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## The Tensions between Culture and Human Rights: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World

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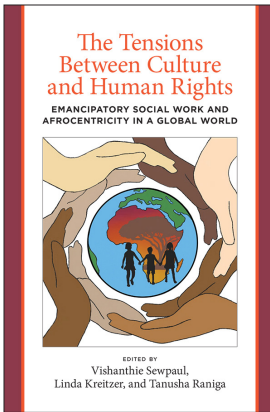
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## THE TENSIONS BETWEEN CULTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS: Emancipatory Social Work and Afrocentricity in a Global World

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# Child Marriage Among the Apostolic Sects in Zimbabwe: Implications for Social Work Practice

*Munyaradzi Muchacha, Abel Blessing Matsika, and Tatenda Nhapi*

Child marriage is a major global child rights challenge, especially in the Global South, where its prevalence is high. For example, in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where its prevalence is higher than in the rest of the world, an estimated 45 percent and 39 percent of girls, respectively, are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2016a). Zimbabwe is greatly affected by this problem; for instance, an estimated 32 percent of girls in that country are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2016a). Child marriage also affects boys, but it mainly affects girls due to structural and gender inequalities as well as harmful social norms that encourage the marriage of the girl child (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). Child marriage is considered a major violation of child rights; it contravenes rights such as health, education, and freedom from abuse and exploitation (UN Fund for Population Activities [UNFPA], 2012). In addition, it is strongly linked to social problems such as birth complications, high infant and maternal mortalities, gender-based violence, and spread of sexually transmitted diseases (UNFPA, 2012). It is contrary to various social work values such as social justice, equality, empowerment, and liberty (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017).

Fortunately, recent years have witnessed a surge in interventions by local and international organizations, governments, and the international community to tackle child marriage (UN, 2017). Such efforts include the development and implementation of international policies, creation and strengthening of laws against child marriage, international conferences, and global campaigns (UNFPA, 2012). Most of these interventions are informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989), which outlines an ideal standard of childhood and child care that every child across the world should have and sets out the obligations of the state and related actors to ensure these envisaged ideals. Indeed, the CRC has played and is playing a crucial role in improving life chances of children by enabling access to various services for children such as health and education (Twum-Danso, 2008a).

Nonetheless, critics of this international human rights norm argue that it advances a “Eurocentric” form of childhood that contradicts the lived realities of children in Africa and other parts of the Global South (Twum-Danso, 2008b). For instance, the CRC views childhood as age specific, and children as asexual, innocent, and deserving a special form of care to successfully transition into a better adulthood (Twum-Danso, 2008b). Yet many scholars, especially from childhood studies, have clearly demonstrated that childhood is context specific and shaped by local cultures and socio-economic and political circumstances. This view contrasts with the universalization of childhood furthered by the CRC and its conduits, such as the civil society and local and international non-governmental organizations (Twum-Danso, 2008a). On the other hand, it can be argued that the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACWRC) (African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, 1990) enabled the “domestication” of the notion of rights to suit African contexts. Certainly, this continental child rights law makes efforts to better fit child rights to African contexts by highlighting children’s responsibilities and other cultural issues. On the contrary, Twum-Danso (2008b) argues that these “modifications” did not go far enough to contextualize child rights and that in some respects, the African Charter is even more ambitious and stringent than the CRC.

The CRC and its consequential child protection systems across Africa have received criticism about their relevance and effectiveness in

addressing pressing childhood problems such as child marriage, sex work, female genital mutilation/cutting, and child labour. In most cases, these problems are embedded in deep-rooted and structural socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious issues and complexities (Sibanda, 2011). Hence, some scholars argue that most low-income countries cannot afford the childhood standards espoused by this international law regime and are calling for contextualization to better suit the peculiar dynamics in African contexts (Laird, 2005).

This chapter contributes to the growing body of literature that explores this contestation, and the need for the alignment of international human rights norms and practices, which are central and advanced by the social work profession, with the lived realities in Africa. It does this by exploring the contravention of children's rights to health, education and freedom from abuse and exploitation when child marriage is common (Human Rights Watch, 2016). However, caution should be taken against stereotyping the sects included in this study, on the basis of their beliefs and practices. The fact that child marriage is also significantly shaped by poverty in Zimbabwe, and across the Global South, must be acknowledged. The chapter then highlights the child protection challenges that social workers face in dealing with child marriage in Zimbabwe. It is fair to say that the persistent uncritical promotion of the rights discourse and the so-called Western forms of social work will not succeed in effectively tackling child marriage. Therefore, in agreement with other scholars across the African continent, we encourage the social work profession in Zimbabwe to contextualize the promotion of human rights through approaches such as dialogue to better address child marriage among the Apostolic Sects. Further, it is also essential to prioritize poverty alleviation given its close link to child marriage.

## Conceptualizing Child Marriage

Child marriage is defined as the marriage of any person below the age of 18, in line with the CRC, which views a child as anyone below the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2012). There are large tensions between the rights- and age-based international definitions of child marriage and what different communities in Africa and across the Global South consider as the

appropriate stage for one to get married. For example, some communities in Zimbabwe consider the beginning of menstruation and one's maturity as the appropriate "stage" for marriage and not age (Sibanda, 2011). This maturity is measured by variables such as ability to perform household chores well (Sibanda, 2011). Further, in many African countries there are tensions between criminal and customary laws, thereby creating different minimum ages of marriage (Melchiorre, 2013). Despite these problems, the age-based definition is preferred by most actors since it allows standardization and is in line with the CRC, which most countries have ratified and are obliged to fully implement.

Several international human rights laws and policies highlight the illegality of child marriage. For instance, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by 187 countries, specifies:

The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory. (UN, 1979, Article 16[2])

Relatedly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) provides that any marriage should involve the free and full consent of both partners, and consequently, children are viewed as not mature enough to make well-informed choices and consent to marriage (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). While the CRC makes no explicit reference to child marriage, many of its articles urge state parties to protect children from all forms of exploitation, harm, and violence, which include child marriage. More precisely, the ACWRC is very emphatic about the illegality of child marriage, and its Article 21 clearly stresses that governments should address harmful cultural practices such as child marriage (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 1990). The ACWRC defines a child as any "human being below the age of 18 years" (Article 2). In addition, there are various resolutions by international bodies such as the Human Rights Council and the Security Council emphasizing that child marriage is a

human rights violation and calling upon state parties to strengthen their efforts against this social problem (UN, 2017).

## Causes of Child Marriage

Child marriage has several causes, which include but are not limited to poverty, cultural practices, religion, early pregnancies, and gender inequalities (Sibanda, 2011). International research highlights that child marriage is mainly caused by poverty, which contributes to limited access to education and other services, poor standards of living, and lack of viable livelihood choices (UNFPA, 2012). Child marriage emerges as a social safety net for vulnerable girls and a way for families to reduce the burden of child care (UNFPA, 2012). As such, child marriage is prevalent among poor households, and thus is more prevalent in the poorest countries of the world. Early child pregnancies are also viewed as a major cause of child marriage because it is a social norm in Zimbabwe, and many other African countries, that a person gets married to the person responsible for the pregnancy, even if the pregnancy was unplanned (Sibanda, 2011). Furthermore, in many societies across the globe child marriage is a consequence of traditional, religious, and cultural norms that are considered harmful to the care and well-being of children (UNICEF, 2016b). More broadly, most of these cultural, traditional, and religious norms are underpinned by patriarchy and gender relations that marginalize and restrict opportunities for girls and women (UNICEF, 2016b). For instance, in many countries the marriage age for boys and girls is different and it is mostly men who decide who and when girls should marry (UNFPA, 2012).

## The Apostolic Sects: History, Practices and Child Marriage in Zimbabwe

The Apostolic Sects (also known as African Initiated Churches, Spirit led churches, Indigenous churches) are the largest religious group in Zimbabwe (Maguranyanga, 2011). They have an estimated three million members, while the total population of Zimbabwe is 14 million people (Maguranyanga, 2011). The Apostolic Sects have a long history in Zimbabwe, having emerged during the colonial era mainly through the

pioneering work of charismatic leaders such as Johanne Marange and Johanne Masowe (Hallfors et al., 2016). The earliest churches were mainly composed of the family members of the charismatic leaders, but these churches have since expanded across Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa (Machingura, 2011). Due to conflicts, there are now several and many types of Apostolic Sects, which share different kinds of doctrines. The earliest sects emerged as a counter and alternative to the domination of Christianity promoted by the state and missionaries, which was regarded as aligned to colonialism (UNICEF, 2015). The Apostolic Sects' practices and beliefs are a mixture of Christianity and African Traditional Religion (Machingura, 2011). This fusion allows these churches to resonate with the world views and lived experiences of many locals, leading to their huge popularity and acceptance (Maguranyanga, 2011). Further, in recent years, these sects have witnessed a significant expansion in Zimbabwe as a result of the recent economic crisis, which motivates many to seek prophecies and other spiritual solutions.

### *Apostolic beliefs*

The Apostolic Sects share a common overarching spiritual concept called *mweya*, a religious practice akin to the Holy Spirit in English (Maguranyanga, 2011). They use *mweya* to communicate with and receive messages from God, and to prophesy (Maguranyanga, 2011). It is also a tool for healing, and most sects prohibit the utilization of formal health services. As such, *mweya* is a major spiritual aspect that differentiates the Apostolic Sects from most Christian denominations in Zimbabwe (Mpofu et al., 2011). Although most Apostolic Sects share this belief system, caution should be taken against viewing these sects as homogenous. As earlier pointed out, there are various Apostolic Sect denominations, and they have a wide range of religious practices. To this effect, Maguranyanga (2011) offers a potentially useful way of categorizing the Apostolic Sects into two major groups, ultra-conservative and liberal. The ultra-conservative Apostolic Sects have religious doctrines that are regarded as “radical,” such as prohibition of access to conventional health care, education, and the formal labour market. Failure to abide by these moral codes is met with sanctions and shaming (Hallfors et al., 2016). Liberal sects are those



such as Zion Christian Churches that allow access to health care, education, and the formal labour market (Maguranyanga, 2011).

### *Child marriage in the Apostolic sects*

It is commonly argued that child marriage in Zimbabwe is disproportionately high among the Apostolic Sects, in particular among those perceived as “ultra-conservative” as evidenced by Human Rights Watch (2015). The Multiple Indicator Monitoring Survey (2014) and Zimbabwe Demographic Health Survey (2010–2011), highlighted that child marriage was highest among the Apostolic Sects compared with other church denominations in Zimbabwe (as cited in UNICEF, 2016b). A participant in the work of Hallfors et al. (2016, p. 184) pointed out that “the church does not have problems with that [child marriage]. It is common in our church (Johane Masowe Apostolic)” (p. 3.3, para. 2). Sibanda (2011) observed that most child marriages within the Apostolic Sects are facilitated by *mweya*, which directs and helps males to choose and marry a girl child. Hallfors et al. (2016) argued that given that *mweya* is a supernatural concept that cannot be verified or questioned, some men were deceptively using it to marry any girl they wished (UNICEF, 2015). Relatedly, a participant in a study by Human Rights Watch (2016) reported that as soon as a girl reaches puberty any man in the church can claim her as a wife. These marriages may be necessitated by church doctrines that prohibit use of family planning and encourage large families and expansion of the Apostolic community in line with the Bible, which says that human beings should multiply like sand (UNICEF, 2015). Nonetheless, Hallfors et al. (2016) noted that there are some Apostolic Sects that prohibit child marriage, where it is punishable through sanctions. This displays the diversity among the Apostolic Sects, and nuanced efforts should be made to understand why some sects accept child marriage while others prohibit it.

It is important to highlight that child marriage is also prevalent among the Apostolic Sects that prohibit it (Hallfors et al., 2016). This is mainly because of poverty, which is generally regarded as the major cause of child marriage in Zimbabwe. Poverty is also a central aspect of the pathway to child marriage even among the ultra-conservative sects (Hallfors et al., 2016). This is not surprising, given that Zimbabwe is experiencing a protracted socio-economic crisis, affecting almost everyone,

which has caused high unemployment, poverty, and poor standards of living (Sibanda, 2011). Poverty compels vulnerable families to pursue child marriage as a form of social safety net. For instance, Hallfors et al. (2016) noted that most children among the Apostolic Sects who got married had dropped out of school due to lack of funds for school fees.

## Child Protection in Zimbabwe: Practice Challenges

Zimbabwe has a child protection system, imported from the West during the colonial era, that is undergirded by rights and various laws meant to protect children from what is considered risk and harm (Muchacha et al., 2016). The new Constitution of Zimbabwe (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013a) is clear that a child is any person who is below the age of 18, and it also provides for various rights such as education, health, housing, and other social services. Relatedly, a Zimbabwe constitutional judgment on child marriage of 2016 ruled that this practice is illegal and a major violation of children's rights. It stated that "with effect from 20 January 2016, no person, male or female may enter into any marriage . . . before attaining the age of 18 years" (Nemukuyu, 2016, para. 6). This ruling, therefore, overrules all the acts of parliament that are discriminatory against girls and "permissive" of child marriage. For example, the Children's Act (Government of Zimbabwe, 2013b, Chapter 5:06) stipulates that the minimum age of sexual consent and marriage for girls is 16 years. Likewise, the Marriage Act (Government of Zimbabwe, 2006, Chapter 5:11) allows girls aged 16 to marry, yet sets 18 as the minimum age for boys.

Indeed, laws are very indispensable to promote a fair, just, and equal society, and they are pertinent to address child marriage. However, a growing concern regarding the child protection system in Zimbabwe, and across the world, is that legalistic solutions are being emphasized. A legalistic approach assumes that a legal ban will end social problems (Laird, 2005); see, for example, the impression given by the earlier mentioned constitutional ruling. Yet there is very limited implementation of such laws, as evidenced by the rarity of cases of prosecution for child marriage cases (UNICEF, 2016b). A legalistic approach is also limited by the fact that, in Zimbabwe, access and use of legal systems is mediated by family ties and consensus, especially regarding cases that are embedded in social

relations and norms, such as child marriage. As UNICEF (2016b) further noted, it is very unlikely for an Apostolic Sect girl to report to the police if she is forced to marry an older man, due to various potential negative consequences such as condemnation by family members, disruption of family ties, and church sanctions. As such, Laird (2002) cautions:

The belief systems and social circumstances, which result in adverse practices against children cannot simply be legislated out of existence. They must be addressed through interventions, which engage with both traditional norms and economic realities. (p. 901)

For example, the Zimbabwean government has tried at several intervals to use force to compel the Apostolic Sects to stop child marriage, and to comply with government laws and policies on education and health, but such efforts have not yielded much in the way of results (Maguranyanga, 2011). Efforts to enforce laws among the Apostolic Sects are obstructed by the fact that these communities are hard to reach and secretive (Maguranyanga, 2011). On the other hand, the government is inhibited from fully applying these child protection laws because the Apostolic Sects are a major portion of the electorate, and further clashes may have a negative bearing on electoral outcomes (UNICEF, 2015). These laws are not positioned to tackle the religious and cultural factors that surround child marriage, or to effect sustainable behaviour and social change (UNICEF, 2015). Rigid legal enforcement may lead to the hardening of religious stances and cases of child marriage being hidden within such communities. As Boyden et al. (2013) contend,

it is not at all obvious that an abolitionist approach backed by punitive measures like imprisonment and fines is suitable for addressing practices of such social significance and intricacy as female genital mutilation and early marriage. (p. 515)

The child protection system in Zimbabwe, and similar Global South contexts, receives strong criticism for being too individualistic and

paying limited attention to structural challenges that children encounter (Muchacha et al., 2016). Yet, poverty is a major cause of child marriage and related concerns: an estimated half of the Zimbabwean population lives below the poverty line, and children are more affected (Muchacha et al., 2016). As Boyden et al. (2013) rightfully state, “conceptions of risk and on generic interventions designed without full consideration of local . . . contexts are unlikely to become effective as rapidly as intended” (p. 515). The government child protection system and practice in Zimbabwe is hampered by limited resources, especially human and financial resources (Muchacha et al., 2016). For instance, in comparison with its southern African neighbours, Zimbabwe has the largest child to social worker ratio in this region (Wyatt et al., 2010). This illustrates the inadequacy of this child protection system in addressing structural child protection issues, such as child marriage, that are widespread (Sibanda, 2011).

Since the late 1990s, when it adopted the Economic Structural Adjustment Programs, the Government of Zimbabwe has increasingly retreated from providing social safety nets, producing a vacuum that is being filled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Muchacha et al., 2016). These actors are now a central part of the child protection system and are arguably providing more services than the government. For instance, there are over 24 NGOs in Zimbabwe that are focused on addressing child marriage (Girls not Brides, 2002). Their major intervention to address child marriage in Zimbabwe consists of campaigns to raise awareness and contribute to behaviour change. Indeed, this intervention is crucial in promoting knowledge and an enhanced understanding pertaining to human rights and the effects of child marriage and related practices (Boyden et al., 2013). However, the conventional information dissemination approach favoured by most NGOs, which includes campaigns, posters, and road shows, has been criticized for being top down, ethnocentric, and incapable of facilitating meaningful behavioural and social change (Myers & Bourdillon, 2012). Given these practice challenges, there is need for the child protection system in Zimbabwe to be reformed and contextualized in order to effectively engage with its socio-economic, political, cultural, and religious contexts.

## Contextualizing Human Rights to Sensitive Address “Harmful” Religious Practices

While human rights or similar notions are cardinal values for a just society, they should be promoted and implemented in a manner that appreciates the local socio-economic, religious, and cultural circumstances (Myers & Bourdillon, 2012). Rejecting human rights on the basis that they are Western and not universally applicable is counterproductive since they have an important goal of promoting human dignity and worth, a value many cultures across the world hold (Hugman, 2012). These values are central to the Afrocentric paradigm. Furthermore, the “universality vs. relativity dichotomy does not help us to protect children on the ground. Hence, it is necessary to move beyond the binary debate relating to the universality and relativity of children’s rights and engage with children’s local realities” (Twum-Danso, 2008b, p. 1).

A vital step in the contextualization of human rights is the recognition that cultures in Zimbabwe and around the world have ways to affirm the notion of worth and dignity of human beings (Hugman, 2012). Consequently, the ways in which these communities recognize the worth and dignity of human beings can be of great value in addressing child marriage. For instance, in Zimbabwe, as with many sub-Saharan countries, most local communities subscribe to the notion of *Ubuntu/hunu*, a philosophy that the “universe is built upon the principles of coexistence characterized by harmony, peace, interdependence, love and justice” (Lubombo, 2015, p. 37). These communities utilize *Ubuntu/hunu* as a reference to address various issues such as domestic violence, disputes, and even the care of children (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). Social workers in Zimbabwe might explore how this notion relates to human rights, and how it could be a reference point in addressing child marriage among the Apostolic Sects, as argued by Chitando et al. (2014). In practice, this involves reflecting on how child marriage compromises *Ubuntu/hunu* or similar notions. Potential answers to this question are that it contributes to deprivation of girls’ education, birth complications, and maternal mortalities. This approach avoids the domination of human rights rhetoric, which may be viewed as foreign, while achieving the same goals of advancing fairness and social justice (Chitando et al., 2014).

A critical aspect of the contextualization of rights is dialogue: this is a “shift from persuasion and the transmission of information from outside technical experts to dialogue, debate and negotiation on issues that resonate with members of the community” (Figueroa et al., 2002, p. ii). In practice, this would entail actively involving the Apostolic community in problem identification, the communication process, and action, monitoring, and evaluation. In this process social workers and the Apostolic Sect communities engage as equals. This dialogue and debate must explore what is needed for children’s well-being, how that relates to the notion of children’s rights, how child marriage affects children, how the Apostolic Sect practices violate child rights, and how this community can work together to address this problem. The role of social workers or other actors in these dialogues is to identify and engage gatekeepers and promote active participation, mutual learning, and collective decision making among the participants (Figueroa et al., 2002). Furthermore, social workers need to promote the active participation and inclusion of marginalized and disadvantaged members, considering that “quite often there are marginalized people, including children and the poorest of the poor, who either do not attend such gatherings or remain voiceless when they do attend” (Wessells, 2015, p. 5).

## Engaging the Apostolic Sects Leadership

The Apostolic Sects leaders are the custodians of the Apostolic religion; they engage in various functions such as preaching, prophesying, healing, and governance of the church. As such, they wield huge influence, and their directives are usually followed and respected. Therefore, social workers in Zimbabwe need to actively engage this leadership to find solutions. The expected outcome of this engagement is to see the Apostolic Sect leadership becoming champions and role models against child marriage, thereby influencing members to follow suit. As UNICEF (2015) suggests, “Identify influential role models (positive agents of change) within the Apostolic community and broader local community and use them to facilitate relationship building and dialogue” (p. xii). The engagement of faith leaders in addressing social problems within faith organizations is considered a “best practice” in addressing religious practices that are

considered harmful to the well-being of the members (Maguranyanga, 2011). This approach would allow the Apostolic leaders to be the facilitators of social change, contrary to interventions by practitioners that are usually short term and interpreted as external.

Consequently, this approach of centralizing the role and influence of faith leaders in social change endeavours has been adopted to deal with various concerns such as gender-based violence, access to HIV/AIDs treatment and prevention, and health care services in general. For instance, organizations such as UNICEF in Zimbabwe are working closely with the Apostolic Sects leadership to facilitate access to maternal and neonatal health services (UNICEF, 2015). Because of this engagement and dialogue, these development organizations have managed to assist the Apostolic churches in developing a gender equality policy to address gender-based violence. This was achieved through the representative organization of 160 Apostolic churches in Zimbabwe, the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe. Social workers in Zimbabwe can engage similar representative organizations such as the Apostolic Christian Council to mobilize member churches to address child marriage (Machingura, 2014). Paramount to this engagement is a non-judgmental and respectful approach to the Apostolic Sect leadership and practices. If one fails to respect these crucial values, resentment and resistance may occur (UNICEF, 2015).

## Promoting the Participation of the Apostolic Sect Communities in the Development of Child Marriage Policies and laws

Following the constitutional ruling on child marriage in January 2016, there have been calls for the Government of Zimbabwe to partner with donors, community leaders, adolescents, and civil society in developing a national action plan to end child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Parliament should also initiate processes to develop a child marriage law in line with the South African Development Community (SADC) Child Marriage Model Law, which sets a consistent standard for how legislation should deal with child marriage and protect children already in marriage (Newlands, 2016). This is encouraging progress indicative of the political

will and concerted efforts to address child marriage. Such policy-making processes are often dominated by experts and policy makers, and to a limited extent the community that they seek to save. While the contribution of technocrats is invaluable, such policies usually encounter resistance and backlash as they lack perspectives from the community. Fortunately, the Parliament of Zimbabwe has a participatory mechanism to mainstream community perspectives in the development of the laws, which is the parliamentary bills hearings. Given this crucial platform, the role of social workers and other actors should be to encourage the participation of communities in such processes, and advocating that parliament ensure that this platform reaches secluded communities such as some Apostolic Sects. Relatedly, such participation must be enhanced in the development of policies such as the National Action Plan.

## Poverty Eradication

As earlier argued, child marriage within the Apostolic Sects happens in a context of poverty, which limits access to education, and generally increases girls' economic vulnerability. Even if religious and other issues surrounding child marriage among the Apostolic Sects are effectively addressed, child marriage is likely to continue if poverty is not addressed. As such, Muchacha and Matsika (2017) argue that developmental social work can be a useful and relevant practice to address child marriage given that its main thrust is to address poverty. The limited space here does not allow a nuanced conceptualization and outline of this approach. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, developmental social work practice is a radical shift from individualistic and curative interventions toward those focused on promoting structural reforms, equality, and social justice. It is strength based, participatory, and aimed at sustainable empowerment of the communities so that even if they do not receive support from the state and related actors they can sustainably meet their needs (Muchacha & Matsika, 2017). The role of social work in this context is to enable equitable access to the social safety nets for education and health among the Apostolic Sects. Equally important, most of the Apostolic Sect communities are involved in informal sector livelihoods such as carpentry, weaving, blacksmithing, street vending, and farming, which are their major



sources of income (Maguranyanga, 2011). The role of social work should be to assist in strengthening these livelihoods to ensure their sustainability, productivity, and viability in order to reduce poverty. This can be achieved through functions such as enabling access to lucrative markets for the products produced by these communities, empowerment training in financial management, and facilitating access to pro-poor microfinance initiatives. In addition, efforts need to be made to ensure that proceeds from these livelihoods are used for goals that enhance the rights and well-being of children, such as access to education and food, which is crucial in reducing child marriage.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored child marriage among the Apostolic Sects and the implications for social work. It has argued that while child marriage among the Apostolic Sects may be linked to their religious practices such as *mweya* and spiritual dreams, it is also reinforced by widespread poverty, which is mainly emanating from the protracted socio-economic crisis affecting this sub-Saharan country. We have also argued that the child protection system in Zimbabwe, which is undergirded by the notion of rights, is not adequately positioned to address child marriage among the Apostolic Sects or the general population of Zimbabwe, due to its overemphasis on legalistic and individualistic interventions and neglect of structural interventions. It is not capable of effectively engaging and tackling the complex religious, political, and economic factors that surround child marriage. To remedy this, we have argued for the conceptualization of rights through recognition of local socio-cultural practices and for dialogue to promote sustainable social change in the interests of children. Similarly, we have argued for the active engagement of the Apostolic Sect leadership, as they are the custodians of the Apostolic Sects religion and role models, and their views are respected by their followers. Addressing poverty, child marriage, and other child protection concerns calls for a strong political will, resolve, and action since these social problems require political and governance solutions. To this effect, social workers in Zimbabwe need to continually lobby political actors to promote economic policies that help the poor and are aimed at promoting equitable access

to social safety nets. These advocacy efforts should also push the government to fulfill its international obligations regarding gender justice and the rights and well-being of children.

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