Justice."

²⁴ Sibanda, "Married Too Soon: Child Marriage in Zimbabwe"; Lami et al., "Prevalence of Child Marriage and Associated Factors among Reproductive Age Women in Harari Regional State, Eastern Ethiopia, 2022: A Community-Based Study."

²⁵ Vishanthie Sewpaul, Linda Kreitzer, and Tanusha Raniga, *The Tensions between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World* (University of Calgary Press, 2021).

²⁶ Renata Tallarico, Karabo Ozah, and Kingsley S Orievulu, "Age of Consent: A Case for Harmonizing Laws and Policies to Advance, Promote and Protect Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 25, no. 2 (2021): 94–102.

eye-opener and a fitting example to push the government to enact strict laws against child marriages. Paradoxically, the cries of agonised citizenry fell on deaf ears. However, in January 2022, another female, Ferby Munyafi (15) of Chiadzwa village in Marange, died from excessive bleeding while delivering under the watch of a faith healer. In October 2022, a 15-year-old female, Nokutenda Hwaramba from Norton, died while giving birth at a Johanne Marange apostolic sect shrine in Bikita, Masvingo Province.²⁷

According to Oberth et al., one in three females in Zimbabwe is likely to be married before turning 18 years.²⁸ Central to this challenge are several factors, but what stands out the most is that Zimbabwe has two sets of marriage laws: the Marriage Act and the Customary Marriages Act. Absurdly, neither law gives a minimum age for marriage consent. For this reason, the older men in the Johanne Marange church continue to marry underage females while hiding behind church doctrines to escape prosecution. Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko discovered that the church only has male leaders and male 'messengers' and subtly discourages female child education beyond the primary school level. In addition, the church's male leadership determines how women and females behave, their sexuality, what to wear and when not to congregate with others at church, and marriage arrangements.²⁹ Observably, the members of the apostolic sect often find solace in connecting with the political elites who constantly flock to their gatherings seeking political support, especially towards elections. This implies that political interference may be confounded with the fight against child marriage. UNICEF reports indicated that approximately 34% of females under the age of 18 are being married off in contravention of the national Constitution in Zimbabwe.³⁰

Ironically, Zimbabwe has made several international commitments to the realisation of children's rights. It is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which contain provisions that protect females against child motherhood and the rights of child mothers. In 2013, Zimbabwe adopted a new constitution stipulating that any practice violating the Constitution's provisions of the Constitution is null and void and should be abolished.³¹ This paper, therefore, brings to the fore the urgent need to protect females from multifarious kinds of abuses to give effect to their rights to the fullest. Social workers and other stakeholders should work hand in glove to form a formidable force to stop child marriages and other forms of abuse.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used the radical feminism perspective to understand the status of female children in Zimbabwe. The radical feminism strand falls within the feminist theory that emphasizes the fundamental rearrangement of society, primarily correcting the challenge of male supremacy across the social, political, and economic contexts.³² Radical feminism traces the disempowerment of women and female children from the perpetual patriarchal system and, as such, advocates for the abolishment of systems that favour males over females. This includes interrogating established gender roles, opposing sexual objectification of women, and raising public awareness about rape and violence against women, among other things. Conceptually, radical feminism aims to undo the entrenched patriarchal practices, especially in Africa, that see women as second-rate citizens subordinate to male hegemony. According to Mafa, patriarchy was usually viewed as a trans-historical phenomenon preceding or deeper than sources of oppression by the early radical feminism strand that emerged within the second-wave

²⁷ S. Buwerimwe and L. Muromo, "Another Teenager Dies Giving Birth at Shrine," 2022.

²⁸ Gemma Oberth et al., "Effectiveness of the Sista2Sista Programme in Improving HIV and Other Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes among Vulnerable Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Zimbabwe," *African Journal of AIDS Research* 20, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 158–64, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16085906.2021.1918733>.

²⁹ Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church."

³⁰ United Nations Children's Fund, "Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects.[Internet]." (New York: UNICEF, 2018).

³¹ Obdiah Mawodza, "Protecting Girls against Child Motherhood and the Rights of Child Mothers in Zimbabwe," 2018.

³² Roggeband, van der Vleuten, and van Eerdewijk, "Feminist Engagement with Gender Equality in Regional Governance."

feminism in the 1960s.³³ Ritzer and Stepnisky also emphasized that the patriarchal system is not only the ancient and most universal form of domination but the number-one form and model for issues that, among other things, include rape and gender inequality.³⁴ Notably, radical feminists locate the root cause of women's disempowerment in patriarchal gender relations, as opposed to legal systems.³⁵ Observably, the legal systems are by-products of patriarchy, and a need exists for a paradigm shift in the design and implementation of legal provisions.

Though the first wave of feminism was primarily concerned with the removal of legal barriers to gender equality, such as voting rights and property rights, the second wave extended the debate to include sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities.³⁶ The second-wave feminism also drew attention to domestic violence and marital rape issues, the establishment of rape crisis and battered women's shelters, and changes in custody and divorce law.³⁷ According to Cornwall, primary players and pioneers of this second wave of feminism included Shulamith Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Carol Hanisch, and Judith Brown.³⁸ These radical feminists aimed to dismantle patriarchal society, thus putting an end to male-inclined perspectives in the mainstream. Also central to radical feminism is radical egalitarianism, an approach to distributing economic resources to diminish differences among people based on sex, cultural roles, or way of life. The constitution of Zimbabwe emphasises the importance of equality in all sectors of life.

Radical feminism unveils the origin and subsequent results of women's oppression and domination by their male counterparts. It presents the patriarchal system as a continuum of practices that support men's supremacy. Thus, this system can be singled out as one of the drawbacks hindering the success of efforts and programmes designed to empower female children. Mafa argues that patriarchally inclined practices like polygamy exacerbate the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among women.³⁹ Research by Gazimbi et al. revealed that polygyny amplifies risky sexual behaviours such as sexual networking and concurrent sexual partnerships, all of which were found to be meaningfully associated with the risk of HIV transmission.⁴⁰ Musevenzi further highlight that polygamy is prevalent among the men affiliated to the Johanne Marange Apostolic church.⁴¹ Radical feminism argues that due to men's self-reasoned supremacy, most support polygamy. At the same time, women and female children have been relegated to domestic duties and, of course, denied a chance to contribute meaningfully to public spheres such as politics and economic development.

Subsequently, the radical feminism framework is welcome as it vehemently challenges the systems of authoritarianism and the cyclical, hostile practices in relationships between men and women, which have produced a vicious cycle of deprivation and disempowerment. Ritzer and Stepnisky postulated that the observations of radical feminists inspired the desire to create an egalitarian society by creating separate spaces and cultures to end patriarchy.⁴² Radical feminism succinctly debunks the travails that women have been universally enduring, largely due to patriarchal power arrangements.⁴³ This situation is being replicated in the Johanne Marange Church, where females are constantly denied the opportunity to advance their education as well as access to sexual and reproductive health. Radical feminism asserts that women have absolute positive values as women and should have opportunities to

³³ Itai Mafa, "An Appraisal of Gender-Focused Non-Governmental Organizations as Agents of Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Zimbabwe: A Case of Harare City" (University of Fort Hare, 2017).

³⁴ George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky, *Classical Sociological Theory* (Sage publications, 2020).

³⁵ Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Classical Sociological Theory*.

³⁶ Andrea Cornwall, "Taking off International Development's Straightjacket of Gender," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 127–39.

³⁷ Roggeband, van der Vleuten, and van Eerdewijk, "Feminist Engagement with Gender Equality in Regional Governance."

³⁸ Cornwall, "Taking off International Development's Straightjacket of Gender."

³⁹ Mafa, "An Appraisal of Gender-Focused Non-Governmental Organizations as Agents of Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Zimbabwe: A Case of Harare City."

⁴⁰ Martin Gazimbi et al., "Is Polygyny a Risk Factor in the Transmission of HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa? A Systematic Review," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 24 (December 1, 2020): 198–212, <https://doi.org/10.29063/ajrh2020/v24i4.20>.

⁴¹ Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-Based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe."

⁴² Ritzer and Stepnisky, *Classical Sociological Theory*.

⁴³ Amartya Sen, "The Political Economy of Hunger," *Common Knowledge* 25, no. 1–3 (April 1, 2019): 348–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-7299462>.

showcase their talents in all spheres of life. In addition, they contest the adage that women can only excel in nurturance and caregiving roles, mainly because they are fragile and emotional. Clearly, radical feminism shows how awkwardly women are positioned in societies, and no doubt this is also backed by how the HIV/AIDS pandemic has severely worsened the survival of the female child. This points to the need for social workers to spearhead interventions to safeguard females affiliated with the Johanne Marange church so that the females can access education and other sexual adolescent-related rights.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The paper adopted a qualitative research approach to understand the context or setting of the participants by gathering perspectives of social workers, counsellors, welfare officers, and sociologists concerning the abuse of female children within the Johanne Marange apostolic church. The researcher sought to unpack the circumstances of female children affiliated with the Johanne Marange by exploring the experiences and perceptions of social service practitioners who had previously dealt with cases involving these females. Exploratory and descriptive designs were used in this study. The exploratory approach was chosen due to its ability to provide experiential information as articulated by those directly involved in the subject matter,⁴⁴ while the descriptive approach was chosen to describe the participants' perspectives on various abuses meted out to female children occurring within the apostolic sects in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.⁴⁵

Research domain and justification of choice

The research was conducted in the Masvingo District, Zimbabwe, where the phenomenon of various kinds of child abuse is widespread among community members affiliated with the Johanne Marange Apostolic sect, and little has been done to surmount this problem. As such, the study sought to unpack the circumstances of female children affiliated with the Johanne Marange Apostolic church.

Study population and unit of analysis

The study interviewed 20 social workers, counselors, welfare officers, psychologists, and sociologists who work and live in the Masvingo district. This was done to capture the views of practitioners who witness the perpetual abuses meted out to the female children by the Johanne Marange Apostolic church in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

Sampling procedure

A sample of 20 informants, 17 women, and 3 men, were purposively selected from twenty professionals in the health and social service sectors who worked directly in programmes involving women and female children. The three male informants were included as they were also involved in women and female child empowerment programmes. These participants participated in an in-depth structured interview. They were believed to give an evidence-based narrative of the abuses that female children and women endure in the Johanne Marange Apostolic church. This also allowed the researcher to gather a perspective of male practitioners in health administration and social services, since the subject matter is presumed to be a by-product of patriarchy. The study excluded other social service practitioners who did not work directly in women's and female empowerment programmes.

Data collection

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with the informants (social service practitioners) at their convenience. An in-depth interview guide was used to conduct the interviews with informants serving as community members and leaders. Their views affirmed the circumstances of female children in Johanna Marange church. The interviews took 15 to 20 minutes to complete. At the same time, the

⁴⁴ Scott F Turner, Laura B Cardinal, and Richard M Burton, "Research Design for Mixed Methods: A Triangulation-Based Framework and Roadmap," *Organizational Research Methods* 20, no. 2 (2017): 243–67.

⁴⁵ John W Creswell, "Reflections on the MMIRA the Future of Mixed Methods Task Force Report," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (Sage Publications Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA, 2016).

researcher also used observation methods to assess the temperamental cues of the participants and their impact on the findings. The gathered data was captured using an audio recorder and then transcribed, and codes and themes were generated.

Data analysis

The collected data were transcribed, and the information was divided into categories and then developed into themes. The thematic analysis procedures were utilised to identify and analyse patterns in qualitative data. Thematic analysis follows a phased and rigorous process of reading and re-reading data to establish meaningful patterns in the codes and themes.⁴⁶ Data analysis followed a six-stage process that involved the following: understanding the information gathered, formulating preliminary codes, looking for themes among codes, revising themes, outlining and identifying themes, and constructing the final account.⁴⁷

Ethical and legal requirements

Ethical issues are a key component of research, particularly in the social sciences. The principal researcher ensured that all the requisite ethical considerations were met, such as respecting the rights of the participants to withdraw from the study at any time, respecting the participants' confidentiality, and upholding their anonymity using pseudonyms or code names. The principal investigator explained to key informants that all the shared information would be used for academic purposes only and their details were not to be included in the final presentation of findings. The verbatim quotations from the dialogue were assigned codes such as (KI), which cannot be linked to any of the key informants. The key informants signed the ethical consent after a proper briefing of the research process. Before conducting the research, the principal investigator sought ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the University of Fort Hare. The study was approved because the researcher adhered to and conformed to the guidelines of ethical research practices provided by the institution, with Ethical Clearance Number (KAN011SCH101). To protect people's physical and mental well-being, respect their moral and cultural beliefs, as well as their religious and philosophical convictions, and uphold other fundamental rights like respect for privacy while maintaining the highest level of confidentiality, research ethics were established.⁴⁸

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: The resultant Themes

Number	Thematic finding
1	Cultural Prescriptions Informing Child Abuse
2	Harmful religious practices allow child abuse
3	Confounded access to the Adolescent sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) programme stifles children's rights and their empowerment.
4	Economic hardships in Zimbabwe motivate child marriage.

Cultural Prescriptions Informing Child Abuse

The findings outlined the existence and impact of archaic practices in some segments of the Masvingo District. These practices include the appeasement of the avenging spirit of a dead individual who died because of a deliberate or accidental killing, so that the accused family compensates the family of the deceased with a virgin bride. To this end, Magosvongwe and Nyamende revealed that cultural

⁴⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "What Can 'Thematic Analysis' Offer Health and Wellbeing Researchers?," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* (Taylor & Francis, 2014).

⁴⁷ Braun and Clarke, "What Can 'Thematic Analysis' Offer Health and Wellbeing Researchers?"

⁴⁸ Dilay Karademir, Ezgi Ağadayi and Seher Karahan, "The Effect of Covid-19 Anxiety on Prenatal Distress and Prenatal Attachment in Pregnant Women," *Interdisciplinary Medical Journal* 14, no. 48 (April 30, 2023): 31–38, <https://doi.org/10.17944/interdiscip.1285742>.

ascriptions often treat women as insignificant people who cannot decide on their own.⁴⁹ Gubba and Chisale advocate that cultural prescriptions play a central role in reinforcing old and harmful practices, such as the appeasement of the spirit of the dead by handing over a virgin female child to the family of the deceased. Inopportunately, the female child is married off to a family member of the deceased without her consent.⁵⁰ This is a gross violation of the human rights of female children.⁵¹ This socio-cultural practice still challenges female children and stakeholders interested in the wellness of women and female children. The following assertions demonstrate the link between culture and the abuse practices of the Johhane Marange sect.

“In some communities, they still give female children to marry older men in exchange for food or money [Kuzvarira], while some give female children to appease the spirit of a deceased [Kuripa ngozi]. This objectification of female children is still happening in contemporary Zimbabwe. This resonates with what is happening at Marange church” (KI2).

“Culture limits female children to reproduction and household duties, and in some families, only boy children are funded to further their education, while their counterparts are either married off to older men or made to stay at home until they get married” (KI17).

Cultural standards and customs remain influential in many segments of the Zimbabwean society. These standards continue to inform how children are perceived and what opportunities they have. Directly or indirectly, cultural facets dictate what happens in families and even other institutions, such as governments. This resonates with Hlupo and Tsikira, who established that despite the existence of programmes and statutes aimed at protecting and empowering female children against exploitation in social, political, and economic realms, the projected goals are far from being achieved. This is because harmful cultural practices still thrive.⁵² Inopportunately, harmful cultural practices such as *chiramu/sibale* (sexual dalliance), *chimutsamapfihwa* (marrying of a girl child to the husband of a deceased aunt), among other things, remain rampant in some segments of the Zimbabwean society.⁵³ Female children must be assisted to weaken the cultural prescriptions to achieve any economic foothold against their male counterparts. Practical economic empowerment for women and young girls will increase opportunities for women and young girls to pacify and destroy patriarchal systems, that increase their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Harmful religious practices that allow child abuse

Findings outlined that despite the existence of legislation designated to protect and promote the well-being of female children in Zimbabwe, there are religious practices that continue to cause immense suffering to female children to date. Religious issues still present challenges to the empowerment of female children in Masvingo District. Within the Johanne Marange apostolic sect, female children are rarely allowed to further their education. Instead, they are married to older men when they reach Grade 7. The following assertions attest to the impact of the apostolic sect (Johanne Marange) doctrine on women and female children's empowerment:

⁴⁹ Ruby Magosvongwe and Abner Nyamende, “What Has Culture Got to Do With It?: Girl-Women Marginalisation and Human Rights Violations—The Case of Zimbabwean Women as Depicted in Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region (2003),” *Journal of Literary Studies* 32, no. 1 (2016): 127–40.

⁵⁰ Angela Gubba and Sinenhlanhla Sithulisiwe Chisale, “Implications of Consolidating Patriarchy Through Exploitation of ‘Better’ Ways of Conveying Disagreeable Practices to Chihera, the Epitome of Empowered Women in Zimbabwe,” in *Chihera in Zimbabwe* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 335–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12466-2_19.

⁵¹ Simon Kang'ethe, “Perceptions of Stakeholders on Drivers of Stigma Subjected to People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Alice Town, Eastern Cape: Implications for Human Rights and Social Service Professions,” *African Journal of Social Work* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v13i1.4>; Sewpaul, Kreitzer, and Raniga, *The Tensions between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World*.

⁵² Takesure Hlupo and Joseph Tsikira, “Still Caught-up in the Cultural Abyss: The Plight of the Girl Child,” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3, no. 3 (2012): 234–40.

⁵³ Mufaro G Chamisa et al., “Religious Affiliation—Child Marriages Nexus in Zimbabwe: A Case of Marange,” *Journal of Economics and Finance (DRJ-JEF)* 4, no. 2 (2019): 38–44.

“In the Apostolic sect, female children do not go further with their education. They only go up to grade 7 and are married to older men. This has been happening for years, and nothing seems to change, even when we have a constitution that prohibits the violation of children’s rights” (KI5).

“Some religious leaders use their authority to brainwash unsuspecting teenagers and end up abusing them sexually. Those religious leaders often do that for ritual purposes to get more power to hypnotize their followers” (KI6).

“The Johanne Marange apostolic church continues to run despite reports of malpractices, and women and young girls continue to suffer. On paper, it is like we are making progress, but we are doing badly because girls are still being abused, and culprits are never apprehended for prosecution” (KI15).

At a time when the need to empower female children is crucial, the religious apostolic sects continue to pull in the opposite direction. Female children within the apostolic sect system are not allowed to advance their education prospects, but rather, they are married off to older men. Notably, this exploitation is also becoming rampant among the self-proclaimed prophets who use young females for rituals to perform miracles in their church. These practices continue to go unpunished despite the existence of legislation designed to protect children. Muchacha, Matsika, and Nhapi outlined that harmful religious beliefs and culture form a formidable combination that silences the female children.⁵⁴ In addition, it is a norm that when a girl becomes pregnant, she must go and marry the boy or the person responsible, even if it was unplanned.

Confounded access to the Adolescent sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) programme stifles children’s rights and their empowerment

The findings also revealed the experience of female children in accessing Adolescent and Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) in Masvingo district. Though the service has been made available in health services centres and clinics, members of the Johanne Marange Apostolic church are bound by the church doctrine, which inhibits them from using services such as contraceptives and other essential health care. The findings also revealed that the socio-cultural and religious issues still present challenges to the marketing and uptake of ASRH services among the apostolic sect members. The following assertions substantiate the above outcome:

“Our communities are generally conservative, which makes it hard for parents to discuss sexual health with their adolescent children. Although the ASRH programme is empowering young girls and boys with the knowledge to prevent HIV infections, teenagers from the apostolic sects are adamant about accessing the service. The combination of religion and tradition is formidable and requires serious engagement to dismantle the residue of these cultural barriers that inhibit parental discussions on the subject with their children” (KI15).

“The ASRH programme has led to the establishment of youth-friendly sections in clinics which provide information and services to girls and boys, but the girls in the Johanne Marange Apostolic church are not so keen to utilize this service because of their religious views” (KI19).

“The Johanne Marange female members are urged to have babies in their church shrines instead of clinics and hospitals, which makes young girls in those religious practices susceptible to death and HIV infections. Moreover, Johanne Marange's apostolic group promotes polygamy, and young girls are often married off to older men. This has happened for many years, and no serious

⁵⁴ Munyaradzi Muchacha, Abel Blessing Matsika, and Tatenda Nhapi, “Child Marriage among the Apostolic Sects in Zimbabwe: Implications for Social Work Practice,” *The Tensions between Culture and Human Rights*, 2016, 165.

action has been taken to stop this devious practice. The leaders in the church constantly hide in their doctrine” (KI17).

For more than four decades, the economic situation in Zimbabwe has followed a seesaw-like pattern, with the marginalised population constantly slipping down the economic ladder. Undoubtedly, females have been at the end of the continuum, struggling to make ends meet, as they lack the proper education to compete with males in the labour market. Female children within the apostolic sects have had to deal with the ordeals of being married to older men and subjected to polygamy amid other economic challenges. Optimistically, more economic empowerment for female children will reduce their vulnerability to harmful religious practices that increase their vulnerability to abuse and HIV infections. Sithole echoed the contention that prohibiting female children from accessing sexual and reproductive health constitutes a gross violation of their right to access family planning and maternal healthcare services.⁵⁵ Ngome revealed that the use of reproductive health care for adolescents in Zimbabwe remains significantly low despite the high rates of maternal mortality and neonatal morbidity.⁵⁶ However, the proportion of adolescent women in sexual unions currently using modern contraception is low, whereas more than half of adolescent women continue to give birth.

Economic hardships in Zimbabwe motivate child marriage

The study findings revealed that women resorted to informal business enterprises to empower themselves due to severe economic conditions. In tandem, Muchacha, Matsika, and Nhapi outlined that child marriage is dominant among poor households, thus, with the prevailing economic conditions in Zimbabwe, child marriage is more prevalent.⁵⁷ Due to the polygamous nature of the marriages among the members of the apostolic sect, the young mothers must fend for their children. The participants also revealed that women do petty jobs to raise money for food and clothes for themselves and their children. The following verbatim quotations support this:

“The men within the Johanne Marange apostolic church are predominantly polygamous and are involved in small-scale jobs like welding, carpentry, and so on. Therefore, the young women and their children often look for work opportunities like crop field cultivating or weeding, which do not pay much, but provide them with money for food, or in some instances, they work for second-hand clothes” (KI10).

“Women and young girls from Johanne Marange apostolic church suffer from several economic challenges, and they end up working in people’s fields to have food” (KI13).

“Due to a lack of proper education, the women and their children from Johanne Marange apostolic church cannot get better employment opportunities, and some even miss out on government empowerment programmes as they do not have identity documents. The government provides much support for women in business through the Broad-Based Women Economic Empowerment framework. However, women and young girls from Johanne Marange apostolic church cannot produce the required documents to secure financial backing” (KI12).

Axiomatically, a paradigm shift is urgently required to change the economic circumstances of female children who, for more than four decades of Zimbabwean independence, continue to be on the sidelines of economic development. Agere, Nhapi, and Chingwara pointed out that poverty remains a push factor for the increase in child brides in Zimbabwe.⁵⁸ In support, Motsi and Akşit emphasized that

⁵⁵ Linet Sithole, “Women’s Right to Access Family Planning and Maternal Health Care Services in Hwange Rural District, Zimbabwe: Challenges and Opportunities,” 2021.

⁵⁶ Enock Ngome, “Adolescent Women’s Reproductive Health Care Utilisation in Zimbabwe: A Contextual Investigation” (University of the Witwatersrand, 2016).

⁵⁷ Muchacha, Matsika, and Nhapi, “Child Marriage among the Apostolic Sects in Zimbabwe: Implications for Social Work Practice.”

⁵⁸ Agere, Nhapi, and Chingwara, “Child Brides, Health and Socio-Economic Challenges Conundrum-Perspectives from a Zimbabwean Rural District.”

the problems faced by the girl child worsened due to the unending economic predicaments, which have resulted in a few getting richer while the rest become poorer.⁵⁹ The economic programmes earmarked to empower young girls in Zimbabwe continue to be concentrated at the apex of a government authority. Optimistically, exposing female children in grassroots settings to more economic empowerment will reduce the susceptibility of female children to harmful religious practices that compromise their social and economic functioning in the national development agenda.

DISCUSSIONS

The current findings outlined that in some segments of Masvingo District, people still hold on to archaic cultural practices such as the appeasement of the avenging spirit of a dead individual who died because of murder or accidental killing, and a virgin is sent to his family as compensation. The girl child is married off without her consent. This reveals the unfair treatment that female children still endure in modern society. Similarly, Gubba and Chisale underscored the impact of culture in strengthening certain practices that undermine the human rights of female children.⁶⁰ Through archaic cultural practices, women are constantly exploited, and little has been done to cushion or avert the perpetual suffering of female children. Coupled with patriarchal dominance, religious organisations augment and reinforce males' control over women and female children. Because of that, Mugabe underscored that child sexual abuse has far-reaching consequences for the survivors.⁶¹ For instance, it results in female children having low self-esteem, which increases their susceptibility to further abuse. Furthermore, Mugabe associates females' sexual abuse with harmful cultural and religious practices, poverty, and HIV/AIDS, and trusted individuals such as family members, teachers, neighbours, caregivers, and respected community members are usually the perpetrators.⁶² Tshugulu, et al. also pinpointed that the African continent is a harbour of various cultures and ethnicities, where numerous cultural practices such as virginity tests, female genital mutilation, and traditional male circumcision and child marriages are still being practised.⁶³ These practices contravene numerous children's rights as enshrined in global statutes such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, social workers and like-minded similar institutions must design ways to resolve these mishaps.

The current study further outlined that despite the existence of legislation designated to protect and promote the well-being of female children in Zimbabwe, religious organisations continue to cause immense suffering to women and female children to date. Within the Johanne Marange apostolic sect, female children are rarely allowed to further their education. Instead, they are married to older men when they reach Grade 7. This confirms the findings by the Girl Child Network, which revealed that approximately 8000 females have been forced into early marriages across the country of Zimbabwe.⁶⁴ Central to this mishap has been the operations of religious organizations. Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko support the findings, citing that the abuses perpetrated on female children belonging to Johanne Marange Apostolic Church are embedded in the church doctrine, which promotes polygamy and intergenerational marriages, thus instituting an environment for the abuse of women and the female child under the facade of 'sacredness' of the religious clique.⁶⁵ Sadly, this state of affairs continues to happen despite the reports and the presence of legislative frameworks inclined towards safeguarding children and women. In the name of culture and religion, many female children and women continue to face barriers that hinder them from pursuing education and, therefore, attaining economic emancipation. In

⁵⁹ Vongai Motsi and Sait Akşit, "The International Organizations and the Problems of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe," *Yakın Doğu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 15, no. 2 (2022).

⁶⁰ Gubba and Chisale, "Implications of Consolidating Patriarchy Through Exploitation of 'Better' Ways of Conveying Disagreeable Practices to Chihera, the Epitome of Empowered Women in Zimbabwe."

⁶¹ Miriam Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe" (University of the Free State, 2021).

⁶² Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe."

⁶³ Ansley Nonsikelelo Tshugulu et al., "The Influence of Culture on Child Rights Violations in Zimbabwe: A Case Study," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 3 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.15270/59-3-1141>.

⁶⁴ Girl Child Network, "Gravity of Girl Child Sexual Abuse in Zimbabwe: Towards Creating A Culture of Prevention," *Unpublished Work*, 2004.

⁶⁵ Dudzai, Zvokuomba, and Mboko, "Religion, Women, and Girls' Rights in Zimbabwe: The Case of Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church."

tandem, Muridzo, Simbine, and Chigangaidze outlined that, on paper, Zimbabwe has a wide-ranging child protection legal framework.⁶⁶ Still, the prevalence of child sexual abuse remains a social menace, which raises doubts regarding the effectiveness of law enforcement agents and the justice system of the country. Child sexual abuse cuts across all spheres of life and requires legal, societal, governmental, and economic fraternities to genuinely combine and fight the gross child and human rights violations taking place in some religious and cultural settings. The connection between child marriages and religion in Zimbabwe is indispensable, as most of the Zimbabwean population is religious. Observably, good religious values can shape individuals to become resilient and empowered people, and bad practices can turn societies into havens of misery and pain.

The study also underscored that the female children affiliated with religious groups such as the Johanne Marange apostolic sect experience difficulties in accessing Adolescent and Sexual and Reproductive Health (ASRH) services in the Masvingo district. Though the service has been made available in health services centres and clinics, members of the Johanne Marange are hampered by the church doctrine, which constrains them from accessing services such as contraceptives and seeking other essential health care. Chamisa, et al. aver that religious organisations not only inhibit female children from accessing secondary and tertiary education but also deny them access to the freely available Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health (ARSH) services.⁶⁷ This contravenes several global provisions on education and health stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals, the limit of which is 2030. To this end, Mugabe revealed that child sexual abuse affects the social functioning and psychological faculties of female children, which negatively impact their academic performance, health, and future economic survival.⁶⁸ Masvaure expressed that though religious rights are recognised in the Zimbabwean constitution, it is also crystal clear that basic human rights such as seeking medical health should be respected.⁶⁹ Thus, the doctrine of Johanne Marange, which prohibits followers from seeking modern medical care, infringes on the health rights of female children and women. The unending cases of maternal and neonatal mortality of female children are indicators of the failures of the sect and government to protect female children from death and harm. The findings also resonate with Tsara, who revealed that though the government of Zimbabwe recognises healthcare as a basic human right for all the people, the practices and traditions prevalent in the African Apostolic Indigenous Churches (AAICs), such as the Johanne Marange Apostolic sect, continue to inhibit congregants from accessing contemporary medical health care interventions.⁷⁰ Tsara further asserts that the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church continues to instruct its members to exclusively rely on the Holy Spirit and not to go to the hospital to access modern healthcare, which predisposes female children to HIV infection and death when giving birth.⁷¹

The findings also revealed that the harsh economic conditions prevailing in Zimbabwe have landed most women and female children into informal business enterprises to empower themselves economically. Furthermore, the perpetual economic woes in the country continue to make for harrowing experiences for young mothers in polygamous marriages as they struggle to meet the basic needs of their children. This resonates with Murewanhema, et al. who underscored the influence of the economic hardships in the country of Zimbabwe, particularly on female children who end up engaging in transactional sex to meet their basic needs.⁷² The authors noted factors such as socioeconomic factors, negative peer pressure, childhood abuse, and the influence of uncensored social media as key drivers

⁶⁶ Noel Garikai Muridzo, Samuel Lisenga Simbine, and Robert Kudakwashe Chigangaidze, "Some Religious, Myths, Beliefs, and Cultural Dispositions as Contributors to Child Sexual Abuse in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 43, no. 2 (April 2, 2024): 150–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2024.2311412>.

⁶⁷ Chamisa et al., "Religious Affiliation–Child Marriages Nexus in Zimbabwe: A Case of Marange."

⁶⁸ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe."

⁶⁹ Steven Masvaure, "Liberalising Health-Seeking Behaviour of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Sect in Manicaland, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Health Management* 25, no. 3 (September 7, 2023): 465–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09720634211065203>.

⁷⁰ Lindah Tsara, "Religio-Cultural Standpoints Hindering Adolescent and Young Women's Access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Zimbabwe," 2022, 147–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99922-3_8.

⁷¹ Tsara, "Religio-Cultural Standpoints Hindering Adolescent and Young Women's Access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Zimbabwe."

⁷² Grant Murewanhema et al., "Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Zimbabwe: A Threat to Human and Social Development," *Child Abuse Review* 32, no. 2 (March 18, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2794>.

behind child sex work. Fakomogbon asserts that in the context of Ghana, a collection of factors such as lack of financial emancipation, discriminative cultural practices, inadequate access to education, and poverty contribute immensely to child marriages.⁷³ In the same vein, Motsi and Akşit outlined that the issue of child sexual abuse has received distinguished attention across all spheres of life through the establishment of women empowerment programmes in health and economics.⁷⁴ However, efforts have been primarily directed toward curative interventions. Therefore, much needs to be done to dismantle the cultural and religious facets that incubate toxic gender relations and inequality.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of a framework of economic opportunities targeting female children, coupled with a strong rise in female children's school enrolment levels, contributes to the decrease in HIV/AIDS rates amongst women and female children.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the pitfalls in implementation make progress foggy as cases of child marriages and child sexual abuse remain rampant. Literature pinpoints the disharmony between the Marriage Act and Customary Act, whereby the two sets of Acts do not guide the age of consent, and the latter promotes polygamy. Polygamy promotes intergenerational marriages, thus endangering the lives of female children.⁷⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Zimbabwe has made significant strides in formulating protective legislation for young girls and women, but the enforcement of such legal provisions has been erratic; hence, it is pertinent that the country intensifies the training of community safety personnel. Community-safe persons will be educated to train and report abuse against young girls that occurs in their respective communities.
- Through the Ministry of Education, the government of Zimbabwe can institute structures to protect female children from abuse in school settings. Trained professionals, such as social workers, can be hired specifically to support and empower female children to become independent and resilient.
- To impact future generations affiliated with the apostolic sects, the government should institute scholarships for female children to further their education beyond Grade 7. This will change the trajectory of apostolic sect female children, as education remains the key to their total emancipation.

Implications for social work practice

This paper has revealed the challenges of achieving sustainable development goals on health, gender equality, and women's empowerment in the Zimbabwean context. Understanding the undercurrent factors that perpetuate the unending sexual exploitation and abuse of women and women children is crucial in drafting interventions to prevent this problem. The paper unpacked the impact of the gruesome combination of religion and social and economic sectors on female child abuse, thus revealing why it is pertinent to find solutions for a more sustainable and equitable development for all. Social practitioners also learn to understand and analyse the systems that incubate the challenges presented to female children, particularly in the Johanne Marange Apostolic church. This will assist practitioners in tailoring intervention models that appropriately address the needs of women and female children who are currently facing abuse and exploitation in religious circles. Practitioners who work in rapid response to gender-based violence are likely to benefit from the findings of this study and can design appropriate advocacy programmes to address the issue. The social sector professions can see that documentary or law enactment does not translate into change, necessitating an integrated approach to practice with female children to comprehensively respond to the phenomenon. They need to stand toe to toe with law enforcement agencies to ensure justice prevails.

⁷³ G. Fakomogbon, "Why Is Child Marriage so Prevalent in West Africa?," <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/child-marriage-west-africa-explained>, 2021.

⁷⁴ Motsi and Akşit, "The International Organizations And The Problems Of The Girl Child In Zimbabwe."

⁷⁵ Motsi and Akşit, "The International Organizations And The Problems Of The Girl Child In Zimbabwe."

⁷⁶ Motsi and Akşit, "The International Organizations And The Problems Of The Girl Child In Zimbabwe."

CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe has witnessed years of economic woes, and the situation has constantly hit women and female children the hardest. Often, female children are made to unwillingly shoulder heavy family loads. On top of the asymmetrical roles, female children have either had to forgo their education, as most families tend to favour boy children. Moreover, female children continue to be on the receiving end of all forms of abuse across the social, political, economic, and religious spectrum. However, the Johanne Marange group sits right at the pinnacle of female-child abuse, as young females continue to be married off to older men against their will, which increases their susceptibility to further abuse and even HIV infections. More so, the Johanne Marange apostolic church has been singled out for its stance concerning girl child education and access to sexual and reproductive health services by its congregants. Certainly, this is a cause of concern and should be addressed urgently if Zimbabwe is committed to achieving key SDGS on education, gender equality, and health. Positively, providing more economic empowerment for women and female children will reduce the chances of abuse of women and young girls in light of harmful religious practices, as well as their susceptibility to HIV infections.

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