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The prevailing social attitudes towards child discipline in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries have made strides towards the realisation of children's rights since the signing of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990). Zimbabwe has also worked to promote child welfare and protection. Child discipline practices are a crucial component of child protection, particularly when discipline becomes violent. In Zimbabwe, the High Court recently declared the corporal punishment of juvenile offenders as unconstitutional. However, the physical punishment of children in the home was traditionally regarded as culturally acceptable and seen as a way to guide children in the right direction in life. While there existed several studies on corporal punishment in schools, there is a dearth of studies focusing on parents' disciplinary practices. The paper presents findings from a qualitative study conducted with forty-one parents living in both rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were employed to collect data. The findings suggested that Zimbabwean parents still largely believe in physical punishment as the main method of disciplining children. While few parents reported using a combination of alternative disciplining practices with physical beating, most parents did not believe in doing away with physical punishment altogether. Physical punishment was justified by certain social attitudes, including cultural and religious beliefs. The study has implications for the global initiative towards outlawing corporal punishment for children and provides evidence for more community sensitisation on positive parenting practices, in both urban and rural areas.

KEY TERMS: child discipline practices, child protection, corporal punishment, positive parenting, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Corporal punishment is a social issue that has attracted both local and global attention, particularly with regards to its negative effects on children. From a child rights perspective, corporal punishment has been described as a violation of children's rights. Legal instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) call for the protection of children against all forms of corporal punishment. However, the practical application of this in the home setting, particularly in sub-Saharan African countries has seen slow progress. This is mostly due to the social and cultural attitudes parents hold towards corporal punishment. However, few studies in sub-Saharan Africa have examined the prevailing social attitudes which perpetuate the use of corporal punishment as a form of child discipline. This paper contributes to the literature with a qualitative study on parents' social attitudes towards child discipline in Zimbabwe, a country in sub-Saharan Africa. In a rare instance where a child discipline occurrence is taken to court, the Zimbabwe Criminal Law Act states that one of the factors taken into account when deciding whether the punishment was suitable, is the social attitudes towards child discipline which are prevalent in the community among whom the minor person was living when the punishment was administered on them. This paper, therefore, focuses its discussion on these social attitudes, specifically, seeking to answer the following questions: a) What are the prevailing social attitudes towards child discipline held by parents in Zimbabwe? and b) How do these social attitudes influence their approach to disciplining their children? The paper will begin with a background to the study, followed by a methodology and findings section. This will be followed by a discussion of the findings and some conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Corporal punishment, as it is used in this paper, is distinguished from physical abuse, and is defined as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behaviour" (Donnelly & Straus, 2005). The Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children was launched in Geneva in 2001. According to their progress report, fifty-four states have banned all forms of corporal punishment, including in the home, with fifty-six states making a commitment to do the same (End Corporal Punishment Organisation, 2020). Sub-Saharan African states also committed to full prohibition, but to date, none have moved to formalise it in court. The dominant ideology behind this initiative is that creating non-violent childhoods is necessary, and that any form of violence against children is no longer socially acceptable or legally condoned (Henry & Lenihan, 2018). In South Africa, for example, the Constitutional Court declared in 2019, that the use of corporal punishment in the home is unconstitutional, particularly referring to the "reasonable chastisement" clause in the common-law defence. Corporal punishment has been described as one of the key drivers of the high levels of violence against children in South Africa (Sonke Gender Justice, 2019). Due to the fact that violence against children is a hidden subject in society, very often not reported (UNICEF, 2010) it is very crucial that the attitudes that may lead to its increase are illuminated. Scholars have argued that physical punishment is not only humiliating and/or degrading to children but is also an ineffective disciplinary method which is linked with a range of negative health and behavioural outcomes (see e.g. Tadesse, 2019; Hendricks et al 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social attitudes towards child discipline can be explained by lay theories or beliefs that govern social behaviour. Furnham (as cited in Henry & Lenihan, 2018) alludes to the fact that there is a dearth of research on the morality and efficacy of corporal punishment as it relates to children and adolescents. The underlying beliefs that govern society's attitudes towards the use of physical punishment on children are of importance here. According to Furnham (ibid), these beliefs and lay theories are related to broader beliefs around punishment in general. A study on 25 low- and middle-income countries, (Hendricks et al., 2014), found that both social norms and individual beliefs and attitudes predict caregivers use of physical punishment. The methods that are seen as positive parenting or acceptable forms of discipline mostly originate from the West and they have been slowly adopted in the global South through the influence of education, media and technology (Tadesse, 2019).

In Ethiopia, Tadesse (2019) found cultural values and beliefs to be the main reason why corporal punishment is still practiced in the home. Similarly, in Nigeria, Busari, Owojuyigbe, Okunola & Mekoa, (2017) argued that the cultural methods of child discipline and control, which are part of the indigenous culture, were being undermined by child rights activism and globalisation. Muzingili and Chikoko (2019, p.77) also argued that ignoring indigenous parenting practices will create a "continued polarised relationship between parents and children in the society". This regional evidence is crucial for understanding the differences between the West and the Global South when it comes to raising and parenting children. Some scholars have also argued that religious beliefs may contribute to discipline practices in the home. For instance, according to Greven, (as cited in Giles-Sims & Lockhart, 2005, p. 202) some fundamental Christians believe in the popular phrase "spare the rod and

spoil the child”, which implies that physical discipline is a necessary tool in raising children. For instance, Conservative Protestantism has mostly been regarded as the religion that supports the use of corporal punishment due to its emphasis on obedience (Petts & Kysar-Moon, 2012). Therefore, in this instance, corporal punishment is justified on the basis of instilling obedience in a child and is considered as less harmful, if done with a specific purpose that is meant to cause harm.

Corporal punishment and social attitudes towards child discipline in Zimbabwe

The prohibition of corporal punishment in Zimbabwean homes has undergone much speculation and is yet to be achieved (Veritas, 2019). The High Court of Zimbabwe declared in 2019 that corporal punishment was unlawful as a judicial punishment for juveniles and it was inhuman, cruel and a violation of the right to human dignity (ibid). This court ruling, however, did not cover punishment in the home or in schools and was met with strong reactions in the Zimbabwean community. According to Article 241 of the Criminal Law Act of 2004 (Moyo, 2019) “moderate corporal punishment” of children by parents, guardians and school teachers, is regarded as permissible, while article 7 of the Children’s Act [Chapter 5:06] affords parents and guardians the right to “administer reasonable punishment”. The general Zimbabwean populace still believes that physical forms of punishment, such as canning, and spanking are justifiable (Afrobarometer, 2017). Makura, Chikwiri, Musiyiwa, Mandewo and Hodzi (2015) found that there is a general belief that corporal punishment is indispensable and effective as a form of discipline for children. The practice is ingrained in Zimbabwean culture and society (Shumba, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect data. The interview participants included between 22 parents from both rural and urban Zimbabwe who were purposively selected. Similarly, two FGDs were facilitated in both locations; 8 urban participants from Harare and 11 participants from the rural farming area of Mvurwi in Mashonaland Central. The focus of the study necessitated the inclusion of parents living with their children and only one parent per household was interviewed. Parents aged between eighteen and sixty-two years of age for both interviews and FGDs. Most parents were married, with only two being divorced/separated. The combination of interviews and FGD data provided a rich source of information about the social attitudes held towards child discipline. A thematic analysis was conducted, which entailed reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, grouping and coding recurring themes and supporting the analysis with relevant literature. The research team was involved in checking the coded group, improving the trustworthiness and rigour of the data analysis. The study was commissioned by Lingnan University Division of Graduate Studies. Participants signed an informed consent sheet to show their willingness to participate in the study. There was no coercion used in the recruitment of participants for the study, and no payment was offered in return for participation. Participant confidentiality and protection were assured by not asking participants to disclose their personal details. In presenting the findings in this paper, additional steps to ensure confidentiality are ensured, namely not including participant’s names or addresses. Participants also gave consent for interviews to be recorded, and the recordings were only shared with the research team. These will be destroyed after publication of the research findings. Transcripts were shared with research participants and they agreed that their views were captured sufficiently and correctly.

FINDINGS

The findings in this section will be divided into three main themes, based on the interview and FGD responses. As stated earlier, the study focus is on the prevailing social attitudes that influence child discipline in Zimbabwe. The findings suggest that a) there are certain cultural and traditional beliefs that influence the disciplinary methods parents choose, whether physical punishment and/or other alternative forms, b) justifications for the use of physical punishment, and c) attitudes towards the prohibition of corporal punishment. These three themes will be discussed separately below.

Beliefs influencing parents’ choice of discipline method

Most of the parents who were interviewed believed that physical punishment should be used, together with other methods, such as talking to the child, frightening them or praying for them. Only a handful of parents believed that talking alone would help when a child did something wrong. For instance, a 27-year old mother stated:

I would discipline my child through sitting down with him, talking to make him understand his mistake and teaching him good things. I don't believe in beating up children, I think it creates tension between a child and a parent.

The recurring belief surrounding the choice of physical punishment, in this case, beating with a stick or a belt, was that this is the only way to deal with children who will not listen. This implies that parents will attempt talking to the child first, but then if the child continues to display negative behaviour, beating becomes necessary. The same sentiment was shared by FGD participants in the urban areas. For instance, a 35-year old mother from Harare stated:

It depends what they would have done, sometimes I talk to them, but sometimes I beat them if they do not listen.

Parents mentioned that there were certain behaviours that would necessitate a beating without talking first, such as eating food from neighbours, stealing money. For instance, one FGD participant expressed:

...if he ate, you have the right to beat the child because it is not right to eat at other people's houses.

The language used by parents who choose physical forms of discipline in the study shows a belief that suggests that they have the right to discipline their children in any way they deem fit. The few parents who were against the use of physical punishment believed that a child should be taught the right way, not through beating. This was mostly based on their religious beliefs and upbringing which became the norm for them. A good example was provided by a 49-year old father from Mvurwi (rural) who stated:

Normally I educate, I use verbal. I usually tell my children what and how I want them to live. It's my tradition, how I was groomed. Then Christianity. So, I live along those two ways.

The ages of the children were also a determining factor on what discipline method was used. Parents reported no longer beating their adult children, even though as children, they used to beat them up. This was also supported by data from the FGDs where one participant stated that:

The ways of discipline are in two different aspects, let's look at the age where we discipline with words, and the age where we don't use words. Let's say for an 8-year-old child, you can't use words they will not understand, you can use a stick so that they don't forget.

Justification for use of physical punishment over other methods

For those parents who believed in using physical punishment, they believed that their choice of physical punishment was justified and they were asked to provide reasons for why they felt this way. The popular belief was that as long as parents aim to guide their children on the right path, then it is justified to use physical punishment. For instance, a 30-year old father said that:

It is not really beating the child, it is putting the child on the right track or right direction.

Other parents justified their use of physical methods of child discipline based on their own upbringing. It was not uncommon that a parent who grew up in an authoritative home where physical beating was used reported using the same methods to discipline their own children. We see below the example of a 27-year old mother who stated:

As for me, I think corporal punishment is actually good because, us, when we were growing up, we used to be beaten and we did not have those actual terms to say let me take my child to a Pastor so that they can pray for them. We were used to being beaten.

There were also parents who gave the cultural justification for the use of physical punishment. This was based on the Zimbabwean way of life and raising children. For example, a 62-year old mother stated:

In our African culture, most of the children understand through beating, if you do not beat them, they will not stop misbehaving. I don't think it is right according to our culture, because for our kids, if you see me beating them up, they would have gone to extremes.

Attitude towards the prohibition of corporal punishment

Parents were asked whether or not they would support the prohibition of corporal punishment as a form of child discipline. Their responses show that some parents supported the prohibition of corporal punishment and others were against the idea. Only a few parents were neutral. The FGD data complemented what individual parents stated in their interviews. Even though individual parents held certain views towards the banning of corporal punishment, their justifications came from widely held beliefs in the society as the FGD groups showed. The following extract shows the diversity of views in FGDs around the prohibition of corporal punishment:

Interviewer: *A recent High Court ruling recently prohibited corporal punishment as a form of discipline. What do you think about it?*

FGD Participant 1: *They made a mistake because if a child is not beaten, let's say for teachers, the law out laws corporal punishment but the child should be beaten. The law is just a formality to avoid those who injure children.*

FGD Participant 2: *From my own point of view, it is right because beating up a child will not discipline a child completely. Some teachers brutally and cruelly beat up children which is not right.*

FGD Participant 3: *They made a very big mistake, because you don't beat a child every day. You beat a child maybe once a month. Saying that a child will not be beaten at all, is wrong. Some children if you rebuke them with words they will not understand. They need a beating, hence saying children will not be beaten completely is wrong.*

FGD Participant 4: *As for me, it's wrong because they are now promoting bad things in children because some of the children now take it as a right that they should not be beaten.*

FGD Participant 5: *It is now difficult to discipline children, as they will report you to the police. If you don't discipline your child at early stages, they will then commit bigger offenses that will end them in jail.*

From the above, it is evident that most parents believe in corporal punishment as a form of child discipline and they fear that not disciplining children in this way will lead to worse outcomes. The interview data also showed the same trend of most parents disagreeing with the High Court ruling outlawing corporal punishment, even if it has not yet been outlawed in the home. Some parents even cited religion as a basis for the use of corporal punishment, for instance, a 26-year old mother stated:

Even the Bible says if a child does something wrong, they have to be disciplined using a stick.

Some parents also feel that giving children too much freedom to report parents or teachers who discipline them, will harm them in the future. Parents described this as “following the law at the expense of a child’s future” and it was one of the recurring sentiments among parents who were interviewed. For instance, a 56-year old mother stated:

Some of these laws we may follow them, but they end up killing our children. The beating we are talking about is not murder, but to discipline them so that they walk in the right direction.

Parents fear that they will not be able to control their children if how they discipline them is dictated by law. Some children may take advantage or misinterpret these laws and rights to their detriment. Parents felt that there must be a consideration of their rights as parents together with the rights of the children, but this was not currently being done. Another parent expressed his sentiments strongly:

Very few children pass their exams and most of them end up being involved in drug abuse because you introduced a law which says corporal punishment is illegal. So, if you beat them up, they tell you that they will report you to the police. So, what are we doing with our children? What are we encouraging them to do?

DISCUSSION

The above findings show evidence of some of the prevailing social attitudes concerning the disciplining of children in Zimbabwe. Three main themes relating to parents' social attitudes on child discipline were described, namely a) beliefs influencing parent's choice of discipline method, b) justification for the use of physical forms of punishment, and c) attitude towards the prohibition of corporal punishment. As stated in the introduction, sub-Saharan African countries are lagging behind in their commitment to abolishing corporal punishment for children. Efforts to legalise the banning of corporal punishment in the home in Namibia and Botswana, for example, did not bear much fruit (Sloth (2018). Zimbabwe is not much different from its neighbouring countries as evidenced by the above parents' views on corporal punishment. It is clear from the examples above, that the beliefs that parents hold and their attitudes perpetuate the use of physical forms of child discipline. It is also apparent that most Zimbabwean parents justify their use of corporal punishment based on cultural and religious grounds. This paper argues that these prevailing social attitudes have an influence on any legislation that may be introduced to ban corporal punishment.

Zimbabwe recently declared the practice of corporal punishment unconstitutional, however, the provisions of this law in the home are yet to be legalised. Parents have mixed views as expressed in this study, but most parents disagree with the law as seen above. The argument that corporal punishment is culturally appropriate, and therefore, justified in some contexts is supported by the parents in this study. This is similar to other scholars' findings, (see e.g. Lansford et al, 2010, p.22), who argued that culture is a filter that can "ease or exacerbate the effects of corporal punishment on child behaviour". Cultural relativism allows us to view morality as a social construct (Renteln, 2010), and as such, the argument for which form of child discipline is culturally condonable is also a social construct. Some cultures are more accepting of physical punishment than others, for example Asian Americans compared to European Americans in a study of American parents' discipline methods (Chao, 1995). As seen in the views of Zimbabwean parents above, there were several justifications for the use of physical punishment, including the belief that "this is the only way to get children on the right path".

Religious beliefs are also an important social influence on parents' choice of child discipline in the findings above. We see several references to the Bible by Zimbabwean parents. Similarly, previous studies have found a link between religion and parent's use of corporal punishment. For instance, Conservative Protestant parents were more likely to believe that corporal punishment prevents future child misbehaviours and that it has less detrimental effects on children in terms of their social and moral development (Lansford, et al, 2010). This is also true in the Zimbabwe case, where parents believed that they were preventing future harm to the child by disciplining them through physical beating. Parents also believed that giving children too much freedom will make them uncontrollable in future.

Parents, in general, want more control over the disciplining of their children and they frown upon legislative interference in how they raise their children. This supports previous findings by Zimbabwean scholars, Muzingili and Chikoko (2019) who also argue that parents in Zimbabwe bemoan the lack of legal attention in integrating their role as parents and in defining the rights of children. The reference to children's rights by parents in the present study was often in a negative way because they fear that they will lose control over their own children. Zimbabwean parents justified this attitude by stating that they are avoiding their children becoming worse off as they grow up. This view is supported by Nigerian scholars (Busari, et al, 2017) who argue that child discipline has always been regarded as a way of curbing the rise in delinquency among children and young people.

This poses a significant challenge towards the total abolishment of corporal punishment in Zimbabwe because parents feel that the law should not encroach on their parental rights (Dziva, 2019). It is also a generally held belief that prohibiting corporal punishment is not Zimbabwean and will lead to higher levels of indiscipline among children (ibid). Muzingili (2018) also argued that the emerging child rights movement clashes with the cultural methods of child rearing in the African context. Busari et al (2017) called for more studies which will examine the continued use of cultural methods of child discipline as globalisation continues to take hold of African nations **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The study did not find any stark qualitative differences between rural and urban parents when it comes to child discipline. Parents from both geographical locations had similar views towards their choice of physical punishment. There also appeared to be no differences between age groups, with both young and older parents holding the traditional, cultural views which support physical punishment in Zimbabwe. Although there were few cases of parents who do not believe in beating their children, they are not fixed to a particular age range or geographical location. The age groups of the children, however made a difference to the choice of parenting method parents chose. All the parents in the study reported no longer beating their adult children, even though they used to beat them as children. While contextual circumstances should never be used as a justification for violence against children, they help to provide a more nuanced understanding of the results (Hendricks et al, 2014).

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The study has implications for the global move to eradicate corporal punishment of children. In Zimbabwe, progress may be made by incorporating national education campaigns for parents on the alternatives to corporal punishment or positive parenting practices. These can be run by social workers at government or non-governmental level. Community work, which is a mode of social work, is crucial in the changing of community attitudes towards corporal punishment. This is essential at local level, while government efforts push the national level agenda. Social workers can play the advocacy role and lobby the government of Zimbabwe to harmonise the indigenous parenting methods with current legislature, through consultations with both parents and children. It was made clear in this study that very few parents use alternatives to physical punishment, such as talking to the child or taking away something they love (negative reinforcement). There was little mention of these alternatives, which implies that parents are resorting to what they know best, in the absence of alternatives. Social workers can work with individual families to promote positive parenting practices. It is also transparent that some parents' beliefs that children will become worse off in the absence of physical punishment stem from evidence of youths losing their morals around Zimbabwean society. Therefore, social work programmes must target young people as well, to educate them on positive behaviour so that there is a balance between parents' parenting and the outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the prevalent social attitudes towards child discipline in Zimbabwe and found a predominant use of physical forms of punishing children. Parents in the study gave cultural, religious and moral justifications for their choice of physical punishment over other methods of child discipline. There is still more to be done to change parental attitudes towards physical punishment in the home and social workers can assist in training, raising awareness and lobbying for policy changes in this area.

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