



THE INTRICACY OF RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION AND GIRL-CHILD MARRIAGES IN THE JOHANNE MARANGE APOSTOLIC CHURCH: THE CASE OF MEMORY MACHAYA IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, religion was considered a haven where the heavy-hearted and broken would find solace and hope from unfortunate events such as violence, poverty and death. In recent years, literature has documented various cases where spiritual language has been used to normalize and persuade congregants into sexual relations that constitutionally translate to one form of sexual abuse or the other. This study employs a document review methodology augmented by key informants to interrogate how religious indoctrination has contributed to the sustenance of child marriages in Zimbabwe. Using the 2021 Memory Machaya's "14-year-old dies giving birth in a shrine" case, the study unearthed the abuse of spiritual authority by clergymen to manipulate congregants into child marriages. Further, supposed prophecies were used to facilitate clergy sexual abuse. Some indigenous Apostolic sects were protective of their doctrine. While the government was reluctant to deal with Johanne Marange church, victims' guardians also played a leading role in facilitating child marriages, making it difficult to seek justice for the victims. From a human rights perspective, the paper argues for regulation of religious sects to ensure compliance with the dictates of the constitution. Since laws are reactive, the author also advocates for robust sexual and reproductive health rights education to ensure an attitudinal change which desists from viewing women and the girl child simply through sexual and reproductive lenses. This aligns with the tenets of developmental social work, a profession credited as the legal vanguard for all children in Zimbabwe.

Keywords

Girl-child marriages, Religious indoctrination, Memory Machaya, Rights, Sexual reproduction, Social work

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Human beings by nature and design are social beings (Perera, 2021; Baker, 2015; Hossain & Ali, 2014). They find meaning and navigate life's psycho-social and spiritual challenges through reliance on other people. This relates to the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity for survival. In this quest to belong and relate to others, many people tend to affiliate to one religion or the other (Baker, 2015; Gripaldo, 2008; Melgosa, 1984). The belief,

worship and reverence of a seen or unseen god or God is what entails the term religion (Sitnikov, 2020; Byamugisha, Amusa & Makonye., 2002). Religion can in simpler terms be understood as a pursuit of a particular system of worship and faith with great devotion. It is a belief system with one or more deities, incorporating rituals, ceremonies, ethical guidelines and life philosophies. However, the issue of religion is so controversial that Pirzig (1975) cited in Gripaldo (2008) states that a single person experiencing a delusion is called insanity, but when many people suffer from the same delusion, he calls it religion. Gripaldo (2008), also brings a new dimension to religion, making a distinction between monotheism and polytheism religion. While monotheism is the belief in one God, polytheism is the belief in many gods, evil spirits and goddesses respectively, making religion a complicated enterprise.

Globally, religion is accredited for bringing meaning to people's lives, helping them to appreciate the past, giving meaning to the present and ushering in hope for the future (Chabata, 2023; Gripaldo, 2008; Byamugisha et al., 2002). This, for some people, eases the tension, uncertainties and distress that come with everyday challenges (Melgosa, 1984; Fineman, 1984). Observably, every religion is distinguished from others by its set of different beliefs, ways of worship, norms and a way of life upon which followers are expected to unquestionably follow (Byamugisha et al., 2002). This may denote to what to and not to wear, what to and not to eat, when to worship and the treatment of men and women in societies too. Each religion usually has its distinct set of values and practices commonly known as a doctrine (Weissbrod, 1982). It is this doctrine that distinguishes it from other religions and set them apart from other sects within the same religion, consequently influencing behaviour, expectations as well as the identity of a person.

Through the doctrine, congregants are then indoctrinated into that particular religion. Ayrapetova (2020) defines indoctrination as the psychological process of inculcating a person or group of people with values, practices, ideas and a certain way of life. Religious indoctrination can thus be understood as a form of socialization into a certain faith. Resultantly, indoctrination in itself may not be harmful, unless if the values and practices being imparted violate other people's human rights. Some of the traditions and practices within religious sects pose a great threat to the attainment of gender equality because they constitute harmful practices. It is for this reason that the Johanne Marange's church has been called out because some of its practices such as the normalization of child marriages do violate women's rights, child rights and human rights in general (Dudzai, Zvokuomba, K. & Mboko, 2019; Girl Child Network, 2016).

Ayrapetova (2020) identifies a number of indoctrination methodologies that are used by destructive religious organizations to manipulate congregants. The first one is monologicality, which is a form of unidirectional influence where the strategy is anchored on information deprivation. Here, congregants are isolated from usual forms of communication such as mass media, friends or any other information source as they are considered diabolical, sinful and worldly. The other common method is verbal multiplication where certain phrases for example 'holiness' or 'honouring leadership' are frequently repeated to form a religious ritual with the intention of reducing criticality of perception of reality. With emotionality also, spiritual leaders tend to exploit the vulnerability of congregants who are burdened by life's challenges and in need of God's help. Another element of indoctrination is that of collectivism whereby

behaviour or action such as child marriages is carried out by many people to cultivate a sense of 'rightness', acceptability and normalcy within the church and society at large.

While the prevalence of child marriages globally is undeniable, several studies acknowledge that obtaining accurate data on the true extent of girl-child marriages is difficult to obtain as many marriages go unregistered and girls' ages are often falsified. Nonetheless, WHO (2019) established that about 39 000 girls under the age of 18 are married off daily, translating to 14.2 million annually. UNICEF (2019) in their study also reported that over 700 million women were married before the age of 18. This realization has led to a global consensus to end the prevalence of girl-child marriages. Anchoring this agenda is mainly the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) target 5.3 which seeks to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriages by 2030 (Nyahunda, Shyleen, & Tirivangasi, 2021). The pursuit of this goal is critical as it is an overarching goal. This means that eliminating girl-child marriages has the potential to contribute to the attainment of other SDGs, including goal 1 on hunger, goal 3 on good health and well-being, goal 4 on quality education, goal 5 on gender equality and goal 8 on decent work and economic growth among others. Bengesai, Amusa and Makonye (2021) argue that the fight against girl-child marriages was strategically tied to broader empowerment, educational reproductive health and livelihood goals. This is with an understanding that child marriage is caused by a multitude of variables and that it is also associated with various negative outcomes.

With the global demand for gender equality on all fronts by human rights activists, governments and international bodies, the issues surrounding the status of women in religion have not escaped the attention of scholars and NGO gender experts. In Zimbabwe also, women NGOs and other developmental agents have been making demands for the end of child marriages, especially in the Johanne Marange Apostolic religious sect where the levels of acceptance and prevalence are alarming (Dudzai et al., 2023; Madziyire, 2013). According to Museveni (2017), the Johanne Marange Apostolic church is a religious sect with unique characteristics in that it does not believe in the Traditional Bible but in its own 'Holy Book' called *Humbowo Hutsva HwevaPositori* (The New Testament of the Apostles). The book is centred on the experiences and life of its founder, Johanne Marange. It is this book which guides the doctrine, practices and acceptable behaviour within the church. Some of these practices lead to adverse implications such as death. Regarding this, Buwerimwe and Muromo (2022) indicated that Nokutenda Hwaramba (15) died at the church shrine while giving birth in Bikita, Masvingo Province in October 2022, In January 2022, Ferby Munyafi (15) from Chiadzwa village died from excessive bleeding during delivery. Perpetrators hiding behind doctrine to escape prosecution. Again in 2024, Dorcas Kajanda (13) died while delivering a child under the supervision of an unregistered Johanne Marange Apostolic shrine midwife (Karengwezeka, 2024).

While many cases of women abuse thrive in silence (Mafa, Kang'ethe and Chikadzi, 2020), the Machaya case trended on social media platforms, quickly attracting human rights activists' attention. This amplified advocacy voices and pressured the government to expedite statutory instruments aimed at strengthening the rights of the girl child in Zimbabwe. From a legal point of view, the government has yielded to the call from various advocates including social workers to align the statutory instruments that govern marriages in Zimbabwe. The president recently invoked his Presidential Powers Act to gazette the Statutory Instrument 2 of

2024 Criminal Laws (Protection of Children and Young Persons) to raise the age of sexual consent from 16 to 18 years. This was to align it to the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) which states that the minimum age set for marriage is 18, by extension logically setting the age for sexual consent to 18 years. Zimbabwe generally has two legal pieces that inform the nature and processes of marriages, the Customary Act and the Marriage Act. It is important to note that some of the marriage aspects agreeable in the Customary Act would not be so in the Marriage Act. For example, polygamy is acceptable in a customary union and this is what is practiced in the Apostolic sect. According to Dudzai et al. (2023), their faith is promotive of marriage to many wives at a tender age, as young as 10 years. With the realization that child marriages within the Apostolic sect is underpinned by diverse factors, the study thus seek to explore the relationship between religious indoctrination and the prevalence of child marriages in Zimbabwe. From a social work's perspective, this is meant to inform evidence-based programming which can strengthen child protection modalities in order to safe guard the rights of the girl child.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Children's Act (chapter 5.06) both state that any person under the age of 18 years old is not capable of consenting to sexual activity. By extension, they are not capable of entering into a marriage union. Documented evidence, however, shows that despite the presence of these policies and NGO efforts, child marriage within the Apostolic church, in particular, is still normalized and encouraged (Dudzai et al., 2023; Chamisa et al., 2029; Muchacha and Matsika, 2017). This means that the education rights, as well as the sexual reproductive health rights of these young girls continue to be violated. Consequently, marrying children off also subjects them to the susceptibility to gender-based violence, feminization of HIV/AIDS and feminization of unemployment as they are usually married off to older men (landman et al., 2020; Dzimiriri et al., 2017; Sayi et al., 2018). This has warranted a closer look at Memory's case to understand the Apostolic religious practices and to ascertain how they continue to perpetuate child marriages in the presence of policies and NGOs' efforts in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The study was guided by the human rights-based perspective. From a socio-legal perspective, a human rights-based approach means that individuals in communities should be accorded their rights as enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013). It also means that they should be fully supported to participate in the development of policy and practices which affect their lives and to claim rights where necessary. This then means that they should be made aware of what their rights are so that they can speak out in the event of abuse of their rights. Women and girls' rights as universal human rights should be underpinned by fairness of treatment, respect of their bodies and preferences, dignity as human beings, equality and autonomy to make decisions on issues that affect them (Klaaren, 2015). When girl-child marriage practices are looked at through human rights lenses, it contradicts all of these principles, evidence of human rights violation.

Fig 1: Human Rights Principles



Source: Human Rights Commission: Cayman Islands

Specific Research Question

Why have child marriages persisted in the Johanne Marange church despite various interventions?

METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by the principles of the qualitative approach. An explanatory case study design was preferred as it allowed the researcher to thoroughly critic how the Johanne Marange Apostolic church operates in light of child marriage phenomenon. According to Yin (2013), explanatory case studies explain how and why certain events, circumstances and conditions occur or do not occur. A case study design can therefore be adopted to exhaustively investigate, an organization, an individual, an event or an organization to generate data which can be used to answer research questions. This is in line with the aim of the current study which sort to scrutinized Momery Machaya’s case to understand why child marriage is still prevalent in the Apostolic sect, despite various efforts to eradicate it. The document review and key informant interviews were used to collect data for the study. A triangulation of these two methods was important to serve the corroborative and collaborative aspects of the study findings, thereby augmenting its trustworthiness (Cresswell, 2014).

Sampling issues and Inclusion/ exclusion criteria

Memory Machaya’s documentary case was used for this study because while it resembled other cases of child marriage and death while giving birth, it widely captured by media platforms triggering a legal petition and as such has detailed information which can aid with detailed data. The following key informants were selected to bring insight to the case: a religious leader to comment on the dynamics associated with religious indoctrination and spiritual knowledge; a gender expert to contribute on child marriage as a gendered phenomenon as well as social

worker as the vanguard of children in Zimbabwe to provide the legal position on child marriages as well as the relationship between religion and human behaviour. The purposive sampling technique was utilized in selecting study participants. This sampling method ensured that only the child marriage case with enough details to answer the research question and the experts with the requisite knowledge were chosen (Bryman, 2008).

Data Analysis Methodology

Thematic data analysis was preferred for the synthesis of the data. When analysing documents, it is critical to first ensure the authenticity of the documents as well as deciding on how to organize information contained in the documents (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). For the Mary Machaya case, consistency among other documents which reported on the case was done for validation processes. This was then followed by a systematic review of the document chosen to extract key issues and themes being underscored in the document. Thematic extraction was ensured through the process of familiarization with the contents of the document and the verbatim from key informants. The key themes from the document and key informants were then merged and reviewed and checked to minimise biases.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

The author obtained ethical clearance from her university through the Ethical Committee. Further, informed consent, voluntary participation and anonymity was ensured for key informants. From a social work's perspective, the author understands that the identity of children should always be withheld to cushion the child from further vulnerability. However, the names and picture of Memory Machaya was used in the study because it is awash on social media handles. Therefore, the author did not pose any threat to the victim by disclosing her identifying details.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this paper are based on Memory Machaya's case of child marriage which made headlines in Zimbabwe. The case was then augmented by key informant interviews as indicated earlier in the methodology. The case is given below:

The late Memory Machaya (14) who died giving birth at a shrine

Last month, 14-year-old Memory Machaya was reported to have died giving birth at a church shrine in the eastern region of Marange, Zimbabwe. Machaya's story has sparked a national outcry which campaigners hope could present a watershed moment in raising awareness of the harms of child marriage. A petition named 'Justice for Memory Machaya!' has amassed more than 90,000 signatures following a surge of international press coverage. While police say they have begun investigations, many are calling for greater transparency in the public interest. Memory, whose family is part of an indigenous apostolic sect, was 'married' at 13 after her family forced her to leave school. She was buried within hours of her death, without any official investigation. Machaya's death has been linked to the practices of Zimbabwe's Apostolic Church, a sect that practices child marriage and often rejects the use of medicine and hospital treatment. Zimbabwe has committed to end child, early and

forced marriage by 2030. It also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18. But despite this, girls in Zimbabwe are not safe from the practice. Over a third of girls (34%) are married before the age of 18 in the country, and 5% are married before their 15th birthday. While the drivers for child marriage are complex and vary across the country, it is believed that in Machaya's case, she was married within the Apostolic Church which encourages girls as young as 10 to marry much older men for "spiritual guidance". Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death in girls aged 15-19.

Article extract taken from: Girls not Brides. (18 Aug, 2021).

Spiritual Manipulation by Clergyman

Findings from both the Mary Machaya article and key informants established that some clergymen among the Johanne Marange Apostolic church sect abused spiritual authority and that this sometimes translated to the prevalence of child marriages. These spiritual leaders reportedly took advantage of the honor bestowed upon them and the community at large to perpetuate such that they influence the perspective of their members regarding child marriages within the church. Of particular note was the use of prophecies to manipulate young girls into unlawful marriages with older men. These findings find support from the verbatim below:

It is believed that in Machaya's case, she was married within the Apostolic Church which encourages girls as young as 10 to marry much older men for "spiritual guidance". (Extract from the article)

A church has 5-fold ministries and the Masowe (Apostolic church) relies heavily on the prophetic. And sometimes this can be abused to lure or manipulate congregants to do certain things they would not normally do and that they would not have considered. (Religious Leader, 58 years, male)

Spiritual leaders are regarded with a certain degree of honor in the society. So if they say something especially to a child, whether it is right or wrong they are more likely to be believed. Sadly, this has fueled child marriages in these Apostolic churches because it is often given as 'God said you are my wife' way... (Social Worker, 37 years, female)

The verbatim above suggests the existence of a correlation between Mary Machaya's religious orientation and her being the victim of the child marriage phenomenon. This may be attributable to the fact that Mary's exposure to the commonness of child marriages within her religion had somehow shaped her value system to normalize and embrace it also. Ayrapetova (2020) reveals that destructive religious organizations often use the group pressure tactic to manipulate their congregants into a certain behaviour. Because they are often considered as representatives of God on earth, they ensure unconditional acceptance of the religion's practices by instilling the belief that the doctrine and code of behaviour are undividable entailing that they bind all congregants without room for negotiation or compromise. Children generally have low cognitive comprehension to associate their actions with related ramifications. They therefore become easy targets of the prophetic manipulations and indoctrination by some clergyman who may abuse the trust bestowed upon them to advance their sexual agenda. Children for example may be incapable of judging prophecy to check for

scriptural alignment and biblical consistency. Landa et al. (2019) also revealed that some spiritual leaders use fear-inducing language to brainwash their congregants into a subjugation position. Through such linguistic manipulation, women and the girl children are at the mercy of their spiritual leaders, some who unfortunately abuse them through child marriage. This revelation shows the unequal power dynamics between the spiritual leaders and congregants, a skewed scenario which may pose as a breeding ground for abuse.

The Johanne Marange Apostolic Church Protective of their Doctrine

Besides the abuse of spiritual authority, the findings established that the Apostolic church sect was protective of its doctrine and practices. The report on Memory Machaya's case showed that she was buried hurriedly, contrary to the normal burial proceedings. This was believed to be a strategy adopted to conceal any possible traces of evidence. One key informant revealed that among other practices, the Apostolic church was known for marrying young girls and having many wives and that this was acceptable in their church. Every member was expected to live by this practice and not allow external forces to influence their practices.

She was buried within hours of her death, without any official investigation. (Extract from the Article)

Memory's case is sad because instead of trying to show remorse or anything, they actually wanted to destroy any possible evidence by hurriedly burying her. It's as if they only cared about themselves and not this child. It's like she doesn't matter. She is just a girl and that the image of the church has to be protected at all cost. This makes it really hard for us as NGOs to roll out programs against child marriages.... (Gender Expert, 55 years, female)

When a church is starting, it usually has its way of operation and its doctrine and by this, it distinguishes itself from others. Mapostori (Apostolic church) are known for marrying young girls and for having many wives. They defend their practices and any interference from an outsider is resisted. (Religious Leader, 58 years, male)

The sentiments from the research participants and the document reviewed on Machaya's case are indicative of the fact that some spiritual leaders are more concerned about the reputation and preservation of their doctrine than they are about the dignity of their congregants. In Zimbabwe, there are burial rituals that are observed to honor the life of the deceased and this usually take about three days (Musasiwa, 2022). Memory Machaya was not accorded this honor, suggesting that there was little regard which was given to her as a person. In pursuit of maintaining a status quo, women in society are in many times objectified and relegated to child-bearing and domesticity duties, and treated as replaceable second-citizens to men within the home set-up. Museveni (2017) reveals that the Johanne Marange sect is sometimes referred to as impenetrable by outside beliefs that may want to challenge their marriage practices such that it is highly fortified against change such as the implementation of programs against child marriages. In addition, Ayrapetova (2020) reveals that oppressive religious organizations use a strategy called 'weaning from critical rational thinking' to rid their congregants of criticism and possible questioning which may compromise their doctrine which promotes child marriages. This tactic it intended to instill a sense of fear to question authority or using their intellectual reasoning to evaluate the church's doctrine. It therefore

appears as if the welfare and affairs of women are left solely in the hands of religious leaders who are mainly their male counterparts, who may biasedly want to maintain an environment that will always stifle any efforts to liberate women and the girl child towards the path of gender continuum and empowerment.

Parents and Guardians Facilitating Child Marriages

The study further noted that some parents within the Marange Apostolic church were instrumental in facilitating the marriage of their underage girls. They would force their children to leave school so that they could be married. It also emerged from the key informant that the economic hardship brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic further pushed some parents to give away their young girls into marriage.

Memory, whose family is part of an indigenous apostolic sect, was 'married' at 13 after her family forced her to leave school. (Extract from the Article)

The issue of child marriages cannot be won until parents see it as wrong. They are the ones who receive the 'bride price' and agree for their child to be married off. For Memory, I believe the fact that the parents were part of the Apostolic church and the economic hardship brought by COVID-19 made the parents agree to it (Social Worker, 37 years, female)

It becomes very difficult for us to advocate against child marriages for these girls when some of their parents see them as a way out of poverty or hardship. Parents are supposed to be at the fore of protecting their children and not to be accomplices... (Gender Expert, 55 years, female)

The results presented above reveal a child protection issue where parents and guardians who are supposed to be primary agents in safeguarding the rights of their girl children are in fact the frontrunner perpetrators. This adversely compromises any child protection programming because the children will be lacking the primary safety nets that should be provided by the family. Such a scenario, as was the case with Memory exposes children to unprecedented vulnerability which may lead to a cycle of child marriages within that particular family as the practice becomes normalised and passed on from one generation to the other. Museveni (2017) established that despite the work of various NGOs advocating against child marriages in Zimbabwe, there were still staunch believers in the Johanne Marange who were still loyal to the hegemony of the church's doctrine and belief system, holding fast to the church's beliefs such as child marriages. The findings again testify to the confluence of the effects COVID-19 and the need for congregants to remain loyal to their religious subscription as factors exacerbating the child marriage phenomenon. While the pandemic might have increased the vulnerability of the girl-child to child marriage, the findings of Sayi and Sibanda (2018), Dzimiri et al. (2017) and Muchacha and Matsika (2017) among others traced the existence of child marriages in Zimbabwe way before the COVID-19 pandemic. This therefore establishes that while the pandemic might be an accelerant variable, there is need to tackle religious issues among other variables if the sexual and reproductive health rights of the girl child are to be safeguard.

The Government Seemingly Reluctant to Act

The extract from Memory's case showed startling statistics of the prevalence of child marriages in Zimbabwe. The findings reveal that one in every three girls succumbs to child marriage in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the findings show that even their right to access general health is compromised, which in Memory Machaya case has led to her death during child birth. Inasmuch as Zimbabwe has legal instruments that seek to protect the sexual and reproductive health rights of girls and other related rights, the findings revealed that these are seldom violated, especially within the Apostolic church sect.

Zimbabwe has committed to end child, early and forced marriage by 2030. It also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18. But despite this, girls in Zimbabwe are not safe from the practice. Over a third of girls (34%) are married before the age of 18 in the country, and 5% are married before their 15th birthday. (Extract from the Article)

While police say they have begun investigations, many are calling for greater transparency in the public interest. (Extract from the Article)

Everyone knows that gender programming goes beyond just ratifying instruments or policies. The truth is that the girl child is still vulnerable to child marriages, especially in the Johanne Marange church because they are allies with the government. They use child gloves with them because they get votes from these mapositori (church members). This really drains all our efforts... (Gender Expert, 55 years, female)

We have had the Constitution and the Children's Act like forever now which is clear that, anyone below the age of 18 is considered a child and can't consent to sexual activities. As such, they should not be married off because this is against the law. But we continue to see these cases in Apostolic churches. The question should be beyond these Acts, what has the government done to safeguard the rights of the girl child. Cases are reported every day, evidence of the prevalence of child marriages... (Social Worker, 37 years, female)

The findings of this study suggest that Machaya's case was more of a watershed case to determine the government of Zimbabwe's commitment to protecting the girl child rights. The evidence above seems to disinter that the government has a weak implementation strategy when it comes to ending child marriages. While the key informants and the document acknowledge the presence of statutory instruments to drive the agenda of eradicating child marriages, the evidence presented above suggests an unholy relationship between the government and the Marange apostolic sect. Dudzai et al. (2023) reveals that the government had kind of turned a blind eye when it comes to practical steps needed to eradicate child marriages among the Apostolic sect where it is most prevalent. In addition, Mundeya (2023) argues that the Apostolic sect commands such a huge following across the country and were close to the political leaders who were seemingly careful not to offend the church leaders as this would compromise their political support. It is therefore sad to imagine that the sexual and reproductive rights of the girl child could be sacrificed on the altar of political gain.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study if analyzed through child protection lenses have implications on the rights of the girl child.

Need for Evidence-Based Programming against Child Marriages

The study has concluded that the implementation of the statutory instruments meant to guide the eradication of child marriages is rather compromised due to the compromising alliance between the Apostolic sect and the government. It is critical to note that policies and laws in themselves do not automatically translate to solving social phenomena (Mafa et al., 2020). There is need for these to be decoded into practical evidence-informed programs that can respond to the root cause as well as reinforces of child marriages. Child marriage as a global 'pandemic' and therefore requires that programming be tailor-made in accordance to the variables that are reinforcing or resisting the eradication of child marriages. This will ensure that programs are specific to Zimbabwe's socio-cultural and religious orientation.

A Multi-stakeholder Approach in Eradicating Child Marriages

The findings have revealed that there are various groups of people that are implicated by the prevalence of child marriages; children, parents, spiritual leaders, law enforcers, community members and the government through social workers. Clearly, the phenomenon is experienced at various levels of interaction and this demands a multi-sectorial and stakeholder involvement strategy. The programmes aimed at eradication child marriages should be consultative and holistic in nature to ensure a sustainable solution. The National Gender Policy of 2017 in support emphasizes on the need for inclusivity when dealing with issues that have gender dynamics such as child marriages. This will help to reduce the resistance which usually emanates from people having little information of the purpose of the programmes and the implications thereof. It is recommended to include male-based organizations such as Men of Zimbabwe Arise (MEZA) and Padare to be at the forefront of such programming programmes that have a patriarchal orientation. The deliberate involvement of men, traditional leaders and spiritual leaders in the Marange sect can be instrumental in neutralizing the resistance which is always associated with advocacy for women's rights.

Robust Grassroots and Targeted Awareness Campaigns against Child Marriages

The study has concluded that sometimes parents are the ones facilitating child marriages, forcing their girl children to leave school. This finding implies that the primary defence mechanism of the girl child is already compromised, leading to exposure to all forms of abuse. It is possible that some of these decisions are made out of ignorance. Dudzai et al. (2023) reveal that many congregants in the Apostolic church sect do not attend school. This may suggest their inability to comprehend the implications of their decisions to marry off their children to older men such as susceptibility to gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS and death through complicated delivery as was the case with Mary Machaya. The National Gender Policy of 2017 in realizing this information gap recommended the translation of statutory instruments into native languages to allow communities at grassroots levels to comprehend the meanings and intentions of these policies. Social workers as custodians of children through the empowerment of the Children's Act should therefore spearhead robust grassroots awareness campaigns

targeted at groups such as the Apostolic church sect where child marriages are rampant. Community case workers (CCWs) who are the foot soldiers in dealing with child protection issues in communities (Mudewe, Simango, Mafa, & Chingangaidze, 2022) can drive this agenda in collaboration with other relevant stakeholders as suggested above. Targeted awareness programming will therefore breach the information gap, decoding statutory instruments into simple terms that can be understood by all community members. There is a need for broad-based sexual and reproductive health rights conscientization to expose the psychological indoctrination element embedded in the church's doctrine. Through such strategic and inclusive programming targeting the Apostolic church sect, a culture of attitudinal change can be attained to ensure that spiritual leaders desist from viewing women and a girl child in their church simply through sexual and reproductive lenses but as human beings with rights.

Regulation of Religious Sect to Provide a Safety Net Against Spiritual Abuse

The evidence from the findings further concluded that while the prevalence of child marriages among the Apostolic church sect was widely known, there was little being done by law enforcers to curb this menace. As such, Maluleke and Nadar (2002) in their assessment of ATR in relation to gender issues have bracketed and labelled gender socialization, culture and religion as covenants of death. This demands a reorganization of the government's priorities to prioritise the girl child's rights over political gains. Strict regulation of religious operations is critical to ensure that they practice their religion within the confines of the law. This means that all religious groups should be mandated to honor all human rights enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013. The law should be applied to everyone impartially as no one should be above the law. While laws in themselves do not necessarily guarantee compliance because they are reactive in nature (Mafa et al., 2020), they are critical as frames of reference upon which compliance can be demanded. That way, spiritual leaders will not use trust bestowed upon them as a currency that can be used to exploit and manipulate unsuspecting congregants and then hide behind doctrine.

CONCLUSION

The study has established the prevalence of various variables that have compromised the realization of the eradication of child marriages within the Johanne Marange apostolic church. Using the underscored Memory Machaya case study, the paper unearthed the utility of spiritual language to influence and manipulate congregants' behavioral patterns. Trust was seen as a spiritual currency which was exploited to influence congregants towards religious loyalty. While guardians were seen as perpetrators of child marriage in the apostolic church, the government was also seen as displaying laxity in their attempts to end child marriages, despite the presence of relevant statutory instruments. Various interventions through social work practice were proffered to usher in a paradigm shift towards attitudinal change in the way that girls and women are viewed and treated within the Marange Apostolic sect and the society as whole. These have been recommended to catalyze the translation of child-related policies to the safeguarding of children in Zimbabwe.

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