An epidemic within a pandemic of women, children and domestic violence: A case of Zimbabwe from 2020-2021

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ABSTRACT
The current global Covid-19 pandemic has not spared Zimbabwe from the impact of domestic violence against women and girls. To curtail the spread of the covid-19 virus, the government of Zimbabwe enforced restrictions on movements causing an epidemic of gender-based violence. The trend became 'an epidemic within a pandemic' against women and children. Emerging evidence reflects that lockdown affected economic growth and increased poverty, caused inability for women to escape from abusive partners; ineffective health, and law enforcement service delivery. As a result, unequal gender relations, and patriarchal norms against women became prominent. Identified forms of domestic violence are physical, sexual, economic and psychological abuse leading to deaths, injuries, commercial sex work, stress, early marriages, and unwanted pregnancies; child labour and sexually transmitted infections. The study identified government, church, policy-makers and non-governmental organisations, donors and women's organizations as institutions with possible solutions. The study argues that the domestic violence epidemic has exposed, and been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, hence multifaceted intervention strategies are needed to safeguard vulnerable groups. Strategies comprise of psychosocial support, use of social media to disclose domestic violence, effective legal and justice system operations, inclusivity in policy-making, and implementation process, economic empowerment for income generating projects, and provision of an effective health delivery system. Complexities which hinder effective intervention against domestic violence were also identified. Hence, the study recommends that stakeholders to ensure that necessary services remain accessible. Also, adequate funding to enable high quality of domestic violence interventions, prioritise prevention, response and risk mitigation activities as part of stakeholders' objectives in humanitarian programs and inclusivity of women, and girls in policy-making, and implementation. The study adopts a qualitative approach. Under current lockdown conditions, desk review, official and media reports analysis on the topic; WhatsApp interviews with key selected informants were used.

KEYWORDS
epidemic, domestic violence, pandemic, Covid19, women, children

1. Introduction

This research explores the impact of domestic violence against women and children (young girls) as an epidemic during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also examines the underlining factors leading to domestic violence, identifying intervention strategies to arrest the causes of the concerned epidemic and putting forward recommendations to the stakeholders for safeguarding vulnerable groups. Domestic violence has been viral

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before, during or after the prevalent of disasters. The domestic violence became a traumatic component which is prejudiced by economic, social, cultural and psychological factors; leading one to quest for the causes, effects, impact and possible interventions that can safeguard the victims. This study argues, and concurs with ZADIG (2012), that epidemics, and pandemics, present terrible threats to human life, and health; hence require effective efforts in order to prevent them from inflicting much harm. The study reflects a compound disaster of Covid-19 exacerbating the domestic violence epidemic against vulnerable groups.

An epidemic can be understood as a disease that affects many people in one place or a situation where the number of cases of a disease is greater than anticipated in a given environment (Green et al., 2002; Lock et al., 2001). However, for the purposes of this study, the term means a crisis exacerbated by the prevalence of the current pandemic (Covid-19). Last (2001) and Marsh (2020) regard a pandemic as an epidemic prevailing worldwide, or over a wide area such as crossing international boundaries negatively affecting a huge number of people. Over and above, Zadig (2012, p. 5) stresses that 'seasonal epidemics are not considered pandemic.'

When compound disasters hit, the victims are not even spared from stress, deaths, injuries, isolation, and discrimination, among others. Intervention, though needed, can be very difficult which then increases the risk of harm to victims and responders alike (Coppola, 2015). However, the purpose of this study is to investigate the epidemic of domestic violence within the prevalence of Covid-19 through feminist perspective (theory) using the existing literature as well as primary data. The research quests to expose the causes of the problem (domestic violence), analysis of the consequences of an epidemic within a pandemic of domestic violence against women, and children; identify intervention strategies towards the management of crisis, and provide government, policymakers, and civil society with recommendations for safe-guarding the vulnerable groups (women and young girls).

2. Background to the Zimbabwean crisis from 2020-2021

According to Martin and Ahlenback (2020), the first Covid-19 case was reported in Zimbabwe on the 21st of March 2020 and by 9th of November 2020 the pandemic posed 8,531 confirmed cases and 253 confirmed deaths. Like other countries upholding World Health Organisation (WHO) preventive measures against the pandemic, the Government of Zimbabwe closed its international borders and schools on 23rd March 2020. Thereafter, it declared a national disaster on the 27th of March 2020, and initiated a national lockdown on the 30th of March 2020 which was then lifted on 16th of May 2020. During this year the lockdown was effected on the 11th May 2021 and eased in July 2021.

Scientifically, the coronavirus (Covid-19) is a respiratory infection –an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person with the symptoms that can range from mild to severe illness (WHO, 2020; Balkhair, 2020). Martin and Ahlenback (2020) argue that the experiences of other countries showed that if restrictions were eased too soon there could be a sharp rise in cases and deaths; hence, such measures remained in place in Zimbabwe. Having such a scenario of a lockdown, posed risks to the epidemic of domestic violence against women, and children especially girls during the pandemic (Martin and Ahlenback, 2020). Abraham et al. (2019), and OCHA (2020a) define domestic violence as all trends of sexual, physical, economic, psychological violence or deprivation of individual's rights by a family member, non-family member or intimate

partner. Generally, and in this study, domestic violence is, therefore, treated as an epidemic.

Pandemics create an enabling environment that may spark variable forms of violence against women and children during or post-pandemic. In the case of West Africa, epidemics of rape, sexual assault, and other related acts of gender-based violence against women, and girls were experienced (Perteman et al., 2020). Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone were affected by Ebola while United States, France, China, Thailand, and Serbia were affected by H1N1 flu. As a result, measures to reduce the spread of outbreaks were put in place such as closure of schools (Perteman et al., 2020). According to Gausman et al. (2019), closure of schools exposes children to domestic abuse, and deprives them of their right to learn, and in many settings, women and girls living in poverty en- counter pressure to engage in sexual relationships to gain financial or in-kind support such as transportation, food, and clothing.

Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in Zimbabwe, exacerbated the pre-existing high levels of violence against women, and girls who were forced to spend time enclosed with families, and their abusers (ZIMSTAT, 2020). According to Rauhaus et al. (2020), incidences of domestic violence rise after natural disasters have occurred such as cy- clones, hurricanes, HIV/AIDS, and in this case Covid-19. It has also been argued that the sharp increase in domestic violence could have been exacerbated when individuals are stressed with job loss, discrimination, trauma or community dislocation (Rauhaus et al., 2020.) The prevalent, and subsequent issues, such as an increase of domestic violence, are also gendered and void of feminine of caring, compassion, and empathy. As women become dependent upon men for economic stability, this renders more power and authority to men within the household (Okin, 1998). In view of the above, the research agrees with Okin (1998) in that the pandemic has created a situa- tion where victims may be confined to their abusers for a prolonged time. Within such environment, victims suffer from other coupled stressors including financial strains, for example; unemployment, health concerns, and lack of social support.

Abraham et al. (2020), and Martin and Ahlenback (2020) lament that the Covid-19 outbreak has reduced access to law-enforcement which made the victims susceptible to domestic violence. Martin and Ahlenback (2020) proffered that during the early days of the national lockdown the Musasa Project, a gender-based violence serving non-governmental organisation registered 764 cases of gender-based violence as compared to 500-600 per month before Covid-19. The perpetrators were intimate partners (69.5%), constituting physical and economic violence while non-partners (30.5%) were committed by law-enforcement agents, and could be experienced at service provision points. Further to that, the non-partners violence was in the form of sexual violence, and rape; harmful practices including early marriages, sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse (Sachiti, 2020; SAFE, 2020). Martin and Ahlenback (2020), further argued that key drivers for gender-based violence during pandemics are patriarchal social norms, and gender inequalities in Zimbabwe. In support, Fraser (2020) asserts that the Covid-19 lockdown promoted the prevalence of domestic violence due to forced coexistence, economic stress and fears about the virus, hence disturbed access to support services for survivors especially in the health, police and justice system.

Because an epidemic, and a pandemic coexist like the left and right leg, perennial challenges are experienced as established by UNICEF (2006) with reference to HIV/AIDS or Ebola, and by implication, Covid-19 imposes the same fate. Economic growth is affected; hence, governments may fail to adequately support orphans with basic provisions like food, medical care and education. Morantz et al. (2013), Evans & Popova (2015), and Ferguson (2019), stressed that in sub-Saharan Africa,

orphaned children mostly suffer during social restrictions from stigmatisation, intra-household discrimination, material, and educational neglect, excessive child labour, exploitation by family members, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse. However, the United Nations (UN) has called for widely action to fight the surge of domestic violence by considering women and girl child's safety as governments respond to the pandemic (Rauhaus et al., 2020). In the same manner the UN's proposal by Rauhaus et al, corresponds with Peterman et al. (2020, p. 19) in that, 'available evidence suggesting multiple mechanisms across typologies of violence against women and children, should challenge formulation of policy and implementation guidance to inform a gender-responsive strategy to avert additional epidemic'. Generally, any form of violence against human beings takes away human dignity, hence, intervention by all stake holders to safe-guard human life is critical.

3. Materials and Methods

The study was guided by qualitative design in its approach. It accessed secondary data from relevant online articles, local news from Zimbabwe Television (ZTV), and online interviews based on the research topic guided by research objectives. These objectives are meant for the study to; comprehend the nature of the problem, analyse the consequences of an epidemic within a pandemic of domestic violence against women and children, identify institutions' management of crisis, and to propose recommendations to the government, policymakers, and civil society for safe-guarding the victims of domestic violence.

On sourcing secondary literature (desk research), key themes searched for were; epidemic, pandemic, domestic violence against women and children/girls, impact of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe, gender-based violence and abuse. Using content analysis, the study examined local news which had been considered important to establish the tone of news coverage in the country that portrays vulnerable groups (women and children/girls) during the prevalence of compound disasters; Covid-19 and domestic violence (epidemic). For the online published, and unpublished literature, were from institutions like academic institutions or non-governmental organisations that have been adapted to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, and gender-based violence between May 2020 and March 2021.

Content analysis was mainly qualitative, and engaged in an in-depth study of the narratives to identify meanings, themes and the patterns within the framework of research problem, and objectives. Data was gathered from members of Musasa Project (non-governmental organisations) against gender-based violence, law-enforcement agency who handle related cases of domestic violence. Further, data was also gathered from university academic staff and the general members of society through online interviews in order to have variable opinion over the problem under investigation. Respondents were both males and females branded of various age groups, and for reasons of confidentiality the interviewees were identified by codes, for example, Respondent 1, 2, and so on. The desk research approach for data gathering was significant in order to observe Covid-19 regulations though it has some challenges of communication with interviewees.

In this study, a feminist perspective was adopted as a theoretical model in the discourse of domestic violence despite being exacerbated by the current pandemic (Covid-19). McPhail et al. (2007) state that feminist model is grounded in the principle that domestic violence is the result of male oppression of women within a patriarchal system. In this regard men are regarded as the primary perpetrators of violence while women, and girls, being primary victims. Men pervade violence through use of

control; including physical, sexual, economic, psychological abuse by embracing approaches of intimidation and isolation. According to Kanuha (1998); Markowitz and Tice (2002), the model demands the public solutions for the victims, such as establishment of programs and services for females who are beaten, and effective judicial system to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

4. Covid-19 trends and impact

According to Beck (2020, p. 5):

> there are unique factors about Covid-19 that make it particularly alarming. With regards to physical distancing and movement restrictions that have been put in place across the world to curb the pandemic, women and girls face an increased risk of experiencing violence at the hands of family members, intimate partners or others living within their homes.

Peterman et al. (2020) assert that Covid-19 rendered quarantine and social isolation ineffective because they brought about challenges of coping behaviours, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, depress disorders as well as limitation of freedoms. This scenario is well reiterated by Respondent 1 who echoed that family members stayed together for a long time due to Covid-19 induced lockdown. In that enclosure, the more physical interaction increased, the more the rate of conflict also increased. This conflict was also influenced by lack of conflict management skills, loss of jobs as a result of lockdown hence, poverty increased domestic violence. According to Renzetti (2009), and Doyle and Aizer (2018), poverty and poor coping strategies yield to conflict, arguments, and interpersonal violence. Unfortunately, unequal gender relations and patriarchal norms, affect women and children as victims of domestic violence (Heise & Kotsadam, 2015; Gibbs et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2019). From 20:00 pm ZTV News (2021, July 17), a woman from Dema area (Seke Village), was bashed by her husband after requesting money to buy gas for domestic use. The husband argued that he did not want to be bothered by his wife's request as he was financially broke due to the lockdown. Respondent 7 also argued, 'the fact that people have now spend more time together as a family, they tend to observe a lot of mistakes on each other and out of frustration of just staying home raised quarrels may affect children and wife.'

According to Rafah and Osborn (2020), sometimes women are found entangled in a situation whereby failing to escape abusive partners due to various reasons such as emotional attachment and societal ideologies. Because of the limited financial resources due to lockdown, Beck (2020), Kidman (2016), and Wodon et al. (2017) agree that economic insecurity leads to early marriage, street kidding because of material and educational neglect, child labour, sexual, and physical abuse. Having such a scenario, Respondent 2 commented that Covid-19 is a catalyst which fuels depression, frustration, and resentment in people. This study noted the trending of an epidemic within the pandemic, as observed by UNDP (2015); and Petermen et al. (2020) during Ebola and Covid-19 outbreaks when communities suffered lack of law enforcement. In that respect, Respondent 7 noted that:

> …due to lockdown, spaces for getting assistance in case of a domestic violence have been reduced since most people are being confined to their households. At one time, movement time was curtailed because one would need a traveling document to pass through police roadblocks. Closure of schools prolong contact period and thus increases chances of abuse and violence. Intervention from community support systems like police, neighbours and churches has been cut off because of social distancing and other lockdown measures.

Response by Respondent 7 indicated that loss of livelihoods due to Covid-19 lockdowns exacerbated frustration in men who ended up redirecting it to women and children. The study observed that due to culture, and gender norms, men are supposed to be the bread winners. Unfortunately, lockdowns changed some of the norms, and conflict emerged as men offloaded their anger on to the wives and children. Domestic violence also increased due to women's multiple roles leading to tiredness and failing to honor their husbands, who spend most of their time relaxing, with their conjugal rights. As established in Martin and Ahlenback (2020), there is some evidence, including from women's rights organisations, and the media, that certain women and girls have been most affected by, and are at increased risk of gender-based violence during the pandemic. In NSWP (2020), sex workers reported that law enforcement agents have used a variety of repressive measures against sex workers during the Covid-19 lockdown, including increased raids, arrests and prosecutions of sex workers, and crackdown in areas known for sex work.

On the health issues, Global Financing Facility and Reproductive Health Supplies Coalition (GFFRHSC) (2020) established that the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. The socio-economic implications caused sexual reproductive health services to be unaffordable and it limited accessibility, hence, between 88,300 and 371,000 women in Zimbabwe could be unable to access contraception resulting in 2,210 to 111,000 unintended pregnancies (GFFRHSC, 2020). Martin and Ahlenback (2020) contend that unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections consequentially led women and girls to be distressed, as they risked unsafe abortions and maternal mortality and further financial implications. To worsen the situation, the inaccessibility of gender-based violence services meant that women and girls could not always obtain the doctor's reports needed to build a legal case against perpetrators (Perry & Saynde, 2017).

The study can affirm that since the advent of Covid-19, it has been an era of an epidemic within a pandemic which deserves holistic strategies from various institutions. As has been suggested by Respondent 12, 'intervention is critical in such a time as this [one] to save victims from all kinds of domestic violence which threatened their physical, social, economic and psychological dimensions of life.'

5. Prevention and Protection

Beck (2020, p. 7) acknowledges that:

> COVID-19 creates a perfect storm of complications, whereby cases of gender based violence are likely to rise significantly, while at the same time the ability of survivors to seek help, or the capacity of providers to respond effectively, is more limited than ever.

As the researcher believes in the sacredness of life, external support is of paramount importance when it gets threatened. With regards to the principle of priority, Beck (2020) argues that donors, policy-makers, and implementing organisations should give preference to gender-based violence prevention, response and risk mitigation strategies as critical components of Covid-19 related programming. In addition, adequate funding and political will can make intervention against domestic violence possible. According to Fraser (2020), when epidemics violently engulf rights of women and children/girls, it is vital for health, education, child protection, security and justice, social protection and job creation to directly work with survivors as a positive response. According to Beck (2020), for the sake of service provision, stakeholders should provide gender-based violence risk mitigation,

response services and prevention services.

Response from Respondent 4 shows that the Zimbabwean government and churches have a role to play in as far as prevention and protection of women and children/girls are concerned. The interviewee (Respondent 4) articulated that through government's initiatives, there is a need for media to have an advocacy role against domestic violence, effective health and social services, inclusive of psychiatric services, to cushion citizens against loss of income. Over and above, there is a need for some policy changes and strategies on the part of the law enforcement agencies which at times are found wanting, to reduce domestic violence incidences against vulnerable groups.

Respondent 5 said that the church can be instrumental by providing safe homes for victims of domestic violence, rendering counselling services as well as constantly empowering communities with income generation projects to avert economic and social crisis. In Respondent 9's contribution, the church should sensitize the congregants on the effects of domestic violence through its theological reflections and contextual bible studies based on themes like forgiveness, love, caring and parenting. As established by Peterman et al. (2020), multiple mechanism across typologies of all abuse against women and children should lead to a relevant policy formulation and implementation guidance for gender responsiveness.

Despite formal social support systems, Pereira et al. (2020) proposed informal social support networks; social media such as WhatsApp, twitter, phone call, telegram, Facebook, among others, to be used by family members, core-workers and neighbours to disclose to the public and security of any nature of domestic violence. According to Respondent 1, families have a fundamental role of sitting down and addressing domestic violence issues amicably, or refer to third party's intervention. In view of Pereira et al.'s (2020) approach, the study views it as ideal since social media knows no boundaries in terms of reporting. However, an appropriate response is, therefore, needed from the concerned stakeholders.

According to Murphy (2020), the proposal for implementing and investing in a flexible mechanism by multilateral and bilateral donor institutions is important in view of gender-responsive participation to curtail risks brought by pandemics such like violence against women and children. Financial support guarantees social support for vulnerable groups especially relief funds from local governments to bolster non-governmental organisations for services towards violence against women and children (Murphy, 2020). From what Respondent 6 shared, there is concurrence with Murphy (2020) on the ideology that government's sufficient budget can make it possible to increase awareness campaigns during lockdown towards violence against women and children.

Sullivan (2012) proposed intervention by availing shelter or temporary housing for the domestic violence survivors is vital. Victims also feel safer if accorded accommodation and counselling, legal protection, food among others. Respondent 10 noted that other civil society organisations can do awareness campaigns against domestic violence through media and conducting workshops to sensitise communities, offering psychosocial support to the victims. Through awareness campaigns, the study echoes Respondent 11's suggestion that victims should seek for Police assistance as well as safe shelters from churches, traditional leaders' homes, but the challenge could be on implementation during lockdown. In line with Covid-19 regulations, Respondent 3 suggested that the church can do counselling sermons through online church services and increase the frequency of devotional messages to address domestic violence matters.

In view of the aforesaid, the study argues that the approach is not 100% effective

because of network connectivity problems as well as lack of money for data bundles, hence reaching out all survivors of violence becomes impossible. With regards to the provision of psychosocial support to gender-based violence survivors, Fraser (2020) suggested that women's organisations and activists have a big role to play by coming up with various approaches to raise awareness during the pandemic (Covid-19). For example, setting up networks can help survivors when volunteers pay attention to abuse and support families to resolve conflicts peacefully. Since information is power, Fraser (2020) proffered that publishing online manuals on how the vulnerable groups can be protected through legal aid is of great help and also to educate conflict management skills at family level since conflict is ever there and inevitable. Since technology globalizes almost everything, raising awareness online using hashtags #AntiDomesticViolenceDuringPandemic# can make an effective alarm to a larger extent.

Activists supporting domestic violence survivors need to engage hosting livestreamed workshops to advise on how and where to get assistance (Fraser, 2020). However, the approaches suggested by Fraser (2020) can be fruitful if there is political will from government through financial support since the issue of running community and social support programmes needs funding for both survivors/victims and humanitarian organisations. Whilst Respondent 6 reported that awareness campaign against domestic violence can reduce its prevalence, it is also a noble idea for communities to come up with income generating projects to improve nutrition at household level since poverty ignites domestic violence.

Legal intervention was seen to be valuable in Respondent 5's response. The interviewee informed that perpetrators of domestic violence should, accordingly, face the full wrath of law, for example, the arrest of rapists. Also, rather than waiting for crimes to be committed, law enforcement agencies can empower the community to detect early warning signs of violence and abuse and take appropriate measures. While the legal process takes its course, it has been established by the UNICEF GBViE Helpdesk (2018) that police and justice systems can become overwhelmed during an epidemic, creating an 'atmosphere of impunity' where gender-based violence increases. However, the study argues that despite being overwhelmed by the situations, the police and justice system are there to enforce law and order in society. There should be no proffering of lame excuses or compromising the justice system.

6. The complexities in prevention, response and risk mitigation processes

Though it is a cause of concern to respond, prevent and mitigate matters of gender-based violence against women and children within the context of Covid-19 pandemic, the government, social services providers and other actors were faced with some challenges during intervention (Beck, 2020). Funds for gender-based violence programming were limited because priority was given to Covid-19. Healing systems and national social services became overstretched as resources were diverted towards Covid-19. UN (2020) reported that the economic crisis precipitated by the pandemic has resulted in multiple gender impacts that require specific attention. On ZTV 20:00 hours news report (2021, July 18), some women came forth and testified that they engaged into sex work due to economic insecurity. Unfortunately, they lamented that the male counterparts did not pay well and when they complain of physical abuse from patrons. A report from UN (2020) alleged that the pandemic, indeed, increased the burden of women's unpaid care work especially girls who also suffered child labour due to heightened family needs. According to

UNICEF (2020), the Covid-19 outbreak compounded existing child protection issues, depresses economy, restricted access to basic services to non-formal traders leading to increased anxiety, psychosocial distress and depression in children and caregivers.

UN (2020, p.3) notes that the 'health sector continued to suffer from nationwide strikes by both doctors and nurses and increased brain-drain'. Strikes were a wake-up call for the government to provide health workers with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and for salary adjustment. Unfortunately, the long standing national economic meltdown prevented the government to address the concerns of workers on time. According to Martin and Ahlenback (2020), women and girls were facing increased care burdens with additional time needed for caring for children out of school and family members who cannot access healthcare due to hospital closures. In other words, the government's health Ministry failed to respond to health services needs of the vulnerable groups.

The UNFPA (2019); and Chattu and Yaya (2020) encourage the health sector to be accessible to female health care workers. Muzarabani (2020) alleged that lockdown restrictions could not make it possible for women and girls to access safe abortion services. In Zimbabwe abortion is only permissible under the legal pretext, for example, in cases of rape and incest or when the mother's health is at risk or in the case of foetal abnormalities. Obtaining the necessary appointments and court documents to access a court-ordered abortion was often delayed even before the lockdown restrictions, making this option unviable for many victims (Muzarabani, 2020).

Martin and Ahlenback (2020) argue that the Zimbabwean government's deployment of law enforcement agencies; police and military to make sure citizens compliance with lockdown regulations in most cases, while cases of gender-based violence were not given enough attention. Also, during the prevalence of the pandemic there was an increase in food insecurity and household financial instability leading to higher levels of gender-based violence' (Martin and Ahlenback, 2020, p.16).

The study argues that for the sake of survival, one has to work and feed the family. Unfortunately, the non-formal women traders were victimized by police and military as they breached Covid-19 regulations trying to make ends meet (Martin and Ahlenback, 2020). The police and military (representing the government) are alleged to have destroyed the stalls and produce of street vendors in areas like Bulawayo. Despite that, during demonstrations against the government's handling of the Covid-19 response, law enforcement agents perpetrated violence against women (Anderton, 2020). In such a scenario, the research observed that instead of the law to protecting and mitigating all forms of abuse against the vulnerable groups, government was found on the wrong side though it was implementing Covid-19 measures.

Respondent 8 identified another challenge that worsened child abuse within the lockdown framework. The interviewee alleged that the majority of perpetrators of child abuse are those familiar to the them, probably relatives, but because of confinement within this same space children might not be able to report. For the case to be reported, victims and their relatives could not travel to report to police because for one to travel, they needed a letter from police, and long distances needed public transport which was barred from operating or if they had personal transport, fuel cost could not allow them to make a journey. According to Fraser (2020), the Covd-19 regulations impeded access to support services for survivors especially in the health, police and justice system.

The study reveals that the government failed to realign Covid-19 restrictions with human rights principles because the law is supposed to save citizens. According to Martin and Ahlenback (2020), girls, especially those with disabilities and in rural areas, were faced with the challenge of accessing online educational material. Those who managed to access it faced heightened risk of online violence and abuse.

The same reason of economic insecurity, and having to travel to make a police report hindered the victims from being assisted. Fraser (2020) suggests that governments should adopt a paradigm shift in its approach for court systems. A case of Beijing court states that the justice system has been using online court hearings and 'cloud visits' to handle cases and protect vulnerable survivors such as women and children during the epidemic (Fraser, 2020).

This study argues that Fraser's findings are adaptable to Zimbabwe if the Government adopts them. As long as the prevalence of Covid-19 persists, traditional approaches to service delivery may not be effective, hence the study also suggests that innovation is the best way to go. With regards to ensuring observance of human rights in the response, GiHA WG (2020) argues that lockdowns, quarantines and other regulations to manage and fight the spread of the virus, should always be handled in strict accordance with human rights standards. The position of GiHA WG is very important in the sense that if lockdown measures and human rights are failed to be harmonised they can cause more harm than good since both are meant to preserve human life and dignity.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study established that an epidemic of domestic violence was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe because of various challenges. It has been discovered that Covid-19 became a fertile ground for unequal gender relations and patriarchal norms to prevail in violating rights for women and children. As the pandemic forced the sectors of business, legal and justice, education, and health services to change the traditional way of operation, it negatively affected the vulnerable groups (women and children/girls). The loss of livelihoods due to lockdowns reduced incomes leading to family tensions.

The study established that there has been an increase in household poverty which led women and girls to engage in sex work in Zimbabwe. Young girls were forced into transactional sex in return for cash, food or even sanitary products and at the end of the day, could be infected with sexually transmitted infections and having unwanted pregnancy. Socially, failing to resolve misunderstandings exposed women to physical, economic, sexual, psychological abuse. Unfortunately, as the survivors of domestic violence seek health services and legal protection, Covid-19 minimised chances for effective delivery of services.

The research also revealed that education for learners was disrupted. The privileged managed to do online learning while the underprivileged did not. During lockdown, most girls were sexually abused and failed to go back school. In the study, complexities were identified which hindered effective intervention against domestic violence on women and children/girls. The identified challenges are noted as Covid-19 regulations, economic instability, government's failure to align restrict measures of the pandemic with human rights regulations.

However, the study suggests what can be done to protect women and children in an epidemic within a pandemic. Stakeholders like the donors, government, church, policy-makers and non-governmental organisations for women's organizations and activists against gender-based violence or violence against women and children

should ensure that necessary services remain accessible. Also, adequate funding to enable high quality domestic interventions should be availed. These stakeholders should take focus on domestic prevention, response and risk mitigation activities as part of their objectives in humanitarian activities.

   The study also recommends that in terms of policy making, women and girls need to participate in leadership and decision-making process to be assured of gender-based violence prevention and response in combating unequal gender relations and patriarchal norms within the framework of Covid-19. These, among other solutions, suggested in the study could assist the country out of the deep-seated crisis that it currently finds itself in over the vulnerable groups.

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