

Input to The UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls' Report on the Country Visit to Zimbabwe to be presented at the 62nd session of the Human Rights Council in June 2026.

Submitted to: The United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls

Date: 13 June 2025



1. Introduction

The United Nations Working Group on discrimination against Women and Girls (WGDAWG) will be conducting a country visit to Zimbabwe from 28 July to 8 August 2025 to understand issues relating to discrimination against women and girls and gender equality, including efforts made and remaining challenges on discrimination against women and girls. Input from various stakeholders will be considered during the country visit and will be taken into account in the drafting process of the Working Group's report before the Human Rights Council in 2026. At the end of the visit on 8 August 2025, the Working Group will present an end-of-mission statement and a press release containing preliminary findings and recommendations for State and non-State actors to implement. The full visit report will be presented at the 62nd session of the Human Rights Council in June 2026.

This submission presents Equality Now, [Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe](#), [Women and Law in Southern Africa](#), [Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association](#) and [Center for Human Rights](#) contribution and input on the situation of women's and girls' rights in Zimbabwe, progress made and recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe's consideration. This submission was prepared in partnership with women's rights organizations in Zimbabwe, namely Women and Law in Southern Africa, Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association, and the University of Pretoria Center for Human Rights.

2. Context

2.1 Zimbabwe has demonstrated a commitment to addressing discrimination against women and girls by ratifying several international and regional human rights treaties. These include the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified in 1991, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified in 1990, along with its Optional Protocols concerning child armed conflict and child exploitation. However, while Zimbabwe has ratified CEDAW, it has not ratified its Optional Protocol, which provides for individual complaints and an inquiry procedure. The CRC upholds the rights of all children and addresses issues like child marriage, sexual exploitation, and child labor, which disproportionately affect girls.

2.2 In addition to the UN treaties, regionally, Zimbabwe ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the "Maputo Protocol") in 2008. This Protocol is a comprehensive and innovative legal instrument for women's rights, covering a wide range of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights, including provisions on the right to medical abortion, women's rights in the context of HIV/AIDS, and the prohibition of harmful practices, specifically including child marriage and female genital mutilation.

2.3 Zimbabwe's commitment to these treaties is reflected in its domestic laws and policies, including its Constitution which provides a strong framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls and explicitly outlaws discrimination on the grounds of sex and gender. Zimbabwe has also made significant progress in promoting gender equality through recent legislative reforms. Key legislative advancements include the harmonization of marriage laws, which crucially ensures equal rights and obligations for both spouses and establishes a

minimum marriage age of 18 without exception to prevent child marriages. Additionally, the introduction of mandatory sentencing laws for rape and aggravated indecent assault serves to deter sexual violence by imposing a minimum 10-year prison sentence for offenders for rape and a presumptive penalty of 20 years for aggravated assault with a statutory penalty of life imprisonment or any definite period of imprisonment¹. The Cybercrime and Data Protection Act also plays a crucial role in addressing tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), recognizing the growing concerns associated with online harassment. Furthermore, the Labour Amendment Act focuses on combating workplace violence and harassment, ensuring safer working environments for women.

2.4 However, despite progressive laws and treaties, challenges remain in the effective implementation of these rights and their translation into tangible gains for women and girls in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is grappling with severe socio-economic and political challenges. Given these pressing conditions, it is a critical juncture for Zimbabwe to reassess its progress towards realizing the rights enshrined in the Maputo Protocol and other treaties. By conducting a thorough examination of the progress made, along with the challenges encountered, stakeholders including the Government can strategize more effectively to ensure the realization of women's rights and advance gender equality in Zimbabwe.

3. Family and cultural life of women and girls

3.1 Zimbabwe has harmonised its marriage laws through the [Marriages Act \(Chapter 5:17\)](#), aligning with constitutional provisions by raising the minimum marriage age to 18. This legislation aims to curb child marriages and ensures equal rights and obligations for spouses in all types of marriages, both during and upon dissolution. The Matrimonial Causes Act (Chapter 5:13) guides separations, divorces, annulments, and asset distribution in a progressive manner that recognises direct or indirect contribution made by each spouse to the family, including looking after the home and caring for the family and any other domestic duties. It is supportive to women who may have fewer individually registered assets but have significantly contributed to the acquisition and maintenance of family wealth through their labor and support.

3.2 Section 3 of the Marriages Act explicitly prohibits marriage or civil partnership for anyone under 18 without exception, and outlaws the pledging or promising of minors in marriage. However, despite these legal reforms, child marriages persist due to deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, limited law enforcement, and prevalent religious and social norms, particularly in rural areas where customary marriages are common. The low rate of prosecution for child marriage cases indicates a lack of will to effectively enforce laws. Efforts to eliminate this issue must extend beyond legal frameworks to include sustained, state-funded community engagement and awareness programs. Customary marriages still pose challenges in enforcing this law, particularly in rural areas, where cultural practices facilitate early marriages.² We also note that

¹ Criminal Procedure (Sentencing Guidelines) Regulations, 2023

² Zimbabwe Women's Lawyers Association (ZWLA), 'Legal Gaps and Challenges in Implementing the Marriages Act' (2023) <https://www.zwla.co.zw> accessed 24 April 2025

child marriages remain prevalent in Zimbabwe, with approximately 33% of girls married off before the age of 18 and 5% married off before the age of 15.³

3.3 To protect women in polygamous marriages, the Marriages Act recognises polygamous marriages in Section 5 (2) of the Act, stating that a customary marriage, subject to the customary law of the persons concerned, may be polygamous. However, it does not encourage monogamy as the preferred form of marriage, which violates Zimbabwe's regional and international legal obligations.

3.4 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Ensure full and effective enforcement of laws, penalties and sanctions against child marriage, in conformity with national laws and regional frameworks including the Maputo Protocol.
- ii) Take measures to educate the public on harmful cultural, traditional and religious beliefs which perpetuate child marriage and other harmful practices.
- iii) Take measures to sensitise the public about the provisions of the Marriage Act and strengthen the capacity of state actors and the designated marriage officers responsible for the implementation of this law.
- iv) Ensure the expeditious hearing and prosecution of cases of child marriage.
- v) Allocate adequate funding and ensure sustainable financing for programmes aimed at supporting the eradication of child marriage and to provide social protection services for victims/survivors and those at risk of child marriage.
- vi) Encourage monogamy as the preferred form of marriage, in line with the state's obligation under the Maputo Protocol and to protect the equal rights of women in marriage including within polygamous marital relationships.
- vii) Provide toll free national helplines that are as accessible as possible and linked to well-equipped support groups to help protect children at risk of child marriage. In the case of rural children without access to the telephone, clear referral pathways should be established at public institutions and publicized within the community and in schools.
- viii) Establish, equip, and provide adequate funding for safe shelters and homes where girls at-risk of child marriage can seek protection.

4. Economic and social life of women and girls

4.1 Food insecurity in urban Zimbabwe rose significantly, from 29 to 35 percent primarily due to economic shocks⁴. Vulnerable groups, including households headed by women, the unemployed, less educated, and people with disabilities, have borne the brunt of this increase.

³ UNICEF, 'Child Marriage in Zimbabwe: A Brief Overview' (2025)

https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/13106/file/CP_Child%20marriage%20briefing%20note%202025_final.pdf.pdf accessed 24 April 2025.

⁴<https://www.fnc.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ZimLAC-2024-Urban-Livelihoods-Assessment-Report.pdf>

4.2 The Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development has set up the Zimbabwe Community Development Fund (ZCDF) to provide technical and financial support to community projects in agriculture and value addition thus contributing to the achievement of SDG 2 on Ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture.

4.3 Zimbabwe has promoted women's economic participation efforts through programs like "Agric for She" initiative, the Women's Micro-Finance Bank, and the National Financial Inclusion Strategy II (2021–2025), which have improved access to credit and resources for women in agriculture and MSMEs. However, these programs have limited reach, especially in rural and marginalized areas where women face significant economic exclusion. Financial inclusion alone is insufficient without addressing structural barriers like poor infrastructure, limited access to markets and energy, and social norms that restrict women's participation in economic activities.

4.4 Zimbabwe has a comprehensive climate change and environmental governance policy framework in line with Section 73 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe which provides for Environmental rights and states that; (1) Every person has the right- (a) to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and (b) to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations.⁵

4.4 In addition, Zimbabwe has adopted the Zimbabwe Climate Change Gender Action Plan in line with the adoption of the Gender Action Plan at the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP)25 in 2019.⁶ The Gender Action Plan provides a framework for mainstreaming gender into the four sectors of the Zimbabwe Revised Nationally Determined Contributions.

4.5 In June 2024, the National Gender and Climate Change Taskforce was established which is set to enhance women's access to climate finance, technology, and capacity-building opportunities in collaboration with international partners.⁷ Zimbabwe is also working on a Climate Change Bill and a new Mines and Minerals Bill will be tabled before the Parliament of Zimbabwe by May 2025. Zimbabwe has therefore made progress in developing laws and policies that acknowledge the disproportionate impact of climate change on women.

4.6 However, despite such progress being made, women and girls, especially those living in rural areas, continue to face significant challenges to land ownership, access to climate finance, and participation in environmental decision-making.⁸ Low representation of women in climate

⁵ Section 73, Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act

⁶ Gender Action Plan

chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-04/Zimbabwe%20Climate%20Change%20Gender%20Action%20Plan_0.pdf (Accessed 30 April 2025)

⁷National Gender and Climate Change

<https://africa.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/06/national-gender-and-climate-change-task-force-launched#:~:text=This%20initiative%20was%20announced%20during.climate%20change%20and%20food%20security.>

⁸<https://cnrgzim.org/news/rural-women-battle-climate-change-and-injustices/#:~:text=Gender%20inequality%3A%20Climate%20change%20exacerbates.adapt%20to%20changing%20climatic%20conditions.> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

change decisions further constrains their ability to meaningfully participate in adaptation and mitigation initiatives. It renders them less able to influence policies, programs, and decisions that impact their lives.

4.7 Droughts, deforestation, and extreme weather events have further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of food security. Women are responsible for food and nutrition security at a household level, despite having fewer means for achieving this as well as fewer decision-making powers over what crops are grown.

4.8 The 2017 Intercensal Demographic Survey (ICDS) revealed that 68 percent of the population usually resides in rural areas. Women constitute 52 percent of the rural population and 53 percent of the urban population. They constitute the majority of subsistence food producers in Zimbabwe and contribute 68% of household and family labour in rural communities where they comprise about 70% of the population.⁹

4.9 Women also continue to have limited access to financial services including climate adaptation funds¹⁰, especially in light of the El Nino drought¹¹ that affected many parts of Southern Africa. Therefore, whilst Government policies reflect a growing recognition of gendered environmental challenges, implementation gaps exist and women's voices are often sidelined. There is still a need for targeted interventions including increasing funding for women-led climate initiatives to ensure meaningful progress is made.

4.10 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Address structural barriers to women's economic empowerment by investing in rural infrastructure, access to markets, domestic energy, and public services.
- ii) Ensure gender parity in climate and environmental governance structures, particularly decision-making bodies at all levels.
- iii) Implement awareness campaigns and training programmes aimed at building women's capacity to engage in environmental governance and climate resilience initiatives.

5. Political and public life of women and girls

5.1 Zimbabwe adopted a constitution that provides equal representation of women and men in all positions. However, women's participation in leadership and politics remains low at 35% in parliament, 16% in local government and 11.5% in Cabinet. This is due to inadequate implementation of the Constitutional provisions and inadequate capacity of state institutions to mainstream gender in electoral and political processes. There continues to be a regression in the participation of women in politics and decision-making. Although the government introduced women's quota systems at the national and local levels, the number of women represented in both local government and Parliament has remained very low. The quota system is inadequate,

⁹Inter Censal Demographic Survey
chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Inter%20Censal%20Demography%20Survey%202017%20Report.pdf> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

¹⁰https://www.adaptation-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/3_AFB.PPRC_33.6-Proposal-for-Zimbabwe.pdf

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1152936>

and it does not address the root causes of women's exclusion, such as patriarchal norms, election-related violence, and financial barriers.

5.2 Although the Electoral Act has been amended to include gender mainstreaming and gender equality in electoral processes, it is not explicit on how this should be done to ensure women are equally represented in politics.¹² For instance, the two leading parties in the 2023 elections, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) both fielded 11% and 9% of the female candidates for the First Past the Post (FPTP) parliamentary seats, respectively. By the election day, the number of women candidates had for various reasons dropped down from an initial 70 to 55 (9.5% of the total 558 candidates contesting for the 210 FPTP parliamentary seats)¹³. The majority of the women candidates (29%) who contested in the FPTP were fielded by the female-led United Zimbabwe Alliance (UZA) party whose leader, Elizabeth Valerio, was the only woman among the 11 candidates who contested for the presidency in the 2023 elections.

5.3 The lack of penalties for political parties that do not field female candidates and the lack of incentives built within the electoral legal frameworks to ensure that political parties adhere to constitutional provisions, have proved to be a gap that impedes women's participation in politics. Only 18 women contested for National Assembly seats, and 44 for local government roles, showing limited progress despite concerted efforts through the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise and the [Zimbabwe Gender Commission](#) campaigns for women's participation in politics and decision making. The absence of robust legal protections, such as reforms to the Electoral Act, leaves women vulnerable to election-related violence and discrimination.

5.4 Zimbabwe adopted the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) that focuses on the role of women in peace and security. In line with the Resolution, Zimbabwe launched a National Action Plan (NAP) for the Implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and other Related Resolutions (2023-2027).

5.5 The aim of the NAP is to promote women's participation in peace and security efforts and focuses on gender mainstreaming. It encourages the active participation of women and girls by addressing issues of peace and security at community level, while also increasing women's participation in decision-making bodies, and the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence.

5.6 The Government is commended for making concerted efforts in ensuring that women are included in all decision-making spaces through capacitation of the Zimbabwe Women's Parliamentary Caucus. By so doing women are not left out of important fora pertaining to peacebuilding and security.

¹² ZESN (2018). 2018 Harmonised Election Report Final.

<https://www.zesn.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Final-ZESN-2018-Harmonised-Election-Report.pdf>

¹³ Carter Center Preliminary Statement on Zimbabwe's 2023 Harmonized Elections, p 30 (August 31, 2023)

https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/zimbabwe/zimbabwe-preliminary-election-statement-2023.pdf (Accessed 01/05/2025).

5.7 However, despite the above, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, is no longer functional as its term of operation has ended thereby leaving a notable gap in efforts to ensure that women continue to participate in post-conflict dialogue and rehabilitation.

5.8 The NAP Monitoring and Evaluation Plan is not available to the public and it is unclear if it has been developed in line with the provision of the NAP. The Plan was meant to be implemented by all partners including Government Ministries who were to report on their activities implementing the NAP. The failure to properly monitor the implementation of the NAP dilutes its efficacy as there is a gap in accountability by implementing organs of Government.

5.9 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Consider extending the tenure of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission ensuring that women are equally represented in the decision-making positions.
- ii) Ensure that proper structures and mechanisms are in place so that women are included in all peace and security processes, including peace negotiations, peacebuilding initiatives, and post-conflict recovery efforts.
- iii) Finalise and publish the NAP Monitoring and Evaluation Plan to allow public access and enable independent monitoring by civil society and other stakeholders.
- iv) Strengthen community-based peacebuilding structures by funding and supporting women-led initiatives that address local conflict and promote social cohesion.

6. Women and girls' rights and access to health

6.1 The Zimbabwean Constitution, through section 76, guarantees the right to health. Section 76 (I) states that “Every citizen and permanent resident of Zimbabwe has the right to have access to basic health-care services, including reproductive health-care services”. Zimbabwe has further developed progressive policies such as the National Development Strategy 1 (NDS1), Community Health Strategy, National Health Strategy, Reproductive Health Policy, and the National HIV/AIDS Policy.

6.2 The Government of Zimbabwe equipped health facilities with essential maternal/newborn equipment and is currently procuring equipment for 96 maternity theatres, including operating tables, anaesthetic machines, and other key items. During the 2021-22 period, there was an increase from 88% to 89% of women who delivered their babies in health institutions. In this same period, there was also a decrease in maternal mortality from 122 deaths per 100 000 births in 2021 to 107 deaths per 100,000 in 2022.¹⁴

6.3 Maternal healthcare services for women face critical challenges. Elevated institutional mortality rates indicate deficiencies in the quality of care, compounded by high healthcare worker turnover and shortages of essential medical commodities. Prevailing social norms and

¹⁴ Zimbabwe National Development Strategy 1(2021-2025) Mid-Term review at page 74

stigmas further impede efforts to provide adequate support for pregnant girls and young mothers to continue their education.¹⁵

6.4 Zimbabwe's Termination of Pregnancy Act provides that abortion can be done by an authorized court order if the pregnancy endangers the life of the woman, when there is a risk that the child to be born will suffer from a physical or mental defect, and if there is reasonable possibility that the pregnancy was conceived because of unlawful intercourse which include rape and incest.

6.5 However, as highlighted in the case of *Mildred Mapingure v Minister of Home Affairs and 2 Others*, a woman who was raped by robbers, and had fallen pregnant as a result, was unable to access abortion services timeously in terms of the Termination of Pregnancy Act. She only obtained a certificate to terminate the pregnancy 6 months after the occurrence of the rape when it was no longer safe to do so.¹⁶

6.6 The CEDAW concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Zimbabwe (2020), expressed concerns over the criminalization of abortion services in Zimbabwe except in the mentioned three grounds above, citing that it limits access for women to safe abortion services.¹⁷ Despite the Termination of Pregnancy Act, access to safe abortion in Zimbabwe is still limited. It is documented that some women who were eligible for lawful procedures still sought unsafe abortions, thus contributing to a 16% increase in maternal deaths since 2021.¹⁸ It is argued that where legislation is prohibitive it does not deter women from aborting, but rather forces them to seek out illegal and dangerous abortions "in conditions that are detrimental to their wellbeing and have socioeconomic repercussions for the country."¹⁹

6.7 In the case of *Women in Law in Southern Africa & Talent Forget v Minister of Health and Child Care, Parliament of Zimbabwe & Attorney General of Zimbabwe*²⁰, the High Court of Zimbabwe ruled that denying access to legal abortion for children under 18 and married women raped by their husbands under Section 2 (1) of the Termination of Pregnancy Act is unconstitutional. There is a need to implement the ruling to ensure access to safe abortion for adolescent girls and women in abusive marriages.

¹⁵ BEIJING +30 COUNTRY REPORT, "Thirtieth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and Adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)" – July 2024

¹⁶ *Mildred Mapingure v Minister of Home Affairs & 2 Others* SC 22/14

¹⁷ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?f1=author&as=1&sf=title&so=a&rm=&m1=e&p1=UN.+Committee+on+the+Elimination+of+Discrimination+against+Women+%2875th+sess.+%3A+2020+%3A+Geneva%29&ln=en>

¹⁸ Derick Matsengarwodzi, "Zimbabwe's Review of Restrictive Abortion Laws" (2024)

<https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/zimbabwes-review-restrictive-abortion-laws> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

¹⁹ Grant Murewanhema (et al), "Towards the decriminalization of abortion in Zimbabwe: A public health perspective", (Oxford, England), 3, 100237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhip.2022.100237> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

²⁰

https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/WOMEN%20IN%20LAW%20IN%20SOUTHERN%20AFRICA%20TALENT%20FORGET%20versus%20MINISTER%20OF%20HEALTH%20AND%20CHILD%20CARE%20and%20ORS.pdf

6.8 Regarding HIV/AIDS, Zimbabwe is implementing an AIDS levy which is a 3% tax on income and business profits in Zimbabwe managed by the National AIDS Council and is meant to fund HIV/AIDS interventions in Zimbabwe. The funds from the levy is ring-fenced and is used to procure essential medicines.²¹ This is being done through various policy frameworks, including the National Health Strategy (2021 – 2025).

6.9 Regarding sex education, the Government of Zimbabwe reviewed the school curriculum and content on the Guidance and Counselling syllabus, and updated it to strengthen Life Skills, Comprehensive Sexuality, HIV/AIDS, and GBV education in the Curriculum Framework 2015-2022.²² While Guidance and Counselling as a learning area has been actively promoted since the early 2000s, as part of the fight against HIV/AIDS, what has been lacking is the implementation due to several reasons, which include teachers not knowing how to talk to students about sexuality.²³

6.10 In 2025, Zimbabwe's health budget is expected to be 9.8% of the total national budget. This falls short of the 15% target set by the Abuja Declaration. The 2023 health budget was 11% of the total national budget. While the 2021 health budget was 13%. However, the current budget is still considered insufficient to address the country's healthcare needs

6.11 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Prioritize Healthcare Funding: Meeting the Abuja Declaration's 15% GDP target for health spending is essential. The national health budget allocation must be increased for improved access to healthcare for all.
- ii) Address the high maternal mortality rate by investing in quality antenatal care, skilled birth attendance, and emergency obstetric care. Ensure availability of essential medicines and equipment for maternal health. Address the social determinants of maternal health, such as poverty, access to education, religion and culture.
- iii) Ensure that women and girls have access to a wide range of contraceptive methods and family planning counselling services. Family planning services should be integrated into other health services such as maternal health and HIV/AIDS care.
- iv) Provide comprehensive health and reproductive rights services, including services for adolescents and young people, as well as elderly women such as in cases of menopause.
- v) Address stigma and discrimination related to reproductive health issues.
- vi) Ensure access to safe abortion services, where legally permissible, and post-abortion care, and ensure that access to these services is not inhibited by undue procedural restrictions.

²¹ <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/new-arv-consignment-to-last-until-september/> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

²² While the Guidance and Counselling as a learning area has been actively promoted since the early 2000s, as part of the fight against HIV/AIDS, what has been lacking is the implementation due to several reasons, which include the teachers themselves not knowing how to talk to students about sexuality.

²³ [UNFPA Zimbabwe | Strengthening Sexuality education and GBV prevention in schools: Teachers meaningfully engaged in Guidance and Counselling trainings](#)

7. Violence against women and girls as a crosscutting issue

7.1 According to national statistics, one in four women is subjected to violence. Online violence has become a pervasive issue, particularly targeting women in public office, politics, and decision-making, especially during the 2023 harmonised elections period. The GBV landscape in the country is compounded by the fact that Zimbabwe is increasingly becoming a multi-hazard environment. These hazards include effects of climate change such as prolonged droughts, floods and cyclones; disease outbreaks; and economic and fiscal instability. These hazards often interact and amplify each other, creating a vicious cycle of vulnerability and crisis and in the process increasing women and girls and children's vulnerabilities to GBV.²⁴

7.2 The Government of Zimbabwe has legislation in place to protect women and girls rights, including the Trafficking in Persons Act [Chapter 9:25] and an Anti-Trafficking in Persons Ministerial Committee was formed to tackle these issues. Sections 51, 52, and 53 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe also uphold the right to dignity, personal security and bodily integrity. Laws criminalising sexual violence include such as the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act and the Domestic Violence Act.

7.3 The Government of Zimbabwe, through the Guidance and Counselling – Life Skills Education learning area embedded in the national school curriculum, has made efforts to equip children with foundational knowledge on issues such as sexual abuse and exploitation as a way to mitigate against the risk of sexual violence among minors.

7.4 However, statistics from UNICEF show that 12% of Zimbabwean women reported having experienced sexual violence.²⁵ In the aftermath of Cyclone Idai, there were reports of women being coerced into exchanging sexual favours for aid and social safety nets.²⁶ Further, public policy and legal frameworks in Zimbabwe continue to narrowly define violence against women, focusing primarily on physical violence while neglecting psychological, emotional, and economic abuse. As such, the protection of women and girls in times of social unrest remains inadequate. For example, in 2019, CSOs documented 17 cases of rape and sexual assault to intimidate or punish political opponents, particularly women activists.²⁷

7.5 Regarding practices harmful to women, including female genital mutilation, the Government of Zimbabwe acknowledges that Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices (GBV/ HP) are: a serious breach of human rights; a major barrier to women's involvement in decision-making; a significant constraint to women's participation in economic and social activities; and a hindrance to the country's development goals. The Government of Zimbabwe has also pledged to eliminate

²⁴ Zimbabwe National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender Based Violence (2023-2030) p ix https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/zimbabwe_national_gbv_strategy_2023_to_2030.pdf

²⁵ Guidelines for Media Reporting about Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Zimbabwe <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/3881/file> (Accessed 24 April 2025)

²⁶ NewZimbabwe. "Aid agencies demand the removal of soldiers from cyclone Idai hit areas." <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/aid-agencies-demand-removal-of-soldiers-in-cyclone-idai-hit-areas/>, [Accessed 8 April 2025].

²⁷ ZHR NGO Forum, "On the days of darkness in Zimbabwe." (2019) <https://www.veritaszim.net/node/3514>, [Accessed on 9 April 2025].

GBV and harmful practices by signing international and regional instruments on GBV and gender equality.

7.6 Deep-seated cultural beliefs and traditional practices continue to perpetuate discrimination against women and girls. Women and girls continue to be subjected to harmful practices such as child marriages. This is explored in Section 3.2 above. In some communities in Zimbabwe, they practice labia elongation for young girls as a rite of passage to entrance into womanhood. It is believed to enhance sexual pleasure to men thus increasing marriage prospects for the woman²⁸. The practice in itself degrades the dignity of young girls and raises concerns of bodily autonomy of women and their gender expectations. In the Shangani community, female genital mutilation is used as a power tool to subjugate women in the society. The deeply entrenched patriarchal system in the community ensures women remain at a subordinate position as compared to their male counterparts. This underscores that there is a gap in implementation of laws relating to FGM in Zimbabwe.

7.7 On sexual harassment, Zimbabwe has made strides in the development of laws and policies that address sexual harassment, including the development of the National Strategy for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment and Gender Based Violence in the Workplace in Zimbabwe (2021-2025)²⁹. This Strategy is an integral part of the national gender machinery. Section 8(h) of the Labour Act [Chapter 28:01] specifically defines sexual harassment as an unfair labour practice.

7.8 In 2022, the Government of Zimbabwe introduced the Public Service Sexual Harassment Policy to combat all forms of sexual harassment in the workplace. This policy aims to create a safe and inclusive work environment, particularly safeguarding women who are often the primary targets of sexual exploitation. By promoting diversity and fostering equitable work practices, the policy represents a significant step forward in addressing systemic harassment and ensuring accountability within public service institutions. Its implementation is intended to enhance workplace protection and inclusivity for women in Zimbabwe.

7.9 However, despite the existence of these laws and policies, sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue in the country cutting across sectors and institutions. Sexual harassment and exploitation are widespread in male-dominated sectors such as the police force, military, and private security firms.³⁰

7.10 In October 2023, the national broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) was accused of systemic sexual harassment, where female employees reported being coerced into sexual relationships with male superiors in exchange for promotions or favorable treatment.³¹ These cases highlight the abuse of power and the lack of accountability mechanisms within

²⁸ <https://www.thepatriot.co.zw/health/no-to-female-genital-mutilation-complications-can-be-severe/>

²⁹

<https://zgc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Zimbabwe.-Strategy-to-Eliminate-Sexual-Harassment-and-GBV-in-the-Workplace.-Aug21-.pdf>

³⁰ ZGC, "Strategy for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence in the Workplace", available at <https://zgc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Zimbabwe.-Strategy-to-Eliminate-Sexual-Harassment-and-GBV-in-the-Workplace.-Aug21-.pdf>, [Accessed on 10 April 2025].

³¹ [ZBC investigates 'sex pests' -Newsday Zimbabwe](#) (Accessed 24 April 2025)

workplaces across sectors and the prevalence of such cases within the media industry in Zimbabwe. Similarly, the scandal involving Vice President Kembo Mohadi brought national attention to the issue of sexual misconduct by individuals in positions of authority. Mohadi was accused of exploiting his office to pursue inappropriate and coercive relationships with subordinates, including arranging encounters where he sexually exploited and abused them in his government office.³² Civic groups condemned his actions as an abuse of power and called for thorough investigations to address the culture of impunity surrounding such behavior. He resigned from office but was reappointed as Vice President of Zimbabwe following the 2023 harmonised elections highlighting the Government of Zimbabwe's lack of commitment to truly eradicating sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment.³³

7.11 A critical gap in the GBV response mechanism is lack of accountability for perpetrators and the 'reward' of such behavior at the highest level of Government perpetuates these harmful practices across other sectors. One such sector is tertiary education especially State universities where female students are subjected to sexual exploitation by lecturers who demand sexual acts in exchange for academic passes. The Zimbabwe Gender Commission has launched an investigation into such cases following reports from students that girls and young women are being sexually exploited in universities.

7.12 Similar patterns of abuse have emerged in religious institutions such as the Prophetic Healing and Deliverance Ministries. The charismatic Prophet Walter Magaya has faced multiple allegations of sexual abuse by female congregates. The persistent nature of these allegations have prompted the Zimbabwe Gender Commission to initiate an investigation into the matter.³⁴

7.13 These cases highlight the pressing need for Zimbabwe to strengthen policies against sexual exploitation and abuse and enhance accountability and create safe environments for victims to report misconduct without fear of retaliation.

7.14 There are indeed legal remedies for sexual harassment such as the Labour Act (Chapter 28:01), the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (Chapter 9:23) and the Public Service Regulations (SI 1 of 2000), but these laws cannot sufficiently provide for recourse and protection in the case of TFGVB.

7.15 Regarding Gender based violence, in 2021, the Government of Zimbabwe committed itself to ending GBV by officially launching the first ever High-Level Political Compact (HLPC) on Ending Gender Based Violence and Harmful Practices (2021-2030) which was launched by the President of the Republic in partnership with donors, development partners, CSOs, traditional leaders and religious institutions. The Government has also promulgated progressive laws and policies with specific provisions seeking to end GBV. These include the national Constitution (2013); The Domestic Violence Act of 2007; the Sexual Offences Act (2002); the Marriages Act No.1 of 2022; High Level Political Compact (HLPC) on Ending Gender Based Violence and Harmful Practices (2021-2030) in Zimbabwe; the new National Gender Policy (2023); the

³² [VP resignation over sex scandal leaves Zimbabwe's Mnangagwa exposed](#) (Accessed 24 April 2025)

³³ Zimbabwe: Commission to Probe Sexual Violations At Universities, Tertiary Colleges <https://allafrica.com/stories/202504300208.html> (Accessed 30 April 2024)

³⁴ Walter Magaya in Gender Commission's crosshairs <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/walter-magaya-in-gender-commissions-crosshairs/> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

National Development Strategy 1 (2021- 2025); and the National Strategy for the Elimination of Sexual Harassment and Gender Based Violence in the Workplace in Zimbabwe (2021-2025) among others.

7.16 Despite implementing a National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence (2023-2030), having a progressive legal and policy framework and concerted efforts of government, development partners, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and communities, the prevalence of GBV in Zimbabwe remains unacceptably high. According to the [\(MICS\) 2019](#), 39% of women aged 15-49 experienced physical violence since the age of 15, while 12% of women aged 15-49 experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. About 1 in 3 women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence and about 1 in 4 women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. (UNFPA). The [ZIMVAC rural assessment \(July 2021\)](#) indicates that over 70% of households do not have access to GBV services and of those that sought help, 32% reported the services as being unsatisfactory. Sources of information about GBV services were profiled to be radio by 66% respondents, 28% health workers, 23% government extension workers and 12% friends and relatives, Emotional abuse was the most prevalent form of spousal violence at 41%, followed by economic abuse at 28% , and sexual abuse at 10%. Reporting of GBV incidents remains low with many victims opting not to report or relying on informal networks like relatives. GBV multi-sectoral services remain fragmented, and often limited to provincial and district level, while the existing facilities are unable to meet the demand from GBV survivors in remote and hard to reach areas. Statistics from UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, and specific surveys like the 2019 MICS and 2015 ZDHS indicated higher prevalence rates around 34% for marriage before 18 and results from the National Population Census conducted in 2022 show 1 percent of women ages 20-24 having married before age 15 and 16.2 percent before age 18. Of those females aged 20-24 years who married before age 15, 1.6 percent were in rural areas compared to 0.3 percent in urban areas while for those that married before 18 years, 22.7 percent were in rural areas and 7.2 percent were in urban areas.³⁵

A strategy for accurate data on all forms of violence as not all women and girls in Zimbabwe experience GBV in the same way. Some groups of women and girls face more risks and challenges than others because of their intersecting identities. For example, women and girls with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in Zimbabwe. They face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion based on their gender and disability status.³⁶

7.17 Although the Government of Zimbabwe has put in place policy and administrative measures towards the reduction and ultimately the elimination of GBV and harmful practices, as evidenced in the above paragraphs, significant challenges remain. These include among others: insufficient implementation of GBV related laws and policies owing to weak accountability mechanisms; human and financial resources capacity constraints among GBV stakeholders and service providers; pervasive patriarchal values, attitudes and practices; inadequate funding of the GBV

³⁵ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/zimbabwe/card/2XxB9GOV93/>

³⁶ UNESCO, 'Zimbabwe works with UNESCO to protect rights of girls and women with disabilities' (2023) '<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/zimbabwe-works-unesco-protect-rights-girls-and-women-disabilities>' (Accessed 24 April 2025)

national response; weak coordination of the national GBV response; and limited awareness of GBV laws, rights and availability of services leading to poor help seeking behaviour.³⁷

7.18 To support victims of violence, including health services and psychological counselling, the Government of Zimbabwe has established mechanisms aimed at providing support to victims of violence, including health services and psychological counseling. Most notably the country has established Victim Friendly Courts that were initially designed for child victims of abuse but has since been expanded to include adult female rape survivors. Victim Friendly Units have also been established at police stations and posts to discreetly handle cases of violence against women, child sexual abuse, adult rape, among other sensitive matters. As stated in the State report, Zimbabwe has 419 Victim-Friendly Units (VFUs) across the country. It is however worth noting that women have complained that VFUs do not take issues of intimate partner violence seriously and instead of accepting police reports they ask the parties to go for counselling to resolve issues. This becomes a barrier to accessing justice for women who are experiencing intimate partner violence.

7.19 The Government of Zimbabwe, in partnership with CSOs, has established community-based safe shelters nationwide. These shelters provide a secure, protected temporary shelter to GBV survivors as they receive GBV services and await reintegration into their families. However, despite this, gaps continue to exist within the National GBV Response Mechanism. Firstly, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development (MWACSMED) is one of the most underfunded Government Ministries.³⁸ The Ministry coordinates GBV response in the country but is allocated less than 5% of the National Budget. In the 2023 National Budget, the Ministry of Women Affairs was allocated a mere 0.41% of the National budget and 0.31% in 2024. This was increased by ZWL20 billion, which was equivalent to US\$297,965.34, following outcry from the women's movement but which remains insufficient for GBV response.³⁹ This in itself highlights the lack of commitment to addressing women's issues.

7.20 The State report also highlighted the issues of One Stop Centers, which are aimed at the provision of care for survivors of violence. However, inadequate budgetary allocations for GBV prevention and response services, including shelters, legal aid, and psychosocial support, dampen the provision of these critical services. Further, weak coordination among government ministries, law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders involved in GBV prevention and response. This leads to duplication of efforts and gaps in service provision.⁴⁰

7.21 Despite the existence of VFUs, Zimbabwe continues to face challenges in this regard. There is weak enforcement of GBV laws due to limited resources, inadequate training of law

³⁷ Zimbabwe National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender Based Violence (2023-2030) p ix
https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/zimbabwe_national_gbv_strategy_2023_to_2030.pdf

³⁸ <https://www.herald.co.zw/national-budget-needs-to-give-women-a-stepping-stone-to-financial-freedom/> (Accessed 25 April 2025)

³⁹ <https://womenforleadership.global/citizen-engagement-leads-to-changes-in-zimbabwes-2024-budget/> Accessed 25 April 2025

⁴⁰ Zimbabwe National Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender Based Violence (2023-2030)
https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/zimbabwe_national_gbv_strategy_2023_to_2030.pdf

enforcement officials, and corruption. This leads to low conviction rates and a sense of impunity among perpetrators.⁴¹

7.22 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Strengthen GBV data collection and analysis to inform programs, resource allocation and interventions informed by the trends.
- ii) Strengthen awareness campaigns through most trusted channels like education curriculum, radio and community structures.
- iii) Improve access to victim friendly GBV reporting mechanisms through community engagement and support systems.
- iv) Increase and adequately resource the number of One Stop Centres (OSC) to allow for the availability of rapid GBV services and have at least one in each district in the country.
- v) Support national GBV facilities with human, financial and material resources to assist with adequate and quality service provision. Survivors should never have to pay user fees or buy their own materials to aid service provision.
- vi) Develop laws on Sexual Harassment and TFGBV that comprehensively addresses sexual harassment and online gender-based violence issues across all sectors, including the provision of criminal penalties for perpetrators.
- vii) Invest resources towards the expedition of revision, harmonization of laws and policies that conflict with each other, and creating fertile ground for poor GBV case management. The Government should establish and fund a national enforcement and monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance with the Marriages Act, with special focus on high-risk areas and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders.
- viii) Strengthen implementation of the Domestic Violence Act by increasing the availability of survivor-centered services including shelters, legal aid and trauma counselling and ensure that gender officers and police units are adequately trained and resourced.
- ix) Address emotional and economic abuse which are often overlooked.

8. Women and girls who encounter multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination

8.1 Although the Constitution provides for widows, including their inheritance rights, they still endure serious violations of their rights, especially in matters of inheritance. Cultural traditions pose a substantial obstacle, as patriarchal inheritance customs frequently exclude widows in favor of male relatives of the deceased. Widows are often forced out of their matrimonial homes, deprived of their possessions, and left in financial hardship after their husbands pass away. These deeply rooted practices in certain communities compromise women's economic stability and their right to dignity.

⁴¹ *ibid*

8.2 It is concerning that a widow can be subject to disinheritance by a will so long as the will complies with all the formalities of the Wills Act. The judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of *Chigwada vs Chigwada*⁴² that parties to a marriage out of community of property can disinherit each other off matrimonial property, including the matrimonial home. This will result in a scenario where the freedom of testament (the freedom to make a will) entrenched in the Wills Act supersedes the right to non-discrimination in Section 26 of the Constitution that the right of a widow shall be an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of her husband including the right to continue to live in the matrimonial house.

8.3 Zimbabwean law establishes the rights of widows and equitable inheritance, but its implementation and enforcement are often inadequate. In practice, customary law and cultural norms frequently overshadow statutory provisions, particularly in rural areas where access to formal legal systems is restricted. In such cases, inheritance decisions, especially concerning land ownership, are typically made by community courts led by traditional leaders who interpret matters from a patriarchal, traditional, and cultural perspective. Additionally, a lack of legal literacy poses a significant challenge, as many widows are unaware of their rights or the steps required to seek legal recourse.

8.4 **Women with disabilities:** Zimbabwe launched a Disability Policy in 2021 to address the marginalisation of persons with disabilities and enable them to contribute to the national developmental agenda. A Persons with Disabilities Bill was gazetted in February 2024 and was reviewed by the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee and is currently before Parliament for the Second Reading. Notably the Bill establishes the National Disability Commission whose mandate is the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. However, the Bill has not been finalised since 2024 and this slows down progress in the establishment of legal safeguards for women with disabilities because the persistent marginalization of persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, in the national development and their exclusion from public, social, economic, and political spheres remains a critical concern. Additionally, dismantling deeply ingrained societal norms that perpetuate their exclusion is vital in fostering inclusivity and equality and the Government needs to invest in citizen awareness programs aimed at dismantling harmful narratives around persons with disabilities.

8.5 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Expedite the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act, allocate adequate funding towards its implementation and raise public awareness of the provisions of the Act.
- ii) Take measures to ensure the protection of the right of widows to an equitable share in the inheritance of the property of their husbands including the right to continue to live in the matrimonial home including amending and harmonizing the gaps in the Wills Act and the Deceased Estates Succession Act.
- iii) Take urgent measures to operationalise the National Disability Commission.
- iv) Introduce quotas for persons with disabilities especially women with disabilities within key leadership platforms.

⁴² *Chigwada v Chigwada & 2 Ors* (Civil Appeal SC 397 of 2017; SC 188 of 2020) [2020] ZWSC 188 (28 December 2020) <https://zimlil.org/akn/zw/judgment/zwsc/2020/188/eng@2020-12-28>

8.6. Protection and Support of Survivors of Child marriage

Zimbabwe is among the 20 African countries where child marriages are most prevalent with about 34% of girls getting married before they attain the age of 18 years. [A study](#) on protection and support mechanisms for victims/survivors of child marriage was launched by Women and Law in Southern Africa (WiLSA) and Equality Now in May 2025. The study focused on Epworth, which was the field research site,^[1] and one of Harare's densely populated areas with an estimated population of over 200 000 people. It is characterised by various socio-economic challenges including high rates of poverty and drug use, all of which may arguably be contributing to the high prevalence of child marriages that the area has witnessed.^[2] An analysis of the laws and policies in place for protection and support of victims/survivors of child marriage revealed the following critical issues faced by child marriage victims and survivors include the following:

- (a) Susceptibility to GBV, lack of financial and moral support and inability to continue with their education during the subsistence of the marriage.
- (b) Post the 'marriages,' survivors contend with extreme poverty, lack of employment and sources of income, lack of acceptance by their own families, difficulties obtaining birth registration certificates for their offspring, and lack of support to pursue their education, amongst other concerns. These challenges define their common support and protection needs.
- (c) Despite commendable legislative effort made by the Government in prohibiting child marriages through laws such as the Marriages Act and subsequent alignment of related laws, there is still no comprehensive framework for the provision of adequate support and protection of the victims/survivors of child marriage. Existing laws are weak on support and protection mechanisms for children already in marriage or who have survived such marriages.
- (d) Various implementation and structural gaps are hampering the required accessibility of the support and protection of child marriage victims and survivors, and these include:
 - Inaccessible and, at times, unaffordable maternal, sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial support services.
 - Lack of support for community level health personnel such as Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) who play a critical support role in the communities. Amongst other things, the TBAs are in dire need of requisite medical supplies and related equipment as well as finances to enable their work.
 - Inadequate resourcing of critical support institutions, including those providing social services and related support.
 - Poor coordination, and duplication of roles amongst key support institutions which create detrimental support gaps.
 - Inadequate training, human and financial resources amongst key stakeholders, which is hampering required support to victims/survivors.

The study also highlighted the following policy and legislative gaps on protection and support for child marriage victims and survivors:

i) Criminal laws amendment (Protection of Children and Young Persons) Act No.1 of 2024

The Amendment Act introduces a new provision conditionally exempting children or adults who have sexual intercourse with a child in instances where there is not more than a three-year age difference between the perpetrator and the child involved. Such persons can only be prosecuted at the instance of the Prosecutor-General, after consideration of a report by a probation officer appointed in terms of the Children's Act [Chapter 5:06].

Gaps - This provision is most likely to prejudice girls above 16 or 17 years of age who may have sexual relations with older young men who may take advantage of this provision. It will be interesting to track how the Prosecutor General will make use of his powers under the provision vis-a vis differences in ages but where one of the parties is a minor and another one an adult, to avoid criminalizing consensual sexual activity, while at the same time ensuring accountability for adults who coerce, exploit, intimidate or pressure children into having sex.

Additionally, the current laws applicable to child marriage give too much discretion to Magistrates during the sentencing of perpetrators in terms of Section 70 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act and in terms of the Marriages Act, which has led to instances of offenders receiving only community service as has been reported by the media.^[3]

Recommendation for Government of Zimbabwe:

(i) Ensure efforts to educate the key demographic that is likely to be victimized by abusers - young girls - on the new amendments to the Criminal Code which raised age of consent for sex to 18, in order to arm them with knowledge on what their rights are and to ensure they know the multiplicity of reporting channels that are available to them.

(ii) Address the disparities in sentences relating to child marriage offences in various laws, such as the Criminal Code and the Marriages Act, for example, should be addressed. This can be cured through the introduction of Sentencing Guidelines to promote uniformity in sentencing by the judiciary and to ensure that the discretion afforded to them under the law does not result in disproportionately light sentences. Such guidelines would also critically provide clarity that certain penalties are not appropriate for child marriage or GBV cases as they do not reflect the gravity of the offence and the lifelong impact on the survivors / victims.

Marriages Act (Chapter 5:17)

Gap - Limited support measures in the Marriage Act

While the Act progressively prohibits and criminalises child marriages, beyond this, it is scant of any measures applicable to persons who are already in or have been in marriage. Further the study also revealed that there is a dearth of knowledge about the provisions of this law on child marriage and the ensuing implications of related offences.

While Zimbabwe provides for legal aid services under the Legal Aid Act, access to legal representation for child marriage survivors is not always guaranteed as the department is underfunded and can be inaccessible. Some of the survivors may not have the necessary resources to challenge child marriage or its consequences in court.

Zimbabwe does have some provisions for support services for survivors of child marriage such as access to counselling and shelters particularly under the Domestic Violence Act, but the services are often limited in scope and availability. There is a lack of comprehensive support mechanisms specifically designed for survivors that integrate psychological, educational, medical and economic support.

Recommendations for Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Concerted efforts are needed in providing detailed citizenry awareness on the provisions of this law regarding child marriages. Such initiatives should also involve traditional leadership as they live in the communities where child marriages are occurring and are mostly likely to promote change of perception as well as influence required changes through customary law and outlawing these practices within their jurisdictions.
- ii) Having a single section on the prohibition of child marriage without extensively providing for other measures can focus merely on criminal prohibition of child marriage, without adoption of a holistic approach towards prevention, education, and provision of protection and support services to victims of child marriage. More effort is needed to make the enjoyment of this right fully accessible for those at risk and those already in child ‘marriage’. It is important therefore for the government to consider a standalone law on ending child marriage, which includes comprehensive provisions in line with the guidelines established by the SADC Model Law.
- iii) There are notable gaps in Zimbabwe’s legal framework when compared to the SADC Model Law on Child Marriage. The laws fail to ensure full and clear inheritance rights for survivors of child marriage. Customary law often neglects the property rights of women and girls, making them vulnerable, particularly in rural areas where child marriage is also rife. The law lacks a clear and strong mechanism to protect survivors of child marriage from losing their inheritance rights upon the death of their spouse.

The Termination of Pregnancy Act (15.10)

Gap - The permissible grounds for termination of pregnancy provided in section 4 of this Act are restrictive and expose many children who fall pregnant to unsafe abortions or giving birth to unwanted children. In terms of this provision, termination is only allowed where the pregnancy poses a serious risk to either the mother or the unborn child and where the pregnancy is a result of unlawful intercourse. Unlawful intercourse however is defined as rape or incest,^[5] excluding other forms of sexual abuse and exploitation of the child which may result in pregnancies.

Recommendation for Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) The Act should be amended to allow for termination of pregnancy in any circumstance of sexual exploitation of children; including in the cases where survivors of child marriage have become pregnant. This is more-so because any sexual activity with a child is an offence in terms of section 70 of the Criminal Code, thus children should be allowed to terminate any pregnancy which result from the same, particularly where girls as young as 12^[6] fall pregnant because of consensual relations. The statistics on teenage pregnancy are staggering.^[7]

The Birth and Deaths Registration Act (Chapter 5.02)

Section 12 of the Act also provides that men who father children out of wedlock are not compelled to register their children's birth, with such children only registering in their mothers' maiden surnames, while the father's details do not show on their birth certificates. This is discriminatory and detrimental to the children and the mothers at various levels. This position of the law compounds the challenges that child marriage victims are currently facing in as far as registration of their offspring is concerned, especially in cases where the unions end before the child is registered.

Recommendation to Government of Zimbabwe:

i) Section 12 of the Births and Deaths Registration Act should be amended to cover children born in unregistered customary law unions and civil partnerships, and to compel men who would have been adjudged by the courts, implied through a court order (maintenance order) or determined by paternity tests to be fathers of the children, to register them.

The National Gender Policy (beyond 2017)

Gap - With the lapsing of the 2017 National Gender Policy, the country still awaits the launching of a new policy years later, despite indications that progress has been made in the development of the expected incoming policy.

Recommendation for the Government of Zimbabwe:

i) Urgent introduction of a current and responsive gender policy to guide and consolidate gains on child marriages. The long delays in between the lapsing of one policy and the introduction of the other are retrogressive to envisaged progress and targets towards the elimination of child marriages and related effects.

The National Action Plan and Communication Strategy on Ending Child Marriages (NAP on ECM)

Gap - Since the lapsing of the National Action Plan on Ending Child Marriage (2019-2021) in 2021, no new action plan has been put in place creating a yawning gap at a time when the strategies of the policy that lapsed were yet to be fully implemented

Recommendation for the Government of Zimbabwe:

i) A new, costed NAP on ECM should be adopted as a matter of urgency and accompanied by adequate resources for its effective implementation. The NAP should be comprehensive, addressing the root causes, barriers and necessary conditions for transformative change. A leaf could be taken from countries such as Malawi, with respect to how it has ensured that there is timely adoption of key policies and action plans on child marriages, avoiding lengthy gaps as has been the case in Zimbabwe, which has facilitated much needed continuity in their implementation.

The National Development Strategy [NDS-1]

Gap - Beyond its recognition of children as part of persons in need of care and protection, the strategy does not make an express link between national development and child marriage which arguably detracts from much needed national and even budgetary attention required to effectively mitigate the scourge as well as provide required support and protection measures.

Recommendation for Government of Zimbabwe:

i) Wide mainstreaming of child marriage as a theme in national policies, action plans and key strategies such as the NDS is critical. A leaf can be taken from the approach employed by countries such as Uganda which has mainstreamed child marriages in various national policies including its National Development Plan (NDPIII), an equivalent of Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy-1. The incoming NDS-2 is a good opportunity to ensure that child marriage issues are more recognized and strategized on, through this key national blue-print.

Education Policy and Education Act

Gap - There is no current comprehensive policy guiding the sector on matters relating to child marriage, and which particularly provides comprehensive support and protection of affected children. The Education Act as amended in 2019 for example, is yet to see key policy provisions to guide the implementation of section 68C of the Education Act (Chapter 25:04), on the prohibition of exclusion of children from school on the basis of pregnancy.

Gap - Despite the progressive provisions introduced by the Education Amendment Act No. 15 of 2020, these are yet to be operationalised through regulations. Section 15 of the Amendment for example requires the amendment of section 69 of the principal Act to come up with regulations on use of technologies, feeding schemes in schools and management of sexual abuse in schools.

Recommendations for Government of Zimbabwe:

- i) Measures should be taken to urgently pass all outstanding regulations to fully operationalise provisions of the Education Act as Amended.
- ii) A comprehensive national policy on education should be put in place which amongst other things, makes clear provision for the rights of all children with respect to access to education, including children affected by child marriages.

Other general Legal/Policy recommendations

- a) **Harmonization of laws-** In light of the penalty discrepancy between the Domestic Violence Act [DVA] and the Marriages Act with respect to offences related to facilitating of child marriage, there is need for harmonization of all applicable laws including with respect to applicable penalties, and provision of sentencing guidelines on related offences.
- b) **Need for a dedicated child marriage law and focal point-** Enact a stand-alone law on child marriage, with broader provisions beyond criminalization of child marriage or related sexual abuse, to facilitate adequate support and protection to persons already affected by child marriage. Lessons can be learnt from other jurisdictions. India's 2007 *Prohibition of Child marriage Act*,^[8] has been instrumental in helping the country reduce incidences of marriages which were rife in the country. A structure, such as that proposed in the U.S. Child Marriage Prevention Bill of 2024, which seeks to establish a child marriage specific focal point i.e. the ***National Commission to Combat Child Marriage***,^[9] at the federal level which will conduct research, provide recommendations and report to Parliament on initiatives to combat child marriage in the country. A structure such as the proposed '***National Commission to Combat Child Marriage***', would require dedicated budgetary

support, which would go a long way in mitigating current challenges of lack of support of the multi-stakeholder initiatives on child marriages, that have been established to date in Zimbabwe.

- (c) **Improved coordination and resourcing of critical support mechanisms-** Put in place an effective monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the various support mechanisms relating to child marriages in Zimbabwe, coupled with effective accountability pathways to promote their improved efficacy.
- (d) **Improved access to information and awareness raising-** Implement awareness campaigns and encourage more public discourse, including on the age of consent, applicable laws and related implications, and available support services, as a means to empower affected girls and their families.
- (e) **Mainstreaming of child marriage as a common theme in key national and multi-sectoral policies and strategies** - Ensure mainstreaming of the issue of child marriage so that the impact on national development and the critical need for resources to be availed, is well recognized and accommodated.

9. Women's Access to Justice

9.1 Whilst the Constitution provides for legal education and awareness in Section 7, there continues to be a wide gap in constitutional and legal awareness amongst citizens, especially women. Whilst Zimbabwe has made commendable efforts to decentralize the Legal Aid Directorate, more district coverage is required to enhance access to justice, especially in rural communities.

9.2 The Legal Aid Directorate is currently based in Harare, Marondera, Gweru, Hwange, Gwanda, Bindura and Mutare only⁴³ Due to the absence of Legal Aid directorate offices in other areas, costs of accessing their services become high due to transport costs to get to these offices. Additionally, regional courts and High courts remain few, and some provinces do not have these courts, thereby affecting access to justice for the majority of women and girls.

9.3 There are less than 30 regional courts in Zimbabwe despite the Judicial Services Commission establishing 4 new regional courts in Guruve, Mutoko, Kwekwe and Zvishavane in 2024⁴⁴. Zimbabwe also has 4 High courts sitting in Harare, Bulawayo, Masvingo and Mutare as well as circuit High courts in Gweru, Hwange and Mutare⁴⁵. Whilst this is commendable, citizens in other areas such as Kariba struggle to access these courts as they are not available in their areas and in instances where the Magistrates courts have no jurisdiction to deal with their matters they have to travel long distances to file their cases. This ultimately increases the cost of litigation for many low income persons and for women in particular who might not have the financial resources to pursue such cases; this limits their ability to utilise the legal system to protect their rights.

⁴³ Legal Aid Directorate <https://www.justice.gov.zw/?service=commercial-law> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

⁴⁴ 15 Residential and Regional Courts established in 2024 <https://www.zbcnews.co.zw/32727-2/> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

⁴⁵ Courts Overview <https://www.jsc.org.zw/page/courtsoverview> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

9.4 Further, in 2022 Zimbabwe has introduced the Integrated Electronic Case Management System⁴⁶, which is operated by the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) as a way to digitise the court system. However, the digitisation of courts introduces new challenges for rural women in accessing the justice system such as limited access to the internet, the necessary technology, and language barriers.

10. Women in the Digital Space

10.1 Gender Digital Divide

Zimbabwe, like many other developing nations, faces a significant gender digital divide. The [2019 MICS](#) data indicated that fewer women had used a computer (29%) or the internet (34%) than men. In 2024, data from sources like [DataReportal](#) show that while internet penetration is growing, the gender split in social media usage (which often correlates with internet access) still favors men, with 43.6% of Facebook's ad audience in Zimbabwe being female compared to 56.4% male. Similar patterns exist for Instagram and LinkedIn. In 2025, [data](#) from X showed that 20.8% of its adult ad audience in Zimbabwe was female, while 79.2% was male. There is also a significant digital skills gap, with fewer women having ICT skills than men across various areas. Studies by [ZIMSTAT](#) highlight that women tend to pursue non-science-related areas of study, leading to lower representation in STEM fields and, consequently, in ICT professions. For instance, women constituted only 22% of those who studied engineering, manufacturing, and construction, and about 32% of those who studied ICTs ([2022 Census data](#)).

The gender digital divide significantly impacts women and girls in Zimbabwe's educational opportunities by hindering access to online learning resources, e-learning platforms, and digital skills development. It exacerbates economic inequality by restricting access to digital financial services (like mobile money), online marketplaces for small businesses, and job opportunities in the digital economy. While mobile money has significantly boosted financial inclusion, particularly for women in the informal sector, challenges like lack of IDs, low education levels, and high transaction costs persist, women's ability to participate in civic discourse, advocate for their rights, access vital information (e.g., on health, legal aid), and engage in political processes is suppressed. Limited digital access deepens social isolation and reduces access to support networks for women in remote or marginalized areas. The gender digital divide not only reflects existing inequalities—it amplifies them. When women are excluded from the digital transformation, offline gender disparities are magnified, and new forms of exclusion emerge. This hinders progress toward gender equality and undermines the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We commend the Government of Zimbabwe's efforts to bridge the gender digital divide by adopting the National ICT Policy 2022-2027. The Policy aims to promote inclusivity and ensure equal access to ICT services for all citizens, including marginalized groups. It explicitly mentions promoting gender equality and instituting STEM promotion initiatives to encourage girls' participation in STEM. Despite these efforts, the gender digital divide remains a significant

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https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1560-683X2023000100022#:~:text=In%20Zimbabwe%2C%20the%20Judicial%20Service,to%20digitalise%20the%20litigation%20process.

challenge in Zimbabwe, requiring sustained and targeted interventions to ensure that women and girls are not left behind in the digital age.

10.2 Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence

As internet use rises in Zimbabwe, so too do the online and technology-facilitated risks faced by women and girls, including a growing prevalence of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). A study by Emthonjeni Women's Forum found that of the participants surveyed, 94.2% of women, compared to men at 5.8%, are the most affected by TFGBV.⁴⁷ Moreover, participants indicated that the most prevalent forms of TFGBV they experienced were hate speech (60.3%), trolling (16.7%), and sexual harassment (11.5%).⁴⁸

According to a study by [Emthonjeni Women's Forum \(EWF\) on Online Gender-Based Violence \(OGBV\) in Zimbabwe \(published in late 2023\)](#), Twitter and Facebook (62%) were rated as the platforms where TFGBV occurred the most, often attributed to the ability of perpetrators to operate under fake identities. 50% of victims said they were attacked by one person, with 54% of attackers being strangers. Data2X research (referencing IFES work) found that over 60% of abusive and violent political online content between 2013 and 2018 was directed at [women](#) who were mainly in public and political roles. According to [MISA](#), the growth in the use of online technologies in Zimbabwe has also come with a spike in cases of TFGBV targeting female journalists. Most cases of online gender-based violence centre around sexual coercion and extortion, emotional blackmailing, cyberbullying, verbal attacks, and defamation of character.

The EWF study highlights that the long-term impact of TFGBV includes depression and suicides, especially among teenagers and academic students. Victims also suffer from anxiety, shame, embarrassment, loss of self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. For women in public roles (e.g., politicians, journalists), TFGBV can silence their voices, forcing them to reduce their online presence or abandon public roles. Challenges identified in addressing TFGBV include underreporting due to stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of awareness about reporting mechanisms, and inadequate legal frameworks (although the Cyber and Data Protection Act aims to strengthen the legal response). The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) and other institutions lack sufficient understanding and capacity to deal with TFGBV cases effectively. There is no comprehensive documentation of cases through a centralized OGBV database. The ability of perpetrators to operate under fake identities on platforms like X and Facebook makes the identification and prosecution of perpetrators challenging.

We commend the Government of Zimbabwe for enacting the Cyber and Data Protection Act [Chapter 12:07] in 2022, a crucial legal step toward criminalizing many forms of TFGBV. This Act directly addresses violence against women and girls in digital spaces by introducing key legal protections:

- Cyberbullying and Harassment (Amending Section 164B of the Criminal Law [Codification and Reform] Act): The Act criminalizes the use of computers or

⁴⁷ Emthonjeni Women's Forum, "Online Gender Based Violence in Zimbabwe Research Report", (2023) p10 <https://emthonjeniwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Research-Report-on-Online-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Zimbabwe.pdf> (Accessed 30 April 2025)

⁴⁸ *ibid*

information systems to send messages or post material intended to coerce, intimidate, harass, threaten, bully, cause emotional distress, or demean another person.

- Transmission of Intimate Images Without Consent (Section 164E): Specifically criminalizes the non-consensual sharing of intimate images or videos. This is a vital protection, as women and girls are frequent targets of this form of digital abuse.
- Transmission of False Data Messages Causing Harm (Section 164C): Addresses the spreading of false information online to damage someone's reputation or cause emotional harm—a tactic often used in TFGBV cases.
- Transmission of Data Messages Inciting Violence: While not exclusively gender-specific, this provision can be applied in cases where online platforms are used to incite violence against women and girls.

Passing the law is a positive development, but its effectiveness will depend heavily on robust implementation, public awareness, and strengthened institutional capacity to address these complex digital harms.

10.3 Recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe:

i) Ensure budget allocations to increase digital facilities and digital access for women and girls, particularly ensuring that those living within rural communities and those with disabilities are not left behind.

ii) Accelerate efforts to institute education curricular reforms to equip women and girls with digital skills and literacy from early education and ensure their meaningful participation at all levels of digital growth. Curricular reforms should incorporate gender equality approaches and eliminate gender stereotypes, e.g., those that discourage girls and young women from taking on STEM subjects.

iii) Promote and ensure gender equality in decision-making at all digital governance structures, processes, and cooperation levels.

iv) Promote the participation and leadership of women, girls, and young people in decision-making regarding digital rights and governance at all levels.

v) Ensure that the human rights of women, girls, and young people, including freedom of expression and assembly, are respected in the digital realm and are aligned with international and regional instruments to which Zimbabwe is a party.

vi) In consultation with women in their diversity, strengthen laws and policies to prevent, respond to, protect, and support victims/survivors of digital harms, including TFGBV, and ensure effective implementation, oversight, and accountability.

vii) Increase awareness of laws and services that address TFGBV.

viii) Strengthen GBV services, including mobile One-Stop Centres for hard-to-reach communities.

ix) Establish toll-free lines for reporting TFGBV cases.

— END OF SUBMISSION —

This Submission was prepared by: [Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe](#), [Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association](#), [Women and Law in Southern Africa](#), [Equality Now](#) and [Center for Human Rights](#)