



# Children’s Rights versus Cultural Expectations: A Path to Cultural Compatibility in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** *The promotion of children's rights is a critical issue in many countries in general and Zimbabwe is no exception. International frameworks such as the Convention on the rights of the child emphasise children's rights to autonomy, education, health and dignity yet culture dictates traditional ways of raising children which may digress from universalised children's rights. Harmonising cultural expectations and children's rights calls for a strategy that respects culture while protecting children's wellbeing and development. Thus, this paper explores cultural expectations on children's rights in Zimbabwe. The paper thus sheds light on challenges, progress made and ways to promote frameworks that balance the two for sustainable well-being of children. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected twenty articles from Google scholar published between 2018 and 2024. The study established that there are some cultural practices that violate children's rights. It was also revealed that children's rights are viewed in a positive way in Zimbabwe. However, the rights are not aligned to Zimbabwean culture, thus not compatible with the norms and values of the Zimbabweans rendering them alien and irrelevant. Findings also showed that there was an overemphasis on children's rights at the expense of responsibility. Therefore, there is need to shift from cultural practices that are harmful to children to practices that promote children's wellbeing and development. The study also recommends that policy makers come up with a framework which harmonises children's rights and culture in order for children to enjoy their rights while celebrating their cultural practices.*

**Keywords:** *Culture, Children's rights, Cultural Compatibility, Traditional ways, Zimbabwe*

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## 1. Introduction

After the declaration of human rights by the United Nations, it was later realised that children as minors required more protection than adults. Thus, 1989 saw the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child in many countries (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020). The scheme gives Universal standards to ensure the protection and wellbeing of the children globally (Cappa and Petrowski, 2020, Vashchnko, 2021). The framework highlights children's rights which include the rights to health, education, shelter, freedom of speech, association and the right to be heard among other rights.

Zimbabwe as a signatory to the convention has put in place legislation to ensure that children are protected. However, the implementation of these rights alongside Zimbabwean culture is facing some challenges especially where the rights digress from its cherished norms and values.

In light of the above, Guner (2023) and Mesthrie (2025) note that cultures do not give in to the needs of children's rights. Nguma and Isango (2022) share the same sentiments that in African countries, adults focus more on their beliefs and responsibilities contained in their culture despite the fact that they may violate children's

rights. This shows a mismatch between children's rights and culture. The imbalance may be due to the fact that in African countries in general and in Zimbabwe in particular, children are not granted total freedom to do or to say what they want. Hence, accepting autonomy imbibed in children's rights may not be acceptable in Zimbabwean culture, for example, Mukau and Kufakunesu (2025) highlight that parents do not want their children to be taught sex education. They argue that it's against their culture. Sex education is regarded as a driver of immorality. As a result, children are deprived of their right to education. This indicates that parents disregard the precarious state of culture. Thus, a common ground between children's rights and Zimbabwean culture is needed.

In addition, Ndhlovu (2021) highlights intrafamilial child abuse, a situation where a child is sexually abused by family members. Because of culture the abuse is not reported as publicising it is seen as a taboo. Thus, traditional beliefs prevent people from saying anything negative about their culture. Consequently, children suffer in silence whilst their rights are violated. In concurrence, Harbach (2025) indicates that children have no freedom to express their views even if they are abused because children's freedom is not within reach in African culture. Parents are allowed to beat their children in a bid to discipline them. Therefore, in Ubuntu/ Unhu parents have an obligation to protect their children using their traditional methods acceptable in the society which may be outside children's rights.

Thus, the introduction of children's rights in Zimbabwe has generated more questions than answers. Many people are worried as to whether children's rights are consistent with the Zimbabwean way of life. Children's rights give children unrestricted freedom which is at variance with Zimbabwean culture. In 'Chivanhu' a child has limited freedom, or one can say a child has freedom within given parameters. However, with the advent of children's rights, one is bound to wonder whether elders still the power have to control children's behaviour.

Across Africa, children's rights have met resistance due to cultural practices. A study in Zambia by Muleya (2022) revealed that children were physically abused. Corporal punishment was cited as a common method of disciplining children. Similarly, Kelly (2020) observed that in Northwest Tanzania adults resisted the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. Physical punishment was seen as a necessity in maintaining order and obedience (Kelly, 2024). This illustrates that Africans countries are immensely rooted in their culture. However, infliction of corporal punishment is violation of human rights according to international standards of children's rights. This indicates a clash between children's rights and African traditional values. Thus, this paper calls for a framework that incorporates culture while protecting children well-being,

In addition, the tension between children's rights and traditional practices is not peculiar to Zimbabwe. It is a global phenomenon affecting many countries where especially cultural values are firmly grounded. In Turkey children's rights are seen as weakening the authority of parents and caregivers (Guner, 2023). Similarly, Wan et al. (2025) argue that children's rights cause the erosion of cultural values especially of undermining parents and authority. In concurrence, Olsson (2020) indicates that there is tension between children's rights and parental rights. Parents argue that they have an obligation to monitor their children's behavior, yet rights give them autonomy. This puts forward that children's rights are viewed as disturbing the social fabric even in Western countries, the context in which the children's rights emanated.

Furthermore, a study by Weber and Abbasi (2023) highlights some challenges on the implementation of children's rights. The study pinpoints some dissonance between children's rights and culture. In support, Faulkner and Nyamutata (2020) suggest a decolonisation of children's rights for them to represent African values, thus the tension between children's rights transcends Zimbabwean boundaries. This clearly indicates a collision between international standards and culture on human rights in different countries. In contrast, Third et al. (2025) highlight digital tools as infringing on children's rights. The authors indicate that children are exposed to content which is not suitable for their age because the internet is age blind. This implies that while culture contributes to infringement of children's rights, there are other forces coming into play. This scenario seems to confirm the assertion that children's rights sound like a slogan which needs to be expatiated.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Zimbabwe, despite being a signatory of the United Nations Conventions on the rights of children, it's culture is contributing to the infringement of these rights. Tshungulu et al. (2023) indicate some passage rites that are practiced in Zimbabwe that violate children's rights. These include male circumcision and virginity tests among other others. These practices violate children's rights to privacy and dignity. Not only that, the right to education is also violated during the period these children are subjected to cultural practices. In contrast, the elders feel that they have an obligation to initiate their children into adulthood (Olsson, 2020). The practices maybe deemed necessary by the elders, but the children may see it as a violation of their rights.

## 1.2 Research questions

The following questions guided this paper:

1. To what extent are children's rights upheld in Zimbabwe's cultural context?

2. How are children's rights perceived within Zimbabwean cultural contexts?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Promotion of Children's Rights

Promotion of children's rights ensures the development and wellbeing of children. However, the promotion of children 'rights' varies depending on how the society values them. Ursin and Lysa (2024) carried out research in Norway and found out that parents want to decide careers for their children despite the fact that children may not be interested in their parents' choices. Thus, parents have certain expectations of their children and children's rights give children autonomy to do what they want regardless of going against their parents' wishes. In concurrence, Messner (2024) echoes that parents usually transfer their values to children during the process of socialisation. It is noted that most parents want to raise their children in exactly the same way they were raised by their own parents. They do not accept that things change, hence what their parents cherished may not be necessary or relevant to their children as society is dynamic. Thus, a gap between what is valued by parents and children is noted. Due to children's rights, most children do not want to accept intergenerational reciprocity. They want freedom and independence.

Despite the existence of children's rights, Nambia and Said (2024) observed that sexual abuse and violence exists in Malaysia between the powerful and powerless domain which is supported by patriarchy. The society because of its culture accepts that in the society there exists the powerless who can be abused or exploited by the powerful. Thus, children's rights are sometimes not observed due to the influence of culture. This indicates a clash between children 'rights and culture. Similarly, Warren (2021) observed that in Australia educators use their own experiences which are anchored in their culture to care for their ECD learners. Thus, children' rights are observed in the context of Australia. This reflects that children's rights cannot be enjoyed outside the context of the children in which the rights should be enjoyed. From this basis children's rights cannot be universalised. They are culture bound.

In another study conducted by Zhussipbek and Nagayeva (2023) it was revealed that the Convention on Children's Rights does not clearly define how children should be treated. There are no specifications on parenting styles that resonate with children's rights. Thus, this leaves room for parents or guardians to do what they feel is good for the child. Moyo (2024) shares the same sentiments that children's rights are among the genre of human rights that are elusive. This is an indication that there is interplay between children's rights and culture. In a related study, carried out by Vietnam Tri (2024) it was found that the realisation of

children's rights remains a challenge due to culture. The study revealed that Vietnamese culture emphasises familial duty and respect for those in power. On the other hand, children's rights emphasise on autonomy and participation in decision making. Given this situation, children often obey orders from parents or elders. Similarly, Farini and Scollan (2024) observed that parents provide children with what they deem essential for their development and wellbeing. So parents are seen as advocates who act on behalf of their children. It is believed that the culture dictates welfare rights for the children.

In Africa there are also some challenges in the observance of children's rights. A study conducted in Ghana by Darkwah, Daniel and Yendork (2018) noted that children's rights do not represent African ideologies of parenting. In Ghana the way children are raised is consistent with the socio- economic context of that country. Hence children are required to submit to what they are told by their parents. This scenario indicates that if children's rights are at odds with the local culture, they may not be observed. In addition, Kelly (2020) noted that parents did not give in to the abolition of physical punishment as they considered it necessary to maintain peace and order in schools. This clearly indicates how Africans are deeply immersed in their culture. Hence promoting children's rights outside their culture.

Emanating from the foregoing, Moyo (2024)'s study revealed that whilst children's rights are universal, their implementation is influenced by culture and religion. Cultural values often mould how children are raised. Chisanga (2023) supports the above views by stating that, although the Zambian government provides protection to children's rights to health, there is tension between children's rights to health and the parent or guardians' religion. Chisanga noted that parents and guardians particularly of the Jehovah's Witness refuse consent for their children's blood transfusion due to their religious affiliation. Thus, the rights to health or medical care rest on the parents or guardian. Farini and Scollan (2024) share the same views that parents act on behalf of their children since children because of their age are not able to voice their concerns. Thus, children enjoy their rights within parameters given by their parents or guardians.

Stakeholders in schools understand the contents of the Convention on the Right of the Child differently. Moyo (2024) and M Gomezulu (2016) noted that stakeholders of Malawian schools conceptualise the contents of the Convention on the Child's Rights differently. This poses challenges in disciplinary issues as stakeholders are not clear on the values that are compatible with their culture. This indicates a gap between children's rights and the local norms. Ngema et al. (2025) share the same sentiments that, despite numerous international laws of human rights in South ????, children's rights continue to be violated due to customary laws. The convention on the

children's rights was meant to allow children to enjoy their childhood. However, due to the customary law, a child can get married at the age of eleven [11]. Thus, the customary law seems to override children's rights. Another study carried out in Kenya by Ngira (2023) singled out that children's wellbeing is not anchored on universalised children's rights, rather, children among the Kipsigis are protected through the ethics of care and 'do not harm principle' as espoused in their living rights. This shows that Kenyans do not want to protect their children using foreign laws.

## 2.2 Perceptions on Children's Rights

Generally, the support for children's rights is growing. However, the way these rights are perceived vary depending on the context in which they are implemented. A study conducted in New Zealand shows that there are some clashes that exist in the family settings. There is a clash of interests between children or guardians (Blaisdell, Kustatscher and other Zhu,2021.) Parents have their expectations on children yet on the other side children want to enjoy their rights without the interference of adults. Thus, children's rights may be seen as undermining parental control. In another study by Berrick, Skiveness and Roscoe (2023) findings indicate that parents want unrestricted freedom to control their children, while the state wants to play a mediating role to ensure that children are not abused. This shows that there is a relationship between children's rights and cultural expectations. In the same study, parents indicated that they were not comfortable advocating for autonomy rights than non-parents. Similarly, Michail (2023) noted that adults were not willing to give children total freedom. This shows that parents were not willing to grant their children freedom rights. Parents want to enjoy the foundational rights which allow them to direct their children.

Considering the above, Van Bueren (2021) 's study found out that families did not pay much attention to the rights of the child. This implies that children's rights were not looked after or observed. The same was noted by Berrick, Skiveness and Roscoe (2023), who highlight that Norwegians and Californians prefer values of security, equality and freedom rights. Thus, parents choose rights they want to promote leaving out other rights.

Africans have their own perception of children's rights. Faulkner and Nyamatata (2020)'s study revealed that some children's rights are not suitable for African countries. The argument is that some children's rights may not be appropriate for African countries since the convention on the rights of the child was initiated in western countries. Similarly, Simbine and le Roux (2021) argue that some children's rights that are seen as being violated emanate from the application of western worldview of children's rights. A case in point is the issue of respect among the Vatsonga people. (Simbine &

le Roux,2021) The issue of respect is central to how they raise their children. Therefore, anything which does not value respect is viewed as aimed at destroying their culture.

In other studies conducted by Mugadza et al. (2019), Gafnel, Ismail and Yaswirman (2023) and Van Bueren (2021) findings show that children's rights cannot be fully promoted outside the children's immediate environment. The studies above highlight that customary laws clash with children's rights leading to violation of both children and women's rights. Hence, successful implementation of children's rights in the sub-Saharan Africa depends on their socio-cultural context. Adonteng-Kiss (2020) concurs by stating that there is tension between children's rights and parental expectations. Parents want to teach their children work ethics and responsibility, hence, seeing children who are engaged in work as child labour is counter-productive in the African way of child-rearing. The study highlights that some children's rights are not consistent with African culture. Children 'rights should not uproot the child from his or her roots.

## 3. Methodology

The researcher selected articles published between 2019 and 2025 from Google scholar. A total of twenty articles were randomly selected. The content to be analysed was selected using purposive sampling. The researcher chose content which was relevant to the research questions thus, the data was coded in relation to the research questions. Qualitative data was presented and analysed in a narrative manner. Bias was avoided by selecting articles from different authors. Data was approached with an objective mind to guard against preconceptions. Primary sources that were used were relevant to the study. This was done in order to avoid misinterpretation of original findings. The researcher also used dated sources to trace the historical development of children's rights so that progress and challenges could be easily evaluated. To ensure that the findings are plausible, the researcher used credible sources from Google scholar. In addition, sources were triangulated to verify information or data obtained. Apart from that, the researcher observed ethical issues through proper citation and use of accredited sources.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Promotion of Children's rights in Zimbabwe

Whilst culture assists humans to preserve their environment, norms, traditions and values, it can also hinder the promotion of children's rights. Tshugulu et al. (2023) revealed that there are cultural practices in Zimbabwe that violate children's rights. These include

virginity testing, child marriages, labia elongation and sexual dalliance. Gumbo (2020) Mutetwa and Muchacha (2020), Midzi and Svongoro (2024) echoed the same sentiments that children are subjected to sexual abuse due to some cultural practices. In addition, Ndhlovu (2021) highlights interfamilial child abuse, that is, sexual abuse by family members. To make matters worse, the abused children are not allowed to report the abusers as they are relatives. These findings agree with what was noted by Nambia and Said (2024) who found that sexual abuse and violence are evident in Malaysia and is accepted as it is supported by patriarchal structure. Similarly, Warren (2021) reveals that educators in Australia teach children based on their experiences which are rooted in their culture. This indicates that children's rights cannot be observed outside the context in which they should be promoted. The concurrence of findings both in Zimbabwe and in Western countries show that there are cultural practices that violate children's rights signifying that indeed culture has influence on the promotion of children's rights.

Although children's rights are known in Zimbabwe, rural communities continue to raise their children using their cultural/traditional ways not as given in the Convention on the right of the child Ringson, (2019). In Agreement, Simango and Mafa (2022) point out that parents use both violent and non-violent disciplinary measures to discipline their children. In concurrence, Nyamanhindi and Mukoyi (2023) indicate that in Zimbabwe a child can be pledged for marriage when it is still in her mother's womb "kuzvarira" UNICEF (2018) noted the same that children still suffer due to cultural practices. The findings above cohere with what Ursin and Lysa (2024) established. The study by Ursin and Hysa revealed that children do not enjoy their rights in total because parents decide for their children especially on issues to do with discipline and career choice. Parents feel that children are too young to make informed decisions. By virtue of their experience and age parents are in a better position to know what is good for their children (Messner, 2024). However, society is dynamic, what the parents think might be beneficiary to their children may not be relevant to their children. This signifies that children may not enjoy their rights without the involvement of their parents. Parents provide what they feel is ideal for their children (Farin and Scollan, 2024). The findings show that children cannot enjoy their rights outside their parents' interference. In addition, Ndondo (2024) aptly puts it that children's rights are not fully implemented in Zimbabwe due to cultural and economic reasons.

Furthermore, Hlungwani (2024) and Musiwa (2021) highlight poverty and economic problems as limiting factors in the implementation of children's rights. Children continue to suffer in Zimbabwe due to poverty and thus do not enjoy their social and economic rights. The studies above give some insights that hinder children from enjoying their rights other than cultural practices.

Some scholars argue that the contents of the convention on the right of the child are known in Zimbabwe, Ndondo (2024)'s study reveals that most Zimbabweans have knowledge of children's rights and how they should be promoted. However, Ndondo indicates that Zimbabweans have some reservations due to cultural issues. Zimbabweans advocate for rights aligned to their norms and values. Thus, because of the issue of culture, people may be hesitant to promote children's rights. Conversely, Zhussipbek and Nagayeva (2023) indicate that the Convention on the right of the child does not specify what should be done to promote children's rights. As a result, people use what is within their culture which might not be in line with laws governing the well-being of children. There is a variation in the conceptualization of the contents of the convention on the rights of the child (CRC). The contrast may be due to different contexts, level of literacy or attitude towards the rights. However, the studies concur that rights should be consistent with culture to be fully promoted. This suggests that for children's rights to be fully promoted they have to be culture specific.

Children's rights continue to suffer because they are not contextualized (Van Bueren, 2021). In support, Ndondo (2024) highlights that children's rights are not functional due to cultural reasons. Mundau and Chineka (2023) noted the same by stating that for children's rights to be promoted they should operate within a context. The sentiments noted above agree with the findings of Moyo (2024), Chisanga (2023), Darkwah, Daniel and Yendork (2018) who state that children's rights represent ideologies of countries in which they are implemented. This implies that Africans want to do things which are grounded in their culture or religion. This suggests that promotion of children's rights is possible within a given context. Refusal to universalize children's rights may indicate that Zimbabweans are not comfortable to promote rights which are not consistent with their culture.

## **4.2 Perceptions of Children's Rights in Zimbabwe**

There are varied perceptions on the rights of children in Zimbabwe. Mpofu and Machingauta (2024)'s study established that children's rights brought some challenges of indiscipline, bullying, and delinquency among others. In addition, the study revealed that the custodians of children are facing challenges of arrogance with some children threatening parents. Harbach (2025) also noted that children's rights brought some challenges. The challenges include clashes of interest between children and parents or guardians. Parents have their own expectations which are different from their children. Parents see rights as making children undermine their authority thus parents are not comfortable with the autonomy rights (Berrick, Skiveness and Roscoe, 2023); Michail, 2023). The

findings show that parents perceive rights as making their children digress from the norm. The rights are not taken as promoting child welfare but as causing problems. Hence children's rights are not seen in a positive way.

Emanating from the above, Mpofo and Machingauta (2024)'s study revealed that there is over emphasis on children's rights at the expense of responsibility in the classroom. Thus, schools will produce rowdy students. There is a call for a balance between children's rights and responsibility. This concurs with Ndondo (2024)'s argument that acceptable rights are those rooted in norms and values. The findings above concur with Simbine and Le Roux, (2021); Mugadza et al (2019); Oyelana, Kamanzi and Richter (2021) who say that some children's rights are not suitable for African countries, for example, exclusive breastfeeding is not acceptable to Africans. Issues to do with respect, obedience, work and discipline form the core of child rearing practices in African countries (Mugadza et al, 2019). From the above findings, it can be noted that children's rights are seen as going too far than expected. Moreso, the rights are viewed as doing more harm than good to the children.

Studies in Zimbabwe have shown that there are cultural practices that promote children's rights. These include traditional games, totem recital, child naming among others (Tshugulu & Simbine, 2023). This shows that child protection is not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe. It has existed since time immemorial. This confirms Ndondo (2024)'s finding which shows that Zimbabweans are positive about children's rights. Similarly, Durualp, Gunes and DURUALP (2023) study revealed that parents or guardians with the knowledge of children's rights displayed positive attitude towards children's rights. This indicates that there are some parents who appreciate that children need to be protected. These parents are likely to allow their children to enjoy their rights. It may imply that parents noticed some instances of child abuse or that there were victims of child abuse during their childhood. Nemeth et al (2025) observed that parents who suffered child abuse can strongly advocate for children's rights due to their experiences. Thus, to a greater extent children's rights are perceived as being inconsistent with Zimbabwean culture. However, some see children's rights as protecting or promoting the wellbeing of children.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusion

It can be concluded that the study revealed that culture is essential in shaping identity. There is a strong relationship between culture and children's rights in that culture influences children's rights. Due to some cultural practices, some children's rights are violated. Children are not fully enjoying their rights as culture hinders that

freedom. . However, it should not be used as a basis for violating children's rights. Dehumanizing practices such as child marriages, passage rites, child labour and physical punishment violate children's rights to freedom, privacy, dignity and education. Furthermore, as children's rights are rooted in a context outside the children's immediate experiences, they may not be fully understood, thus making their promotion doubtful. In addition, the rights over protect children, yet there are real life challenges they will need to face in real life situations.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

1. Children's rights be contextualized in order for them to be relevant and acceptable.
2. There be a shift from cultural practices that are harmful to children to practices that promote children's wellbeing and development.
3. Policy makers come up with a framework which harmonizes children's rights and culture so that children enjoy their rights while celebrating their cultural practices
4. The government encourages open discussions between local people and children's rights advocates.
5. Children's Rights advocates to involve parents and elders in crafting children's rights to ensure shared responsibility and acceptance.

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