THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NORMS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES: A CASE OF NDOLA DISTRICT IN ZAMBIA

Nkandu Musonda, Pethias Siame[*]

Department of Literature and Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia

Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the influence of social norms on women's rights within child protection policies in Zambia, focusing specifically on the Ndola District. Against the backdrop of increasing global emphasis on gender equality in policy formulation, this research examines how entrenched social norms shape the perception and implementation of women's rights in child protection. A purposive sample of 50 participants, including local women, policymakers, child protection officers and community leaders, was selected to ensure diverse perspectives. Grounded in Feminist Theory and Social Constructivism, the study provides insights into the dynamics of power, agency and cultural expectations surrounding women's societal roles. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, facilitating a rich, contextual understanding of the challenges women face. The findings reveal critical intersections between social norms and women's rights, demonstrating how prevailing attitudes influence the effectiveness of child protection measures and perpetuate systemic gender inequalities. The study concludes by advocating for transformative policy approaches that actively engage with and challenge existing social norms to advance equity in women's rights.

Keywords

Social norms, child protection policies, women's rights, feminist theory, social constructivism theory, Zambia.

1. Introduction

Child protection policies are fundamentally designed to safeguard children's well-being. However, their implementation and effectiveness are often deeply intertwined with prevailing social norms, particularly those governing gender roles and women's rights. As Heise (2000) argues, gender inequality is a root cause of violence against women and girls and a major obstacle to effective prevention and response. This inequality manifests subtly and overtly within child protection systems, influencing definitions of harm, resource allocation and the credibility afforded to women's voices.

Social norms, defined as the "rules and standards that members of a group understand and that guide and/or constrain social behavior without the force of laws" (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), can either reinforce or undermine protections for women and children. For instance, in societies where women are primarily viewed as caregivers, their reports of child abuse may be dismissed or minimized, particularly if the alleged perpetrator is a male family member (World Health Organization, 2020).

Conversely, policies that challenge patriarchal norms and empower women can foster safer environments for children. However, as programs in conservative settings

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[*]**Corresponding Author:** Pethias Siame, e-mail: psiame@yahoo.com

have shown, empowering girls and women can significantly alter community perceptions (UN Women, 2019). Normative changes often begin at the community level, influenced by local leaders and family members.

This research evaluates the complex interplay between social norms, women's rights and child protection policies, examining how these factors converge to impact the lived experiences of women and children. By analyzing specific policy frameworks and their implementation, this study identifies key leverage points for promoting gender-equitable and effective child protection.

2. Literature review

The intersection of social norms, women's rights and child protection policies represents a complex and under-examined area of research. While each domain has been studied extensively in isolation, the synergistic effects of their interaction require further investigation.

Social norms, the unwritten rules governing acceptable behavior, play a pivotal role in shaping women's lives, dictating their roles, responsibilities and limitations (Bourdieu, 1977). Despite promising developments, altering entrenched social norms remains challenging. Resistance from conservative factions, fear of social ostracism and economic dependency contribute to the persistence of gendered expectations (Mahmud & Mohanty, 2016). Women are often caught between social conformity and the pursuit of personal autonomy, complicating efforts to promote gender-equal norms. This tension necessitates nuanced, culturally sensitive strategies that acknowledge local contexts. Only through sustained commitment, inclusive dialogue and systemic reform can societies move toward equitable conditions where women are empowered to realize their full potential.

Bicchieri (2006) describes social norms as rules of behavior that individuals follow because they believe others think they should. These norms are powerful determinants of behavior, particularly in gender relations. Research consistently demonstrates how deeply ingrained social norms perpetuate gender inequality, impacting women's access to resources, decision-making power and overall well-being (Sen, 1999). Folbre (2001) adds that traditional norms assigning primary caregiving responsibilities to women can limit their economic opportunities and reinforce dependence on male partners. Furthermore, Jewkes (2002) asserts that these norms influence perceptions of violence against women, with communities adhering to traditional gender roles more likely to condone or excuse domestic violence.

The relationship between women's rights and child protection is well-established. According to UNICEF (2007), societies with greater gender equality tend to have better outcomes for children, including lower rates of child mortality, malnutrition and abuse. Narayan (2002) argues that children's well-being is inextricably linked to women's status in society. When women are empowered with access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities, they are better equipped to protect their children from harm. Ellsberg et al. (2000) add that legal frameworks protecting women's rights, such as laws against domestic violence, create safer environments for children by holding perpetrators accountable and supporting victims.

Child protection policies are designed to safeguard children from abuse, neglect and exploitation. However, their effectiveness is significantly influenced by prevailing social norms. Gelles (1996) notes that reporting mechanisms may be less effective in communities with strong cultural norms of family privacy, where reporting abuse is seen

as a betrayal. Similarly, Korbin (1987) observes that policies aiming to remove children from abusive homes may face resistance in societies where the family is considered sacrosanct. Social norms regarding gender also influence how child protection professionals interpret and respond to abuse cases. Stark (2007) finds that mothers are often blamed for failing to protect their children, even when they are victims of violence themselves.

While the literature offers valuable insights into these individual domains, a notable gap exists in research examining their interconnectedness. Few studies have explicitly investigated how social norms shape the implementation and effectiveness of child protection policies concerning women's rights. This study aims to address this gap, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for creating safer, more equitable societies for women and children.

3. Theoretical framework

This study employs two interrelated theoretical frameworks: Feminist theory and Social constructivism theory.

3.1. Feminist theory

Feminist theory provides a lens for understanding the power dynamics and systemic inequalities affecting women's rights. It posits that gender is a fundamental organizing principle of social life and women's experiences are often marginalized in policy discussions. As Tong (2009) states, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression", highlighting the need to challenge societal structures that perpetuate gender discrimination.

In the Zambian context, Feminist theory critiques the formal and informal systems governing women's rights within child protection policies. It emphasizes that women's experiences are rooted in social, economic and political contexts that can hinder their agency. Scholars like Narayan (2002) argue that women's interests are often excluded from political decision-making processes where social norms dictate acceptable roles. This framework allows the research to examine how societal expectations and power structures shape policies and marginalize women's voices.

3.2. Social constructivism theory

Social Constructivism complements Feminist theory by emphasizing the role of social processes and interactions in developing knowledge and understanding. This framework is crucial for assessing the effects of social norms on women's rights in child protection. It investigates how societal beliefs, values and practices shape the creation and enforcement of policies.

At the heart of social constructivism is the belief that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Social norms, as invisible guidelines for acceptable behavior, significantly influence how individuals comprehend their rights and responsibilities (Goffman, 1959). These norms can either foster or impede women's rights within child protection policies.

In many cultural contexts, entrenched gender roles position women solely as caregivers, marginalizing them from critical policy-making discussions. Kabeer (1999) asserts that women's empowerment involves expanding choices and the ability to make

strategic life decisions. However, when social norms favor male authority, women's voices are frequently overshadowed, leading to inadequate policies.

Employing a social constructivist framework enables researchers to unveil the underlying social norms driving policy outcomes, aligning with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) assertion that reality is socially constructed. By scrutinizing how norms influence discourse, we can identify mechanisms through which they are sustained or challenged. As Cornwall and Rivas (2015) note, the challenge is to understand how power operates in constructing social norms and how these norms can be transformed.

Combining these theories creates a comprehensive framework to explore how societal gender expectations interact with policy structures affecting women's rights in Zambia. In Ndola, this intersection is significant, as traditional beliefs regarding gender roles may limit women's autonomy within the child protection system. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality reinforces the importance of understanding the multilayered challenges women face based on their social location, including race, class and culture.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore the influence of social norms on women's rights within child protection policies in Ndola, Zambia. A qualitative case study is suitable for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within a specific context (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including policymakers, social workers and women's rights activists. This method allows for exploring participants' perspectives while ensuring coverage of key topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Focus Group Discussions were held with community members to capture a broader range of perspectives and facilitate dialogue on community norms. FGDs are effective for examining how opinions are formed and identifying social dynamics' influences (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Document analysis was conducted on relevant policy documents, reports and legal frameworks to triangulate data and provide context (Bowen, 2009).

The study employed purposive sampling to select 50 participants with direct experience or expertise in child protection and women's rights, ensuring a range of relevant perspectives (Patton, 2015). Data analysis followed a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving inductive coding to identify patterns and themes related to social norms and women's rights. Qualitative data analysis software aided in organizing and retrieving data systematically. This process was iterative, with themes refined as new data were analyzed.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured to protect participants' identities and encourage candid responses (Babbie, 2016).

5. Findings and discussion

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, policy documents and FGDs revealed several key themes regarding the intersection of social norms and women's rights.

5.1. Persistence of traditional gender roles

A prevalent theme was the persistence of traditional gender roles shaping child protection policies. Participants expressed views reinforcing stereotypical notions of women as primary caregivers. One participant noted:

In our culture, mothers are expected to be the main protectors of children. Our policies reflect this belief.

This sentiment was echoed in policy documents, which often placed disproportionate responsibility on mothers for child welfare. This finding aligns with Folbre (2001), who asserts that social norms undermine women's participation in decision-making, particularly in public spheres.

5.2. Tension between women's rights and child protection

A significant theme was the tension between women's rights and child protection measures. Participants highlighted instances where policies designed to protect children inadvertently restricted women's autonomy:

Sometimes, in our eagerness to safeguard children, we create policies that limit women's choices and freedoms.

This finding aligns with Gelles (1996), who states that policies relying on reporting mechanisms may be less effective where cultural norms prioritize family privacy. While some participants acknowledged positive steps towards enhancing women's rights, others pointed out that societal expectations dilute policy effectiveness, indicating a disconnect between legal frameworks and societal realities.

5.3. Cultural resistance to change

The analysis revealed strong cultural resistance to changing established norms. One participant stated:

Altering our child protection policies to be more gender-neutral faces significant pushback from conservative elements in society.

This resistance was particularly evident in discussions about child custody and parental leave, consistent with Korbin's (1987) observation that policies removing children from abusive homes face resistance where the family is considered sacrosanct. The research also emphasized the pivotal role of community leaders; when respected figures advocate for women's rights, it can shift communal attitudes, whereas their adherence to traditional norms stymies progress.

5.4. The critical need for education and awareness

A significant theme emerged around the need for increased education and awareness regarding women's rights and child protection. Many women cited a lack of information as a barrier to understanding their rights and available resources, often compounded by limited access to education. A participant submitted:

Many women do not know their human rights and resources.

This correlates with Narayan (2002), who argues that children's well-being is linked to women's status and empowerment. Participants expressed a desire for

educational programs to empower women and promote understanding of child rights, suggesting a path forward for policy implementation and highlighting a critical gap that policymakers must address.

6. Conclusion

This research illuminates the intricate relationship between social norms and women's rights in child protection policies, underscoring the need for multifaceted approaches incorporating cultural, legal and educational strategies to foster systemic change. The findings demonstrate that social norms significantly influence how women's rights are interpreted and implemented within child protection policies. These norms act as an invisible hand guiding gendered behavior, often limiting women's agency while maintaining social cohesion. This intricate web of expectations perpetuates gender inequalities but also offers avenues for resistance and change.

The study found that social norms are deeply rooted in cultural, religious and socio-economic structures, influencing women's participation in various spheres. In patriarchal societies, norms often prioritize male dominance, relegating women to domestic roles. This institutionalization of gender roles constrains individual agency and sustains broader social hierarchies.

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