


THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE GIRL CHILD IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically analyse the problems of the girl child in Zimbabwe and investigate the role and involvement of international organizations in dealing with these problems. Even though, the girl child has drawn a lot of attention, the literature largely approaches from a problem-solving perspective with the idea of an empowered girl child to be the image of an expectation for a true definition of development through instrumentalization of education and health care provisions. The study presents that not only material factors, such as poverty and lack of income but also ideational factors, such as cultural norms and religious practices, constitute an environment conducive to the problems faced by the girl child and the prevalent power relations of gender inequality in Zimbabwe. The international organizations that are involved in education and training, promote activities to raise awareness, provide support and social protection mechanisms, lobby the governments to encourage institutionalization of international gender equality regime and goals. The study argues that the problems of the girl child in Zimbabwe are a

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result of the structural nature of social relations and that the involvement of international organizations have not been sufficient to overcome the structural nature of these circumstances.

Keywords: *Girl child, Zimbabwe, international organizations, poverty, child marriages, gender equality, constructivism.*

ULUSLARARASI ÖRGÜTLER VE ZİMBABVE'DE KIZ ÇOCUKLARININ YAŞADIĞI TOPLUMSAL SORUNLAR

ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı Zimbabwe'de kız çocuklarının yaşadığı toplumsal sorunları eleştirel bir yaklaşımla irdelemektir ve bu sorunların aşılmasında uluslararası örgütlerin rolünü incelemektir. Kız çocuklarının yaşadığı toplumsal sorunlar son dönemde önemli bir inceleme konusu olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Konunun incelenmesinde birçok çalışmanın sorunların tespitine ve çözmeye yönelik bir bakış açısı benimsediği görülmekte ve kız çocuklarının eğitim ve sağlık imkanlarına ulaşmasının gelişmekte olan ülkeler için temel bir önem arz ettiği vurgulanmaktadır. Çalışma, kız çocuklarının toplumsal sorunlarının ortaya konmasında ve Zimbabwe'deki cinsiyet eşitsizliği ve güç ilişkilerinin anlaşılmasında maddi unsurlar kadar değer ve pratiklerin de önem arz ettiğini belirtmektedir. Uluslararası örgütler sorunların giderilmesi amacıyla çeşitli eğitim ve öğretim faaliyetlerinde bulunmakta, farkındalık yaratmaya çalışmakta, toplumsal destek ve gelir mekanizmalarına destek vermekte ve hükümetler nezdinde cinsiyet eşitliği kural ve hedeflerinin kabul görmesi ve kurumsallaşması için çalışmalarda bulunmaktadırlar. Çalışma, Zimbabwe'deki kız çocuklarının toplumsal sorunlarının yapısal nedenlere dayandığını vurgulamakta ve uluslararası örgütlerin çabalarının bu yapısal nedenleri ortadan kaldırmaktan uzak olduğunu ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kız çocukları, Zimbabwe, uluslararası örgütler, yoksulluk, çocuk yaşta evlilik, cinsiyet eşitliği, sosyal inşacılık.*

1. Introduction

Some communities in which the local people in Zimbabwe reside are commonly found with fundamental and underlying faults such as the disproportionate connection between the genders to such an extent that men have control over a woman's life. Due to such a contortion, women and the girl child deal with varying challenges and problems in the Zimbabwean setting. As

recently as August 2021, the death of a 14-year-old girl, Anna Machaya, made the headlines after she gave birth at a church shrine in the Marange region of Zimbabwe (Chingono, 2021b). The incident was condemned strongly by local and international organizations which called on the Government of Zimbabwe to address the circumstances leading to this case of child marriage and the death of the girl child (UN Zimbabwe, 2021a; BBC, 2021). Indeed, child marriage is a manifestation of problems of the girl child in Zimbabwe where one in three girls are married before the age of eighteen, as the legal age for marriage.

Zimbabwe, accordingly, is one of the many countries in the world that has to deal with numerous problems faced by the girl child. Although numerous initiatives are in motion, it still turns out that women and the girl child confront major problems in social relations that directly target them through various socially constructed forms and methods of discrimination. This has since called for deliberate efforts to address the issue of gender-based imbalances by the government of Zimbabwe. It can be noted that despite many efforts by the Zimbabwean governments to try and deal with these problems faced by the girl child, Zimbabwean norms prioritize the male child over the girl child at home, pushes the girl child towards school dropouts and into early child marriages among many other problems (UN, 2016; Chingono, 2019). The problems of the girl child are largely a consequence of poverty and cultural norms and practices that are reinforced through gender-based socialization and discrimination. All these have dire consequences on the social or future status of the girl child.

Aside from the Zimbabwean governments, various international organizations have been involved in efforts to help ease the various problems faced by the girl child; the United Nations (UN) and its various agencies, the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and the World Bank, just to mention a few. International organizations most commonly initiate programs, raise awareness, liaise with the government, and also financially contribute to the cause, whilst putting pressure on the government of Zimbabwe for the implementation of laws. The projects initiated are usually specific, targeting to overcome difficulties in sustaining the girls' education due to the above-mentioned problems, and inevitably seeking to prevent child marriages. By presenting that poverty, cultural norms, and religious practices have socially constructed an environment conducive to the development of the problems faced

by the girl child in Zimbabwe, this article argues that the involvement of international organizations has not been sufficient to overcome the structural nature of these circumstances.

The main focus of this article, as such, will be to critically understand and analyse the problems faced by the girl child in Zimbabwe, and to investigate the role and involvement of international organizations in dealing with these problems. Thus, the introduction will be followed by a brief literature survey and a conceptual framework concerning the problems faced by the girl child. The conceptual framework will briefly present the main aspects of the constructivist approach that will be used in the study. Then, the third section will present the general framework of the role and involvement of the international organizations in the institutionalization of gender equality regime and goals. The fourth section will give an understanding the issue and will analyse the problems faced by the girl child in Zimbabwe. The problems faced by the girl child in Zimbabwe will be detailed through a historical analysis of the conditions that create the socially constructed environment that places them in an unequal and hierarchical social setting. The focus shall be on poverty and cultural and religious practices as the main defining factors that shape the social relations and self-understandings prevalent in Zimbabwe. This section also aims to outline the role of the international organizations concerning the nature of their involvement in dealing with the problems of the girl child through a brief analysis. The last section will summarise the main findings and conclusions of the study.

2. The Literature Review and the Conceptual Framework

The extant literature on the girl child is largely focused on a problem-solving perspective putting forward that an empowered girl child can be an image of the expectation for a true definition of development in a country. There is a very strong interest in research on the gender gap and challenges in education (Ncube, 2013; Tuwor & Sossou, 2008; Shabaya & Konadu-Agyemang, 2004). These studies investigate and outline reasons of the factors that inhibit the girl child from going to school. Thus, they provide recommendations, suggestions, and strategies to retain her in school. Some scholars focus on poverty or lack of income (Chinyoka, 2017; Chinyoka & Nadiu, 2014), others on cultural practices (Ndlovu & Bhala, 2016; Rutoro et. al., 2013; Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013;

Shangwa, 2011; Marshall & Taylor, 2006) as major factors creating the problems faced by the girl child. Understanding the extent and impact of the implementation of gender-related policies has been a concern for some scholars (Mutanana & Bukaliya, 2015). Others elaborated on the implementation of international rules and norms by the Zimbabwean state in its endeavour in trying to end harmful practices towards women and the girl child (Munalula, 2011; Sithole & Dziva, 2019). A limited number of studies evaluate how economic structural adjustment programs influenced women's status in Zimbabwe, especially in the 1990s (Riphenburg, 1997). These studies provide very valuable knowledge based on field research for understanding the social relations that surround the problems of the girl child. It is in the interest of this study to build on these contributions by establishing a constructivist framework.

Thus, the study intends to employ a constructivist approach to analyse, understand and interpret the problems of the girl child in Zimbabwe and the involvement of international organizations to overcome the structural circumstances that exacerbate these problems. Using a constructivist analysis will help the study to move away from an understanding of lack of capabilities and an interpretation of the conditions as one of underdevelopment and help embed the conditions and circumstances leading to the problems of the girl child into a social context. The analysis and background on Zimbabwe shall provide that, ideational factors -that is the system of norms, beliefs, and values- present, along with material factors such as poverty, structural characteristics and “exert a powerful influence on social and political action” (Reus-Smit, 2005: 196) of actors on gender relations in Zimbabwe. Poverty, and cultural-religious norms and practices are presented as constitutive elements that create the circumstances, or the social environment, that limit and constrain the girl child in Zimbabwe. The structural circumstances are thus understood to be socially constructed and reinforced through multiple forms of interaction, exclusion, and gender-based discrimination leading to the persistence of unequal power relations. The persisting conditions of subordination, dominance, and dependence in the area is evident as in most of the developing world (Murphy, 2015).

Such an approach builds upon the criticism of the liberal perspective which argues that enabling the participation of more women in positions of policy, decision making, and influence as well as increasing the role of women in

development, especially in the Third World, will eliminate gender inequalities. Actors' identities and interests are shaped by culture, history, and context, that is the "social and legal norms and the ways in which these are deployed, through argument and communication," giving social relations a distinctive character in a particular time and place (Reus-Smit, 2005, 211; Kardam, 2004: 98). International organizations are also part of this social process acting as agents to transform the inherent gender relations or the behaviour of states. The main point is that international organizations reflect the dominant interests, norms, and ideas in the global political economy in ways they promote or prioritize to overcome poverty and gender inequality. This approach is largely based on a liberal perspective, intending to provide support and opportunities for the participation of women to overcome gender disparity. The current study intends to go beyond this understanding and examines the basis of cultural practices and the type of power relations they establish to create the social circumstances for the persistence of the problems of the girl child.

3. The International Organizations, Gender Relations, and The Girl Child

The international organizations have primarily constructed their involvement and efforts to overcome the problems of the girl child along the lines of Millennium Development Goals (MDG), especially MDG3 that aims to 'promote gender equality and empower women'. As Murphy (2015: 3) indicates MDG3 "sought to transform gender relations in developing countries through achieving parity in primary and secondary education, and increasing women's participation in politics and non-agricultural market-based activities and employment". The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that was adopted in 2015 transformed the Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and expanded the aim under SDG5 to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.' Indeed, this general policy framework intended to build on the 'critical areas for action' that were defined by the Beijing platform for action in 1995 defining poverty, education and training of women, health, violence against women and the girl child among the twelve critical areas of action (Kardam, 2004: 88-89).

As Kardam (2004, 89 and 91) argues that the main role of international organizations on improving gender equality is focused on providing the necessary resources and development assistance for women and helping shape as well as to define and diffuse norms on legal aspects, such as property rights, and to provide support mechanisms for education and training. The World Bank has been more focused on “providing resources for women’s education, family planning and microcredit, all justifiable in ultimately serving market-based economic growth and efficiency norms” (Kardam, 2004: 92). This is also evident in the three dimensions used by the World Bank to define gender equality: “the accumulation of endowments”, “the use of those endowments to take up economic opportunities and generate income”, and “the application of those endowments to take actions, or agency, affecting individual and household well-being” (World Bank, 2011: 4). These were perceived as important to improve economic efficiency and achieve welfare through development outcomes. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development similarly indicates that gender equality requires visionary arrangements for feasible, comprehensive, and fair financial development, upheld by full business and equal opportunities for all, social reconciliation, declining disparities, and raising the efficiency of governments (UN, 2021).

Within the context of dealing with the problems of the girl child, the main focus then becomes the issue of sustaining the education of the girl child and providing support mechanisms that will enable the girl child to achieve acquisition of this important endowment. This is in line with the main targets defined by MDGs/SDGs aiming primarily to achieve parity in primary and secondary education and women’s participation in the labour market or market-based production. Murphy (2015: 9) and the UN (2021) report that there have been improvements in achieving these targets in recent decades. Indeed, international organizations have established a strong link between poverty, education, and the problems of the girl child: An educated girl child benefits everyone, an educated woman is more likely to take up economic opportunities and can generate productivity gains in supporting development outcomes. Besides, girls who finish school are perceived to be less likely to marry early (Cotton, 2013). Therefore, it is framed that to allow the girl child room to reach her full potential, there is a need to protect her by law and provide resources to enable her to pursue her education.

A strong emphasis on education has strongly been a priority of the international agenda since 1990. The launch of the ‘Education for All’ initiative led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank is accepted as a milestone. The World Education Forum that was held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 established a more comprehensive framework for the ‘Education for All’ initiative. The approach constructed, through the statements of institutional representatives, the idea that education is at the core of development, through the statements of institutional representatives and advocated prioritizing education and health care of the girl child. It is also argued that “education is key to sustaining growth and reducing poverty” (Peppler-Barry and Fiske, 2000: 15; 18; 25).

Education, in this sense, is argued to secure the girl child’s future (Gumbonzvanda et. al., 2020) and this approach is supported by various global and regional initiatives. United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) is one such initiative that was launched by the UN in 2000 in partnership with various non-governmental organizations to achieve gender equality in and through education. One such partner that the UN works with is the international non-governmental organization, the Campaign for Female Education (Camfed), whereby education has been set as a solution to poverty and means of empowering the girl child in Africa. Camfed aims schooling for all, particularly supporting girls in rural areas, through providing all fundamental school needs from uniforms to boarding, when necessary. This helps lessen the burden for guardians living in poverty. The institution also provides business training and grants to young women in rural areas creating empowerment and economic opportunities for development. Camfed founder and Executive Director Cotton (2013) noted that very frequently girls drop out of school to take on low-paid jobs, as a rule in manipulative conditions. Alternatively, they resort to exchange of money for sexual favours with older men to get their education, at the expense of their lives in the long haul, and a high risk of contracting HIV and Aids. Therefore, it may be emphasized that the involvement of such organizations and initiatives provides a leeway for the girl child to avoid such problems.

In a regional context, the AU has been more involved in institutionalization and developing a policy framework to address the problems of the girl child in the 2000s. The AU International Centre for the Education of Girls and Women in Africa (AU/CIEFFA), which was established in 2004, remains the overriding institution endeavouring to empower the women and girls in economic, social, and cultural spheres in and through education. The policy dimension was strengthened with the declaration of 2010-2020 as the ‘African Women’s Decade on Grassroots Approach to Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment’ and further enhanced with the development of the ‘Continental Education Strategy for Africa’ (CESA 16-25, 2016) that provides a ten-year policy framework for education within the context of the ‘Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want’, the Pan African development strategy that was launched in 2013. The drive on education was also supported by the launch of the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa in 2014. In the African case, the issue becomes even more relevant to the problems of the girl child given that 15 out of 20 countries with the highest rate of child marriages are located in Africa and 39 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides, 2014). As has been mentioned above child marriages are one of the main problems having severe repercussions on the health, education, and wellbeing of the girl child.

The African cooperation framework was strengthened with the declaration of 2015 as the ‘Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development Towards Africa’s Agenda 2063’, and subsequently 2016 as the ‘African Year of Human Rights, with Particular Focus on the Rights of Women’ (Kamal, 2016). It needs to be noted here that while the AU has aimed to establish a bridge between African development goals and the sustainable development goals, there is an understanding that a one-size-fits-all strategy would not work, and the global strategies need to be made compatible with African needs by uniting customary and modern ideas into a useful discourse (CESA 16-25, 2016: 5). Therefore, it can be observed that the AU has been working in close cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO on the one hand, and the African countries and civil society organizations on the other, in trying to find maintainable answers for girls getting to and remaining in school, and to encourage new pathways towards gender equality within schools.

The Union defined, within the context of its focus on rights of women, seven challenges that topped the agenda on gender equality in 2016. This includes “economic exclusion and financial systems that perpetuate the discrimination of women; limited participation in political and public life; lack of access to education and poor retention of girls in schools; gender-based violence, harmful cultural practices, and exclusion of women from peace tables either as lead mediators or part of negotiating teams of conflicting parties” (African Union, 2016; Kamal, 2016). Indeed, the prior debate on these challenges formed the basis of policy objectives for addressing the gender relations as well as the problems of the girl child. This is evident in the objectives of the AU/CIEFFA Strategic Plan 2015-2017 as well. It is defined in line with the ‘Continental Education Strategy for Africa’ as the objectives not only included promotion of education for girls and women, but also assisting member states in building capacities through networks of knowledge and experience sharing and developing innovative strategies of advocacy to consolidate women’s and girls’ education (AU/CIEFFA, 2014). Given this institutional and policy framework, the results of the process of institutionalization, policy diffusion, state compliance, and implementation do not weigh straightforward answers and may vary across countries. Pursuing policies to achieve gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment in Africa through education indeed presents a valuable attempt as women make up more than half of the 1.4 billion African population. It should also be noted that 50 percent of the African population is under the age of 25 is making Africa the continent with the youngest population. Nevertheless, Africa has experienced persistent poverty: According to UNCTAD (2021), extreme poverty levels in African countries have decreased from 40 percent in 2010 to 34 percent in 2019. However, the COVID-19 global pandemic increased the number of people living in extreme poverty, increasing from 478 million people in 2019 to an estimated 490 million people. There are also, strong arguments that in Southern Africa, poor and rural areas may experience a retrogression towards initiatives on the girl child due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Plan International, 2020; Gumbonzvanda et. al., 2020). A significant number of the mind-boggling factors that drive child marriage are likewise exacerbated in crisis settings. A pandemic of this nature presents exceptional difficulties that create a necessity to protect young girls from violence and abuse, both in the reaction and recuperation stages. It is suggested by

NGOs that gender-responsive education plans, alongside social assurance measures, will guarantee that the girl child is not abandoned and that they get the schooling they merit despite the pandemic or any other crisis (Gumbonzvanda et. al., 2020).

4. Problems of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe and the Role of International Organizations in Dealing with the Problems

In the wake of acquiring political independence in 1980, Zimbabwe adopted a proactive strategy in addressing the rights and problems of women and children. The efforts to address gender discrimination were, firstly, a consequence of women's association in the battle for freedom in Zimbabwe and throughout Africa. In addition, these attempts intended to overcome the shortcomings of the British colonial era (1890–1980) that gave way to unequal social relations within which the girl child faced deep-rooted problems.

During the colonial era, the aim to escape the poor conditions of the rural areas was one of the factors that pushed young girls towards urban areas. Young girls worked as maids and gardeners in white communities and at times, intending to stay in urban areas without a permit, they sold their bodies for a living and indulged in prostitution from a young age. They offered sexual favours to white men and sons of rich and influential colonizers (Mhike, 2016). The community leaders would also trade off their children to colonial rulers to gain favour in their eyes, which can be argued to be a form of sex trafficking as well. On the other hand, cultural practices such as '*kuzvarira*'^{††} and '*ngozi*'^{‡‡}, which continue to this date, created the conditions for abuse, violence, and child prostitution (Mawere & Rambe, 2012).

Following independence, Zimbabwe primarily reinforced the efforts by strengthening her legal framework (Sithole & Dziva, 2019). The country endorsed

Kuzvarira is a customary marriage system that denotes “marrying off, without her consent, an underage girl (sometimes as young as eight or even before birth) to a rich man who already has another wife or wives in exchange for money, food and other material possessions that guarantee the girl's family not to suffer acute economic deprivation ever again” (See Mawere & Rambe, 2012, 2).

^{‡‡} *Ngozi* is “the customary practice offering a young girl as compensatory payment in inter-family disputes” (See Mawere & Rambe, 2012, 9).

the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights that was approved by the members of the Organization of African Unity and entered into force in 1986 emphasizing the member states' obligation in Article 18 (3) "to ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women and also ensure the protection of the rights of the women and the child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions" (OAU, 1981). Zimbabwe has additionally endorsed and consented to United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1991, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and the empowerment of women in 1995 and the regional South African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development in 2008.

Zimbabwean efforts went beyond attempts to strengthen the legal framework to deal with the problems faced by the girl child. The circumstances in Zimbabwe presented some improvement until the early 1990s as the government increased spending on primary education and healthcare to address gender inequality, despite a lack of sources (UNDP, 1990; UNDP, 1995: 3). Zimbabwe was able to protect its human development in the 1980s by introducing measures that targeted the most vulnerable groups through increasing public spending on rural health centers, water, sanitation, and rural schools, and strongly implemented progressive social policies at a time of emerging global readjustment towards free-market economies. This was described as an 'adjustment with the human face' by the UNDP (1990: 4 and 55-56; 2010: 30). However, Zimbabwe faced a reversal from the early 1990s onwards which negatively influenced its human development: Zimbabwe was one of the only three countries, among 135 countries presented, to have a lower level of human development in 2010 when compared to the 1970 levels (UNDP, 2010, 27), inducing poverty largely blamed on mismanagement. Accordingly, present-day Zimbabwe fails to meet the sustainable development goals set by the United Nations on eradicating poverty, promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and achieving primary education, amongst others (Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013).

Zimbabwe, indeed, is one of the countries that has suffered high levels of poverty over a long period. According to Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (Zimstat), extreme poverty increased to 7.9 million, affecting 49 percent of the

population in 2020, showing a stark increase over the last decade from 23 percent in 2011/2012 (Zimstat, 2021a: 3; World Bank, 2021: 21). The economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and climatic drought have had a drastic influence on the rise of extreme poverty recently. Yet, poverty has been prevalent since the mid-1990s, but the individual national poverty rate presented slight changes from 1995 to 2017, fluctuating between 75.6 percent in 1995, 70.9 percent in 2001, 72.3 percent in 2011/2012, and 70.5 percent in 2017. For the same years, poverty was more prevalent in rural areas than urban areas respectively standing at 86.4 percent (1995), 82.4 percent (2001), 84.3 percent (2011/2012), and 86 percent (2017). Extreme poverty rates were more prevalent in rural areas even though Zimbabwe was able to alleviate an important share of its population from extreme poverty, especially in the early 2000s. The share of the population in extreme poverty decreased from 47.2 percent in 1995 (62.8 percent in rural areas) to 41.5 percent in 2001 (52.4 in rural areas), to 22.5 percent in 2011/2012 (30.4 in rural areas), only to rise again to 30.4 percent in 2017 (43.4 in rural areas), to 38.3 percent in 2019 (51 in rural areas). The increase in extreme poverty in the latter half of the 2010s was drastic, where the economic conditions negatively influenced those in the urban areas as well leading to an increase in extreme poverty from 4 percent of the population in 2017 to 10 percent in 2019 and 16 percent in June 2020 (Zimstat, 2019a, 43; Zimstat & World Bank, 2019, 16-17; World Bank, 2021: 20-21).

The World Bank (2021: 20) stated that, in 2019, “nearly 90 percent of the extreme poor lived in rural areas, and 1.6 million were children”. Indeed, women and children are most affected by the structural nature of poverty and inequality. Education imbalances between boys and girls were further exacerbated by the consequences of the 2007/2008 global crisis and more recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, as economies shut down and unemployment rates increased. This has created more room for poverty to reign, especially in rural areas in countries such as Zimbabwe (Chingono, 2021a). Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency figures also suggest that the severity of child poverty in rural areas is higher, wherein rural areas of Zimbabwe child poverty prevails over 70 percent, and there is particularly a high degree of inequality as well (Zimstat & UNICEF, 2019: 7).

Poverty-related factors have been important in creating grave problems and conditions for the girl child in Zimbabwe. However, poverty and lack of

income were not the sole reasons; problems are further exacerbated by the socio-cultural and religious practices and the socially constructed role of women in society. Throughout decades of suffering, the girl has been seen as someone who should be prepared to be a wife and take care of a home rather than the one to get an education and take care of a family (Makuyana, Mbulayi & Kangethe, 2020). The girl child has been overburdened by expectations of household duties such that there is little to no attention towards her education. As such, in most Zimbabwean homes with patriarchy as the form of leadership, most girls were never given the opportunity to pursue education. Fees were made available for the male child, whilst educating a girl child was seen as an expense, as she shall be married off anyway. Therefore, families put emphasis on raising the girl child in order to produce a good wife for their future prospective son-in-law (Mawere & Rambe, 2012; Mavhunga & Bondai, 2015). Rutoro et. al. (2013: 3) argue that this culture implicates certain gendered roles for girls and boys, and “girls are socialized a low status in life and boys are socialized for a higher status”.

In places where poverty prevailed, marrying off one’s daughter was seen as a solution to their poverty crisis. Cultural practices whereby if the husband of an elder sister passes away the younger sister becomes the elder sisters’ replacement wife or the acknowledgment that a husband’s wife’s little sister is also his wife has culturally created situations of abuse, early child pregnancies, and early child marriages. The fact that girls are married off to older members of religious sects in some cases as it is seen as “God’s will” or poverty will be prevailing in a family has led to the formation of religious\cultural practices since the 1990s (Mutanana & Bukaliya, 2015). The belief that this is right with “God” is also constructed through a guardianship as the new family becomes guardians of the girl to keep her away from the risk of abuse and vulnerability from those around her perpetuating the power, control, and domination practices inherent in the patriarchal nature of the society (Armstrong, 2018). Cultural practices such as initiations to adulthood whereby the girl child may be raped, or sexual advances may be made towards her, resulting in pregnancies, and forced early child marriages. In addition, traditional and cultural beliefs such as the belief that sleeping with a pure minor would cure HIV, developing with the growing HIV/Aids pandemic in the mid-1990s, put the girl child at risk of being abused (Kang’ethe, 2014). All these led to a high rate of girl child dropouts from

the school where the girl child assumed the task of looking after the ill in their families or financially supporting their families, and to an increase in poverty rates as uneducated girls could not take care of themselves and their children.

The high number of girls dropping out and being forced into early child marriages in the rural areas of Zimbabwe due to poverty has been an influencing factor for the prose of this article. Although Zimbabwe has a rather equitable enrolment level in education, access to education is marred with inequality for the girl child. Notwithstanding, this is a general trend in most Sub-Saharan African nations; female enrolment in schools lingers behind male enrolment (Muchacha & Matsika, 2018). Especially at the upper secondary level. In rural areas, this is due largely to a high girl dropout rate from schools “owing to early marriages, teenage pregnancy, discriminatory cultural practices, poverty, and the policy on re-entry of adolescent mothers into school after delivery not being implemented”, as presented in the CEDAW observations (UN Zimbabwe, 2021b: 12). As a result of recent economic instability and the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of girls out of school has further increased (Muromo, 2021).

Education for the girl child is perceived as vital to break the pattern of generational poverty; and indeed, to prevent child marriages. Data collected by Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency indicates a strong link between education and child poverty and puts forward that educated people are less likely to have poor children: even in rural areas “households headed by someone with secondary education are only a third as likely to have poor children as those headed by someone with only primary education” (Zimstat & UNICEF, 2019: 20).

Child marriages are also directly related to the factors given above. Zimbabwe stands out as one of the top countries where child marriages persist even though the government launched the AU Campaign to end child marriages in July 2015 under the theme “We are Girls not Brides” (African Union, 2015) and changed the constitution in 2016 to set the age of marriage as 18 to protect the girl child. Indeed, a series of Zimbabwean constitutional changes intended to overcome the loopholes leaving the girl child vulnerable (Sithole & Dziva, 2019). Following the launch of the National Gender Policy in 2012, the Zimbabwean Government made constitutional changes to address the requirements of the Policy, to outlaw child prostitution in all forms and shapes, and to address the 2016 court decision that ruled it to be unconstitutional for a child younger than 18

to be married off (Sithole, Manwa & Manwa, 2013; Chipunza, 2018; Murombe, 2020). Zimbabwean First Lady Auxillia Mnanagwa has also been active in campaigning to end child marriages. In 2018, the First Lady initiated The National Action Plan (NAP) and Communication Strategy against Child Marriages (NAP, 2019) aiming to create favourable conditions for girls, so that they do not have to go through child marriages (Chipunza, 2018). The call was made upon traditional, religious, and political leaders to take a stand against child marriages in Zimbabwe. Men were also encouraged to be at the forefront of this campaign. Despite all these attempts, various reports reveal that 34% of girls in Zimbabwe are married before 18 years (Zimstat, 2019b, 254; UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018). The disparity becomes starker when one compares rural areas with urban areas: the figures are much higher in rural areas, twice as much when compared with urban areas, rising to 50 percent in the poorest provinces. As indicated by Zimstat (2019b: 254), the gender disparity is also more prevalent when child marriages are concerned: compared to 34 percent of girls only 2 percent of boys marry before the age of 18.

Cultural and religious beliefs, when coupled with poverty, also hinder the health and well-being of the girl child, creating further challenges and vulnerabilities. Cultural and religious beliefs have traditionally seen menstrual cycles as a misfortune upon the girl child, at times, excluding them from everyday life practices and resulting in dropouts from school (See Ndlovu & Bhala, 2016; Rutoro et. al., 2013). Most rural parts of Zimbabwe are difficult to access due to bad roads, making it tough for transportation to schools on the one hand and the attempt to create knowledge and awareness through campaigns, on the other. Cultural and social beliefs, as in the case of menstrual health management which is a taboo in some communities as Ndlovu & Bhala (2016: 4) argue, impose poor menstrual knowledge and access to sanitary products. Notwithstanding various endeavours to advance girl child education in Zimbabwe, menstrual hygiene management has not been given sufficient consideration in the educational sector. As a taboo, the issue stays blurred in social restrictions, limitations, and unhygienic practices that further compound the wellbeing-related perils for women and the girl child, especially in poor localities. In some families, they would rather buy a loaf of bread for the family rather than waste money on sanitary products. Beliefs as well as negative attitudes based on beliefs directed by

cultural and social practices along with lack of appropriate information, such as the negative attitude of boys in schools, set barriers for school attendance creating a situation whereby the girl child misses so many learning days because of their cycle (Montgomery et. al., 2016; Ndlovu & Bhala, 2016). This has resulted in school dropouts, creating a room for child marriages or prostitution, making this unfortunate reality true for many girls (Shabaya & Konadu-Agyemang, 2004; Shangwa, 2011).

International organizations, especially the UNFPA, have been active and worked with local organizations such as Tese Foundation, Kubatana Trust, Sista2Sista Club, Zichire, FACT, ZAPSO, World Vision to create awareness about menstrual health. Various training programs since the mid-2000s sought to train the girl child with tangible skills in addition to their formal education. In localities, they organized various awareness campaign meetings to educate people on the value of the girl child and to educate her. They also tried very hard to remove the stigma surrounding menstrual cycles and them being a curse. UNFPA has been instrumental in initiating the distribution of reusable sanitary pads as a solution to the girls who cannot afford to buy disposable ones and the 2019 Zimbabwean government decision concerning the provision of sanitary pads in schools. The UNFPA was also active through the COVID -19 lockdowns, collaborating with local partner organizations, to distribute sanitary pads for the girl child, and enhance awareness, especially in the rural areas and high-density localities (UNFPA, 2020).

The link between poverty and education was essential for the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education that assigned a considerable part of its public plans to build sound strategic plans and activities for education after independence in the 1980s. Despite several initiatives by the Ministry of Education, such as providing free education, problems faced by the girl child persisted as the economy took a downward spiral. The 2005 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2005) suggested that Zimbabwe lacked strong governance institutions to enforce the rule of law and control corruption in the late 1990s and early 2000s. What is more being that, in the mid-2000s, high HIV\Aids rates persisted, necessitating new measures. The government of Zimbabwe, seeing the magnitude of the problems the girl child had to deal with, came up with a strategy to be implemented between 2005 and 2010 in the form of the Zimbabwe National Strategic Plan for the

Education of Girls, Orphans, and Other Vulnerable Children, which was later sustained (UNICEF, 2006). This was further supported by the National Gender Policy (2013-2017), National Action Plan, and Communication Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2019-2021). The development and implementation of policies were done in cooperation with international organizations and in association with non-governmental organizations, public and global, such as Tese Foundation, Kubatana Trust, Sista2Sista Club, Zichire, FACT, ZAPSO, World Vision, which intended to keep up the high enrolment rates while improving the ability to finish school and to address the problems of education and to end child marriages (See UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, 73-76; Ncube, 2013).

International organizations have also been instrumental in terms of addressing violence against women and girls in all forms by 2030 in line with the sustainable development goals. Violence, indeed, is an issue that is exacerbated by child marriages. Zimbabwe was among the twenty-five countries targeted by the Spotlight Initiative that was launched in 2019. The initiative is run by the United Nations in partnership with the European Union, and work in close cooperation with UN agencies, the Zimbabwean government, and civil society organizations to enhance and enforce the legal framework, to strengthen institutions that protect women and girls, promote ‘gender-equitable attitudes’, raise awareness, as well as providing services for the survivors and victims of violence (UN Zimbabwe, 2020; UNDP, 2020). The UNDP defines its role and involvement -through awareness campaigns, donations, and educative training in rural communities- as transformative aiming to achieve normative and structural changes that can enable and expand women’s agency and empowerment for gender equality (UNDP, 2020).

Various initiatives have been carried out by the international organizations to maintain support for women and the girl child, through monetary and non-monetary means, to try to uphold the implementation of equal gender-responsive policies in the public sphere and social protection measures in confronting the problems faced by the girl child. It is possible to observe progress in the legal framework in Zimbabwe towards providing a policy of fairness for the girl child. The establishment of a framework of economic opportunities disregarding the sex of the person, is coupled with a strong rise in school enrolment levels, and reduction of HIV/Aids disease rates amongst women and the girl child (UNDP,

2019). Nevertheless, the implementation of these policy decisions is uneven and not as straightforward as was revealed by the death of a 14-year-old girl child after she conceived an offspring at a congregation place of worship on 15 July 2021. The fact that Zimbabwe has two sets of marriage laws, the Marriage Act and Customary Marriages Act, and that neither one of the laws gave a base age for marriages in the nation, while the customary law permits polygamy strongly brings question marks on implementation. Child marriages are prevalent despite parliamentary attempts that aimed to synchronize the laws, ban marriage of anyone under 18 years, and sought to arraign anyone engaged with the marriage of a minor (Chingono, 2021b). The public authorities have customarily chosen to disregard child marriages and polygamy due to the traditional aspect of it, especially in rural areas and within religious sects (Munemo, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The study has attempted to substantiate the argument that the problems of the girl child in Zimbabwe are a result of the structural nature of social relations. Indeed, various studies on the problems of the girl child reveal that there have been improvements in Zimbabwe such as increased enrolment rates in education, especially in education at the primary level and early stages of the secondary level. Education is an endowment and as such, important in the empowerment of the girl child to take action or to act as an agent to change her social environment. However, the status of the girl child in Zimbabwe has not seen a dramatic transformation, especially in poor and rural areas, and remains fragile in the face of political, economic, and social developments. The prevalence of gender disparity in school dropouts and child marriages are indicators that the problems of the girl child are structural, socially constructed, and reinforced through multiple forms of gender-based discrimination.

The international organizations have been actively involved in Zimbabwe. They have been working to support education and training, to promote activities to raise awareness, and to provide support and social protection mechanisms, as well as lobbying the governments to encourage institutionalization of international gender equality regime and goals. Providing resources and assuming a range of actions on behalf of women have not led to a fundamental restructuring of gender-based power relations. The role and involvement of the international organizations

have largely created temporary relief, but it has not been sufficient to overcome the structural nature of the circumstances that create the problems of the girl child, and indeed, the empowerment of the girl child has not been materialized.

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