



# Pathways out of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: The Dissonance Between Interventions and Social Norms

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## Abstract

The fight against the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in Zimbabwe has tended to focus on the need to enact and effectively implement laws, policies and programmes. While these interventions are important, negative norms and attitudes towards children who are victims of CSE continue to be embedded in the Zimbabwean society. This study examines how the dissonance between legal and formal institutions on the one hand and social norms and attitudes towards CSEC on the other undermines interventions against CSEC. This is because in order to be effective; laws, policies, programmes and institutions need to largely emerge from and be consistent with society's underpinning relationships, aspirations and norms. The fight against CSEC in Zimbabwe can take a meaningful trajectory if these negative norms and attitudes towards children who are victims of CSE are transformed.

## Résumé

La lutte contre l'exploitation sexuelle commerciale des enfants (ESCE) au Zimbabwe a eu tendance à se concentrer sur la nécessité de promulguer et de mettre en œuvre efficacement des lois, des politiques et des programmes. Malgré l'importance de ces interventions, les normes et les attitudes négatives à l'égard des enfants victimes de l'ESC continuent d'être ancrées dans la société zimbabwéenne. Cette étude examine la manière dont la dissonance entre les institutions légales et formelles, d'une part, et les normes et attitudes sociales envers l'ESCE, d'autre part, compromet les interventions contre l'ESCE.

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En effet, pour être efficaces, les lois, les politiques, les programmes et les institutions doivent largement émaner des relations, des aspirations et des normes sous-jacentes de la société et être en cohérence avec celles-ci. La lutte contre l'ESCE au Zimbabwe peut prendre une trajectoire significative, si ces normes et attitudes négatives envers les enfants victimes d'ESCE sont changées.

## **Introduction**

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) – defined as ‘the commodification and coercion of a child to perform sexual acts’ in exchange for money or other forms of payment (Bang et al. 2014: 17) – is a conscience-wrenching problem that has become a pandemic feature of Zimbabwean society (ECPAT 2014; ZNCWC 2014). Various constituencies across the country have made distress calls to the government and other actors to take steps to eliminate CSEC. For example, in April 2019, a concerned resident of the Chiredzi community in Masvingo petitioned Parliament to take action against CSEC (Mafirakureva, 2019). The government, civil society organisations and other actors have implemented sporadic interventions to combat CSEC. However, the solution to CSEC has remained depressingly elusive. It is the primary responsibility of states to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, including taking steps towards the recovery and reintegration of victims. However, other actors such as civil society, families, communities and the business community also have a critical role to play in the fight against CSEC.

Multiple pathways and guardrails of protecting and emancipating children from CSE have been proposed by various segments of society. These include the establishment of mechanisms of reporting CSEC that are accessible, confidential and anonymous; the elimination of religious and cultural beliefs and practices that are harmful to the rights and wellbeing of women and children; the training and deployment of social workers; the provision of robust social services in communities; the establishment of effective and efficient mechanisms of recovering and re-integrating victims into their families and communities; the provision of material and other forms of support to victims, children at risk and their families; the reforming, harmonisation and effective implementation of laws; the provision of birth certificates to children; the arresting, prosecution and deterrent sentencing of perpetrators; the closure of illegal bottle stores, bars and shebeens; the conduct of regular investigations and patrols by the police; the placement of victims in children’s homes and rehabilitation centres; the conducting of awareness campaigns and group therapy programmes and the provision of medical, psychosocial, legal and counselling services.

Emphasis has been placed on the establishment and implementation of legal and institutional pathways out of CSEC. While these interventions are important, they are severely weakened by society's negative norms and attitudes towards children who are victims of CSE. There is consequently a dissonance between legal and formal institutions on the one hand and social norms and attitudes towards CSEC on the other. These norms and attitudes are also embedded in those institutions – such as civil society, government institutions, religious organisations, the private sector, the media and community leaders – that have the responsibility to play a leading role in protecting and emancipating children from CSE, which exacerbates the problem. These attitudes and norms are characterised by the further victimisation of children 'for supposedly making a conscious choice' to engage in sex work.

These children are generally characterised by society as 'innate deviants' who are bereft of socially sanctioned dreams and aspirations. It is not surprising that some potential respondents refused to take part in this study on the reasoning that it is 'a waste of time and resources' to talk about CSEC. Others said that it is vile to even talk about CSEC. Simon (not the participant's real name; this study uses pseudonyms throughout), who is a religious leader, stated that children who engage in commercial sex work 'are the Biblical Philip's proverbial Nazareth...nothing good comes out of them'.

This study seeks to examine how society's institutionalised norms and attitudes towards CSEC, particularly the victims, undermine legal and institutional interventions against CSEC. The main argument is that unless legal and institutional interventions against CSEC are built on and reinforced by foundational relationships and shared norms and attitudes that value the protection and emancipation of children from CSE, their capacity to stem the tide of CSEC will remain limited. This has been evidenced by the implementation of episodic, poorly resourced and ephemeral interventions against CSEC.

While various stakeholders are willing to protect and promote children's rights, there is a comparative deficiency when it comes to extending protection to victims of CSE. When children are affected by problems such as natural disasters, diseases and hunger – that is, factors that are considered external to and therefore uncontrollable by victims – society tends to mobilise resources and offer what support is deemed necessary. However, this is not the case with children who are victims of CSE because the voices of these children are 'seldom heard' (Hoot et al. 2006: 129). It is against this background that this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Can formal institutions and legal reforms be effective in the fight against CSEC if social norms and attitudes towards the victims do not change?

- How can the dissonance between social norms and attitudes towards CSEC and legal and institutional interventions against CSEC be eroded and reduced?

The study is anchored to the hypotheses that legal and institutional responses to CSEC cannot be effective and lasting without eroding and reducing the dissonance between these responses and social norms and attitudes towards CSEC. A positive shift in the norms and attitudes of society towards CSEC is critical if this is to be overcome.

## **Methodology**

This study was funded by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). The researchers are grateful to CODESRIA for this funding. The study was conducted in Mabvuku, Epworth, Hatcliffe, Dzivarasekwa, Caledonia and Beit Bridge communities in Zimbabwe, which are high density urban communities. These communities were selected because of the prevalence of CSEC. The study was conducted over 14 months.

The study uses methodological and ethical approaches that are child-focused and sensitive, recognising that children are ‘reflexive participants’ who ‘are central informants of their own life worlds (Christensen and James 2008: 5pp). Its methodology was designed with the understanding that it must be appropriate for the participants and their social, political and cultural contexts. It was also designed in a way that children were not mere respondents, but participants who played an active role in the interpretation and shaping of the research process. The methodology encapsulated multiple data collection techniques that are child-centred. This allowed the capturing of children’s language, experiences and perspectives. It also allowed flexibility in the collection of data and the triangulation of research findings. A planning and training workshop was conducted during the first phase of the study. It was during this workshop that the researchers were trained and familiarised with all components of the research process. The semi-structured Interview Guide and the Code of Conduct were validated during the workshop.

Desktop research was conducted during the second phase. Existing data on CSEC in Zimbabwe were gathered from varied sources such as newspapers, books, research reports, government documents and journals. This was followed by field research that was conducted using three methods: a reconnaissance study, observations and in-depth interviews. The reconnaissance study was used to informally gather information about various aspects of CSEC in Zimbabwe. These include what children and communities think about CSEC, where and why CSEC is prevalent, what makes children vulnerable to CSE, the practices that are involved in

CSEC, the experiences of children who are victims of CSE and existing interventions against CSEC.

The reconnaissance study enabled the researchers to gather information that was difficult to gather through formal interviews. It also enabled the researchers to form and build relations with children, community members and leaders, sex workers and government institutions. The reconnaissance study was followed by observational visits to bars, nightclubs, *mashabhini* (shebeens) and brothels. The objective was to gain an appreciation of the 'ecosystem' of CSEC, with a focus on where and how it takes place, the practices that are involved and societal attitudes towards CSEC. Focused observation was directed towards the victims, the perpetrators and the facilitators or collaborators of CSEC. Rich data were gathered through this method.

The observational site visits were followed by in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with victims and survivors of CSEC; sex workers; the media; parliamentarians; community members and leaders; civil society organisations working on children's rights; the police; the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare; truck drivers; and the owners, staff members and patrons of bars, night clubs, brothels and *mashabhini*. The sampling of participants was dependent on the characteristics of the context such as access and vulnerability of participants. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit child participants and sex workers because of the characteristics of this population. Criterion sampling was used to recruit community leaders and participants from civil society organisations and government institutions. Their experience and engagement with CSEC was used as the key criterion. Different methods were used to access participants, especially child participants. Child participants were accessed through referrals, key informants and civil society organisations and government departments whose work focuses on children's rights and wellbeing. Communities were accessed through community leaders.

The participants were chosen because of their capacity to provide valuable information and perspectives for the study. Children who are survivors of CSE provided experiential information about the circumstances that made them vulnerable to CSE, their experiences with CSE and how they escaped from CSE. Sex workers were chosen because of their special knowledge about CSEC and their capacity to help the researchers to gain access to child participants. Community members, civil society organisations, truck drivers and the owners, staff members and patrons of bars, night clubs, brothels and *mashabhini* provided information about the factors that make children vulnerable to CSE, the places where CSEC takes place, the perpetrators of CSEC, what society thinks about CSEC and the interventions against CSEC.

The Zimbabwe Republic Police, especially the Victim Friendly Unit, has a special responsibility in the fight against CSEC. The Unit was established to police sexual crimes that are committed against women and children. Police officers provided information about what is being done by the police in the fight against CSEC, the challenges that the police encounter in this fight, the areas where CSEC is prevalent, and what makes children vulnerable to CSEC. Parliamentarians provided information about the causes of CSEC and what Parliament has done and should do to effectively fight against CSEC. The inclusion of diverse participants enabled the study to appreciate the ecosystem of CSEC from diverse perspectives. In total, 126 participants were interviewed – 52 child victims of CSE and 74 other stakeholders. These participants provided enough information to fully examine and understand the phenomenon of CSEC in Zimbabwe. After interviewing 126 participants, the researchers realised that the research project had reached data saturation stage. Any further collection of data would yield redundant information. Table 1 shows the categories of participants and the number of people who were interviewed per category.

**Table 1:** Interviews

Category of participant	Nber of participants
Victims of CSEC	52
Survivors of CSEC	2
Parliamentarians	2
Police officers (Victim Friendly Unit)	10
Sex workers	12
Truck drivers	3
Community leaders	4
Community members	18
Civil society organisations	2
The media	1
The Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare	2
Owners and staff members of bars, night clubs, brothels and shebeens	18
<b>Total number of interviews</b>	<b>126</b>

## Research Ethics

It is important to establish and observe research ethics, especially when conducting research with children who are victims of CSE. Researching on CSEC raises social, religious, cultural, ethical, legal, methodological and

practical dilemmas. Before undertaking this research project, the researchers attended a workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe, organised by CODESRIA. During the workshop, it was emphasised that all research projects should observe research ethics and that when conducting research that involves children, researchers should seek informed consent from the parents or guardians of the participants (Laws and Mann 2004; Twum-Danso 2004). However, this ethical requirement is difficult to apply to research projects on CSEC. This is because some of the children do not have parents or they are often located geographically far from their parents or guardians. But for those who have, seeking consent from their parents or guardians can cause many risks for them. Under such circumstances, informed consent should be sought from the children themselves. This explains why, during the planning phase of this study, the researchers sought to establish whether children who are victims of CSE can be interviewed, and whether they are capable of giving informed consent.

Scholars have debated whether children are capable of giving informed consent. King and Churchill (2000: 42) argue that parental consent should be waived in circumstances where request for it might put the child at risk of harm. Rittenhouse and Felicini (2015) argue that when conducting research with children who are victims of CSE, their participation should always be based on informed consent. They further argue that although researchers can provide full information about the research, it is not possible to guarantee that children will understand it, even where clear and simple language is used. The consensus among scholars is that children can be capable of giving consent, but it is difficult to tell whether the consent is informed (King and Churchill 2000; Morris et al. 2012). Bourke and Loveridge (2014) argue that it is not possible to fully obtain informed consent from children because they are unlikely to comprehend the complex nature of the research; they therefore believe that children should be offered on-going opportunities to express informed consent and dissent.

Other scholars argue that the ability of children to give informed consent should be assessed on a case-by-case basis because it depends on the peculiarities of the research context and each child's experiences and expectations (Graham et al. 2013; King and Churchill 2000; Morrow and Richards 1996). However, whether the consent is informed or not, child participants must be made fully aware that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to change their mind, to withdraw from the interview and to answer questions selectively (King and Churchill 2000; Mishna et al. 2004). It is important for information to be provided to children in ways that are appropriate to their age, competencies and cultural contexts (Ruiz-Casares and Thompson 2016).



The researchers established that most studies on CSEC conducted interviews with children. For example, in their review of studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, Hounmenou and Her (2017) found that 52 out of 72 studies conducted interviews with child victims. Likewise, the Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children (ZNCWC) conducted a study on CSEC in 2014. In this study, children were interviewed without having sought consent from their parents or guardians. The study argues that 'acquiring parental/guardian permission is not a reasonable requirement given the characteristics of the population under study' (ZNCWC 2014: 9). Perschler-Desai (2010) interviewed victims of CSEC during a research project on teenage prostitution in Southern Africa; and Hoot et al. (2006) interviewed 70 children during a study on CSEC in Ethiopia without parental consent.

It was against this background that consent was sought from the children who participated in this study, and not from their parents or guardians. In the consent-seeking process, the children were provided with all the information about the research. They were informed that participation is voluntary, confidential and anonymous, that consent is an ongoing process and that they reserve the right to withdraw from participation at any stage of the interview process and to decide to answer certain questions and not others. They were also informed about the purpose of the research and how the information will be stored, used and disseminated. The researchers noted that the children easily understood expert terms such as 'voluntary participation', but they could not easily understand terms such as 'confidentiality' and 'anonymity'. In order to address this problem, the researchers explained these terms using more familiar and context-specific terms. A multi-stage ethical clearance approach was adopted in order to safeguard the rights, wellbeing and interests of participants. Official government clearance was sought and obtained. Clearance and informed consent were also obtained from local authorities, the police and community leaders in the areas where the interviews were conducted.

There are multiple risks associated with research on CSEC. Children who are victims of CSE may experience psychological and emotional trauma during and after interviews (Twum-Danso 2004). For this reason, a number of ethical guardrails were used to ensure that children were adequately protected from any harm that could arise as a consequence of their participation in the study. First, all researchers who conducted interviews had prior knowledge and experience of conducting research with children. The researchers also received rigorous professional training on how to conduct research with children who are victims of CSE, including how to identify signs of discomfort and trauma and what to do should participants show these signs. These steps were stipulated in a comprehensive Code of Conduct, which was developed and validated during



the planning and training workshop. Second, a child-friendly semi-structured interview guide was used throughout the interviews. However, the researchers were encouraged to be flexible because general guidelines lack the capacity to address the complexity and reflexivity of working with vulnerable populations (Pittaway et al. 2010: 78). Third, the researchers mapped out and developed a register of governmental and non-governmental actors whose work focusses on providing support and services to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The register was used to establish referral pathways. A psychologist was engaged to identify and handle the social, emotional and psychological issues that arose during interviews. A budget was set aside to deal with such eventualities, especially to facilitate referrals. Fourth, the lead researcher monitored and evaluated the entire research process to ensure that research ethics were strictly observed by all the researchers. Fifth, where necessary and possible, the victims were accessed through government departments, civil society organisations, key informants and parliamentarians who previously engaged or assisted them. Sixth, the research questions were framed and asked in line with the principles and practices of childhood research.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses concepts of social mobilisation as its theoretical framework. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2015) defines social mobilisation as the process that engages and motivates a wide range of partners and allies at national and local levels to raise awareness of and demand for a particular development objective through dialogue. It seeks to facilitate change through a range of players engaged in interrelated and complementary efforts. The World Health Organization (WHO n.d.) defines social mobilisation as the process of bringing together all societal and personal influences to raise awareness of and demand for health care, assist in the delivery of resources and services and promote sustainable individual and community involvement.

WHO further argues that social mobilisation involves collaboration between members of institutions, community partners, organisations and others to reach specific groups of people for intentional dialogue aimed at facilitating change through an interdisciplinary approach. Social mobilisation has been mainly used in health promotion, especially in the fight against pandemics. Since the 1990s, it was used for the prevention of AIDS and the global campaign for the eradication of polio (Chaturvedi 2013). Social mobilisation can be used to mobilise different constituencies of society to actively participate in the fight against CSEC, and especially to change norms and attitudes towards CSEC.

## **Findings**

This section discusses the findings of the study. Using the responses from participants of the study, it focuses on exploring mainstream norms, values and attitudes towards CSEC and how they affect interventions against CSEC. The major finding in this study is that societal norms and attitudes towards CSEC can either promote or erode legal and institutional interventions against CSEC. In a landmark speech on ‘The spirit of liberty’ the American judge and philosopher Justice Learned Hand stated that:

I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. While it lies there it needs no constitution, no law and no court to save it (Learned Hand 1944, cited in Lewis 1949: 68).

Norms play a fundamental role in building societies. In their famous book, *How Democracy Dies*, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight the significance of norms or unwritten rules in the wellbeing of society. They define norms as ‘shared codes of conduct that become common knowledge within a particular community or society – accepted, respected, and enforced by its members’ (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 23). They also argue that ‘all successful democracies rely on informal rules that, though not found in the constitution or any laws, are widely known and respected’ and that ‘like oxygen or clean water, a norm’s importance is quickly revealed by its absence’ (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 67).

### ***Societal Attitudes Towards CSEC in Zimbabwe***

There is a tendency to believe that negative attitudes towards child victims of CSE are predominantly held by members of society who are relatively uneducated and may lack awareness of human rights issues and who are susceptible to the influence of negative cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Conversely, actors in civil society, government institutions, intellectuals and human rights activists tend to be regarded as comparatively progressive as far as their attitudes towards CSEC are concerned. These actors tend to take a leading role in the fight against CSEC, including the conduct of awareness campaigns to change attitudes towards CSEC among grassroots populations. However, this study found that bluntly negative attitudes towards children who are victims of CSE are also embedded in these constituencies of society. This makes it difficult for them to play a meaningful role in the fight against CSEC.

In her study of CSEC in Southern Africa, Perschler-Desai (2010: 112) states that ‘even representatives from women’s and children’s organisations often believe that the children, especially girls, are to blame for “immoral” behaviour’. This is a profound observation because it exposes a deeper and hidden problem that characterises the fight against CSEC. To put it bluntly, most of the institutions that advocate for child victims of CSE are comprised of individuals who hold the children responsible. Clearly, normative transformations must take place within many of the institutions leading the fight against CSEC.

### **Selected Interviews**

The interviews in this section illustrate the mainstream beliefs and attitudes towards CSEC, particularly towards the victims, by individuals working to combat CSEC.

#### ***Moyo***

Moyo works for the Zimbabwe Republic Police in the Victim Friendly Unit. The Unit was established to proactively and reactively police crimes of a sexual nature that are committed against women and children. It seeks to do this in a manner and environment that is conducive, private and friendly to victims. Moyo was trained to deal with victims in a friendly, professional and confidential manner. Moyo believes that women and children should be protected, by every means possible, from sexual abuse and other forms of violations. However, he believes that children who are victims of CSE are not ‘genuine victims’ because they ‘actively and openly hunt for clients’. He stated that he would rather spend the whole day drinking beer or working on his farm than to ‘waste time and resources’ protecting children who have ‘consciously’ made the decision to go into prostitution with the objective of raising money. He confessed that the training that he went through did not change his attitude towards children who are engaged in sex work. He also stated that there is little to zero willingness within the police to investigate and arrest perpetrators of CSEC because of the belief that the children are to blame. He said to the researcher ‘do you think that there is any serious police officer who would want to spend the whole day patrolling a neighbourhood in order to protect *zviTokwe Mukosi* [a term used in Masvingo, especially in Zaka, to refer to children engaged in commercial sex work]’. He continued to say that:

we have received many reports about that problem. We have read stories in the media. The issue has been raised in the Parliament. But police officers are not willing to go into communities to investigate and to arrest the men who are having sex with *zviTokwe Mukosi*. In fact, many of our police officers live

in the communities where zviTokwe Mukosi operate. They know who these zviTokwe are and they know the men who are having sex with zviTokwe, but they can hardly do anything about it because the zviTokwes have made a personal and irrevocable choice to take the path of prostitution.

### ***Tinotenda***

Tinotenda works for the Zimbabwe Republic Police. She believes that the fight against CSEC should not be a priority for the police. She stated that:

If I am to write down my work schedule in order of priority, I would put the fight against child prostitution at the bottom of the list, if at all I can put it on my list. This is because the country has been economically distressed for close to two decades now. As the police, we do not have the resources which enable us to do our work. We have to do the best with the sparse resources we have. We do not have the vehicles and fuel to attend to criminal activities which threaten to destabilise the country. How can we then use the sparse resources to fight against child prostitution? If you go to every town across this country, especially where long distance trucks operate, there are thousands of underage girls who are into prostitution. Imagine the resources which are required to patrol all these areas. These children have become a shame to themselves and the society.

### ***Precious***

Precious lives in Epworth but she comes from Zaka, Masvingo. She believes that the men who perpetrate CSEC are actually the victims. She stated that:

if you drive along the Roy-Chiredzi highway, you will see a hive of zviKwasine [a term used to refer to children engaged in commercial sex work] who waylay truck drivers who transport sugar from Tongaat Hullet [a sugar producing company] to its markets around the country and beyond our borders. Some of the drivers do not want to have sex with zviKwasine, but the zviKwasine aggressively and persistently persuaded them to the point where they have to give in. Most of the zviKwasine use threats and charms to persuade the drivers to comply. The drivers are the victims, not zviKwasine. Most of these drivers have families to take care of, but their money is now going to zviKwasine. Most of them are being infected with HIV/AIDS.

### ***Matilda***

Matilda works for an NGO that focuses on children's rights. The NGO is one of the stakeholders engaged by the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Services to provide specialised services to child victims of CSE. Matilda stated that she is committed to protect and promote the rights of

children, especially against sexual abuse. However, she stated that children who are into sex work are largely to blame for their situation. She said that she cannot openly express this view because it may cause her to lose her job. She also stated that:

to be honest, many of the people and NGOs which are implementing interventions against CSEC believe that the children are to blame. Some of them try to help because of the need to get funding from donors. But of course, they will not tell you that they do not believe in what they do. In the end, they defend the children publicly, but blame them privately.

### *John*

John works for one of the government ministries whose work focuses on the welfare of children. The ministry is a key player in the fight against CSEC. John believes that children should be protected against all forms of abuses, especially of a sexual nature. However, he believes that children who are into sex work are 'inherently recalcitrant' and that they should not be empathised with. He stated that because of the nature of his work, he has to participate in efforts to help children who are victims of CSE. However, he participates in these efforts 'with his lips and not his heart' because he believes that the children are to blame and that they can hardly be assisted because of their behaviour. He claimed that government is aware of the problem but it feigns ignorance because it does not have the willingness to 'fight a useless and infinite battle'. He also claimed that this is why the leaders of Katswe [an NGO] were harassed after reporting that children as young as 9 years old are victims of CSE.

### *Anesu*

Anesu is a member of parliament. He believes that parliament has 'better thing'" to do than to discuss CSEC because 'these children are creators of their own situations'. He stated that when a motion on CSEC was moved in parliament, he 'did not pay even a grain of attention' to the debate because he believes that it is 'not parliament's business' to deal with the problem of CSEC. He stated that it was clear that then Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Services was unwilling and uncomfortable to discuss this issue in parliament. He further stated that the Minister eventually issued a Ministerial Statement due to pressure from 'overzealous' opposition parliamentarians who had moved a motion on the subject and demanded that the Minister should issue a statement. He believes that the interventions by the Ministry 'will not go anywhere' because they are 'not implemented out

of zeal', but as 'a mere public relations exercise' because the Ministry should be seen as 'doing something' about the phenomenon. He claimed that only a 'handful' of parliamentarians believe that these children are victims and that resources should be allocated towards the fight against CSEC.

### *Spiwe*

Spiwe is a community member who is based in Beit Bridge. She believes that children who are into prostitution are 'demon possessed' and should 'live in their own society' because they are a 'disgrace incarnate' to society. She believes that the children are to blame for their 'abhorrent' behaviour.

### *Joseph*

Joseph is a chief. He believes that there are no external factors, even extreme poverty, that can force children into prostitution. He believes that children are going into prostitution because prostitution 'is in their blood'. He stated that the children who are engaged in prostitution should be 'shunned' by the larger society because they can 'spoil' good children.

### *Thelma*

Thelma is a businesswoman in a high-density suburb in Harare. She said that:

these children often ask us [business owners] to allow them to strip dance at our premises or to give them free beer. They tell us that they are on demand and that they can bring more business to us. They do everything they can to get clients. Our patrons end up sleeping with them. We do not blame our clients; we blame the children. Our parents taught us that we have to work hard if we are to make it in life. That is what inspired me to start my business. But these days, these children do not want to work with their hands. They want to use their bodies to get quick money. They are not worthy to help.

### *Anna*

Anna is a sex worker. She stated that some children always request her to 'recruit them into the industry'. She believes that it is 'a mission impossible' to try and get the children out of prostitution because 'prostitution is in their veins'. She further stated that:

in this area [Epworth], it is normal to see children who are into sex work. That is why the society tolerate it, including the police officers who live in this area. No-one thinks of wasting their time fighting against this issue. Most

of the unregistered business places where these children work from are owned by government officials, including members of the police force.

### ***Tariro***

Tariro lives in Mabvuku. She sells fruit and vegetables. She stated that:

we must make a distinction between children who are sexually exploited and abused against their will and those who are into sex work. Those who are into sex work are willingly selling sex. They visit hot spots in search for clients. Someone comes, take them, have sex with them and pay them for the service. How can people report the client to the police when the children themselves are willingly participating? The moment a child sells sex, she is literally saying that “I am no longer a child, I am an adult”.

### ***Vimbiso***

Vimbiso works for the media. She has covered a number of stories on CSEC. She believes that the media should play a leading role in the fight against CSEC, especially in raising awareness in Zimbabwean society. However, she believes that while the media has played a commendable role in researching and raising awareness on CSEC, it has promoted and entrenched stigmatisation and victim-blaming attitudes through insensitive and poor reporting. She stated that:

the fourth estate has done more damage than good when it comes to the fight against CSEC. This is because many of us in the media fraternity consciously or unconsciously hold negative attitudes towards the children who are victims of CSE. I have heard of many complains from children’s rights organisations in respect of how the media tends to cover stories of children who are into sex work. The media tends to take the blame to the door of child prostitutes and not those who are abusing and exploiting them.

These case studies show that victim-blaming and ostracising attitudes towards child victims of CSE are shared by individuals, groups and institutions across the economic, political and social spectrum. They debunk the view that human rights organisations, government institutions and other supposedly enlightened individuals and institutions do not hold such attitudes towards the victims. These attitudes may be wholly or partly rooted in cultural, religious, patriarchal and traditional norms, expectations and practices. Most African countries are replete with traditional, religious and cultural beliefs and practices that promotes structural violence against children (ECPAT 2014). In Zimbabwe, ‘vulnerable children are often the victims of harmful cultural and social practices’ (Muyengwa 2014: 5). Similarly,



Galtung (1990) argues that societies are characterised by ‘cultural violence’. This refers to any aspect of culture that can be used to legitimise direct and structural violence against some members of society. To effectively fight against CSEC, it is important to look at the cultural structures of society and how they either enhance or harm the welfare of women and children. It is important that harmful practices are eliminated.

However, it is erroneous to believe that cultural beliefs and practices are always harmful to children. One of the notable findings of this study is that respondents believed Zimbabwe had historically been characterised by norms, beliefs and practices that enhanced the protection of children against sexual and other forms of abuses. Although the family, being the basic unit of society, has the primary responsibility to up-bring, protect and nurture children, broader society was traditionally involved in assisting families in the protection, nurturing, and upbringing of children. It provided a safe, supportive and stable environment for children. Children were not regarded as belonging to the family, but to the larger society. However, it is believed that the collective approach to the protection and promotion of the wellbeing of children has partly or wholly dissipated. This explains why CSEC has emerged and spread, and why it is increasingly difficult to address. These views were expressed by 83 percent of the adult participants. The participants reasoned that in traditional Zimbabwean society, children were protected from (commercial) sexual exploitation, not because of interventions by government, civil society or any altruistic actors, but because of the broader attitudes and norms that were shared, accepted and religiously respected by community members. For example, Tapiwa stated that:

Traditionally, children were protected from sexual abuse by an ecosystem of unwritten norms, not by codified law or formal institutions. The Zimbabwean society had a collective moral fibre which placed responsibility for the protection and nurturing of children in the hands of society. This moral fibre has completely depleted. We can use laws and state institutions to try and protect children from falling victim to commercial sexual activities. But these interventions cannot produce results if the moral fibre is not restored. This is because to be effective, laws and institutions should be built on the values, needs and aspirations of society.

Another respondent, Rudo, stated that:

Traditionally, people worked together as brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and grandparents to raise children and make sure that every child is protected and cared for. Children belonged, not to their immediate families, but to the larger community. The welfare of the child was everyone’s responsibility. Those who abused or exploited children were heavily sanctioned by the community.

But in today's community, the responsibility is no longer communally shared. The stable, secure and loving environment which used to exist outside the family unit is not only gone, but it has been replaced by a vulturistic culture of neglect, violence, exploitation and iniquitous abuse of children.

Speaking during a National AIDS Council meeting in May 2018, chief Nyakunhuwa said that relatives and communities should work together and provide guidance and support to children, especially those who come from child-headed families. He said that traditionally, members of the extended family and the larger community shared the responsibility of protecting, nurturing and upbringing children and that this protected children from sexual abuses (Mubaiwa 2018). However, instead of nurturing and taking care of children who are vulnerable the dominant 'culture' of contemporary society is to either neglect or abuse them.

Some participants stated that, traditionally, society emphasised the need for community members, despite the circumstances, to earn income through hard work and other morally acceptable ways. But in contemporary Zimbabwean society, people are overwhelmingly concerned with getting money, including through means that are deemed morally unacceptable. Some participants stated that they know of parents or relatives who have 'sold' their children into prostitution so that they can raise money for the upkeep of their families. Other participants expressed the concern that there has emerged a strong 'culture of individualism' in Zimbabwe, which inhibits concerns for broader societal problems such as CSEC. For example, Mutumwa stated that:

We are living in a *zvangu zvaita* or *zvangu ngazviite* economy. It is an economy in which everyone is concerned with their immediate circumstances and needs. There is very little to zero concern for others and for the future. The *zvangu zvaita* economic principle tells you that if those children who are being commercially sexually abused are not yours, then there is no need to worry. It also tells you that if you can directly benefit from the exploitation of those children, then why not. It is an economy which leaves little or no room for altruistic behaviour.

In all the areas where the interviews were conducted, the interviewees emphasised that the owners and managers of local bars have developed a 'culture' of using the children to attract customers.

### **How do Norms and Attitudes Affect Interventions?**

The preceding section established the mainstream norms and attitudes towards CSEC, particularly towards the victims themselves. This section critiques how these attitudes and norms affect efforts to prevent and eradicate CSEC.

### ***Recovery and Reintegration of Victims***

The recovery and reintegration of victims into their families and communities, as opposed to placing them in children's homes, is one of the long-term pathways of getting them out of CSE. However, as is evident in the presented case studies, this study found a major challenge relating to societal blaming and stigmatisation of child victims. These victim-blaming attitudes and norms make it difficult for CSE child victims to be accepted by their families and the larger society. Perschler-Desai (2010: 120) also noted that 'community responds to child prostitution in a generally negative way, often rejecting the children, which leads to further isolation'. Likewise, in a research project conducted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 64 percent of child interviewees expressed the view that society has neither tolerance nor sympathy for them (Hoot et al. 2006). Consequently, many of these children believe nobody cares for their wellbeing, which, in turn, is likely to lead to a sense of resentment toward broader society. This resentment is often characterised by bouts of anger, violence and the tendency to hurt themselves or others. For example, Memory stated that:

I hate all the people around me except my friends. I can easily get angry and fatally assault someone with a brick or an empty bottle because I am angry with the way society treats me. I do not think that anything good can come out this society because it is so cruel.

Ninety-one per cent of the victims stated that they do not want to be placed in children's homes or be taken back to their families because of how they are perceived and treated. Grace, a former victim who was reunified with her family by the government, stated that:

I never found peace and love since I came back to my family. No one in this community wants to associate with me. This is painful. Parents in this community have told their children not to play with me. I went back to school but everyone avoids and mocks me. I am therefore planning to run away and go back where I was.

Similarly, Joyline stated there was a time she decided to quit sex work. She went back to her rural home but her parents and the community found it difficult to trust and accept her. She went back to sex work. Of the community members who were interviewed, 82 per cent stated that they will not accept or they will hardly accept former child prostitutes as bona fide members of their family or society because of the fear that they can 'recruit' other children into prostitution and other deviant acts. For child victims who have their own children, this issue becomes far more complex.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that some child participants expressed that commercial sexual engagement offered them the love and protection that they failed to get from their families and communities. For example, Thelma stated that 'there are some good clients out there who have done to me what my parents and family failed to do'. Patricia also stated that:

Growing up, I never knew the meaning of love and protection. I never had someone who could listen to me. All I knew was abuse and hate. I started to experience love and protection from time to time when I joined this industry [commercial sex work]. Yes, I still get abused and hurt, but at least there are times that I get the love and protection which I so desperately needed.

She stated that even if, by the sheer twist of fate, the chance to go back and live with her family members arises, she will not take it because 'it is better to be killed by strangers than to be killed by my own people'.

Studies recognise the importance of child participation in the development and implementation of interventions to prevent and eliminate sexual abuse and exploitation (UNICEF, 2009). This is because the views of children themselves matter. However, the researchers observed that while child participation can be promoted at the level of prevention, it is difficult to promote at the level of recovery and reintegration of victims. It is easier to engage children who are at risk than those who are already into sex work, especially those who regard themselves as 'battle worn'. The stigmatisation of child victims tends to cause them to develop mental health problems and a negative self-image from feelings of shame, guilt and powerlessness. These factors affect their capacity and willingness to engage, trust others and build healthy relationships. In other words, laws, policies and programmes to promote child participation may be put in place, but social attitudes of blame, neglect and stigmatisation play a major role in preventing meaningful and effective victim participation in the development and implementation of pathways out of CSEC.

### **Arresting, Prosecution and Sentencing of Perpetrators**

Reporting, arresting and sentencing perpetrators of CSEC is important because it sends a message to society that CSEC is unacceptable and heavily punishable. Government should therefore 'enforce the law and pass sentences that are deterrent to would-be-offenders' (Muyengwa 2014: 30). In 2014, Oppah Muchinguri, who was the Minister of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development, 'vowed' to take action against CSEC. She implored government to institute harsher sentences against convicted perpetrators, stating that 'if the country has stiff mandatory sentences for livestock theft, what about those who abuse children?' (*The Dailynews* 2014).

In 2015, senators, in their bid to end child marriages, demanded that government should enact laws that approve castration as punishment for anyone who sleeps with a child below the age of 18 (Netsianda 2018a). In January 2018, Bulawayo High Court Judge, Justice Francis Bere, made headlines when he stated that government should enact a law which requires convicted child sex offenders and paedophiles to be castrated (Netsianda 2018b). Under the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act (Chapter 9: 23), sex with minors (below the age of 16) is considered rape. In July 2017, government proposed to amend Chapter 9: 33 of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act to impose a minimum of 60 years jail term for people convicted of raping children under 12 years, as well as the disabled (Mushava 2019). However, the proposal 'slipped through the cracks' until April 2019, when it was revived. The Mandatory Sentencing for Rape and Sexual Offences Bill is currently being debated. If it is passed, those convicted of raping minors under the age of 12 years will be jailed for a minimum of 60 years (Towindo 2019).

However, the fight against CSEC requires the political will to arrest alleged offenders. Eighty-two per cent of the adult participants stated that there are two main challenges that make it difficult for offenders to be arrested. First, community members are generally not willing to report offenders to law enforcement agencies, other governmental institutions, community leaders or non-governmental organisations. Second, there is little or no commitment within the police force to protect children who are victims of CSE. As a result, there is lack of willingness to investigate and arrest alleged offenders. John stated that:

the police knows the areas where child prostitution takes place and the people who are responsible for it. They also know the children who are being abused. But they simply do not have the willingness to arrest the offenders and to protect the children. This is mainly because of the belief that the children are to blame.

During his contribution to a motion on CSEC in parliament, former Parliamentarian James Maridadi expressed the same sentiment:

Mr. Speaker, what we need to do as Parliament is to instruct the police to go tonight and make sure that those girls that are being abused are picked. It is not like we do not know where they are. In Mabvuku, I have gone to every household where they live and I know where they live. I have made a report to the police but nothing has been done (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017).

There are four main reasons why there is little or no political will to investigate, arrest and prosecute alleged perpetrators of CSEC. First are the victim-blaming attitudes that some members of the police force have

towards child victims of CSE. As long as these attitudes remain, it is difficult to see how the police can make significant progress towards the elimination of CSEC. Second, in the context of decades long economic hardship, the fight against CSEC is perceived as a non-priority; deploying sparse resources towards policing CSEC tends to be perceived as improper use of resources. Third, combatting CSEC is perceived as an endless and unsustainable fight; it is considered too widespread and therefore difficult to conduct effective investigations and police patrols. Fourth, CSEC is not considered to be of political importance because the problem does not threaten the interests of the political elite. Law enforcement agencies tend to intervene in strategic situations that are considered an existential threat to government and the political elite. There is consequently very little willingness (particularly among victims, sex workers and community members) to report the perpetrators. Many of the cases of CSEC – this study found 96 per cent – go unreported despite the fact that most of the adult perpetrators are known, especially by community members, business owners and managers and sex workers. Instead of reporting, community members often casually talk about CSEC, thus the practice becomes somewhat tolerated.

However, some efforts have been made by government and non-governmental actors to promote the reporting of alleged offenders. For example, the Victim Friendly Unit has established anonymous mechanisms of reporting. These include suggestion boxes, hotlines and direct reporting to Victim Friendly Unit Coordinators. The Unit has also adopted a multi-sectoral approach towards the management of child abuse. Ten police officers who work in the Unit participated in this study. All of them stated that while these efforts witnessed increased reporting of abuses against women and children, the reporting of CSEC has remained very low. Sixty-three per cent of adult participants expressed the view that negative attitudes towards victims of CSEC is the main reason for the underreporting of perpetrators; 37 per cent stated that underreporting is prevalent because the Victim Friendly Unit is unfriendly/perceived as unfriendly when it comes to handling cases of CSE.

Victims often choose not to report because of the fear of reprisals, victim-blaming, embarrassment and ostracisation by their families and communities. They also fear that they may be arrested. These fears primarily come from the belief, based on their experiences, that they are criminalised and stigmatised by society. In fact, the victims are afraid and unwilling to present themselves not only before the police, but state institutions in general, including health facilities. While presenting a motion on CSEC in Zimbabwe, Pricilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga stated that:

When I said to them [victims of CSEC], I want you to come and meet Members of Parliament, they said *tinotya, tinozosungwa* [we are afraid of getting arrested] instead of them saying that they want to see Members of Parliament because they will be able to help me and find me a place to go and stay (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017).

Only 6 per cent of the community members who participated in the project stated that they would report CSEC; 90 per cent believed that reporting CSEC was a waste of time. This belief is mainly based on the view that the children themselves are to blame for aberrant behaviour. It is also based on the belief that the police and other responsible authorities are not willing to take action against perpetrators. It can be argued from the findings of this study that society's norms and attitudes towards CSEC, particularly the victims, are a major impediment in efforts to extricate children from CSE. It is therefore difficult to see how the fight against CSEC can be effective without a change in these attitudes and norms.

### ***Norms and Political Will***

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 4) requires states to protect and promote the social, economic and cultural rights of children to the maximum extent of their available resources. It is therefore important that states allocate as much resources as they can towards the fight against CSEC. This is because while laws, policies and programmes to counter CSEC may be put in place, greater political will is important for effective implementation and adequate allocation of resources. The majority view among interviewees is that the government does not have the political will to fight against CSEC, primarily because of victim blaming and stigmatising attitudes. Others believe that this is partly because of lack of resources.

For example, in September 2017, an organisation called Katswe Sisterhood featured the case of a 9-year-old girl victim of CSE on Star FM radio station. The child, using the pseudonym 'Lady B', narrated her experiences. The government's immediate response was to accuse Katswe Sisterhood of peddling falsehoods and, within days, the leadership of Katswe was arrested. Opposition Parliamentarians Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga and James Maridadi reached out to Katswe Sisterhood and visited the affected children and areas. Outraged not only by the apparent lack of political will to deal with the problem, but also by the government's accusatory response to the organisation, Misihairabwi-Mushonga tabled a motion in Parliament demanding action:

I raise this motion with the heaviest of hearts. This motion speaks about children who are reported to being abused under the guise of selling sex.



The reason why I am upset about this particular motion is that KATSWE brings this out. What happened to KATSWE? Firstly, Social Welfare swoops on KATSWE not to ask them where these children are and where this is happening. They swoop on KATSWE to say, why are you bringing out things like this? Immediately they [KATSWE] are picked up and they are arrested for publishing falsehoods. As we speak right now, KATSWE has become the criminals. KATSWE has now been banned from doing work in those communities (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017).

Both Maridadi and Misihairabwi-Mushonga demanded that the Minister of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare make a Ministerial Statement about what the government was doing to fight against the problem. In his contribution to the motion, Maridadi stated:

Mr. Speaker, when I was taken by this organisation called Katswe Sisterhood to go and see the children who are being abused, every woman in the house after listening to their testimonies including Hon. Misihairabwi-Mushonga and the former Deputy Minister of Health, Mai Tsungirirai Hungwe, started crying. I tried to console Mai Hungwe and I could not. In the process of trying to console Mai Hungwe, I also started crying and could not be consoled. My heart sank, I was so angry with myself and everything. I was angry with even the Almighty, the creator of heaven and earth that how do you create a man who is 45 years old, who takes a nine-year old girl to a room and have sex with her and thinks he will get satisfaction (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017).

The government soon responded. On 8 September 2017, the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Services deployed task teams to Epworth, Caledonia, Hopley, and Hatclife communities in Harare to conduct investigations and to identify and profile child victims and survivors of CSE (Kakore2017). The Ministry removed 73 children from Hopley and Epworth (Government of Zimbabwe 2017). The Ministry placed the children in a safe house and established a one-stop service centre to deal with their needs. They were later transferred to Domboshava Training Centre or placed in children's homes where they continued to receive rehabilitation services. The Ministry engaged different organisations to provide services, which included therapy, training, medical examinations, psychological support, counselling and assisting the children to get birth certificates.

The cabinet also gave the Ministry the directive to establish a national, inter-ministerial taskforce responsible for creating an environment that is sensitive and responsive to the needs of children so that they cannot be vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. The Ministry also conducted vulnerability assessments of families of the affected children to provide social protection services to vulnerable households. It also trained childcare workers in affected communities. Awareness campaigns about sexual abuse

and exploitation of children were conducted in Harare. However, 91 per cent of the people who participated in this study expressed the view that these interventions were not well-intended. They believe that they were implemented because government was under pressure from different sections of society. They believe that the interventions 'will not go anywhere' because the government does not have the commitment to fight against CSEC.

## **Conclusion**

Various interventions to prevent and eliminate CSEC have been implemented in Zimbabwe. However, these interventions have been largely sporadic. Emphasis has been placed on the need to enact and effectively implement laws, policies and programmes and to take a collaborative approach by various stakeholders. However, while these interventions are useful, they are constantly undermined by the attitudes and norms that society has towards CSEC, particularly the victims. These attitudes undermine the willingness of different stakeholders, including the government, to enact and robustly implement pathways out of CSEC. The fight against CSEC can take a meaningful trajectory only if these attitudes are changed.

The laws, policies, programmes and institutions that are not rooted in societal norms and aspirations tend to be ineffective. As long as the social attitudes and norms remain the same, it is difficult to see how various interventions can contribute towards the prevention and elimination of CSEC. Institutional approaches are part of the 'hardware' infrastructure that responds to CSEC. However, for these approaches to be effective, they must emerge from and be reinforced by the infrastructural 'software' of underpinning relationships and shared norms, attitudes and expectations. In many cases, this societal 'software' is more expansive and influential than the formal systems of society. In order to effectively respond to CSEC, there is need to reduce and erode the dissonance between the formal systems of society and its norms and attitudes towards CSEC. Social mobilisation plays a critical role in this process, especially if it is directed towards changing society's norms and values towards CSEC.

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