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The purpose of the *Ngenani - Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Community Engagement and Societal Transformation Review and Advancement*, is to provide a forum for community engagement and outreach.

CONTRIBUTION AND READERSHIP

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Body: Where the scholars are more than three, use *et al.*,

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CHALLENGES FACED BY CHILD PROTECTION ORGANISATIONS IN COMBATING GIRL CHILD LABOUR IN ZIMBABWE

KUDZAI MWAPAU¹ AND AMINAH MICHELLE SAIDI²

Abstract

Girl child labour (GCL) remains a significant challenge in Zimbabwe, hindering children's rights and development. This qualitative study investigates the challenges faced by child protection organisations in addressing this issue. Using a constructivist research philosophy and a human rights framework, the study employs a case study design and gathered data through in-depth interviews with 10 key informants. The findings highlight significant obstacles in combating GCL, including insufficient funding, inadequate coordination and limited community involvement. These challenges hinder the ability of child protection organisations to implement comprehensive prevention and response strategies. To address these challenges, the study recommends increased funding and capacity building for child protection organisations. It also stresses the importance of strengthening education access and promoting alternative livelihoods for girls and their families. The study underscores the urgent need for improved strategies to address GCL and its findings reflect the critical role of child protection organisations in reducing this phenomenon. By addressing these challenges, Zimbabwe can enhance child protection and safeguard girls from exploitation, ensuring their right to education, safety and a childhood free from labour.

Keywords: *child protection institutions, rights, Zimbabwe*

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INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, the issue of girl child labour (GCL) remains pervasive and complex, resulting in thousands of children engaging in hazardous jobs that jeopardise their mental, emotional and physical well-being. Factors such as inadequate child protection systems, prevalent poverty and limited educational opportunities contribute to the on-going prevalence of GCL, even amidst attempts to combat the issue. Child protection institutions, including government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community organisations, play a crucial role in addressing GCL and safeguarding children's rights. However, their effectiveness is hindered by challenges such as inadequate funding, poor coordination and minimal community engagement. This qualitative study aims to explore these challenges by gathering insights from key informants. It informs the development of practical strategies to combat GCL and enhance children's rights. It is essential to highlight the need for effective child protection mechanisms, emphasising the situation of Zimbabwean children and their rights. Despite this need, societal biases persist, often undermining the recognised rights of children in favour of traditional views which prioritise familial or community judgment over children's welfare. Consequently, vigilance is necessary regarding governmental actions related to individual rights and child well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article posits that the Human Rights Framework is a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding and addressing the challenges faced by child protection organisations in combating GCL in Zimbabwe. This framework provides a comprehensive and principled approach to addressing the human rights dimensions of GCL, ensuring that the rights of the girl child are respected, protected and fulfilled. It is grounded in international human rights law and treaty bodies, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Ife *et al.*, 2022; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022). This

evidence-based approach ensures that interventions are informed by best practices and international standards. The study uses the CRC and other relevant human rights documents to define GCL and its various forms, including child domestic work, child begging and child prostitution. It identifies gaps in existing laws and policies that perpetuate GCL, highlighting areas for reform and advocacy. The study develops recommendations for policy and programmatic interventions which address GCL based on human rights principles and international standards. By applying the Human Rights Framework, the study can provide a comprehensive and principled approach to addressing the challenges faced by child protection organisations in combating GCL in Zimbabwe.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that 152 million children between the ages of five and 17 are involved worldwide, making it a widespread and on-going problem affecting millions of children (ILO, 2020). About 1.5 million girls in Zimbabwe are engaged in dangerous labour, making GCL a serious issue (UNICEF, 2019). An estimated 68 million girls are engaged in child labour worldwide. Many of these girls labour in similar fields as boys, but they encounter more risks, more difficult circumstances and more hardships. Compared to boys, girls perform more work that is less apparent and they are frequently the targets of the most severe types of child labour involving more cruelty and exploitation. Girls who are trafficked into bonded labour, prostitution and pornography are some of the most exploitative circumstances in which they may be involved in the most severe types of child labour (Chikoko, 2024). Because they have little to no interaction with the outside world, girls in such difficult circumstances worry about their safety and well-being.

Institutions for child protection are required by law and are in charge of shielding people from dangers to their lives and growth. They are

established by the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) which Zimbabwe ratified in 1990 and contains Articles 2(3), 26 and 27. Children are shielded from a variety of dangers, including child labour, child marriages (Ngema, 2021; Muchawaya *et al.*, 2023), commercial sexual exploitation (Makaudze and Mushonga, 2021; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022; Murewanhema *et al.*, 2023), child abuse and GCL, by the government and civil society organisations (CSOs). As of 2021, the government had enacted five child protection legislation in this area. This legislation includes the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] (2004), the Children's Act [Chapter 5:06] (2001), the Marriages Act [Chapter 5:11] (1984), the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (2013) and the Labour Act [Chapter 28:01] (1985) (Kurevakwesu *et al.*, 2022; Magaya and Fambasayi, 2022; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022; Chikoko and Tandire, 2024).

Any work that is detrimental to a child's overall development is considered child labour. Children may be harmed by the work due to the potential for physical, social, or moral danger. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 182 on the worst forms of GCL is one of the international treaties on child rights which Zimbabwe has ratified. The Zimbabwean government has signed and approved some regional and international accords, mostly about children's rights in acknowledgement of the numerous difficulties Zimbabwean children confront. These include the African Union's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), the Optional Protocols to the UNCRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and the UNCRC and other regional and international agreements (Magaya and Fambasayi, 2021; Mwapaura, Chikoko *et al.*, 2022; Ndlovu and Tigere, 2022).

Child trafficking and the worst types of girl child labour, including child pornography and commercial sexual exploitation in child

prostitution (Chikadzi, 2020; Murewanhema *et al.*, 2023; Muridzo) and work that is dangerous or harmful to children, also need to be addressed immediately. This includes passing and enforcing laws to combat these practices in Zimbabwe. Even though the Domestic Violence Act has incorporated these international agreements into Zimbabwean law, the rights of children are still violated and many young people are currently engaged in GCL.

To combat girl child labour, Zimbabwe has set up several child protection organisations, such as the Department of Social Development, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs (Kurevakwesu *et al.*, 2022; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022). Child protection institutions are either NGOs with the same or related goals, or they are legally mandated organisations created to safeguard children's rights. As argued by the Domestic Violence Act, these organisations include the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), principal social welfare officers (PSWOs) and probation officers, who are also authorised to issue preliminary protection orders. The Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children, SERVE, Childline, the Girl Child Network and the Child Protection Society are a few of the NGOs that focus on child rights.

Few studies have looked into the connection between child protection institutions and girl child labour, even though earlier research has examined GCL in Zimbabwe (Muridzo and Chikadzi, 2020; Murewanhema *et al.*, 2023). By examining the advantages, disadvantages and deficiencies in Zimbabwe's child protection system, the study seeks to close this information gap. The fact that Zimbabwean youngsters are still involved in GCL despite these institutions. shows that child protection agencies are not doing a good job of safeguarding young people. Concerns have been raised about the circumstances which contribute to these organisations'

shortcomings in defending the rights of children, especially those who are vulnerable to exploitation in Zimbabwe. Information about the function of child protection organisations in fulfilling their responsibilities as a first step toward the elimination of child exploitative circumstances, is required to close this gap. In Zimbabwe, a large number of girls are still compelled to work in dangerous jobs, frequently in the unorganised sectors like agriculture (tobacco, cotton and sugarcane plantations), gold, diamond and chrome mining; housework; and street vending.

The term "girl child labour" describes the exploitation of girl children, usually those under the age of 18, in a variety of jobs which violate their physical, emotional and psychological development, expose them to dangerous situations, abuse and exploitation and rob them of their childhood, education and potential.

Table 1: Types of Girl child labour (Scoping literature review)

Type	Description
Hazardous girl child labour	- Work that poses a risk to girl children's health, safety and well-being Examples: agriculture, manufacturing, mining and construction
Unpaid girl child labour	- Work done by girl children in family businesses or farms without pay Examples: helping with household chores, caring for siblings, or working on family farms
Domestic girl child labour	- Work done by girl children in private households, often in exploitative conditions Examples: domestic servitude, childcare or household chores
Forced girl child labour	- Work done by girl children against their will, often under threat or coercion Examples: human trafficking, forced begging, or forced recruitment into armed groups
Bonded girl child labour	- Work done by children to pay off debts or loans, often passed down through generations Examples: debt bondage, forced labour, or servitude

Commercial sexual exploitation of girl children (CSEGC)	- Work that involves the exploitation of girl children for sexual purposes Examples: child prostitution, child pornography, or forced marriage (Chikoko, 2023; Chikoko and Tandire, 2024)
Agricultural girl child labour	- Work done by girl children in agriculture, often in hazardous conditions Examples: farming, livestock herding, or forestry work

GCL in Zimbabwe is driven by multiple factors, primarily economic instability, poverty and limited educational opportunities. Many children, some as young as five, engage in hazardous work such as street peddling, mining and agricultural labour due to these pressures. Families often depend on their children's earnings because of pervasive poverty and a lack of economic prospects. Limited access to quality education, especially in rural areas, further exacerbates the issue by pushing children into the workforce. Vulnerable and orphaned girls are particularly at risk, as some cultural norms view child labour as a necessary survival skill or rite of passage. Weak enforcement of labour laws allows GCL to persist, as legal protections are not effectively implemented. The on-going economic crisis, characterised by high unemployment and inflation, contributes to inadequate social safety nets for families. Additionally, migration due to climate change or natural disasters drives young girls to urban areas, where they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Nhapi, 2021; Charamba *et al.*, 2024). Addressing these root causes is critical for effectively addressing GCL in Zimbabwe.

GCL has profound and harmful effects on the mental, emotional and physical health of millions of girls worldwide. The consequences of GCL extend throughout a girl's life, severely impacting her development and well-being. Physically, girl children face heightened risks of accidents, diseases and malnutrition and exposure to hazardous environments and limited healthcare. Mentally, GCL increases the chances of substance misuse, depression and anxiety, negatively affecting self-esteem and emotional resilience (Chikoko,

Zvokuomba *et al.*, 2021; Chikoko, Nyabeze *et al.*, 2022; Chikoko and Mwapaura, 2024). Socially, it hampers the development of essential skills, fostering isolation and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. In terms of education, GCL reduces school attendance and academic performance, leading to lower literacy and numeracy skills and higher dropout rates. The long-term implications include diminished job prospects and economic mobility, perpetuating a cycle of poverty. Ultimately, addressing child labour is crucial in breaking this cycle and unlocking the potential of future generations through access to education (Chikoko, 2024).

Nations are required by international legal instruments to eliminate GCL, reflecting global disapproval as emphasised by the ILO. In response, African countries have adopted various initiatives aligned with international standards, focusing on policy creation, legislative action, institutional infrastructure and rehabilitation programmes for affected children. This chapter details these measures undertaken to combat GCL.

Table 2: Child Protection Institutions in Zimbabwe (Scoping literature review)

Child institutions	Protection	Description
Government Agencies		Department of Social Development within the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare: ensures child protection, welfare, rights and well-being through legislation and guidelines. (Kurevakwesu <i>et al.</i> , 2022; Mwapaura <i>et al.</i> , 2022)
Legislative Framework		Zimbabwe's laws protect children's rights, emphasising protection from exploitation and abuse.
NGOs and CSOs		NGOs in Zimbabwe focus on child protection, education and advocacy services such as Save the Children, Childline Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children (ZNCWC) work collaboratively with government agencies to provide services and raise awareness about children's rights.
Community-based		Local organisations protect children through support

Organisations	and awareness of their rights, such as Shamwari Yemwanasikana.
Judiciary and Legal Aid	The child protection system is supported by a judiciary that is responsible for ensuring adherence to child protection laws, such as the Ministry of Justice Legal and Parliamentary Affairs. Legal aid organisations provide support to families and children, navigating the justice system, particularly in cases of abuse and neglect such as the Legal Resources Foundation
Rescue and Rehabilitation Centres	Institutions such as children's homes and rehabilitation centres provide shelter, counselling and rehabilitation for abused, abandoned, or exploited children. These institutions aim not only to provide immediate safety, but also to facilitate reintegration into society where possible.
Awareness and Training Programmes	Various child protection institutions offer training programmes for law enforcement, social workers and teachers on child rights and protection mechanisms. These programmes aim to enhance their skills in identifying and responding to child protection issues effectively.

In Zimbabwe, several government agencies bear responsibility for addressing the issue of GCL, although their effectiveness varies. The Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare plays a central role, overseeing labour laws and policies and is responsible for inspecting workplaces to identify and combat child labour violations. The Department of Social Development, under the same ministry, is tasked with providing support to vulnerable children, including those affected by GCL, through programmes like fostering and rehabilitation (Kurevakwesu *et al.*, 2022; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education is crucial, as it is tasked with ensuring access to education, a key factor in preventing GCL. The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) also has a role in enforcing laws related to child labour and investigating cases of exploitation and abuse. While these agencies have mandates and legal frameworks in place, challenges remain in terms of resource allocation, enforcement capacity and coordination between different departments, which can

hinder their ability to effectively combat child labour across the country.

Several NGOs and CSOs in Zimbabwe actively work to address child labour, striving to protect vulnerable children and improve their well-being. These organisations often collaborate with government bodies, communities and international partners to implement a multi-pronged approach (Kabonga *et al.*, 2022). Activities typically involve raising awareness about the harmful effects of child labour, advocating for policy changes to strengthen legal protections and providing direct support to affected children and their families. This support often includes education and skills training to prevent children from entering the workforce and offer alternative income-generating opportunities for families (Kurevakwesu *et al.*, 2022; Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022). Some key areas of focus are identifying and removing children from exploitative work environments, rehabilitating children who have been subjected to child labour and promoting preventative measures to combat the root causes of GCL, such as poverty and lack of access to education.

Zimbabwe's legal framework addresses child labour primarily through the Labour Act [Chapter 28:01] and the Children's Act [Chapter 5:06]. The Labour Act sets the minimum age for employment at 15 years and prohibits hazardous work for those under 18, reflecting adherence to International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. The Children's Act further protects children from exploitation, including harmful labour practices and defines "child" as anyone under 18. Zimbabwe's Constitution includes several clauses aimed at preventing child labour and protecting children's rights. For example, by specifically protecting children from "economic and sexual exploitation, from child labour and from maltreatment, neglect, or any form of abuse". Section 81(1)(e) essentially outlaws child labour in the nation, guaranteeing that no child under the age of 18 is subjected to forced labour (Government of

Zimbabwe, 2013). While these acts provide a solid foundation, enforcement remains a significant challenge (Mwapaur *et al.*, 2020; Mwapaura, Magavude *et al.*, 2022). The lack of resources for inspections, coupled with informal economic structures where child labour is often prevalent, hinders effective implementation. Furthermore, the absence of specific provisions addressing the worst forms of child labour, such as forced labour and trafficking, necessitates further legislative development. On-going efforts to revise and strengthen these laws, aligned with international human rights standards, are crucial to effectively combat child labour and safeguard the rights of Zimbabwean children (Chikoko and Mwapaura, 2023).

In Zimbabwe, the government has put in place various policy frameworks to address the issue of child labour, particularly focusing on the girl child, as mandated by the UNCRCC and the ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182 on the Protection of the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. However, despite these efforts, the prevalence of child labour, including GCL, remains a pressing concern in the country. The National Child Labour Policy (2012) outlines a comprehensive approach to preventing and reducing child labour. The policy emphasises the importance of education, social protection and economic empowerment in addressing child labour. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has also introduced policies such as the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) to support education for disadvantaged children, many of who are affected by poverty and GCL (Chikoko and Mwapaura, 2023).

STUDY DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the challenges faced by child protection organisations and gendered child labour in Zimbabwe, emphasising the significance of first-hand

experiences (Alston, 2020). By conducting semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants from diverse sectors such as academia, social work, and governmental and NGOs, this approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the operational challenges within child welfare systems. The selected participants were specifically chosen for their expertise and engagement in child protection programmes, ensuring that the study encompasses a wide range of perspectives pertinent to the issues at hand. The rationale behind selecting a small sample size of 10 participants lies in the need for an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding child protection and girl labour in Zimbabwe. Given the exploratory nature of the study, a smaller sample size allows for a more detailed and thorough examination of the data that is essential for developing targeted interventions.

The semi-structured format of the interviews, lasting 45-90 minutes, allowed for in-depth discussions on the roles and challenges of these organisations, while enabling participants to share their insights comfortably. This duration was informed by pilot interviews (n=3) which provided insights into the optimal length of the interviews and helped refine the question framework. The pilot interviews were conducted with participants from similar backgrounds, ensuring that the initial data collection phase aligned with the broader objectives of the study.

Data gathered from the interviews, underwent thematic analysis, revealing critical patterns and themes related to child protection and GCL in Zimbabwe (Clarke and Braun, 2013). The research initially familiarised itself with the transcripts before coding significant terms and grouping them into broader themes which ultimately helped in synthesising the findings. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, multiple researchers reviewed and validated the themes and cross-checked the codes to confirm consistency. This iterative process not

only strengthened the validity of the themes, but also provided an opportunity to reflect on the research’s biases and assumptions. Ethical considerations were integral to the research process, with informed consent obtained from participants, assurances of anonymity and respect for their right to withdraw at any time.

The study identifies pressing challenges in the child protection sector, such as resource limitations and difficulties in community engagement, underscoring the need for better coordination and support within the child protection framework in Zimbabwe to effectively tackle issues related to GCL. Nevertheless, some limitations of the study deserve consideration. The small sample size (n=10) may not be representative of the broader Zimbabwean context, and the qualitative nature of the study may limit the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, participant bias may have influenced the perspectives shared during the interviews and the study's findings may have been shaped by the research’s preconceptions. Nevertheless, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on child protection and GCL in Zimbabwe and highlights the need for further research to inform evidence-based interventions.

FINDINGS

Table 3: Biographical profile of participants (In-depth interviews with participants)

Key informant	Position	Affiliation	Expertise
K1	Senior Child Welfare Researcher	Academic	PhD in Social Work; expert in child welfare.
K2	Programme Manager	NGO	Experienced in child protection and advocating safe environments.
K3	Social Worker	Public Sector	Social worker specialising in child abuse cases.
K4	Community Leader	Civic Society/ Interest Group	Community leader, fights child exploitation through awareness campaigns.

K5	Child Rights Advocate	NGO	Child rights expert with 12 years of advocacy experience.
K6	Programme Officer	NGO	Childline veteran supports abused children and trains authorities.
K7	Legal Advisor	Civic Society	Expert in child rights law advocates for justice.
K8	Educator	Public Sector	Integrates child protection into school curricula.
K9	Child Psychologist	Clinic/Facility	Expert in trauma care for abused children.
K10	Project Coordinator	NGO	Addresses child exploitation through community empowerment projects.

Organisations in Zimbabwe that fight GCL say they urgently need more support. Due to a lack of funding, many crucial programmes for intervention, rehabilitation and educational outreach cannot be carried out successfully. Initiatives that could help eliminate GCL are limited in their reach and scalability by this financial hardship. One participant, K6 said,

"Despite our commitment to preventing girl child labour, our efforts are consistently hindered by a lack of adequate resources. We just lack the resources to put the initiatives required for successful intervention into action.

There is a lack of qualified staff to carry out child protection initiatives in addition to a lack of resources. Effective service delivery is further hampered by the high staff turnover and dearth of trained specialists in child rights advocacy that plague many organisations. The efficacy of child protection programmes is limited by the absence of resources, including safe locations for children's rehabilitation, counselling materials and instructional tools. This is especially harmful in under-resourced urban and rural regions when there is a pressing need.

There is a considerable lack of coordination among various government departments and organisations involved in child safety.

Because of this fragmentation, efforts in some areas overlap, while others go entirely neglected.

Poor cooperation between different organisations is one of the main challenges encountered, as argued by one attendee:

Organisations that operate in silos lose their effect and fail to protect children who are at risk. To properly address this issue, we must adopt a cohesive strategy (K1)

Ineffective coordination makes it difficult to execute and monitor policies effectively which leads to disparate regional standards and approaches to child safety. The total effect of interventions is compromised by this discrepancy. Organisations frequently fail to exchange important data, resulting in redundant work and lost chances for comprehensive approaches which could successfully address the underlying causes of girl child labour.

Participation in child protection initiatives is limited since many parents and community leaders are not aware of the regulations currently in place to safeguard children. In remote areas with limited educational outreach, this disparity is made worse. This is what one participant said:

"Involving the community is essential, but we frequently discover that local leaders and parents are not completely aware of the laws protecting children. Our efforts struggle to get traction without their participation and support." (K3)

The adoption of child protection programmes may be hampered by opposition arising from conventional views regarding the duties of children. Creating a conducive atmosphere requires enlisting the help of powerful community leaders to promote children's rights. Missed chances for grassroots participation in policy development and programme design stem from the lack of channels for parents and community people to express their worries or experiences surrounding girl child labour.

Girl child labour is seen by many families as a necessary source of household revenue. Any child protection strategy must address these socioeconomic variables. K9 said:

“Our efforts are made more difficult by the fact that many households see GCL as essential to their livelihood. Reducing GCL requires educating communities and altering perceptions about the value of keeping children in school.”

Programmes for community education prioritising the long-term advantages of education over the immediate financial gains from GCL, are desperately needed. By showcasing effective case studies of families who have profited by keeping children in school, we can influence attitudes and inspire others to adopt better habits.

Zimbabwe has laws that prevent children from being exploited for labour, but these regulations are frequently not enforced effectively. To guarantee compliance, strong accountability and monitoring methods are required.

"We have laws in place to protect children, but the implementation is often weak. . Ensuring compliance and accountability among all stakeholders requires more than just strengthening the legal framework." (K6)

The execution of child protection legislation may be further jeopardised by claims of corruption and malpractice within the local legal system. Fostering an accountable culture requires addressing these structural problems. To ensure that laws are not only passed, but also actively executed, law enforcement and pertinent institutions must be strengthened. This includes educating law enforcement and local government representatives on children's rights.

DISCUSSION

The results reveal significant obstacles that organisations face in combating GCL, highlighting a critical nexus between resource allocation and the efficacy of child protection programmes in

Zimbabwe, all viewed through the lens of the Human Rights Framework. Limited funding, a fundamental breach of the state's obligation to protect children's rights, directly impacts the scope and effectiveness of intervention strategies (Ife *et al.*, 2022). One participant poignantly stated the constant pressure on their efforts due to financial deficiencies which directly limits the scope and effectiveness of crucial intervention, rehabilitation and educational outreach initiatives. This scarcity is particularly felt in rural and underdeveloped urban areas, where essential resources like educational materials and secure rehabilitation spaces are lacking, thus violating children's right to education. Furthermore, the inadequate number of experienced experts in child rights advocacy and the frequent staff turnover exacerbate the issue, diminishing the ability of organisations to effectively implement and deliver services (Mwapaura, *et al.*, 2022). The combined effect of these resource shortages jeopardises the fundamental human right to be protected from exploitation, undermining the overarching goal of safeguarding vulnerable children and ensuring their access to education and a safe environment. Therefore, addressing these resource limitations is paramount to guaranteeing sustainable and effective measures which can reduce GCL in Zimbabwe and uphold the human rights of its children.

Another central challenge, viewed through the Human Rights Framework, is the lack of effective coordination among child protection organisations and government agencies. This fragmentation, a systemic failure to fulfil the state's protective role, undermines the right to effective protection for all children (Ife *et al.*, 2022). This lack of coherence often leads to overlapping programmes, inefficient resource allocation and critical gaps where vulnerable girls remain unprotected (Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022). The lack of synchronised policies and a patchwork of varying standards between regions, coupled with the failure to exchange vital information, hinders the creation of comprehensive, rights-based plans to address the root

causes of GCL. One participant highlighted the impact of poor coordination which not only dilutes initiatives, but places vulnerable girl children at great risk. Such inconsistencies compromise the effectiveness of child protection programmes and violate the right to equal protection under the law. Creating transparent lines of communication and cooperative structures is essential. Acknowledging potential counterarguments, one could argue that logistical challenges might make complete coordination difficult. However, the right to effective protection and the reduction of GCL requires a unified, collaborative approach across all entities. Such an approach strengthens the shared commitment to protecting the rights and welfare of children across Zimbabwe.

The findings also point to significant cultural and community resistance to child protection efforts, particularly stemming from ignorance of children's rights laws by parents and community leaders. This lack of awareness, a failure of the state to educate and inform its citizens of their rights, directly hampers community involvement in anti-GCL campaigns. This disconnect is most pronounced in rural areas where educational outreach is lacking (Mwapaura, Mhiripiri, Bhala, 2022). The entrenched traditional views of children's roles, another form of cultural resistance, further complicate these efforts. These views, which can condone or even encourage GCL, directly contradict the child's right to be free from exploitation. One participant rightly pointed out the crucial need for community involvement. To overcome these obstacles, it is essential to engage influential community leaders and facilitate grassroots input in programme design and policy creation. To address these challenges effectively, the community should engage with the cultural traditions and work with the community to promote awareness. Including more depth of analysis on these aspects could strengthen the argument for community engagement strategies. Such engagement is critical to counteract these traditional views and ensure that programmes are

culturally sensitive, contextually relevant and ultimately successful. In the absence of community support, child protection initiatives will struggle to achieve their goals, thereby, failing children's right to participate in all decisions that will affect them.

The findings underscore a crucial connection between economic necessity and GCL, with many families viewing the latter as vital for their survival, directly undermining the right to education, health and freedom from exploitation of the girl child. Community education initiatives highlighting long-term benefits of education and showcasing successful case studies, must be put into place immediately. The prevalent belief in GCL's necessity makes altering attitudes within the community more challenging (Ndlovu and Tigere, 2022). One participant emphasised how such a belief complicated efforts to change community behaviours. Therefore, addressing these socioeconomic factors is not just a supporting element, but a crucial component of any successful child protection approach. This requires a comprehensive, rights-based approach that tackles both economic vulnerabilities and harmful traditional practices, helping shift attitudes concerning GCL. By changing the way people think, these educational initiatives can create a more secure environment for children, helping promote a culture of respect for children's rights and ultimately fostering a more equitable society.

Finally, while Zimbabwe has legislative frameworks intended to protect children, the fundamental challenge lies in the inconsistent enforcement of these laws, directly violating the right to equal protection under the law. As one participant stated,

"Strengthening the legal framework alone will not suffice".

The absence of effective implementation techniques and lack of strong monitoring and accountability procedures turn initiatives to stop GCL into ceremonial actions, creating a culture of impunity. Moreover, the

allegations of corruption and mismanagement in the local court system further exacerbate this issue, weakening accountability (Mwapaura *et al.*, 2022; Muridzo and Chikadzi, 2020). To effectively protect children's rights, strong monitoring and accountability procedures are essential. It is crucial to provide focused training on child rights to strengthen the capabilities of law enforcement and other organisations and increase awareness of the importance of these laws in protecting vulnerable children. The right to effective remedies should also be promoted so that individuals are aware of the steps to take if their rights have been violated. Comprehensively addressing these challenges will support the fight against GCL. This means providing legislative changes and a workable implementation of rights-based techniques.

The study on child safety in Zimbabwe has significant implications for future research, practice and policy. The pressing need to strengthen laws and practices dealing with child safety has been highlighted, emphasising the importance of updating current legislation to guarantee strong protection against abuse, neglect and exploitation. The report also underscores the need for increased funding for child protection services, enabling the creation of new programmes and the improvement of current ones to safeguard vulnerable groups. Allocating sufficient resources can enable the successful implementation and maintenance of initiatives by government and NGOs. Effective intersectoral cooperation amongst different child protection stakeholders is crucial to addressing child welfare issues. Silos between government agencies, NGOs and CBOs hinder effective responses to child welfare issues. To develop a comprehensive strategy, it is essential to improve collaboration and communication across various organisations. Building the capacity of professionals through training programmes is vital, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to recognise and address child

protection issues. This will impact the overall effectiveness of interventions, ultimately leading to better outcomes for children.

Community involvement is critical to child protection initiatives, enabling local communities to actively address their child-related challenges. Creating community-based initiatives that raise awareness and educate people about children's rights and protections can foster sustainable solutions. By encouraging a sense of ownership and responsibility among community members, resilient environments which prioritise children's safety and well-being can be established. Community-driven solutions utilising local resources, expertise and social networks can create supportive environments for children.

Future research on child protection in Zimbabwe is essential, with longitudinal studies examining the long-term consequences of child protection programmes. Mixed-methods research combining quantitative and qualitative approaches can provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies underlying child protection issues. Comparative research can offer insightful information applicable to diverse contexts, improving best practices and knowledge exchange. Finally, addressing underlying causes of girl child exploitation through social protection and economic empowerment initiatives is crucial, including initiatives to increase public knowledge of child rights and the effects of exploitation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, Zimbabwe can significantly strengthen its efforts to protect children from exploitation by proactively addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by child protection organisations and implementing targeted, specific measures informed by a human rights framework. This entails creating an environment where childhood is valued and protected, where girls are guaranteed their fundamental rights to safety, education and holistic development, free from the

demands of exploitative work. Building upon the study's findings, such measures include increasing resources for community-based child protection services; strengthening coordination between government ministries, NGOs and community leaders to streamline reporting mechanisms and intervention strategies; investing in training and capacity-building for social workers and law enforcement officials on GCL identification and response; and developing culturally sensitive awareness campaigns to address societal attitudes that perpetuate GCL. Therefore, the study calls upon Zimbabwean policy-makers to prioritise the allocation of resources towards child protection programmes and the enforcement of existing laws related to child labour. Community leaders are urged to actively promote the importance of education and girls' empowerment within their communities and to collaborate with NGOs to create safe spaces and opportunities for children.

The government should immediately increase dedicated funding for child protection organisations by at least 20% within the next fiscal year, with a clear allocation strategy focused on GCL prevention and response. Child protection institutions should expand access to quality education (including vocational training) and establish or partner with programmes that provide girls and their families with sustainable income-generating opportunities. It is important to launch comprehensive community engagement programmes that use culturally appropriate educational materials, interactive workshops and local leaders to change attitudes and behaviours related to GCL.

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