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THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON CHILD RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The article explores child rights violations emanating from harmful cultural practices in Zimbabwe. A qualitative case study research design was used. The targeted population included people considered custodians of the Ndebele culture in the Nkayi district of Zimbabwe. Social workers familiar with Ndebele culture and working in the child protection field within the Nkayi district also participated in the study. In-depth interviews were used to collect data. The data were analysed using Creswell's thematic analysis. Whilst culture undoubtedly provides some ecological resources for the realisation of child rights, findings highlight harmful cultural practices which violate children's rights, and these are the focus of this article.

Keywords: Child rights; culture; rights violations; social work; Ndebele; Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of the high moral standards embodied in the Zimbabwean fabric of culture, research has demonstrated that traditional practices like labia elongation, puberty rites of passage such as the *Vukhomba* practice among the Vatsonga, sexual dalliance, and many others are damaging, especially to young girls (Mawodza, 2019; Muzingili & Taruvinga, 2017; Simbine, le Roux & Muridzo, 2023). Poverty is cited as a major driver of harmful cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa (Wamoyi *et al.*, 2014). There is wider research on harmful cultural

practices in general, yet very little research has been done focusing more on specific cultural groups in Zimbabwe. This qualitative study aims to explore the various Ndebele cultural practices that may lead to violations of children's rights. A background to the study is presented giving context; the research problem and the rationale for the article are explained, and finally, the research questions which guided the study are addressed. The research methodology and the ethical considerations relevant to the study are outlined. Limitations of the study are indicated, followed by a synthesis of the implications of the study's findings for safeguarding child rights and social work practice in Zimbabwe. Recommendations for policy and social work practice are offered. The article concludes by advocating for a double-pronged approach to apply concerted pressure to uproot harmful cultural practices and strengthen positive cultural practices.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

African cultures are characterised by several harmful cultural practices that violate children's rights such as virginity testing, traditional male circumcision, and child marriages, to mention a few. In 2018 UNICEF (2018:1) estimated that in Africa 125 million girls and women were married before they were 18, and 30% of women were married before they could legally do so. The absence of financial independence, gender discrimination, inadequate access to education, and poverty are among the factors that contribute to child marriages (Fakomogbon, 2021). For example, in Ghana, where early marriage is frequent, there was a growth of 7.9 percent from 2014 (19.3%) to 2018 (27%), whilst in 2021 over 80 000 girls aged 12 to 17 were in a marital union (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022:1-4). Makombe (2016) argues that the debt-bondage practice known as *kuroodza*, in which a household in poverty swaps a girl child with another household in exchange for aid, is a cause of child marriages in Zimbabwe.

According to Mdhluliand Kugara (2017), South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia are among the countries in Africa that practise virginity testing. Virginity testing is a harmful cultural custom that is used to justify violence against women and girls under the guise of maintaining purity (Farise, 2019). This harmful cultural custom is occasionally carried out, perhaps to secure financial security for the girl's family during her marriage. Virginity testing on children is a detrimental practice that infringes on their rights to dignity, privacy, and health. Traditional male circumcision refers to a technique in which boys and young men are circumcised by a traditional operator who is untrained professionally or medically (Tusa, Weldesenbet & Tefera, 2021). Dehydration, death, bleeding, infections, haemorrhaging, urine retention, and penile amputations are possible side effects of this type of circumcision (Douglas, Maluleke, Maanyapelo & Pinkney-Atkinson, 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, this type of circumcision is typical and used as a rite of passage and a sign of manhood. Behrens (2014) contends that children's participation in cultural life must be safeguarded because cultural participation can be exploited to violate other basic rights, such as their rights to education and health. Despite the existence of these harmful cultural practices in Africa that violate children's rights, it is crucial to note that culture in Africa determines moral norms, has an impact on personality formation, and is also a source of ecological resources that social workers can utilise to ensure children's rights are upheld. It is important to acknowledge that there are cultural practices that seek to promote children's rights in Africa and these include communal care of children, the

extended family system as a safety net, preserving folklore, and encouraging various children's games that aid to socialise children (Mahuntse, 2021). Thus, whilst we discuss the contribution of culture to child rights violations, it is imperative to note that we are not blind to the immensely positive contribution that good cultural practices make to the realisation and protection of child rights.

In Zimbabwe, culture continues to be one of the factors contributing to violations of children's rights, despite the country having ratified and domesticated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) through the implementation of legal measures to safeguard children (Sibanda, 2022). Children in Zimbabwe are susceptible to various detrimental cultural behaviours like sexual dalliance that violate their rights to protection against sexual abuse. Accordingly, harmful cultural practices interfere with children's rights in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, for instance, by violating their right to an education or by exposing them to sexually explicit material sometimes through rites of passage (Muzingili, 2017). Yet there are positive cultural practices in Zimbabwe that continue to provide ecological resources for the promotion of child rights, welfare, and care (Mahuntse, 2021; Simbine & le Roux, 2022). As such, there is a need to advocate for the integration of sound African cultural practices into mainline human rights principles in a way that may enhance the realisation of child rights in Africa, whilst discouraging the continued practice of harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), labia elongation, sexual dalliance, among many others. Drawing on Ndebele culture from Zimbabwe as a case study, the article demonstrates how cultural practices can in certain instances infringe on children's rights. The article adds a social work voice to ongoing debates on culture and children's rights violations. It contributes to building social workers' cultural awareness and competencies necessary when working with children and their families in the context of Zimbabwe in the ensuing sections below.

Aim of the study

The study aimed to explore those Ndebele cultural practices that may lead to violations of children's rights in the Nkayi rural district.

Research question

What cultural practices of the Ndebele people of the Nkayi district violate children's rights?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the constructivist research paradigm. In line with the dictates of constructivism, the study employed a qualitative research approach, which is defined as a technique for acquiring non-numerical data (Bhasin, 2020). The approach helped the researcher to examine phenomena for which there was little information or data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research involved comprehending the ideas, points of view, and experiences of the participants (Bhandari, 2022). Given that the researchers wanted to acquire both in-depth information on the problem under study and verbal data to capture the meanings that the participants attributed to their experiences, the qualitative research approach was appropriate.

This study used a case study research design, which is defined by McCombes (2021) as a methodology to obtain specific, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world

subject through a thorough analysis of a specific issue, such as a person, group, place, or phenomenon. A case study research design enabled the researchers to collect data using a wide range of data collection methods such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) which improved our understanding of the problem (Miller, Vander Laan, & Marković, 2020).

The participants and key informants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique. With the aid of a local authority official, the researcher was able to find the appropriate sample. Thus 12 participants and 3 key informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge of Ndebele culture in Nkayi. This is in line with the purpose of purposive sampling as it seeks to identify specific sources that can provide comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Murauzi, 2018; Robinson, 2014). The inclusion and exclusion criteria for selection to participate in the study included the following: resident in Nkayi rural district for a minimum period of 5 years, being a traditional leader, considered an elder and custodian of the Ndebele culture in Nkayi district, either male or female, and a willingness to participate in the study. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for key informants included that one has to be: a child protection social worker domiciled in the Nkayi district, have basic knowledge of Ndebele culture, have been resident in the Nkayi district for the past five years, either male or female, and a willingness to participate in the study.

The researcher used in-depth interviews to collect data from the participants and key informants. In-depth interviews enabled the researchers to gather comprehensive verbatim data, allowing for a deeper exploration of the phenomenon under study. In-depth interview guides were used as data-collecting tools, which were useful in enabling participants to submit extensive data with minimal interruption from the researchers (Bird, 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed, which involved translating Ndebele into English and converting audio into written interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which were first transcribed and the data set established. The six steps of thematic data analysis that were followed include familiarisation, coding, producing themes, evaluating themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings (Caulfield, 2022).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher secured ethical clearance from the Midlands State University's ethics committee (clearance reference SW20032022) and then obtained permission to carry out the study in Nkayi from the Nkayi Rural District Council. It is a scientific norm that researchers must submit a research proposal for ethical review before conducting a study, hence we followed this procedure (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). Additionally, the study upheld the principles of ethical research, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, as well as the publishing of results. Bhandari (2022) defines ethical concerns as a set of rules for research designs and processes that work to promote research quality, safeguard participants' rights, and increase the reliability of the research. As such, we had to observe all the ethical standards associated with research in social work.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the limitations of the study is the likelihood of personal bias, as one of the researchers belongs to the ethnic group and the area of the study. This was addressed through member checking; whereby analysed data were shared with the participants for validation before finalising the research results. The study sample was also of concern, as only 12 people participated as participants and 3 people as key informants, which may not be representative to warrant the generalisation of the findings to the broader Ndebele people in Zimbabwe. However, this is a qualitative study that sought to explore, describe and document the Ndebele cultural practices relevant to child rights in Zimbabwe, hence generalisation was never the predominant aim. The experiences of the participants offered adequate insights into the phenomenon under investigation, which meant that it was possible to answer the research questions despite the small sample. Studies of an anthropological nature, looking into the culture, normally demand a long time to complete. But because of the university's predetermined timeframe to carry out the study, as well as the inadequate financial resources, the research was conducted in a shorter period than what would be considered more appropriate for such a study. In addition, the implications of the findings seem to be more focused on Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, making it difficult to apply the findings to other contexts, especially those outside Africa. Yet the findings do provide insights helpful even to those in non-African contexts to understand issues of culture and child rights violations from an insider perspective.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This article presents and explores findings from a study on children's rights violations which are presented in four sub-themes: *ubulamu* (sexual dalliance), *ukudonsa* (labia elongation), discrimination against children with disabilities, and the elevated status of boys over girls. Using participants' views and corroboration from the literature we present and discuss the findings in the sections below.

***Ubulamu* (Sexual dalliance)**

Sexual dalliance "*ubulamu/ukulamuza*" was identified as one cultural practice among the Ndebele that violates children's rights. The following views were expressed regarding sexual dalliance by some of the participants:

No, but I also think 'ubulamu' (playful relationship between a girl and her brother-in-law) is a cultural practice that we need to do away with because you see old men touching girls inappropriately in the name of 'ubulamu' and this has exposed a lot of our girls to sexual abuse and sometimes culture is used to justify that abuse such that families even protect the perpetrators.

Another participant added:

Okay, I wanted to add that there is another cultural practice called 'ukulamuza' where a child's sister's husband may act like he has also married the child and have a playful teasing friendship with her and this has led to the violation of a lot of children's rights as they may be sexually abused in the name of the cultural practice.

Given sexual dalliance as a harmful cultural practice that violates child rights, one of the key informants said:

Okay, this is a cultural practice that may result in the sexual exploitation of children ... I was saying these abuse children because you find a person touching a child's breast or asking them to sleep with them in the name of 'ubulamu'. I have seen such scenarios where a child is abused and even impregnated in the name of this culture.

Sexual dalliance exposes children to sexual exploitation and abuse in the name of culture. It is also evident that this practice leads to child marriages and pregnancies. This practice violates Article 34 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), which provides for children's right to be safeguarded from sexual abuse. Section 81 (1) (e) of the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, Amendment No. 20 also provides for children's rights to be safeguarded from sexual abuse (government of Zimbabwe, 013). Mawodza (2019) found the practice of sexual dalliance to be a major contributor to unwanted child pregnancies, social stigma, child marriage, traumatic stress disorder, and discrimination against the girl child. There is therefore a need for collaboration between social workers, community leaders as well as other custodians of culture in Zimbabwe to identify harmful cultural practices such as sexual dalliance within communities and strengthen monitoring to ensure that perpetrators of such practices are punished.

Ukudonsa (Labia elongation)

It was also established by the study that “*ukudonsa*” labia elongation or labia pulling is another harmful cultural practice amongst the Ndebele people of Nkayi. Elaborating on labia elongation, this is what one participant had to say:

There is also what we call 'ukudonsa' (labia pulling), had my child that practice was adopted from the Xhosa, I also did it because that is what was required of me, but nowadays you see that with your generation it becomes a violation of children's rights. Because we force our children to do it, we don't know the medical side effects of the practice, but we tell our children to do it so that their husbands can love them and be sexually gratified.

In support of the view that labia pulling violates children's rights, another participant said:

Again, my child you are a girl you might know this, we practice labia minora pulling (laughs). You know if you do not want your husband to leave you, you must do that (says jokingly and laughs), anyways to be honest I do not see the relevance of that practice, except that it exposes children to sexual abuse and health risks, and children are forced to do it because our aunts and grandparents believe it helps to make their marriage strong. This is also bad because, at such an early age, children start being moulded for marriage instead of being taught things more relevant to them.

One of the key informants confirmed this by saying:

So, looking at girls now, there is the issue of virginity testing and labia pulling that most Ndebele families here see as important. Girls are checked for their virginity by their aunts and grandmothers, and others are told or rather forced to pull their labia

minora so that when they get married, they will be able to please their husbands
(laughs).

It is clear from the research findings that labia elongation in children is a harmful cultural practice that violates children's rights. The findings above indicate that this practice is discriminatory towards the girl child, as children from an early age get prepared how to please their future husbands. This places girls at a lower level than male children because girls are seen as serving the sole purpose of pleasing men. *Ukudonsa* leads to discrimination against girls based on their sex.

The practice of labia elongation is also in conflict with Article 34 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and Article 27 of the ACRWC (1990), which speak against sexual abuse. This practice also makes children vulnerable to sexual abuse, because once they start being taught about sexual intercourse at tender ages, they may engage in the activities to test what they have been taught. Children's rights to be heard are also violated by this practice because children do not consent to it, but are rather forced or coerced into it. This contravenes the UNCRC article 12, which provides for the children's right to be heard (UN, 1989). The practice also affects children's health and thus violates their health rights. According to Bhebhe (2014), labia elongation among Ndebele women and girls included the usage of herbal seeds that made the female genitalia uncomfortable and swollen, and occasionally necessitated hospitalisation, making it clear that the *ukudonsa* practice damages the health of children. There is a need for concerted efforts to uproot harmful cultural practices among indigenous ethnic groups in Zimbabwe for the safety of children, especially young girls and women.

Discrimination against children with disabilities

The research findings indicated that discrimination and stigmatisation of children with disabilities was another practice that was identified as violating children's rights. It was established that disability was viewed as some form of punishment by the ancestors and that it may be caused by witchcraft, demonic forces, charms backfiring, or the misdeeds of one's parents, among many other perceived causes. These misconceptions about disability were established to be fuelling stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities in society. This is what one participant had to say:

Yes, I was thinking, here in Nkayi, it has become difficult for Ndebele-speaking people to accept children with disabilities, because some families still believe that they are a form of punishment by their ancestors. Others also believe that a child with albinism or another disability will also give birth to another child with disabilities, so these children are usually hidden by their families and not taken to school as they are considered a mistake or punishment.

Another participant also commented on the negative cultural views that the Ndebele people in Nkayi adopt towards children with disabilities:

Children with disabilities have also not been fully accepted by the Ndebele people as well as their culture. They are embarrassed and there is a belief that having such a child shows that you would have done something bad in the past, hence such children

are kept hidden and they are not even taken to school such that sometimes we fail to even know that such children will be there in that household.

One of the key informants who participated in the study added that:

Yes, forgive me I forgot to mention, due to the introduction of the policies such as the National Disability Policy, people are now knowledgeable of the rights that children with disability have, but even still some people through language, which is a part of the culture, discriminate or degrade children with disabilities because you hear them saying, 'isilima lesi' (this cripple) or 'uhlanya lolu' (this mad person), 'isacuthe lesi' (someone deaf). People use these degrading words which may be discriminatory to children with disabilities.

The findings as evidenced above indicate that children with disabilities in the culture of Zimbabwe are viewed from a discriminatory perspective where they are seen as a punishment or curse, and are also deprived of their educational rights. Children with disabilities are also seen as an embarrassment in the view of some participants, so they may be confined indoors to keep them away from the rest of society. This would restrict their access to education, health care, and freedom of association and play as a result of the solitary confinement they are subjected to. Some use words with derogatory meanings to describe children with disabilities.

Baker and Imafidon (2020) add that in Sub-Saharan Africa cultural beliefs about the causes of disabilities are still widely held and traditional animism is one of the explanations for the causes of disabilities. Traditional animism refers to beliefs that associate disabilities with witchcraft or punishments for bad deeds (Stone-MacDonald, 2012). The UNCRC (UN, 1989), Article 2, which is also a guiding principle of the UNCRC, states that children must enjoy their rights regardless of other factors such as disability, and Article 23 guarantees the right of children with disabilities to enjoy their life and dignity. The participants verbatim above also showed, that despite the existence of the National Disability Policy (2021), which advocates for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all sectors, the rights of children with disabilities in Zimbabwe are still violated based on cultural misconceptions about disability. Otufat-Shamsi (2015) is of the view that different cultures have different ways of viewing disability and of treating children living with disability; for example, traditional Confucian beliefs as in China view disability as shameful.

The elevated status of boys versus girls

The research findings established that children in Zimbabwean culture are highly valued. However, the evidence showed that despite their importance, boys are accorded a much higher status than girls. In describing these differences in child preferences, one of the participants stated:

Yes, children are seen as important among the Ndebele here, but in my own opinion, I think much importance is placed on the male child because looking around here in terms of education when parents educate a girl child, they feel like they will be wasting resources because the girl child will get married and when she starts working, she will work for her in-laws and not her biological family. The male child,

on the other hand, is taken to school because they are seen as the heir that will take over the family inheritance and take care of the family.

Another participant added:

In issues to do with children in our culture, much importance is given to the male child. I know that these days there are women's rights and girl's rights, but we value a male child more because he is considered the heir of the family, and they are the child that will carry the family name be it the Ndlovu, Moyo family name, unlike the girl child who will get married and go to another family, but a son helps in the continuity of the family.

In describing the differences between the value given to boys and girls, one of the participants expressed the following view:

Children are very important to us but we place much value or importance on the male child because they are the heirs to our inheritance and they are the ones that will grow the family so they have to be well trained to be able to fend for the family at a later stage. This is why you see that when the male figure in the house passes away, sons are considered the heads of the house and they are even their father's wealth, for example, cattle, but girls are not considered to inherit such wealth, since they will leave the family and take up another surname someday.

One key informant in the study, also highlighted their views on the treatment of children in the Nkayi District:

Okay, there in the Ndebele culture and from what I have seen at work and home, children are valued, yes, but there is some form of gender discrimination where you see that sons are placed at a higher value or are treated with much importance than girls. This is because the male child in our culture is regarded as the heir and the person that will carry the family blood and name through generations, but as for the girl, they get nothing. After all, it is believed that they will get married. So, children are important but their importance varies.

It is evident from the above research findings that in the culture of Zimbabwe children are seen as important, but there is a significant difference in their treatment, as there is a preference for boys over girls. In the culture of the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe, boys are viewed as the ones who will carry the family name into posterity, and as a result, sons are preferred and given access to privileges like education, property rights, and inheritance, among others, as opposed to daughters who are married off into other families. The evidence also shows that the male child is educated at the expense of the girl child, as it is seen as a waste of resources to educate girls. The male child is also given first preference in terms of inheritance over the girl. Preference of sons violates UNCRC Article 2, which guarantees all children, regardless of their sex, the right to non-discrimination and equal access to opportunities and enjoyment of all rights enshrined in the UNCRC (UN, 1989). The Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, like many indigenous people in Zimbabwe, hold the view that female children are an asset when it comes to marriage, as some money is paid to the family as *amalobolo* (bride price). However, they

are then sidelined from accessing family resources and opportunities based on the view that once married they belong to the family of their husband; hence if resources are extended to them, it would be tantamount to enriching another family.

Mahuntse (2021) in another study with the Vatsonga people, also found that children are valued in Zimbabwe and Mozambique; however, boys are given more privileges than girls, particularly in terms of schooling and financial inheritance, and this violates the rights of girls. Similar findings were made by Baloyi and Manala (2019), who discovered that while having children is valued in African societies, male children are prioritised over female children, which results in discrimination against one gender in favour of the other. From a socio-cultural perspective, it can be seen that the Ndebele community in Zimbabwe facilitates the development of the male child, as they accord them different rights such as education in contrast to girls.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Findings from this study have a significant bearing on children's rights and social work policy and practice in Zimbabwe and Africa in general. This, in turn, has far-reaching implications for social work values, ethics, and principles, and impacts on issues to do with policies regarding children's rights and culture. The findings from the study highlighted some of the harmful cultural practices in Zimbabwe that violate children's rights; they are *ubulamu* (sexual dalliance), *ukudonsa* (labia elongation), the elevation of the status of boys over that of girls, and the cultural discrimination against children with disabilities. These harmful cultural practices call for social work to strategically position itself to tackle these offences, whilst promoting those cultural practices beneficial to children. Social work is underpinned by the values of social justice, hence the need to challenge harmful cultural practices to ensure the creation of a more just and safe society for children. This may include putting into place deterrent laws to be applied to perpetrators of violence against children. Concrete steps need to be taken to address gender disparities in education, the economy, and society in general. This would imply addressing negative gender norms in communities.

The findings showed that *ubulamu* (sexual dalliance) is one of the harmful cultural practices in Zimbabwe. *Ubulamu* exposes children to sexual abuse and early marriages, as it may involve fondling, teasing, and making sexually suggestive comments to a girl child by an adult male, who in most cases is the husband of the girl's older sister. This practice was established in other studies as having detrimental effects on the girl child's rights (Mawodza, 2019). Mawodza (2019) argues that the practice of sexual dalliance has led to unwanted child pregnancies, social stigma, child marriage, traumatic stress disorder, and discrimination against the girl child in general. The practice further violates the rights to equal treatment or non-discrimination, and the right to protection from sexual and emotional abuse. In this case, the findings imply the need for social workers to seek collaboration with local leaders, especially traditional leaders, as they were regarded as the custodians of culture, traditions, and customs. There is a need to engage local communities to increase awareness of the possible dangers of *ubulamu* as a practice, hopefully leading to a consensus on the abolishment of the practice. Social workers in Zimbabwe should also collaborate with local leaders and utilise the wisdom of the elders of the Ndebele communities in raising awareness of the existence of laws that prohibit harmful

cultural practices in Zimbabwe. This would dovetail with the social work value of respecting the human worth and dignity of a person. *Ubulamu* as established, reduces the esteem and integrity of young girls, as they are relegated to becoming sexual bodies that can be touched even against their own will. Abolishing such practices will enhance the realization of the human rights of girls and young women in Zimbabwe.

Ukudonsa (labia elongation) is another negative cultural practice identified by the study. There is evidence that *ukudonsa* (labia elongation) perpetuates patriarchal views that women exist mainly to serve men. This practice also puts female children at risk of sexual abuse, as men in the community are likely to go after girls who are known to have elongated their labia in anticipation of sexual gratification. Moreover, this violates their right to be heard, because the girls are frequently forced or coerced to participate rather than asked to give their consent. In some instances, *ukudonsa* infringes on the right to health, because the girls are required to use herbal seeds that could cause swelling of the female genitalia. The study results are consistent with Bhebhe's (2014) finding that labia elongation among Ndebele women and girls entails the use of herbal seeds that make the female genitalia uncomfortable and swollen and may occasionally require hospitalisation. There is, therefore, a need for social workers to educate local communities that the practice of labia elongation poses a danger to the children's health, violates their right to be heard, and exposes them to sexual abuse. Social workers should also advocate for local policies that make labia elongation a punishable offence in a bid to promote children's rights.

The study established the existence of cultural discrimination against children with disabilities as another harmful practice in Zimbabwe that violates child rights. Based on the findings, we conclude that children with disabilities are treated unfairly; they are denied their right to education and are sometimes confined indoors as they are considered an embarrassment. Stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities are generally driven by culture, religion, and spiritual beliefs. Disability is viewed as a curse from the ancestors, punishment by some deity or ancestors, a manifestation of the misdeeds of one's parents, a result of witchcraft, or a result of charms backfiring. Baker and Imafidon (2020) found that traditional animism is one of the explanations for attitudes towards disability in Sub-Saharan Africa, where cultural beliefs regarding the causes of impairments are still commonly held. Social workers in Zimbabwe should engage in community conversations with local communities and leaders to correct the myths that Zimbabwean people believe about children with disabilities. They should also assess the treatment of children with disabilities at grassroots level and facilitate awareness campaigns to sensitise people about the rights of children with disabilities. This would create a greater understanding of the rights and needs of children with disabilities among the general populace in Zimbabwe, thereby promoting the realization of children's rights. It is also important to facilitate the formation of support clubs for parents of children with disabilities to the extent of providing some psycho-social support and equipping them to deal with the stigma and discrimination that they also suffer as parents of children with disabilities.

Lastly, the study also presented a preference for, and preferential treatment of sons, which is characterised by an elevated status of boys over girls, as problematic. This was presented and

discussed as another harmful cultural practice that violates children's rights. Son preference violates Article 2 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), which prohibits the discrimination of children based on gender and sex. It further violates the rights of female children to education, given that their education is not a priority as compared to the education of boys. These findings are in line with those of other studies which show that children are revered among the Vatsonga in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, but boys are often accorded greater privileges than girls, notably in terms of going to school and financial inheritance (Mahuntse, 2021). Social workers should prioritise public education and advocate for legislation that gives girls' education an equal priority and grants them the same rights as boys in society. Providing success stories about girls who serve as positive role models would help social workers combat cultural perceptions that girls are less valuable than boys and ensure that girls have access to education and guaranteed rights to equality. The principle of equality coupled with the value of social justice, and respect for human rights, are foundational values upon which social workers base their advocacy. However, cultural competence is equally important to equip the social worker to be able to keep their personal biases at bay whilst speaking out on genuinely negative norms.

THE WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on the study findings discussed and the implications for child rights, as well as social work policy and practice, some recommendations are made below.

- There is a need for collaboration between social workers, community leaders as well as other custodians of culture in Zimbabwe to identify harmful cultural practices such as sexual dalliance within communities and accordingly to strengthen monitoring to ensure that perpetrators of such practices are punished.
- Social work curricula should be oriented toward the inclusion of the study of Indigenous Knowledge Systems and how they may promote or violate children's rights. This should include training on issues of cultural competence to equip the social workers themselves to be able to deal with their own biases, whilst remaining competent to isolate harmful cultural practices.
- Given the limited research on the contribution of Indigenous Knowledge Systems to child rights and child protection in Social Work, there is a need for expanded research in this area focusing on various ethnic groups in Southern Africa. This would generate evidence to inform policy interventions on issues of culture and child rights violations.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored some of the harmful cultural practices which violate child rights in Zimbabwe. Four harmful cultural practices that violate child rights were discussed: *ubulamu* (sexual dalliance), *ukudonsa* (labia elongation), cultural discrimination against children with disabilities, and the elevated status of boys over girls. The implications of these practices for child rights and social work practice in Zimbabwe are significant both at the policy level and practice level. It is vital to note that as a consequence of acculturation, globalization, and modernity in general, some of these harmful cultural practices are fading. Despite the presence in Zimbabwe of these harmful cultural practices that violate children's rights, it is vital to note

that there are also positive cultural practices such as child naming, totem recitals, and the extended family system in Zimbabwe that other researchers can explore further.

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