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## 14 Forced and Early Marriages

### Intersecting gender based-Violence, religion and Child Marriages among the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Church (JMAAC)

*Angeline Mavis Madongonda & Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga*

#### Abstract

Many religions are associated with the promotion of peace and protection of followers from any misdemeanors in the world. Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the scourges that challenge this view of religions. Coming from within any religious circle, the association of gender-based violence with religion is not only contradictory, and unacceptable but shocking. Yet, not many view this as the case when dealing with child marriages in the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Church (JMAAC). All child or forced marriages are potentially a hub for sexual assault which is a constituent of gender-based violence. Resultant pregnancies and eventual birth exacerbate this. This paper therefore seeks to interrogate gender-based violence within this church. Girl children, by their gender, are potential victims of GBV and to unearth this, structured interviews were done with participants from the church- both adult and married male and female congregants. Participants were selected using the snowballing technique. This data-gathering method was chosen to cater for most of the targeted population which is largely illiterate and secretive about its activities. *Ubuntu* philosophy is used in a bid to explore this unethical behaviour of GBV through child and forced marriages among the Johanne Marange Apostolic sect. It is hoped that the findings from this study will go a long way in addressing GBV from the least expected source, the church.

**Keywords:** African Initiated Churches, Child marriages, religion, Gender-based violence, intimate partner violence

#### Introduction

The study focuses on Gender-based violence (GBV) which is also referred to as Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), in stances where the perpetrator and victim are in an intimate relationship. Even though both men and

women as well as boys encounter GBV, this paper mainly focuses on the girl child whom the current researchers have seen as the main victim of GBV. We examine the prevalence of child marriages amongst members of the Johanne Marange African Apostolic church which is an African Initiated Church (AIC) and how they impact on the victims. We also strive to find out the prevalence of Sexual Violence as a form of Gender-based violence on girls who are given off and forced into child as well as forced marriages.

## **Background**

Early child marriages in Zimbabwe have been a significant issue with numerous effects not just for the affected children with larger social and developmental implications. While progress has been made in recent years to address gender equity and the education of the girl child, there are social enclaves that appear to escape public scrutiny as they are covertly hidden by the banner of religion. Society has also tended to turn a blind eye or attempted to sugar-coat incidences of child marriages in Zimbabwe. This problem persists in certain areas of the country particularly where members of the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Churches (JMAACs) are dominant. The case of a young girl Anna Machaya who died in childbirth (Mujuru, 2022) may have made headlines, but it soon grew cold and unaccounted for with the fate of the supposed husband and perpetrator remaining unknown as well as that of the parents who facilitated the marriage. The experiences of this young girl child starting with the consummation of her marriage and the subsequent trauma suffered at childbirth point to gender-based violence. This concurs with Kidman's findings on gender-based violence and intimate partner violence which have revealed the following startling findings:

Globally, 9% of respondents were married before they turned 15; another 25% were married between the ages of 15 and 17. Past year physical and/or sexual IPV [Intimate Partner Violence] was higher among women who married as children (29%) compared with those who married as adults (20%)....All marriages under 18 carry heightened risks, and such consequences can be most pronounced for the youngest brides (those under 15) (Kidman, 2017:663).

The case of the 14-year-old girl Anna Machaya cited above is one pointer at the gross acts of sexual violence against children and her death was the shocking final demise of a child who was never allowed to reach her potential. What is also daunting is the fact that the people who tried to assist

in covering up the crime were her biological parents who attempted to hide their daughter's true age by presenting identification documents of her cousin (Mujuru, 2022). It is for this reason that in this paper, we argue that child marriages are a metaphor for the sexual violence that children are vulnerable to and the subsequent escalation of GBV cases in Zimbabwe. We assume that the violence that Anna Machaya experienced as she was ushered into marriage, followed her to the grave, having gone through traumatic sexual violence followed by a protracted grueling labour that resulted in her death. Apart from the physical impact on the young victims, Kidman (2017:662) has linked the violation of children not just to the physical abuse but to the "additional adverse... mental health outcomes". Mujuru (2022: n.p) admitted that the scourge of child marriages is endemic in the country with "33% of women and 4% of men aged between 20-49 reporting that they were married before reaching the adult age of 18, according to a 2019 survey by Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency."

A significant number of factors such as poverty, the patriarchal social set-up leading to gender inequality and inequity, lack of education, and some religio-cultural belief systems that foster harmful traditional practices, amongst others have been blamed for child marriages. Such inequalities have been exacerbated by world conditions such as of late COVID-19 (Chitando, Maseno and Tarusarira, 2023), war, and climate change among others. These have had dire consequences for the girl child (Kurebwa and Kurebwa, 2018) who continues to miss out on educational opportunities and subsequently, lack of employment opportunities and the development of the larger Zimbabwe. Most of all the girl children married off to older men tend to fall victim to domestic violence and have higher risks of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. The Zimbabwean government, along with various organisations and civil society groups have been trying to combat early child marriages and working on lasting solutions to this scourge. While progress has been made, concerted efforts from various stakeholders are still required to eliminate early child marriages in Zimbabwe. Continued investment in education, poverty reduction, and gender equality is essential to ensure the well-being and empowerment of girls and to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and discrimination.

Child marriages have often targeted teenage girls. These marriages are at times arranged by church leaders and parents without the consent or understanding of the young women involved. This makes child marriages

viewed to some extent as forced marriage as most of the girls involved are not agreeable and are not legally able to consent. What makes it worse is how they are usually thrust into the arms of elderly men whose socio-cultural practices and beliefs are beyond the comprehension of the minors. The church's belief system is a combination of elements of some traditional African beliefs and some sectors of Christianity that condone child marriages, practices that are justified by interpretations of local religious and cultural polygamous norms and the concept of *kuzvarira* (a transactional arranged marriage of an older man and a minor girl). The issue of child marriage in the Johanne Marange church is not without its challenges. The Church has its internal governance structures and operates relatively autonomously, making it difficult for external authorities to enforce laws combatting child marriages. The government has expressed concern over child marriage in the Johanne Marange Church but not much has been done and Biri (cited by Mujuru, 2022) has attributed this to politicians who protect the church to secure votes. Johanne Marange is one of the largest AICs, with over a million followers who can easily be swayed by church leaders and politicians to vote for a particular candidate. Thus, the government tends to turn a blind eye to the atrocities of child marriages perpetrated by the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Church for fear of losing the much-needed votes. Half-hearted efforts, however, have been made to rectify child marriages through the legal marriage age (18 years), which makes it criminal for anyone to marry a child below that age. Furthermore, Zimbabwe has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets 18 years as the minimum age of marriage. In 1991, Zimbabwe also acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which requires signatories to ensure free and full consent to marriage by both parties involved. However, the implementation of these laws continues to be a challenge with overt child marriages happening particularly in AICs. This is compounded by the few known prosecutions where children have been known to openly marry.

## Research Methods

This study uses the snowballing technique which is a non-probability sampling method commonly used in qualitative research. The Johanne Marange church is a closed community (Dudzai, Zvokuomba and Mboko,

2023), often guarding its activities jealously so much that open access to members regarding the sensitive issue of child marriage is a challenge and likely to cause problems. The researchers also wished to protect the identity of the respondents who were married off as children and likely suffered violence of first sexual and subsequent encounters as well as men who were perpetrators of the violence. The study purposively selected the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church as it is one of the largest apostolic churches in the country that has been subject to criticism regarding child marriages. A sample of 11 participants drawn from Zengeza in Chitungwiza were interviewed; seven women who married young and four men who married underage girls. Zengeza is a high-density suburb with a significant number of followers of the JMAAC. The chapter devised a coding system that represents the gender of the respondent, for example, Y1 refers to the first male respondent while X1 refers to the first female respondent.

### **Theoretical Framework: Ubuntu and Early Child Marriages**

This study is informed by the *ubuntu* theoretical framework, which is premised on "humanity through recognising the humanity of others" (Samkange and Samkange, 1980) and creating a communal atmosphere that emphasizes "kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa" (Ramose, 1999:271). *Ubuntu* values strong cultural expectations that extended family and other community members care for one another in the spirit of oneness (Kalomo and Besthom, 2018). Within the theoretical framework of *ubuntu*, love and care for others is not restricted to blood relatives but can be extended to the clan, village as well as community. Thus, within the *ubuntu* cultural practice, families and communities embrace each other and share the bond of reciprocal love (Kalomo and Bestorm, 2018). *Ubuntu* is pertinent to this study, which hopes to bring to the fore the atrocities perpetrated against girl-children by their parents and society, the very people who are supposed to love and care for them and prevent them from getting into child marriages.

Mwinipeni (2018) avers that *Ubuntu* philosophy is at odds with modern society. What makes this philosophy suitable is how it frowns on injustice based on empathy and the collective responsibility of a community, a moral philosophy that should frown on child marriages guided by the

maxim 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' and upholding values such as "altruism, kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, respect and concern for others' (Letseka, 2012) what Ujomu & Bature (2018:180) refer to as "humane, compassionate and dignified approach to social living." Ngihbi & Elechi (2022) have aptly captured it when they say that each person's life is intertwined with that of others. Shona society, however, has always had its contradictions when dealing with issues to do with polygamy and child/and or forced marriages. The Shona proverb "*regai dzive shiri mazai haana mutoto*" (let the eggs hatch into birds the egg does not produce gravy) appears to generally emphasize maturation when used in the context of early marriages. It criticises them and emphasizes steering away from children allowing them to reach maturity before they can be given off in marriage. In the same vein, however, the proverb presents a woman as a commodity to be consumed. In the context of this paper, however, the message is the young should reach sexual maturation before they are forced into marriage.

While *Ubuntu* itself does not directly address early child marriages, its principles can be applied to address this issue. However, the philosophy has been selectively used to suit the whims of perpetrators of GBV and IPV. While AICs purport to uphold African value systems, this cannot be said of Ubuntu within such churches and JMAAC is one such example. Scholars such as Houshmand (2019) have lambasted the ambivalence of AICs which refuse to embrace other progressive statutes that combat GBV, opting to select aspects of Christianity and incorporate them into traditional culture, in this case, child marriages and polygamy. Their rigidity is often not to uphold positive values but to selective application of self-serving doctrines that subjugate and subordinate women. Chitando, Taringa & Mapuranga (2014:122) have observed that AICs were formed "to oppose colonial interpretations of Christianity.... to infuse indigenous beliefs and practices and ...formulate a peculiar African Christian identity." In the same vein, they should work towards eliminating oppressive tendencies of traditional value systems as well as those of church doctrine.

Eze cited by Houshmand (2019: n.p) underlines that *ubuntu* as an "ethical tradition grounded in a culture that is inherited from the ancestors" can still be dynamic and thus evolve to suit current situations. He further emphasizes that *ubuntu* should draw lessons from the past to guide the present as well as make sense of the future ... a philosophy of dialogue [which] can embrace differences. In other words, AICs need to address those masculinities which glorify violence and socialise them to resolve conflict

peacefully as well as accord girls and women the dignity and respect they deserve.

*Ubuntu* emphasizes empathy and compassion for others. Applying these principles to the context of early child marriages involves understanding the challenges faced by girls forced into such marriages and working towards creating a supportive and protective environment for them. In this paper, we argue that despite possessing areas of challenges that need adjustments, good practices drawn from *ubuntu* (Manyonganise, 2023) can still be useful in protecting girl children from child and forced marriages which are a form of GBV with grave consequences to the minor girls who are married off before maturity. We contend that if *ubuntu* is fully embraced, the Zimbabwean community can continue to excel in abolishing child marriages as well as preventing the resultant GBV that comes with child and forced marriages.

## **Intersecting Gender-based Violence, Religion and Child Marriages**

The male gender is regarded as divinely superior and, hence, predisposed to dominate and underscore female subordination (Dudzai, Zvokuomba and Mboko, 2023). Among some of the practices in some AICs men are encouraged to be polygamous and as a result, marry as many wives as they deem possible. Thus, power imbalances work against the weaker part in a marriage union of this caliber. Early child marriage, thus, perpetuates and reinforces gender inequalities. These marriages are usually characterised by a significant power imbalance, with very young girls being married off to older men without their consent. This power imbalance sets the stage for potential abuse and GBV within the marriage. The younger the girl, the more her vulnerability; the girl's age and often limited education create a dependence on their husbands that consequently contributes to their vulnerability, making it difficult for them to protect themselves. This is in line with a study conducted by Kidman (2017) where she concurs that intimate partner violence was substantially higher among women who married as children as compared with those married as adults. Kurebwa & Kurebwa (2018:48) list some of the following as reasons for girls to submit to forced marriages, thus, accounting for the persistence of such occurrences:

A variety of reasons that include, poverty, protection of girls, fear of loss of virginity before marriage and related family honour, the provision of stability during unstable social periods, lack of education, and discriminatory customary and religious norms are suggested as significant factors in determining a girl's risk of becoming married as a child.

Consequently, once coerced into early marriages, GBV has significant health implications for young girls. They may experience physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and poor mental health outcomes. These results further the cycle of poverty and hinder their overall well-being.

While van Klinken & Chitando (2015) argue that gender continues to be conceptualised predominantly as referring to issues that concern women, it remains a fact that issues to do with the negative repercussions of gender relations also remain pitted against women. This is the case of gender-based violence. In this chapter, we argue that while gender-based violence reportage has largely been skewed, with older female married partners in Zimbabwe and the world over being the subject of reportage yet, the age of victims has tended to be younger than anticipated and this is possible if placed within the proper context of child marriages or forced marriages, most of which are executed away from the public eye within the secrecy of AICs. The oppressive church doctrine presides over such abuses making victims normalise and submit to the abuses and avoid reporting them to authorities. This means right from the beginning, the moment force is exerted on the victim to enter a marriage union with an older man and the 'union' is coerced, it involves violence to some extent. The consummation of the marriage itself is violent as young girls are violated before they are mature enough to comprehend the implications and effects of marriage on their well-being. While van Klinken & Chitando (2015) admit that their scholarship attempts to avoid the monolithic representation of male masculinities as the cause of high-risk behaviour and male sexual aggression and agitating for more responsible masculinities, the violent nature of forced marriages remains a topical issue that has eluded adequate attention. To add to this, the issue of sexual violence has largely been associated with HIV & AIDS with women who are often defenceless to the sexual whims of their male partners in general.

On a different note, the JMAAC's doctrine has been viewed as oppressive to all congregants irrespective of gender (Dudzai, Zvokuomba & Mboko, 2023). Followers of AICs have thus been subject to church doctrine that

does not leave any room for questioning the prevalence of some religious practices. Sibanda (cited by Chitando, Taringa & Mapuranga, 2014:124-125) states that among AICs:

... the Holy Spirit is used as an intimidating tool, instilling fear in members not to do certain acts as they are threatened with curses. The same Holy Spirit is used to validate child marriages as prophets would have been *'directed'* by the Holy Spirit to marry young girls. They also believe that girls should have only minimum schooling, and therefore, as soon as a girl reaches puberty they are married off. The lack of education often disempowers the girls. They do not question certain harmful practices in the church such as the practice of not taking children to health institutions.

This has resulted in followers of JMAAC not questioning early child marriages and gender-based violence although members, particularly the grievously affected – women and children. The linkages between early child marriages and GBV and their implications on the well-being and rights of women and girls are captured by Kidman (2017)

There are several potential reasons why child marriages may be characterized by greater violence. Women who marry as children are more likely to be uneducated, live in poverty, and subscribe to traditional gender norms. Child marriages are characterized by spousal age gaps, power imbalances, social isolation, and lack of female autonomy; all of the above are demonstrated risk factors for IPV and represent potential causal mechanisms. It may be, for example, that the same inequitable gender norms that give rise to child marriages also perpetuate violence. Men who marry very young girls may hold traditional masculine ideologies, and because of this be more likely to abuse their wives. Child brides are also often given away or sold by families that undervalue women. By the time they marry, young girls may have internalized harmful beliefs. They are more likely, for example, to believe that husbands can be justified in beating their wives – a belief that places them at higher risk for IPV (Kidman, 2017:635).

It is, thus, evident that child marriages have larger implications on the victims who are largely female.

## Findings and discussion

### Early child marriages in the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Church

Findings from the interviews revealed the reasons behind members of the Johanne Marange Church marry underage girls and why the girls themselves submit to the glaring abuse. In all, 11 participants were interviewed- seven women who married young and four men who have married underage girls. Questions that were asked male participants sought to find out if they knew that they were committing a crime by marrying under-age girls and whether they were happy with arranged and polygamous marriages as well as if they used physical violence or force on their women. All agreed that the women they married were not children as they were now mature enough to handle marriage as well as bear children. One participant (Y1) said *“Isu hatitore vana vadiki semafungiro amunoita, kana achinge okwanisa kubata nekutakura nhumbu kusvika izvarwe atove munhu mukuru. Wese mukadzi anogeza uye aane mazamo atove kukwanisa kuroorwa* (We do not take children as per your thinking, if a girl is capable of conceiving and carrying a baby to full term, she is old enough. Any woman who has started menstruating and has developed breasts is wife material). Upon further probing if the women they married young have had complications when giving birth, all except one said his wife had a stillbirth.

The male participants also agreed that arranged marriages were for the benefit of all involved. One male informant, Y2, said arranged marriages were fair as they helped to foster unity within the church. He said sometimes the church elders arrange the marriages and other times the parents of the women are involved and offer them in marriage. Participant Y3 revealed, *“Hapana chinoshamisa apa. Ukapiwa mukadzi unoramba here. Handiti zvinonzi kuwanda kwakanaka, kwakarambwa nemuroyi”* (There is nothing abnormal here. Is it not said that the more the better, only a witch would deny that). Although all the participants said there were no conflicts amongst men in the church, one woman revealed that the marriages were sources of conflict over women. She said the main source of conflict was wealth with the well-to-do members who have the advantage of having access to all the women and with the women stampeding to get married to them. On being asked whether they used violence or physical force, most of the men said they do not support domestic violence for fear of spilling blood. However, it was apparent that they did not want to entertain the question on violence and were evasive when asked if they used

violence on their women. One, however, openly said he did not use violence unless it was necessary thereby indirectly admitting that he used violence as a punitive measure. On the issue of consummation most of the men said they did not use force on their women. Participant Y4 said “*Tinoroora vana vari vasikana chaivo saka zvagara zvinonetsa pakutanga kwavari. Handichazivi kuti kana mava kuti violence munorevei.*” (We marry our young girls when they are still virgins hence the first time might appear violent since the first times are always difficult for them. I do not know what you mean when you say we use physical force). The men concurred that all girls likely experience this in their first encounters and, hence, it is not abnormal for them to feel that violence has been used.

On the issue of polygamy, participant Y3 said marrying women is sometimes directed by the Holy Spirit and so no one questions it. He said,

*Zvinenge zvaonekwa pamweya kuti mukadzi anenge achitori wangu saka ini handingaitisane nharo nezvinhu zvemweya* (The choice of woman is sometimes done on a spiritual level and as a man I don't dispute what the spirit says).

This participant agreed with the others that the use of physical force or violence is not good but stressed that with many wives it was a way of keeping them in line. If one wife becomes wayward and gets scot-free, then the rest would follow.

The findings also revealed that the ages of all the women who were interviewed ranged between 14 and 17. They all agreed that they were governed by the statutes of the church, and they grew up seeing similar marriages. However, despite having witnessed girls marrying as children all their lives (sometimes being forced to marry older men), most of the participants said it was an unfair practice. One (X1) had this to say,

*Unenge une raki ukatowanikwa nemunhu asina kunyanyokura. Madhara madhara anoshusha kupfuura vanenge vakaita vechidiki. Imbofungai ukawanikwa nemudhara ane 60 years? Vanenge vatova Sekuru* (You will be fortunate if you get married to a younger man. Older men are well known for being abusive. Imagine marrying an old man of 60. He is as good as your grandfather).

When asked if they were happy in their marriages most of the participants said they were not happy being in polygamous relationships and two participants specifically pointed out that when one is the youngest or junior wife at any given time, she was subject to abuse from everyone including the husband. Apart from the wifely duties, she is reduced to a household

slave often running errands for both husband and co-wives. This, according to the participants stemmed from being young, alienated, and lacking confidence compounded with the confusion of being a new addition to the family, with every member of the household taking advantage of this. On the issue of consummation of the marriage most of the participants said there was physical violence. Participant X2 had this to say:

Ihhh kumbunyikidzwa hapana kuwirirana. Munhu unenge uchiri mwana anenge asati aane chinhu chaava kuziva. Saka nguva zhinji uri mudiki kudaro kunenge kuri kubatwa chibharo (Physical force is used there is no agreement. One would still be a child who does not know anything. So, most of the times when you are young it is rape).

Three of the participants (X1, X2 and X3) said their first encounter was rape. X1 had this to say regarding such a first encounter,

Mutemo wechechi unoti kana ukatobatwa zamu chairo unofanirwa kutoenda nemunhu anenge akubata. Wesi kana akumanikidza, wabatwa chibharo. Gore negore vasikana vanotariswa kumusan-gano saka zvichinge zvaitika saizvozvo wega unopindwa nekutya wotoenda pasina akuudza. (Church statutes stipulate that even when a man touches your breast, you are supposed to go [and get married to him]. It is even worse when he forces himself on you or rapes you. Each year girls have virginity tests, so once you sleep with a man you are filled with fear, and you have no choice but to elope).

Participants X2 and X3 had similar stories with X3 admitting,

Ini ndanga ndiri form 3 handina kumboplana zvekuroorwa. Muko-mana wangu akandibata ndichibva ndatoenda kumba kwavo nekuti ndizvo zvinotaura mutemo wechechi yedu (I was in Form 3 when I got married. My boyfriend forced himself on me and I decided to go with him to his home because that is what our church rules say).

In the case of Participant X3, it is apparent that at least she did not have to be married off to a total stranger and she added that it was not an isolated incident as girls fell in love and married people of their choice despite the arranged and forced marriages. However, the bottom line was most of the girls who married young had traumatic first encounters. Oliver Mtukudzi (2018) echoed the same sentiments when he sang the song

“*Haasati Aziva*” (She does not know anything yet) and castigated the practice stating that children would still be growing up and, hence, in the dark over adult issues such as marriage.

Participant X4 revealed another form of abuse where, apart from the physical and psychological battery she experiences from the marriage, the child bride is also subject to abuse from other senior wives and their children. She said,

Uri mukadzi mudiki unenge uri pasi pamaikuru kana vanamaimu-Unoita zvese zvavanenge vachida. Uri mudiki unenge utori muranda. Mwana anoorowa ari mudiki anogona kuswerera duty rekuberekeswa vana vemamwe madzimai, washeni nemabasa ese epamba. Zvinenge zvakatooma. (When you are the youngest wife, you usually are under the dominion of the senior wife or wives. A girl who is married as a child ends up as a childminder and is made to carry babies on her back daily as well as other chores around the home. It is hard).

Participant X5 said beatings were rare in the early days but one could be beaten over trivial things. She revealed,

Kana uri mudiki ndiwe waiitwa muenzaniso kune vamwe kana wakanganisa ende waibhurwa kunge mwana mudiki. Asi hazvina hazvo zera zvekurohwa izvi muwanano. Chero maiguru vanenge vasisadiwi vanogona kungorohwa. Kazhinji kacho kungoda kuratidza masimba avo vanababa ava. (When you were young, beatings were meant to set an example over the others, and you were severely beaten like a small child. There is no age limit to beatings though, even a senior wife is beaten because the man does not want her anymore. Most times the man wants to show their power).

This was also echoed by the other women with one (Participant X1) clarifying that the older one got, the less frequent beatings because one tended to defend oneself and fight back. Participant X4 concurred on the issue of the reasons behind the beatings,

Ndini ndaive wekutanga. Zvinhu zvakatanga kuchinja paakanga ava kutora vanamainini. Ndoopandakatanga kurohwa ipapo kunge nyoka yapinda mumba. Hanzi uri kuitira godo vanamainini. Kutorohwa neshamhu kana bhande kana maoko. Pamwe pachu unorohwa kunge mombe nechipepu chaicho. (I was the first wife. Things started to change when my junior core wives joined me. That is when I started to be beaten like a snake which has entered the house. Our husband would say I was jealous of the junior

wives. At times I would be whipped, or he would use a belt as if he were punishing a child, in some instances, my husband would use bare hands to beat me. At times you are beaten like a yoked ox using an ox whip)

Another participant X6 had this to say,

Unoroverwa tunhu tudikidiki. Seni ndakamboroverwa kuti hausi kufarira matarisiro andinoita mainini vanga vaakuda kuroorwa. He said une shanje, pamwe pachu ndakanga ndabika zvavasina kufarira pamusangano. Hanzi ndakavanyadzisa. Vamwe varume vanenge vamanikidzwa kutora vakadzi vavanenge vasingadi ndosaka vachivashungurudza. (I was beaten over petty issues. I was beaten for showing disapproval over the younger woman he was supposed to marry. He accused me of being jealous. The other time I was beaten for not having prepared a good meal at a church convention. He said I had embarrassed him. Some men had been forced to marry women they did not love which is why they abuse them).

Participant X7 also revealed an interesting dimension,

Haurambi kunoorwa musangano. Ini pakangoita wirirano pakati pemurume wangu nababa- ndakazongonzi enda kumurume nababa ndikangobvuma. Murume wangu ane mabusiness saka ndakaona upenyu huchiratidza kuti hunotoita nani kana murume wacho aine chaainacho. Madzimai tese tinoita zvakasiyana-siyana maererano nekuti wakafunda kusvika papi. Kana wakamboenda kuchikoro zvinobatsira. (You do not refuse to marry in the church. For me it was an agreement between my husband and my father, and my father told me to go, and I agreed. My husband is a businessman, so I realised that I had better prospects of a comfortable life than marrying a man with nothing. All the women do something in the shops depending on the level of education you got).

GBV in general as well as SGBV are rampant amongst members of the JMAAC. The selected participants have admitted to experiencing GBV, IPV and SGBV.

It is important to note that child marriages are not limited to the JMAAC in Zimbabwe but in other African Initiated churches as well as in urban areas where well-to-do men sexually abuse young girls in need of economic gain and cohabit with them as their “small houses.” In this scenario, the man will be married but will take advantage of a young girl and rent a house for her, and sexually abuse her. This, therefore, means that

the abuse of young girls is more widespread than is speculated. Such marriages exist and still occur in many communities and across different AICs in the country. This means that efforts to combat child marriages require a multi-faceted approach that involves collaboration between government, civil society, religious groups, and communities at large.

### **“Of Eloquent Silence and SGBV”: Agency and Championing Fight against SGBV**

From the background of the treatment of women of the JMAAC, they are an abused lot. The treatment of women has been stocked by rampant inequalities across African communities. Such inequalities have largely been ignored with women bearing the brand of their effects (Chitando, Maseno and Tarusarira, 2023). It is for this reason that the works of Ezra Chitando are critical to ending gender inequalities and inequities. He has pointed out the rampant reportage in the media of GBV mainly as a weapon in war and conflict regions, yet the sexual component has often been left out (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2013), thus underlining the shocking silence that pervades the subject. Makulilo (2023) has observed the same silence on religion and inequalities in Tanzania. Some of the shocking revelations from key participants interviewed for this study are pointers to the reason behind scholars and civic society agitating and mobilising forces against GBV/IPV in general and SGBV in particular. In this chapter, we argue that the consummation of early child marriages should be viewed as acts of sexual violence, given the age and lack of consent of the children involved. It is for this reason that works of Chitando are of utmost value in propagating some rallying points in raising the voices that speak to and against GBV and IPV. In his introduction to the book aptly titled *Justice and not Silence: Churches Facing Sexual and Gender-based Violence*, Chitando & Chirongoma (2013) touches about sexual and gender-based violence and demonstrates that it requires urgent attention because of its lasting impact on the mental health of the girl child. It is one of the key issues that have been kept under wraps with children being violated daily. From the perspective of men, generally, SGBV is widespread due to men “expressing their power, control, and dominance over women” (Chitando, 2013:9). Most churches have tended to ignore SGBV, what Chitando & Chirongoma (2013) referred to as “eloquent silence” on matters that affect victims perennially, particularly those in AICs. The fact that this

is affecting large numbers of children is cause for intervention from the powers that be. Chitando and Chirongoma have observed that such churches conveniently ignore the subject of SGBV leaving affected men and women metaphorically bleeding with churches ironically being signatories of such violence rather than liberating (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2013).

In a bid to address this, Chitando & Chirongoma (2013) have pointed out that the humanity of women should go beyond mere 'verbal articulation' but be exhibited and ingrained in the church's practices. Chitando and Chirongoma raise pertinent questions regarding sexual matters in the church: –

Why do male church leaders seem to have limitless energy when it comes to debates on homosexuality, but they appear frozen when it comes to SGBV? Why is it that many of them are eloquent when it comes to challenging colonialism but are completely speechless when the issue of sexism comes up? (2013:6).

To show his solidarity and collaboration against abuses against women, Chitando in his works has shown his unflinching support of female gender scholars regarding re-examining the status of women in different religions in particular AICs (2013). The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians whose aim is to expose “how religion and culture have been abused to condemn women and children to premature deaths...” (Chitando, 2013:136), Chitando has strived to expose collusion between religion and culture in the abuse of women and children. Although in the cited volume, Chitando was speaking from the context of HIV & AIDS, the status of women and girl children has deteriorated further in the past 10 years with marked increases in cases of GBV and IPV. The COVID-19 pandemic has also been labelled as one of the causative factors. In support of *ubuntu*, Chitando, Taringa & Mapuranga (2014) have stated that “practices that threaten the well-being of women and children, such as child marriages and resistance to Western medicine, could be classified as running contrary to the spirit of *ubuntu*.”

Chitando has been at the forefront in his attempt to address early child marriages and gender-based violence, working with men's organizations such as Padare/Enkundleni (Men's Forum on Gender) (Chitando, 2007). This, however, requires a comprehensive approach and support across the national divide. This includes raising awareness about the negative impact of harmful religio-cultural practices that foster GBV, IPV and SGBV.

A comprehensive approach is needed to address early child marriage and gender-based violence. This includes raising awareness of the negative effects of these practices, promoting gender equality, ensuring access to quality education, providing support services for survivors, strengthening legal frameworks, and challenging harmful norms and practices.

The empowerment of girls and women is important to combat child marriages and gender-based violence. This includes providing educational opportunities, promoting their rights, promoting economic independence, and creating safe spaces for them to voice their concerns and seek support. From the interviews conducted it is apparent that girl children who are educated belong to a different class of women who are dignified and respected. Participant X1 stated that “*Kune madepartments nemaclass uko. Kana usina kuenda kuchikoro unobatwa sechikorobho and mumunda hau-budi.*” (There are different classes of women in the church. If you are not educated you are treated like a doormat, and you do not leave the fields). It is clear that girl empowerment through education is the key as evidence has shown that educated girls have a level of dignity that their uneducated counterparts lack. This also means the girl gets to marry when she is older and capable of making her own decisions.

Efforts to address early child marriages and gender-based violence should also take into consideration the broader socio-cultural, and economic factors that contribute to these challenges. Using *Ubuntu* philosophy may be a guiding factor that looks at the humanity of others and at the same time watching out for their security. By empowering girls and women, it becomes easier to challenge harmful norms, promote gender equality, and work towards a future in which child marriages and gender-based violence are eradicated.

At the same time churches that condone the preying on young girl children should be outlawed. Men have accused religio-cultural expectations that promulgate child marriages and GBV, but this is no excuse to stop breaking the cycle for the ultimate peace, welfare, and security of girl children. Sowa cited by Houshmand, (2019: n.p.) has this to say, “You do not have to be an evil man to benefit from a patriarchal system that holds women back, and you don’t have to be a vulnerable woman to be discriminated against within that system.” Chitando like these growing voices against GBV seeks to see an end to the gender injustices that have perennially weighed against women (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012). GBV is largely systemic and once the religio-cultural systems are eradicated cases of GBV begin to visibly go down.

## Conclusion

The chapter has amply demonstrated that the Johanne Marange African Apostolic Church (JMAAC) provides a conducive atmosphere for the abuse of the girl-child and women under the guise of religious beliefs which cannot be questioned. It has further highlighted that the prevalence of child marriages and GBV is more widespread than meets the eye. This, thus, calls for immediate practical interventions to arrest this scourge. This may require the involvement of law enforcement agencies to ensure that child marriages and gender-based violence that are concealed in the churches are a priority in terms of protecting the girl child and women. While *Ubuntu* does not directly address early child marriages, its principles of empathy and compassion can be utilised to challenge harmful practices and promote a more inclusive and protective environment for children. By applying the values of *Ubuntu* philosophy, societies can work towards eliminating early child marriages and creating a future where all children can grow and thrive. *Ubuntu* becomes a social resource in handling the tragic circumstances surrounding child marriages and GBV. This begins at the family level and may be rolled out into educational institutions as well as the media. Such a change may be protracted requiring patience and perseverance but is worth the wait. Children cannot continue to die, there should be some practical measures that can prevent these harmful practices of forced and child marriages.

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