

# On the frontline: child well-being and role of the Zimbabwean mass media in awareness creation

## Abstract

Child rights' promotion and protection remain paramount and an integral component of democracy in any nation. As such, traditional mass media—the press, radio and television—continue to be an extremely important source of information for many people regarding child protection issues, providing news and analyses about events around the globe. Thus, informed, sensitive and professional mass media play a critical role in shaping public opinion on and propagation of child rights and well-being. This article analyses the role of the Zimbabwean mass media—public and private—on issues of child protection in the country. It further observes that the media are sometimes found wanting with regards to children's issues by failing to report responsibly and sensitively. It also encourages media professionals to re-examine and improve the way children's issues are covered in print and broadcast media.

**Keywords:** child protection, child well-being, mass media, role, Zimbabwe

Volume 2 Issue 3 - 2018

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**Received:** April 11, 2018 | **Published:** June 21, 2018

## Introduction and background

The media have been essential to the task of placing the topic of child protection in the minds of the public and on the political agenda.<sup>1</sup> Press coverage of child protection issues does not only affect the development of institutions and policy, it can also affect people's individual behavior. Reporting of matters pertaining to child protection creates a more protective environment for children through public awareness, and makes both the public and victims report such cases as child maltreatment to the proper authorities. Thus, the media has played a key role, for example in the construction of child abuse as a social problem. Powell & Scanlon<sup>2</sup> observe that reportage of child abuse by mass media has turned the once largely unacknowledged issue into a recognized major social problem hence a topical subject.

Ideally, a free press should comprise a journalistic community prepared to disseminate information without fear or favour for the right of the public to know, to be informed and to be educated in order to make critical decisions about their lives.<sup>3</sup> However, this has not always been the case. In some instances journalists, particularly those within state-controlled media have been accused of partisan reportage, inadvertent indulgence in unethical behaviour as well as being compromised. Such a scenario with respect to the press and journalism has been said to mirror the circumstances prevailing in most sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>4</sup>

For example, in a letter addressed to the then Zimbabwe's Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare on 09/01/2018, the president of the National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe (NASWZ) noted "The Association is deeply concerned by the publication of children's faces and more seriously the open publication of children's background information on mass media... The publication on public media of the identities or information regarding children in need of care, as far as the association is concerned constitutes a serious violation of the children's right to privacy, protection from exploitation, unlawful interference with correspondence, honour and their reputation... We therefore encourage... the media houses to take heed of this clarion call and exercise caution, restraint and act in a

manner that does not in the process put at more risk the lives of these already vulnerable children..." (NASWZ, 2018). This puts the role of the media in matters regarding the protection of children, particularly those already in difficult circumstances, under scrutiny.

The article seeks to answer the following critical questions:

1. What role does the Zimbabwean media play on child protection issues in the country?
2. What guidelines are in place to assist media professionals when reporting on children's issues?
3. What can be done to improve media involvement on issues of child protection in Zimbabwe?

## General child protection in Zimbabwe and the role of the media

*"The children of any nation are its future. A country, a movement, a people that does not value its youth does not deserve its future."*

## The fundament of child well-being

Child protection in Zimbabwe is informed by both domestic and international legal frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (The Charter) are the two main international instruments that guide child welfare not only in Zimbabwe but in many other countries. Both instruments recognize the child's right to survival, protection, development and participation.<sup>5-8</sup> The Constitution of Zimbabwe as well as the international statutes, the UNCRC in particular, form the basis of legislation and policies of the Zimbabwean government in respect to child welfare. The Children's Act,<sup>8</sup> for example, is informed by the country's constitution as well as some of these international and regional decrees.

Notwithstanding the obvious positives of the Act, some loopholes have also been identified. An important gap to note pertains to the discrepancy on who is a child. Bhaiseni<sup>9</sup> observes that the Children's

Act<sup>8</sup> is at variance with other legal instruments both domestic and international regarding the definition of a child. Whereas other instruments such as the Charter, the Constitution of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe National Orphan Care Policy define a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years, the Act defines a child as a person under the age of sixteen years. Although the definition of the Children's Act might have been informed by the UNCRC which gives leeway for member states to come up with age limits that might be slightly lower than eighteen years, such inconsistency obviously provides a constitutional crisis when it comes to such matters as child sexual abuse, among others. Nonetheless, the onus rests upon every citizen to be conversant with the country's laws regarding child welfare bearing in mind that in all matters regarding children the best interests of the child shall always be the overarching principle.

### A synopsis of media practice in Zimbabwe

Media freedom and the free flow of information is a requirement of a democratic society.<sup>3</sup> However, Saunders<sup>10</sup> observes that press freedom in Zimbabwe has met with severe constraints both before and after independence. Both colonial and post-independence governments have tried to control and manipulate the media to project a favourable image of their rule and thus perpetuate their hold on power. Some observers have noted that the country has one of the least objective media in Southern Africa.<sup>3-12</sup>

The pre-independence period was characterized by oppressive media laws. Mpofu & Chimhenga<sup>12</sup> argue that one of the main aims of the struggle for independence was for a free press. The African nationalists claimed would repeal legislation such as the Official Secrets Act, which made it a crime to report on "classified information" and the Law and Order Maintenance Act, which empowered the state to take action against alleged offenders. However, at independence the new government failed to fulfill its promise to scrap most of these oppressive laws. Instead, the government introduced, at the dawn of the new millennium, more unpopular laws aimed at taming the militant media that had blossomed with the attainment of independence. The Broadcasting Services Act was introduced in 2001; Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) in 2002; and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) in 2002. The passing of these stringent laws was accompanied by a clampdown by the state mainly on the private press which was regarded as highly sympathetic to opposition political parties, particularly the newly formed Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as well as its allies. Several media outlets such as the Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) were subsequently forced to shut down and disappear from the market resulting in several workers including journalists to lose their jobs and being displaced.<sup>11,12</sup>

Presently, the Zimbabwean press is characterized by a marked polarity between the state-controlled and private press.<sup>4</sup> The former continues to eulogize government policy while the latter demands accountability from government and gives space to dissenting voices. Although there was a sigh of relief for the media during the Government of National Unity (GNU) as evidenced by the return of the Daily News and its sister paper the Daily News on Sunday after years in the wilderness, a lot still needs to be done to ensure press freedom and objectivity for both the public and private media.

### Towards perfection

Despite the many hurdles faced by children globally, they are unable to effectively lobby and advocate for the promotion and safeguarding of their rights and well-being. History is replete with bold but repressed attempts by some children to register and promulgate their displeasure on the violation of their rights. Several protests for immediate change by black South African youths against Apartheid are an example. The Apartheid government always ensured that these protests were brutally quashed. Therefore, unless there is political will to support the children's plight, it will always be a colossal mission for the children to protect their rights on their own.

It is against this backdrop that the media has a crucial role to play. Mass media are essential in holding government and society accountable to ratified conventions and commitments made to promote and safeguard child well-being. This may be achieved by reporting failures and neglect as well as highlighting successes where applicable. In addition, the media has a critical role to play in raising public awareness on children's rights as well as the devastating effects of odious acts such as child sexual abuse. To this end, the Zimbabwean mass media is playing a significant role particularly in bringing to the fore issues such as child marriages. Press such as The Herald, Newsday, Sunday Mail, and The Zimbabwean, among others have been ensuring that the subject of child marriage is regularly published. This includes interrogation of incongruities among legislation and policies, analyses of court rulings and the implications on child protection, as well as advocacy on promotion of child rights and prosecution of those who violate them.<sup>3</sup>

A major challenge, however, is to cover these issues while striking a balance between journalist independence and respecting the ethical issues involved.<sup>13</sup> It appears there are no clear-cut guidelines to assist media professionals in Zimbabwe when reporting on children and their rights. Accordingly, there is need to provide journalists with a practical resource that they can refer to when covering stories regarding child welfare. A starting point will be to familiarize with and borrow from UNICEF's principles and guidelines to help journalists report on children's issues. These principles and guidelines are useful for the media to serve public interest without compromising the rights of children.

### Concluding remarks

This article has presented the significant role played by the media in the protection of children in Zimbabwe. It was, however, noted that the press is at times found wanting by engaging in certain actions that might unwittingly put at more risk, particularly those children already in need of care. Factors such as propinquity and 'juicy' required of news stories inexorably slant the selection towards more sensational stories involving children to the extent that chronic forms of abuse like neglect or emotional abuse are almost invisible, though their consequences for the child can be no less devastating. The media therefore need to continue familiarizing themselves with the everchanging legislation and policy that govern child protection and welfare. Journalists need to follow a more positive and constructive trajectory from being in the business of selling juicy news to a business of faithfully and sensitively recording the most common and critical events.<sup>14</sup>

Going forward, therefore, it is imperative that the nation has responsible and vigilant journalism. Since substantial coverage has been made in the area of media and child protection in general, this article will be guided by some of the recommendations made by previous researchers. As such, the following propositions are outlined:

- a) Advocating for the instigation and promotion of a vibrant and non-partisan media that genuinely report matters of child protection without fear or favour, and with the central purpose for reporting being the best interest of the child. Coverage of child protection should be done with a sense of objectivity whilst maintaining the punch power to make impact. It is evident that state-controlled media in Zimbabwe remain biased towards government when covering news. This might be attributed to fear of persecution and losing one's job if reporting otherwise. This may result in reporters prioritizing partisanship than objective reporting and respecting ethical issues involved. When children rights are involved, this might result in the violation of some of the rights.
- b) Collaboration by the media (through their regulatory body, the Zimbabwe Media Commission) with other child protection stakeholders and actors such as civil society, government arms, social work bodies like the NASWZ and the Council of Social Workers of Zimbabwe. This partnership should be based on shared responsibilities, mutual respect, trust and understanding. It should be maintained that fragmentation of child protection actors and poor coordination of activities hinder efforts to create and maintain an animated child protection system.
- c) Encouraging continuous education by members of the media regarding the legal and policy frameworks governing child protection. By familiarizing and understanding this vast array of legislation and policy for child protection, there will be improved journalistic output both in breadth and depth.
- d) Promoting child participation by allowing children space in the media and other platforms to voice matters affecting their lives. Instead of giving more media space to adults and caregivers, it is important to note that children are better placed to debate issues that affect them. This should, nonetheless, be fostered within the rubric and confines of appropriate legislation.
- e) Conducting of research mainly on how to improve the involvement of the media in child protection matters. Research on child protection will never reach a saturation point as long as reports of child abuse continue to dominate news headlines. The media need to be partnered in such research, for example through assisting in the publication of such research so that findings reach as many people as possible by various means and forms of the media.

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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