

# ZIMBABWEAN FEMALE PRINCIPALS' PROMOTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS CONTEXTS

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## Abstract

This is qualitative multiple case study explored the extent to which children's rights are observed in five disadvantaged school contexts in Masvingo District in Zimbabwe. Data were collected through one-hour individual in-depth interviews. The participants comprised five school heads, four deputy school heads and three teachers-in-charge (TICs). Content analysis was used to analyse the data. The data revealed that a number of children's rights were being flouted. The children's families were generally poor as a result children did not have adequate time to rest and play as they helped to augment family income through working in the fields and vending. The schools lacked adequate facilities and furniture exposing children to discomfort and harsh weather conditions. Some guardians exploited resources meant for orphans for their personal use. Older boys at times sexually abused younger girls. Some teachers applied corporal punishment to school children. The study recommends that government set up programmes that educate the populace on children's rights and the need to respect them. It should invest more resources and improve the conditions in disadvantaged schools. Needy children should be on payroll and should be placed in homes where the government working with other stakeholders could take care of them.

Keywords: Children's rights, poverty datum line, child labour, child abuse, exploitation of children, poverty, disadvantaged school contexts.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The wellbeing of children is to a large extent threatened by poverty (UNICEF) [1]. Grugel [2] contends that despite measures being put in place to reduce poverty, more than 600 million children worldwide still live without basic requirements such as food, shelter and safe drinking water. In Zimbabwe, a good number of children find themselves trapped in abject poverty. The paucity of resources in the country manifest in both the children's homes, and the schools. Such a situation has led to an infringement on children's rights especially on their right to food, shelter and play. Poverty in some Zimbabwean schools manifest in children coming to school hungry, wearing worn out clothes, and sometimes absenting themselves from school because they assist their parents to augment family income for survival. Supplementing family income is not the child's responsibility, hence such practice infringes on the child's right to enjoy childhood and to be provided for by parents and guardians.

This study explores the challenges of fulfilling children's rights in five disadvantaged schools in Zimbabwe and also the extent to which child rights resolutions are observed. The aim of the paper was to develop awareness to the populace on children's rights. It accomplishes this aim through an examination of how the children's social and economic statuses limit them from enjoying their rights as children at home and at school. The study explores the perceptions concerning the dilemmas of disadvantaged children in their schools. These perceptions portray ways in which children's rights are observed or defied.

## 2 AN OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS DISCOURSES

Children's rights refers to 'all the rights the child has owned since his/her birth due to being a person and also being in need of care and nursing' (Maltepe & Bayram [in 3: 412]. Fundamental rights which children are entitled to include: the right to improving their skills, to live and to grow, the right to having a name, the right to free expression, the right to health services, the right of social security, the right of education, the right of rest and recreation, the right to be protected from violence, drugs and sexual abuse and the right to cultural activities and work [3: 412]. Grugel [2] adds that rights have been regarded as a vehicle for enhancing the status of the poor and the marginal in the global political economy. Children are a marginal group because they are at the lowest step in the social stratum with the state, parents, care takers, and adults all featuring above them [4].

The history of children's rights dates back to 1962 when physical abuse of children raised concern in the United States (US) leading to the formation of important rights based initiatives such as the Children's Rights and Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) [5] This convention established a globally applicable code of individual rights for all children (ibid). The CRC has led to the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in which almost all countries were signatory – including Zimbabwe (ibid). State parties to CRC have expectations which they have to fulfil. According to Grugel, [2] these include care-giving, standard-setting roles, implementing reforms which ensure minimum levels of shelter, food, schooling, health, respect and protecting them and their cultural environment from violence.

Arce [4] classifies rights into three 'Ps' namely protection, provision and participation. In the case of protection and provision for example, it is the adult who has to protect and provide for the child. This study aims to explore the extent to which children are protected from social ills and how they are provided for by their parents or the Zimbabwean Government. With global campaigns on children's rights so visible and vocal, the question that needs to be answered is to what extent are these conventions fulfilled in the best interest of the child in selected school contexts in Zimbabwe?

### **3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This qualitative research adopted a multiple case study approach. This approach was preferred because it enabled an in-depth understanding of the extent to which children's rights are denied or defended in selected disadvantaged school contexts, in Zimbabwe. Purposeful sample was used on the strength that it enables an in-depth study of individuals and settings [6]. In this study it enabled an exploration of how children's rights are promoted or contravened in the selected schools. The participants comprised five school heads, four deputy school heads and three teachers-in-charge (TICs) all addressed as school principals because each one of them presides over a section of the school.

One-hour individual in-depth interviews which focused on the children's living and schooling contexts were conducted with each participant. Issues discussed reveal much about the way in which children's rights are observed or denied. For validity and reliability purposes, data for interviews were captured on an audio recorder and then transcribed. To reduce bias, a sample of vignettes, on school heads' perceptions concerning the issue under discussion were presented under the main theme 'the plight of children'. Content analysis was employed to interpret the data.

### **4 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

In the background to the study, the social and the physical contexts of the five selected disadvantaged Zimbabwean primary schools in which the study was carried out are described. An understanding of these contexts is crucial because these are the milieus in which children's rights are exercised. Two of these schools are in Masvingo peri-urban and three in Masvingo urban areas. Urban schools refer to schools located in a town while peri-urban schools are in the rural area in the vicinity of a town. A mixture of rural and peri-urban schools was selected because disadvantaged school contexts are prevalent in both environs in Zimbabwe. The aim was to raise awareness about the way children's rights are exercised in the selected school contexts. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and the research sites.

The first research site Sunrise is a peri-urban satellite school. The concept of satellite schools started with the advent of farm resettlements. After independence in 1980, the Zimbabwean Government sought to redress the land imbalances of the colonial era. There were no established schools in these areas and this gave rise to new schools referred to as satellite schools. Satellite schools often began life in a farm house or some other shelter constructed by the parents. Sunrise used a farm house for the administration block and for teachers' accommodation while the rest of the school, from grade one up to grade seven, used a block of rooms one of which was the garage while other rooms were small and dilapidated old chicken incubators. The school lacked adequate furniture, sporting facilities and toilets. They had access to a feeding scheme funded by Hope Tariro, a non-governmental organisation.

The second research school Farm View is also in a peri-urban area and is situated in a farm. The classrooms are a standard size according to Zimbabwean norms, but they are inadequate, for example, all grades except grade seven learn under the shade of a tree for almost half the day then they would swap with another class.

The third research school, Progress Primary School is owned by a church. It has adequate infrastructure. However, there is a shortage of furniture. It is situated in the oldest part of the town and hosts children from various disadvantaged backgrounds such as squatters who live in shacks, children of disabled parents, and those with no fixed abode. Most of the children reside in old hostels which accommodate mostly gangsters and drug dealers and the children tended to have behavioural problems. There are over 300 orphans at the school, most of who are being looked after by old guardians.

Good Hope Primary School is the fourth research site. It is situated in the middle of one of Masvingo's oldest locations known as 'The Old Railways'. The school houses children mainly from African Railways pensioners. The grandparents, most of whom are now widows and widowers, struggle to look after their grandchildren, most of whom are orphans. The school has over 400 orphans and is the only school in the town without computers.

The fifth research site, Hillside Primary School has a catchment area similar to the other urban schools in the sample. The school has poor infrastructure. The classrooms are constructed from old dormitories that previously accommodated workers for the Cold Storage Commission of Rhodesia. When the municipality converted the dormitories into classrooms, they did not extend the hostel rooms, to standard classrooms so the rooms are small. The school toilets are old; constantly break down and are too close to the classrooms.

Perumal [7] and Naidoo & Perumal [8] classifies schools that lack adequate resources such as the ones described above as disadvantaged. Zikhali [9] notes that children who live in deprived contexts encountered a plethora of challenges caused by absolute poverty. She found out that such children tended to engage in activities like farming and vending as they helped to supplement family income. The situation thus caused some of the children's rights to be contravened. Zikhali & Perumal [10] found that the plight of school children caused pain, sorrow and anxiety for school heads who presided over these schools.

## **5 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION: THE PLIGHT OF CHILDREN**

### **5.1 Inadequate resources in schools**

Lack of facilities and resources in schools as depicted in the background was a deterrent to children's learning. The general comment No 13 of The United Nations Committee on Economic, social, and Cultural Rights says 'education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realising other human rights' (Herczog) [11]. By failing to provide adequate resources this infringed on the children's rights to education. Exposing them to poor latrines and to unfriendly weather conditions as they sat and learned under trees caused much discomfort to them. However, an important point to note is that despite the pitiable conditions under which learning occurred, the intention of providing education was in the best interest of the child. Perumal [7] comments about the harsh conditions that children in disadvantaged school contexts in South Africa experience observing that for these children the right to education comes at a high cost.

### **5.2 Poverty stricken homes**

The problem of poverty was cited as a big challenge by all school principals in the study. Shyllette for example expressed serious concern for this ordeal because most of the children in her school had little in the way of school uniforms let alone warm clothes. Another challenge which all the school principals encountered was huge numbers of orphans with one school having as many as 400 out of a school population of 1 027. Some of these children were heads of families as their parents had died and their siblings had migrated to neighbouring countries. Dorcas narrated her experience of dealing with one of these orphaned children:

He is very poor. Teachers help him with clothes. At times we have to pay for his fees and buy him books. Sometimes it is the villagers with the support of the kraal head and well-wishers who assist him with whatever they have. At times when they have good harvests they give him but this time I don't think he will be able to get anything because there is nothing to offer. My heart is broken and sometimes I have to go and look for some things from my children. Sometimes I plead from people to offer him help.

The narrative above depicts a situation of absolute poverty which forces the school heads to play many roles ranging from educating them to taking care of their basic needs. At Sunrise School the head had adopted a child after she realised his potential and that his grandmother was abusing him. The same school head had also managed to source accommodation, a donation and had lobbied for food from the social welfare for one orphan.

Some of these children were in poor health. At Farm View Primary School two sick children had been denied treatment by the clinic in a bid to force the grandmother to come to the clinic for advice. In this case the school head had to call an older child who came from the same village to escort these ill children home to call the grandmother. The case of diseases cited and the refusal by the nurses to treat the children suggest that children's right to health was not being denied. Leroy & Symes (in Gassama) [12] view malnutrition and poor health as major factors leading to children's failure at school.

### **5.3 Child exploitation**

Other challenges which school heads cited were abuse and exploitation of orphans by relatives and guardians. Shylette narrated the ordeal of a child whom she had "adopted". Shylette explained that the child won regional and national awards for poetry writing but instead of using the money for his educational needs, his grandmother would use them for her personal gain. On realising the exploitation that the child was being exposed to, Shylette "adopted" the child. Sandy added that such exploitation was the reason why most orphans had outstanding school fees and levies.

Shylette displayed a certificate of merit for the prevention and management of child abuse which she obtained from the district. She explained that:

I used to have so many cases of child abuse here. So I would make a follow up of each case and report it to the region. I went as far as the courts attending certain cases. Some of the children were being sexually abused. Sexual abuse was promoted by the nature of housing which you saw. Most parents have only two huts. One is their bedroom and in most cases the kitchen is used for both boys and girls. In such cases the older children would abuse the younger ones. I was interested in helping the children not knowing that each case I reported was being recorded. I was found to be the head with most concern for children so I was given this award.

Shylette's actions suggest an awareness of the need to fulfil children's rights. Pamela, another head who led a school in town also indicated the existence of sexual abuse of young girls by old boys especially on their way home. Perumal [7] also found out that in South Africa students who travelled long distances were sometimes exposed to sexual abuse en route to school. Sexual violence of girls by boys is, 'in part a manifestation of the social constructions of masculinity and femininity together with gender inequality, which affords males more power than females' Bhana (in Gevers and Flisher) [13]. Sexual abuse is in contravention of the rights to safety and protection.

### **5.4 Disciplining of school children**

Another area where the rights of children were infringed upon in schools was through corporal punishment. Discipline was generally a preserve of the deputy school head working in conjunction with the disciplinary committee. While in most schools corporal punishment was administered to the children, in some schools children were just counselled and given little errands like picking up papers and leaves or sweeping the floor with the assumption that if children were removed from what they liked most, they would change. On the other hand those who exercised corporal punishment argued that an African child sometimes needed a whipping. Beverley advocated:

The African child is beaten but according to the ministry regulation, the head is the one who applies corporal punishment and signs in the log book. Most of our children come from homes some of which accommodate hooligans. Some of these children are therefore not well behaved. You have to be a strong leader and tell them that I don't want this I don't want that. As soon as you walk into this yard, that bad behaviour should be left behind. Here I want a straight forward person. You have to be very strong when it comes to discipline.

At some of the schools, it was reported that teachers applied corporal punishment in the absence of the school head. However, some of the school heads and even parents were aware that teachers

used corporal punishment but they supported its use arguing that it was an African way of bringing up a child.

According to Deb & Mathews [5], awareness of severe child physical abuse was identified as a phenomenon of significant concern in the United States of America that led to the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In Zimbabwe, Circular P35 and Statutory Instrument 65 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe 1992 deal with the use of corporal punishment to control discipline in Zimbabwean schools. Only school administrators, such as school heads, and their deputies can administer corporal punishment, and they should keep a record of the type of offence and how punishment was administered (Shumba) [14].

## 5.5 Children as source of labour

The farming communities survived mostly on subsistence farming and they were largely self-dependant for labour. As a result some of the children had to assist their parents and guardians with domestic chores and labour in the fields. Shyllette had the following to say about the farming community around her school:

Most of the people here depend on subsistence farming and sometimes the pupils do not come to school because they will be working in the fields to make their ends meet. They provide labour for their parents. The people in the farming area are very poor.

A community that depends on subsistence farming is pre-occupied with having enough to live on. Chikoko [15] indicates that in Zimbabwe, 'if the mother goes to the field, the father goes to herd cattle and they converge at home at the end of the day'. In the urban area children aided their parents to augment the family income mostly through vending. The use of children as labour in the home led to absenteeism. Koppenhaver [16] highlights that absenteeism deprives students from benefitting from their fellow learners and reflects negatively on examination performance. Zikhali & Perumal [17] established that absenteeism led children to miss out on important concepts; and sometimes such children were 'pushed out' of school as they did not ever return to school. Working in the fields also deprives children of an opportunity to play, which is essential for the development of social skills, knowledge and other social concepts (Bingham) [[18]. Unfortunately, child labour is not a phenomenon peculiar to Zimbabwe. In India millions of children work in industries, factories and in the agricultural sectors mostly to service family debt (Deb and Mathews) [5].

## 6 CONCLUSION

Despite several conventions on the rights of children, findings of this study suggest that there are numerous violations of children's rights. Most of the violations such as child labour and corporal punishment are rooted in social and cultural practices which view these as essential practices of bringing up a child. However, poverty contributes to some extent to malpractices such as child labour since children have to contribute towards the welfare of the family.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed. There is need to sensitise society on the need to heed all children's rights and protect them since they are vulnerable. There is need to educate society on the ills of corporal punishment and to encourage them to desist from this malpractice. The government should invest more resources in supporting disadvantaged schools. It could provide materials and garner support from parents to provide labour so that school facilities are improved in the interest of the child. Needy children should be on a payroll or should be placed in homes where they can be provided with protection, food, and accommodation by the government, communities, churches, and non-governmental organisations.

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