

Chapter 5: Revitalising Ubuntu Values for Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy and Strengthening Child Protection in Rural Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Despite legislation, education, and health interventions to protect children's well-being in rural Zimbabwe, adolescent pregnancy remains one of the larger child protection and public health issues. This chapter looks at the potential for Ubuntu to be revived as an indigenous African philosophy of responsibility, respect, compassion and moral accountability and to reinforce work at community level to protect children and prevent adolescent pregnancy. The study utilised a qualitative exploratory design after employing Ubuntu Theory in the collection and analysis of data, using an interpretivist paradigm. This study was based on the collection of data which was obtained via a focus group discussion with fourteen purposively selected community elders (mothers and fathers) from the community of Gwenungu in Gokwe South District of Zimbabwe. The District Development Coordinator gave permission to undertake the study and community entry was established with the assistance of the local ward councillors. Thematic analysis as per Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in analyzing these data. The findings suggest that adolescent pregnancy is influenced by inter-related socio-economic and cultural issues, such as poverty, migration for labour, child headed household, sexual victimisation by extended family, and informal small- scale gold mining. Each time, however, participants attributed a weakening of Ubuntu values as the root cause of the weakening of communal parenting responsibilities, the collective responsibility, respect for elders, and traditional child protection systems. They wanted to improve family life, build up the role of indigenous leaders, encourage better parenting practices and re-establish the community's responsibility for the wellbeing of children. The chapter therefore suggests that the adoption of the positive principles of Ubuntu and existing legal, educational and public health

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interventions can constitute a culturally responsive and sustainable strategy to bolster child protection, reinforce community ownership, and prevent adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe.

Keywords: adolescent pregnancy; child protection; community-based interventions; rural Zimbabwe; Ubuntu.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Adolescent pregnancy continues to be an important child protection, public health and socio-economic issue in the world. Even though educational, health and reproductive health services have improved, millions of girls are still undergoing child pregnancy. Around 21 million girls aged between 15 and 19 get pregnant each year in low and middle income countries, almost half of whom (12 million) give birth to a child (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2024). It is estimated that 777,000 of those births are to girls under age 15 years annually. Child pregnancy contributes to maternal and neonatal morbidity, school abandonment, marriage, chronic poverty and stalls the education and opportunities of girls (UNICEF 2023). In this regard, lowering adolescent pregnancy has become a global development priority and is aligned with the recently passed United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) 3, 4, 5 and 16 (United Nations, 2015). Adolescent pregnancy is most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa where poverty, gender inequality, child marriage, sexual violence, and access to reproductive health services continue to expose girls to vulnerability (UNFPA, 2023). In spite of the fact that the policy frameworks are strengthened and reproductive health programmes are rolling out, adolescent pregnancies are still disproportionately high in rural areas where the following challenges converge: economic hardship, lack of services and socio-cultural issues. To prevent and to sustain prevention, it is increasingly becoming important to consider culturally responsive interventions that can address more complex social and cultural contexts, including those that support health and legal strategies, in which adolescents need to connect and grow (Bhana & Singh, 2021).

The region's trends are an analogy to the Zimbabwean situation. Children are protected by improved laws and policies, and community-based programmes have been enhanced but adolescent pregnancy rates are still high, especially in rural areas (ZIMSTAT & ICF, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). The poverty in rural communities persists, as do migration of workers to cities and orphaned status harrowing more children to care for extended families or by child-heads of households. Extended families or child heads of households raise a growing number of children in the context of persistent poverty in rural communities, along with a process of labour migration to urban areas and an increasing number of orphans. These situations lead to less parental supervision and early pregnancy and/or sexual abuse and exploitation for children. Further, some rural districts are experiencing an expansion of illicit mining which has led to transactional sex and GBV perceptions and has risked adolescents in some instances. In rural Zimbabwe, adolescent sexual and reproductive health continues to be a high priority despite the implementation of extensive sexual and reproductive health programmes, comprehensive sexuality education and child protection legislation which have failed to significantly impact social and cultural factors associated with adolescent vulnerability. Prevention strategies have largely concentrated on increasing knowledge, bolstering laws and access to health services, while comparatively limited attention has been paid to indigenous knowledge systems and prevention strategies that historically protected children and were locally managed. This restriction serves to remind us of the importance of prevention approaches that take account of local cultural assets as well as formal child protection responses. In traditional Zimbabwean communities, Ubuntu or Ubuntuism, an indigenous African philosophy of respect, compassion, collective responsibility and moral accountability was the backbone (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). In this worldview, raising a child was considered to be a joint

community affair, in which parents, extended families, neighbours, teachers, religious figures and traditional authorities all play a role in helping, guiding, and protecting children. These informal social systems for the reinforcement of acceptable behaviour created internal community structures and bonds that were crucial to prevent abuse and exploitation.

The position which has since changes with cultural changes, social norms which are attributed to 21st century changes and cross pollination of ideas in different societies. The role of community perspectives and indigenous perspectives is seemingly underexplored. Addressing this gap is important not only for strengthening community-based child protection but also for advancing culturally responsive interventions that support national and global efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals related to children's health, education, gender equality, and protection. Against this background, this chapter explores how revitalising Ubuntu values can contribute to preventing adolescent pregnancy and strengthening child protection in rural Zimbabwe. Drawing on focus group discussions with community elders from the Gwenungu area in Gokwe South District, the study examines community perceptions of the factors contributing to adolescent pregnancy and identifies culturally grounded strategies for strengthening child protection. The chapter was guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors do community members perceive as contributing to adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe?
2. How has the erosion of Ubuntu values influenced children's vulnerability to adolescent pregnancy?
3. How can Ubuntu values be revitalised to strengthen community-based child protection and prevent adolescent pregnancy?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Global perspectives on adolescent pregnancy

Pregnancy among adolescents is an important global public health and human rights issue especially in low and middle income countries. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) estimates that about 21 million girls between 15 and 19 years old give birth each year, with negative health, educational and socio-economic consequences. School dropouts, intergenerational poverty, child marriage and potential health risks for women and children are also greater risks during early pregnancy than they are otherwise, thus reducing the life opportunities of girls and the potential for national development (UNICEF, 2023). Therefore, adolescent pregnancy continues to be at the heart of efforts to reach Sustainable Development Goals in the areas of health, education and gender issue (United Nations, 2015). In high-income countries, a combination of comprehensive sexuality education, sexual health services and peer-friendly approaches, parental engagement, and community-friendly policies is shown to reduce adolescent pregnancy rates (UNESCO, 2018; WHO, 2024). There is, however, evidence from studies conducted internationally that raising adolescent knowledge alone is not enough to sustain adolescent pregnancy. Successful interventions are interventions which are mutually reinforcing between health education and family support, community participation, gender responsive policies and enabling socio-economic environments. The debate has mounted and has taken the focus from individual behaviour change to broader ecological/community-based strategies that support understanding of the impacts of social and cultural domains on adolescent reproductive health.

Adolescent pregnancy in Sub-Saharan Africa and Zimbabwe

Despite poverty, gender equality, child marriage, sexual violence and inadequate access to reproductive health services, adolescent fertility continues to be highest in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNFPA, 2023). While there are positive reproductive health development programmes and child protection laws in many countries, adolescent pregnancy is still heavily concentrated in rural areas with an intersection of structural disadvantage and socio-cultural factors. From the experience of Botswana, increasing adolescent friendly reproductive health services has led to greater access to information and health care; however, significant sustainable declines in adolescent pregnancies have led to a better engagement of families in communities, greater participation and better implementation of the pregnancy prevention programmes (UNFPA; Nguyen et al, 2021). Other studies in South Africa also note that those interventions that incorporate community mobilisation strategies and culturally derived interventions along with sexual education interventions are likely to translate into better outcomes than biomedical or school-based only interventions (Chirwa et al., 2020). The overall insights gained from these experiences indicate that relying on individuals' knowledge alone cannot be sufficient to achieve effective prevention, and partnerships among families, communities, schools and health systems are essential. Zimbabwe is no exception in exhibiting these regional trends. Child protection and adolescent reproductive health services are augmented at the national level but adolescent pregnancy is still higher in some rural districts, ZIMSTAT & ICF (2024). Rural adolescents still have high rates of poverty, low access to education, poor family stability and a lack of youth-friendly services which make them vulnerable to childbirth (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). Taken together, these results indicate that efforts to change these policies are not enough; actions to help families, communities, and local systems to be protective are necessary.

Drivers of adolescent pregnancy

Literature defines adolescent pregnancy as a complex phenomenon that is the result of complex interplay among social, economic, and environmental factors. Lack of economic stability is always a predictor of adolescent pregnancy, with poverty, school dropouts, exchange sex and susceptibility to exploitation all leading to adolescent pregnancy (UNFPA, 2023). During times of economic distress, girls are forced to enter into transactions that will see them receive some material or money, especially in poorer rural communities. Family structures in Southern Africa have been seriously affected by labour migration and/or orphanhood. The growing number of children being cared for by their grandparents, extended relatives or older siblings are due to their parents leaving to seek jobs. Increases in supervision and emotional support by parents can enhance migration, but prolonged parental absence can lead to greater risk of children being sexually abused and becoming pregnant (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). Sexual abuse is an important factor contributing to adolescent pregnancy, especially among younger adolescents. Research in Southern Africa has identified numerous cases of child pregnancy as falling into the categories of coerced or exploited pregnancies and not consensual ones (Meinck et al., 2021). Likewise, child-headed households put children at greater risk of neglect, exploitation and sexual violence due to a lack of adult protection (Cluver et al., 2020). Factors specific to their context are also involved in adolescent pregnancy. Artisanal Small Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) and illegal mining activities in Zimbabwe have given rise to population mobility, inequality, alcohol abuse and transactional sexual relations amongst adolescents, which render them more vulnerable (International Labour Organisation, 2022). These studies overall show that adolescent pregnancy is not caused by any one particular variable, but a combination of vulnerabilities at both the structural, familial, community, and environmental levels.

Community-based child protection

There is increasing evidence that the active involvement of the community in a sustainable approach to child protection, in addition to the formal statutory system, is vital. Community-based child protection sees families, schools, traditional and religious groups and other members of the community as pillars of child protection, important stakeholders in the process of preventing child abuse, identifying children at risk and acting on child protection concerns (Wessells, 2015). African experiences also show that programmes that have local participation and community responsibility and are based on indigenous knowledge systems are more likely to be made their own by communities and to remain sustainable over time, than externally-led programmes (Save the Children, 2022). This evidence is a further sign that child protection can not be only a Gov task, but must also involve communities as active child protection actors.

Indigenous knowledge systems and Ubuntu

On a historical context Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Africa have been very significant in the socialisation, moral education, conflict resolution and community cohesion of children (Mapara, 2009). Indigenous perspectives on child protection show the need to take a multi-agency approach, as Indigenous collective responsibility to children is not only about parents. However, there is an increasing understanding in contemporary scholarship that when combined with children's rights and evidence based practice (Chilisa, 2020), these systems can complement formal child protection systems. Similarly, South African scholarship understands that indigenous philosophies are still relevant in the work of addressing current challenges in child protection in that they allow for greater themes of collective accountability, community ownership, and regional cohesion. Ubuntu is a way of life enshrined in a philosophy and a framework for community-based child protection efforts in Zimbabwe. It values, encourages and guards children with respect, compassion, dignity, reciprocity and collective responsibility, involving families, neighbours, teachers and local leaders in every aspect of nurturing and safeguarding children (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). While these traditional approaches have been undermined by social and economic change, they are still relevant in enhancing current child protection interventions, according to scholars (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019).

Literature gap

The literature consistently points to poverty, family disruptions, sexual abuse, sexism, and lack of access to reproductive health services, as important risk factors for the manifestation of adolescent pregnancy. Although interest in community-based child protection and community-based knowledge systems is growing, there has not been enough consideration of the perspective of rural communities with regards to the link between the collapse of Ubuntu values and adolescent vulnerability towards early pregnancy. Moreover, there is a lack of practical evidence on how indigenous philosophies may be incorporated in the current child protection framework to combat adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. To fill this gap, this chapter borrows from the community voices from the Gwenungu community in Gokwe South District, and explores ways in which a return to Ubuntu can bolster community-driven child protection initiatives and help prevent adolescent pregnancy.

3. Theoretical framework

The chapter draws on Ubuntu Theory, an African philosophy that prioritises “humanness,” relationality, the collective, respect and compassion, and caring for one another. Ubuntu has been in use for centuries in the various African cultures but was first conceptualised in Zimbabwe scholarship, by Samkange and Samkange (1980) in *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy*. The name Ubuntu is sometimes summarised by the phrase, “a person is a person through other persons”,

expressing the concept that the wellbeing of the individual can't be separated from the wellbeing of the community. It thus fosters social cohesion, moral responsibilities and co-responsibilities for others' welfare. Ubuntu Theory has been embraced by education, social work, psychology, public health and community development because it provides an African viewpoints on the nature of human relationships and collective responsibility (Mugumbate, 2013). Ubuntu differs from individualistic approaches which place the role of child protection foremost in the family and the formal structures of the state; it considers the process of child rearing a collective affair involving parents and extended families, neighbours, teachers, religious and traditional authorities. Its core values of collective responsibility, respect for human dignity, compassion and social accountability present an opportunity to have a culturally based framework for strengthening child protection and fostering children's wellbeing. The theory is particularly pertinent due to its celebration of the beliefs and perceptions held by Africans about family and community life, supports the creation of child protection through community ownership, and because it provides a complementary approach to statutory systems, enhancing trust, working together, and shared responsibility (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Such qualities are particularly helpful in tackling adolescent pregnancy which is a complex issue influenced by a range of overlapping social, cultural and economic factors. Not all is good about Ubuntu Theory; it has been criticized. Scholars debate that the social community structures, which traditionally provided a basis for Ubuntu are becoming lost as a result of urbanisation, labour migration, globalisation and the rise of individualism, and are unlikely to function in the present African context (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013). Others warn about romanticizing native practices and over-romanticizing native systems. Therefore, Ubuntu must never be regarded as a substitute for the rights of children or formal child protection instruments, but rather as an additional instrument which can enhance community involvement and ensure compliance of children's rights.

Ubuntu Theory is the suitable lens for this study as it is an understanding of how the relationship of the community changes affect the vulnerability of the child to adolescent pregnancy. The community consistently linked with a decrease in communal parenting, less respect for older persons, waning traditional authority, and less sense of responsibility for children's welfare to an increase in adolescent pregnancy. They also attributed labour migration, child-headed households, sexual abuse and illegal artisanal mining to the breakdown in the social cohesion that was traditionally good for children. These findings reflect Ubuntu's core belief that communities that are caring, connected, and responsible are essential to achieve children's wellbeing. In this chapter, it is therefore concluded that renewed emphasis on the positive principles of Ubuntu – in combination with existing legal, educational and public health interventions – could provide a cultured approach to consolidating efforts for child protection and the prevention of adolescent pregnancies in rural communities in Zimbabwe.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken using a qualitative exploratory design, and an interpretivism paradigm to gain more insights into how the revitalisation of Ubuntu values can be used to help prevent adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe. It was thought that the interpretivist paradigm would be suitable since in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, beliefs and interpretations of participants' concepts of adolescent pregnancy in a socio-cultural context would be achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was carried out in a very rural area called Gwenungu in Gokwe South District in Zimbabwe where people live off subsistence farming, labour migration, poverty and high level of artisanal gold mining activities. The location was targeted as a result of the increasing awareness about adolescent pregnancy and child sexual abuse issues. Purposive sampling was used for participants selection as it helped to select the individuals with rich knowledge and experience related to the objectives of the present study (Palinkas et al., 2015). There were 14 community elders (mothers and fathers) who were well known

in the community and had a wide knowledge of the community life, indigenous values, and child rearing practices. The District Development Coordinator (DDC) gave permission to carry out the study for the Gokwe South District; community entry was achieved through the local ward councillors who helped mobilise the participants and drafted a central venue for the data collection. Data was collected by using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in which all 14 participants joined. A semi structured discussion guide was developed to elicit participants thoughts on the extent of adolescent pregnancy in their community, factors influencing adolescent pregnancy, shifts in the role of Ubuntu values, and culturally appropriate approaches to generating community-based child protection. Discussion was audio recorded, with the participants' informed consent and supplemented with observational, field notes which documented context-specific observations and non-verbal aspects of interaction. Thematic analysis (Brown and Clarke 2021) was used to analyse the data. The transcripts of the audio were word for word and re-read numerous times to become familiar with the data prior to first coding. Codes that were related were collated and bigger categories with themes were identified, reworked and themed in terms of the study's goals, literature reviewed and Ubuntu Theory. Quotes from the participants are included verbatim in the findings to give voice to the participants' perspective and to support the analysis in an authentic way. Member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study in which participants agreed with the researchers' interpretations of their views (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Further, the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings were enhanced by the use of audio recordings, field notes and verbatim quotations. The study received ethical clearance and administrative approval before the data collection was started. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants after providing them the information related to the objective of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality etc. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and all information was treated with confidentiality based on ethical principles that governs qualitative research.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Thematic analysis with Braun and Clarke (2021) is used for presenting and discussing the findings based on the themes. The focus group discussion identified the following six interrelated themes that represented community perspectives on factors that lead to adolescent pregnancy and how Ubuntu could be utilized to strengthen child protection: Participants did not see adolescent pregnancy as only a reproductive health problem, but as a multidimensional problem in the community rooted in interrelated socio-economic, cultural and institutional forces. Participants' narratives as well as literature and Ubuntu Theory are used in the discussion to illustrate how the eroding communal values undermine the traditional child protection mechanisms and thus leave the child more vulnerable to sexual abuse and early pregnancy. Overall, the results make the case for culture sensitive programmes on the strength of families, strengthening communities, and the formal child protection systems in preventing adolescent pregnancy in rural Zimbabwe.

Theme 1: Adolescent pregnancy as an escalating community crisis

The most prevalent issue that arose in the focus group discussion was adolescent pregnancy. It was seen by the participants as a problem of the community and not a problem of individual families. They have seen more than a rise in the number of very young girls getting pregnant – as young as nine – and believed the situation is a reflection of a faltering child protection system and urgent community action is needed.

Participant P3 (Female, 61 years) stated:

"Child pregnancy has become one of the biggest problems in our community. It is no longer an issue affecting one family. Almost every village has children who have become pregnant before they are even

mature. Some girls are only nine or ten years old when they become pregnant. This is something that never used to happen in our community."

Participant P8 (Male, 67 years) commented:

"We are losing our children. Every year we hear of another child who has fallen pregnant. It is becoming normal in the community, yet it should never be accepted as normal."

Participant P11 (Female, 58 years) observed:

"Parents now live in fear because every family worries that their daughter may become the next victim. Child pregnancy has become everyone's problem."

As participants described, adolescent pregnancy is considered a community-wide issue of child protection and not just a matter of reproductive health. The reports of pregnancies as early as 9 years indicate that most pregnancies are related to sexual abuse, exploitation or consensual adolescent relationships. The World Health Organisation (2024) and UNICEF (2023) also report similar trends, referring to adolescent pregnancy as a public health and child protection issue directly connected to available protection, violence and coercion. Similarly, South Africa, and Botswana show links between adolescent pregnancy and poverty, family instability, gender-based violence (GBV), and a decline in community support systems (Cluver et al., 2020; Meinck et al., 2021; Mmolainyane et al., 2022). However, unlike other studies, the people in Gwenungu readily cited the loss of Ubuntu as contributing to teenage pregnancy in that the responsibility of the community, as a unit, to protect children is decreasing. The finding is conducive to Ubuntu theory that states that the wellbeing of children rests on a few pillars which include collective responsibility and community cohesion (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Generally, the participants perceived adolescent pregnancy as a community problem, and integrated approaches to child protection, engaging both formal services and increased community responsibility, were necessary to resolve the adolescent pregnancy problem.

Theme 2: The erosion of Ubuntu values and the decline of communal parenting

The erosion of Ubuntu values emerged as the central theme underpinning participants' explanations of adolescent pregnancy in Gwenungu. Participants consistently argued that the decline of communal parenting, respect for elders, and collective responsibility has weakened traditional child protection systems. Unlike in the past, when every adult was expected to guide and protect children, participants believed that child upbringing has become an individual family responsibility, leaving many children without adequate social support or supervision.

Participant P2 (Male, 59 years) explained:

"The biggest problem is that we have completely lost our Ubuntu Long ago, every child belonged to the community. If you find a child doing something wrong, you corrected that child, and the parents would appreciate you. Today, if you advise someone else's child, they tell you that you are not their father or mother. Children no longer listen to elders."

Participant P6 (Female, 53 years) stated:

"Our children no longer accept corrections. Even our own children refuse to listen to us. If you become strict, they threaten to report you to the police. Parents are now afraid of disciplining their children because they fear being accused of abusing them."

Participant P10 (Male, 62 years) remarked:

"In the past our village elders guided young people, and everyone respected them. Today no one listens anymore. Our traditional leaders have lost the authority they once had, and children are growing up without proper guidance."

The accounts by the participants reveal that adolescent pregnancy is indelibly connected to the breakdown of traditional child protection mechanisms which were effective in fostering responsible behaviour therefore protecting children. Instead of the poverty or lack of knowledge of RH as the cause of adolescent pregnancy, participants highlighted the lack of communal parenting, the fading of the respect for elders and the breakdown of collective responsibility as the main factors affecting the vulnerability of children. This finding is veritable to Ubuntu Theory, a theory that considers child upbringing a communal responsibility of the family, neighbours, elders, schools and traditional leaders (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). They also mirror the findings of Mugumbate (2013) and Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) that Ubuntu enhances child protection as part of promoting social cohesion, mutual care, and reinforcing a sense of collective responsibility in the community. Participants also raised concerns about a lack of clarity around child protection laws making parents and members of the community hesitant about giving children the right kind of guidance. It is not that these perceptions are criticism of the childrens legislation, that is still essential to protecting children from abuse, but rather that these perceptions are giving an idea that there is a need to increase community education on positive parenting practices aimed at ensuring children's rights are balanced with appropriate parental direction. In general, the findings suggest that the turnaround of Ubuntu was crucial in the reconstruction of a community as parents, in social cohesion and also in the re-assumption of community collective responsibility for the prevention of child sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy.

Theme 3: Family disruption, labour migration and child-headed households as drivers of adolescent pregnancy

Family disruption resulting from labour migration and the emergence of child-headed households was another prominent theme. Participants explained that prolonged economic hardship has compelled many parents to seek employment outside Zimbabwe, leaving children in the care of relatives or, in some cases, without adult supervision. Although migration often improves household income, participants believed that parental absence has weakened family support systems and increased children's vulnerability to sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy.

Participant P4 (Female, 47 years) stated:

"Many parents have gone to South Africa or Botswana looking for work. They leave their daughters with relatives, especially uncles. Unfortunately, some of these relatives are the very people abusing the children. The girls become pregnant, but because the perpetrator is a family member, the matter is often kept secret."

Participant P9 (Male, 55 years) remarked:

"Some children are staying alone because both parents have died or have gone away. These child-headed families have no one to protect them. Older men easily take advantage of these girls because they know there is no parent to defend them."

Participant P12 (Female, 42 years) commented:

"A child without parents is vulnerable. When there is no mother or father to guide or protect that child, almost anything can happen. Some girls are abused repeatedly until they become pregnant."

These tell of the role of family change in placing children at risk of abuse and exploitation. The relationship between parental migration and inadequate parental monitoring was a ubiquitous association mentioned by all participants, especially those relating to children in relatives' care and to those children who were heads of households. Of particular concern were reports that some perpetrators were close relatives entrusted for their care, which means that the "home" may also be a place of vulnerability, where it is lacking of proper protections. The results align with research from Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, which found that traditional family systems have shifted as a result of labour migration, limiting parental supervision and resulting in children's heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation and unintended pregnancy (Meinck et al., 2021; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). In the same way, Cluver et al (2020) found that children of children-headed households face increased risks for neglect, food insecurity and insufficient adult protection. Ubuntu Theory uses this period of children's susceptibility of being unprotected against violence to point to the institutions of collective responsibility to protect children, that are already weak. In her, the community took on the role of safeguarding absent children. Group members felt that such community mechanisms would over time become less and less effective, and therefore vulnerable children have less and less safeguarding. Supporting community-based services, extended families, and communal parenting were thus considered to be critical measures for diminishing risk of sexual abuse and adolescent pregnancy.

Theme 4: Illegal artisanal mining, sexual exploitation and adolescent pregnancy

Illegal artisanal gold mining emerged as another important factor contributing to adolescents' vulnerability in Gwenungu. Participants explained that the expansion of illegal mining activities has attracted transient populations, increased poverty-related exploitation, and weakened community control over children's safety. They described mining areas as environments where adolescent girls are frequently exposed to older men, alcohol, and transactional sexual relationships, increasing their risk of sexual abuse and unintended pregnancy.

Participant P1 (Male, 60 years) stated:

"Gold panning has destroyed our community. Many strangers come here looking for gold, and some of them target young girls. Because some families are poor, these girls are easily lured with money or small gifts."

Participant P7 (Female, 46 years) remarked:

"The mining areas are dangerous places for children. Girls mix with older men who have money, and many end up becoming pregnant. Some even leave school because they think mining offers them a better future."

Participant P14 (Male, 58 years) observed:

"When illegal mining started increasing, cases of child pregnancy also became more common. Children are exposed to alcohol, violence and adults who have no respect for our community values."

Throughout the conversations, the problem of the exploitation of children was discussed in terms of the social conditions that illegal mining fosters that put children more at risk of exploitation, but never discussed as a direct result of the act of mining itself. These were seen as being related to poverty and community's lack of a 'watchful eye', which in turn leads to a higher likelihood of predatory adults exposing adolescents for peer pressure towards either drink and/or drugs. These observations confirm those of the International Labour Organisation (2022) that artisanal mining communities are high-risk areas, in which community members move in and out, informal settlements are prevalent, working conditions are hazardous and child labour is heightened. In mining communities, transactional sexual

relationships have been shown to be associated with economic deprivation and an increase in adolescent pregnancy and gender-based violence (GBV) in similar studies (UNFPA, 2023). Illegal mining also disrupts the communal relationships that in times gone past, protected children, according to Ubuntu Theory. Participants stated that transient populations can have minimal links with the norms and accountability processes of the community in which they live, therefore it diminishes the community's shared responsibility for children's wellbeing. Therefore, to prevent adolescent pregnancy in mining communities, it is not enough to only have law police. The community wanted to focus on the need for community unity, improving economic opportunities for vulnerable households and the need to re-engage with Ubuntu, the idea of community responsibility for children's protection.

Theme 5: Weakening traditional authority, modern legal systems and corruption

Participants also discussed the changing role of traditional leadership and their perceptions of the relationship between modern child protection laws and community responses to adolescent pregnancy. They acknowledged the importance of legal protection for children but expressed concern that the declining influence of traditional leaders, together with perceived corruption within the justice system, has weakened communities' ability to prevent abuse and hold perpetrators accountable.

Participant P5 (Male, 51 years) explained:

"Long ago our village heads and chiefs had authority. If an older man abused a young girl, everyone knew there would be serious consequences. Such cases were very rare because people feared traditional punishment as well as community shame."

Participant P6 (Female, 60 years) stated:

"Today parents fear disciplining their own children because they think they may be reported to the police. Even neighbours are afraid to advise children. We understand that children must be protected, but families also need guidance on how to discipline children in the right way."

Participant P11 (Male, 65 years) commented:

"Sometimes people are arrested, but if they have money nothing happens. Families lose confidence because they feel justice depends on who has money."

There was a recognition that traditional leadership would play a crucial role in community-based child protection systems as historically chiefs, village heads and elders have been instrumental in reinforcing the importance of good conduct, addressing disagreements that arise as well as holding people accountable. The same is witnessed across the African child protection scholarship where traditional institution play an important role in protecting children and mobilising community action (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). The participants strongly felt however that these systems have lost much of their relevance due to the disparity in social norms, and the lack of acceptance of traditional authority by the community. Another significant finding relates to participants' attitudes towards child protection laws. Some were aware of the need to safeguard children from abuse, but felt there is too much uncertainty about how these laws are being put into practice and this has limited parents and community members to giving adequate guidance and discipline. These perceptions are not necessarily representative of failure of the child protection laws, but are a sign of the importance of increasing education about children's rights and positive parenting amongst the general public. Over and above this extent of concern, participants also voiced concerns about corrupt practices in the justice system that deter reporting and bolster lack of trust in formal child protection structures. All of these findings point to a need for collaboration – not competition – between statutory institutions and traditional leaders in effective child protection. In line with Ubuntu Theory, participants called for the need to enhance the

relations with each other among family, traditional leaders, community and government authorities for better accountability and for children to be safe in their environment.

Theme 6: Revitalising Ubuntu for sustainable child protection and adolescent pregnancy prevention

Participants concluded the discussion by proposing the revitalisation of Ubuntu as the most sustainable strategy for preventing adolescent pregnancy in Gwenungu. Rather than advocating a return to past practices, they argued that the positive principles of Ubuntu—collective responsibility, respect, compassion, and moral accountability—should be integrated with existing child protection legislation, education, and health services. Participants believed that strengthening families and restoring community ownership of child protection would reduce children's vulnerability to sexual abuse and early pregnancy.

Participant P2 (Male, 42 years) stated:

"We cannot stop development, but we can bring back our values. Every adult should feel responsible for protecting every child in the community. That is how we grew up, and it worked."

Participant P8 (Female, 34 years) remarked:

"Parents, churches, schools and traditional leaders should work together again. Children need to be taught respect, responsibility and good behaviour from an early age. Prevention starts at home."

Participant P13 (Male, 37 years) commented:

"If we continue waiting for government alone, nothing will change. Communities themselves must stand up and protect their children. Ubuntu teaches us that every child belongs to all of us."

It is evident in the recommendations made by participants that this is not a problem of the individuals themselves or one of government institutions and departments but one of collective social responsibility regarding adolescent pregnancy. They highlighted the need of re-establishing the community in parenting, reinforcing the family system, collaborating with schools, churches, health services and government agencies, and involving the traditional leaders. The proposals are similar to community-based child protection strategies, which build on knowledge that sustainable child protection is generated in response to a coordinated response between formal institutional actors, families and communities (Wessells, 2015). The bottom line observations also support the key tenets of Ubuntu Theory. A fundamental element of the philosophy is understanding that people thrive in caring and connected communities through which they share responsibility for caring for each other's wellbeing (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). It was repeatedly pointed out that these communal values have been eroded as to diminish the capacity of informal child protection structures, and re-improving these values would increase open and accountable opportunities for children to receive moral guidance and supervision. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) draw a similar conclusion in saying that Ubuntu is a framework which is relevant towards solving the problems that faced societies today as it helps unite people and create solidarity, social cohesion and collective responsibility. Motivational points to note are that the introduction of modern child protection systems and legislation on the rights of children was not rejected. Rather, they supported a comprehensive way of looking at the issue where the positive principles of Ubuntu are paralleled with constitutional rights, statutory child protection services, programmes relating to reproductive health and interventions in schools. This includes understanding that adolescent pregnancy is the product of multi-faceted social, economic and cultural forces that legal and health-only strategies cannot solve. The focus on strengthening indigenous values in conjunction with formal child protection systems, thus provides a culturally responsive and sustainable approach

for reducing adolescent pregnancy and enhancing children's wellbeing in rural Zimbabwe. This topic summons the key message of the research: poverty, migration, child headed households, sexual abuse, illegal artisanal mining and institutional vulnerabilities all play a role in adolescent pregnancies, and Ubuntu can give rise to a cultural and social basis for communities to reconstruct effective child protection systems. Combining the knowledge and ethics of traditional societies with current policies and services, rural areas can enhance community ownership of all children and design settings that foster healthy development and adolescence.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the potential role of Ubuntu values for the prevention of adolescent pregnancy and enhancement of community-based child protection in rural Zimbabwe, and how a process of revitalizing Ubuntu values can be of benefit in these respects. The study illustrated how adolescent pregnancy is not only a reproductive health problem but a multi-faceted child protection problem through the qualitative evidence provided by the community elders from the Gwenungu community of Gokwe South District where multiple social, economic, cultural and institutional factors interplay in creating adolescent pregnancy. Participants identified poverty, labour migration, child headed household, sexual abuse in the extended families and illegal artisanal mining as important aspects to consider when addressing the vulnerability faced by adolescents. Yet, they always pointed out that these problems have been compounded by the progressive weakening of Ubuntu principles that instilled and fostered communal parenting, communal responsibilities and moral guidance and respect for elders. The findings indicate that although Zimbabwe has improved its legislative and institutional framework for responding to child protection concerns, one can only go so far with formal interventions to change social conditions that make children vulnerable. All stakeholders noted the need for active partnership between families, traditional leaders, schools, churches, communities and government bodies in the prevention of sustainable prevention. Ubuntu in this sense was not being seen as an alternative to contemporary child protection systems, but as a culture-based philosophy that can complement statutory child protection services by fostering greater community ownership, social cohesion and collective responsibility for the welfare of children. The chapter highlights indigenous knowledge systems' continued relevance in tackling current social issues to the emerging debate on culturally responsive approaches to child protection. It proposes that the resuscitation of the value principles of Ubuntu provides a valuable structure for enhancing the community level of child protection and decreasing the vulnerability of adolescents to sexual abuse and early pregnancy. Therefore, indigenous values ought to be considered in conjunction with already in place legal, educational and public health intervention to create a more comprehensive and lasting solution to child protection in rural Zimbabwe.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, practice, and future research. The following recommendations are proposed.

Strengthen family-centred parenting programmes.

Government departments, civil society organisations, and faith-based institutions should strengthen parenting programmes that promote positive parenting, open communication, and moral guidance within families. Such programmes should incorporate the principles of Ubuntu while reinforcing children's rights and positive discipline practices.

Revitalise community-based child protection

Communities should re-establish collective responsibility for child protection by strengthening community dialogue, neighbourhood child protection committees, mentorship programmes, and awareness campaigns that encourage every adult to participate in safeguarding children. Traditional leaders, community elders, churches, and schools should play a central role in rebuilding communal parenting and promoting positive social values.

Strengthen support for vulnerable children.

Special attention should be given to children living in child-headed households, under kinship care, or in families affected by labour migration. Community-based support systems should work alongside social welfare services to identify vulnerable children early and ensure they receive appropriate protection, psychosocial support, and educational assistance.

Address risks in artisanal mining communities.

Government and local authorities should develop targeted child protection programmes in artisanal and illegal mining communities. These interventions should combine poverty reduction initiatives, school retention strategies, community awareness campaigns, and stronger enforcement of laws protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Strengthen collaboration between traditional and formal institutions.

Child protection interventions should promote stronger collaboration between traditional leaders, community structures, schools, health services, social welfare agencies, and law enforcement. Traditional leadership should be recognised as an important partner in promoting community awareness, mobilising local participation, and reinforcing positive cultural values that protect children.

Promote culturally responsive child protection policies.

National child protection programmes should recognise indigenous knowledge systems as valuable resources for community mobilisation and prevention. Integrating the positive principles of Ubuntu into child protection policies and educational programmes can strengthen community ownership while complementing constitutional rights and evidence-based practice.

Future research

Future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of Ubuntu-based child protection interventions in reducing adolescent pregnancy across different rural and urban settings in Zimbabwe. Comparative and longitudinal research would provide further evidence on how indigenous philosophies can be integrated into contemporary child protection systems and contribute to improving children's wellbeing.

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