

Strengthening Child Protection Mechanisms: The Crucial Role of the 2023 Child Safeguarding Policy in Preventing Abuse and Ensuring Safety in Chipata-Zambia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400491>

Received: 16 April 2026; Accepted: 22 April 2026; Published: 15 May 2026

ABSTRACT

Today in Zambia, there has been an escalating number of reports and incidences of various forms of child abuse. Almost on a weekly basis, the Zambia Police receive many reports of child abuse cases in form of sexual abuse, physical, psychological, emotional and neglect. Chipata as a city is not spared from these cases. These are mostly happening in homes, schools, churches, and on the streets. Chipata Central Police Station receives many cases of child abuse from the surrounding communities and villages. In general, recent reports indicate that cases of child sexual abuse are still prevalent. This being the case, it's indicative of the fact that there is a gap between the available laws or child protection policy and the implementation or enforcement of the policy. The call, therefore, is to find ways of strengthening laws that protect the welfare of children, and most importantly to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the national child protection and safeguarding policy. Additionally, there is even the lack of proper post-care of the victims of child abuse. In this case, there is also the need to establish Institutions whose sole job is to take care of those traumatized by the effects of child abuse of any form. Therefore, strengthening the mechanisms of child protection and safeguarding from all forms of abuse is an important tool to achieving a safe environment for children.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Child Protection and Safeguarding, Policy, Safe environment, Sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Today, in our contemporary world, the language of 'Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy' is a huge topic of discussion and debate because of the many cases of child abuse in human societies. Moreover, this is largely connected to the need to protect the rights and freedoms of children. Generally, today, the protection of human rights of all human beings is threatened by many Socio-political decisions made by world leaders and the various world organisations that look into the welfare of humanity. Arguably, every human being seeks to protect and safeguard the inherent and inalienable rights that are theirs.

However, there is a category of people who need the help of others to protect and safeguard their rights and freedoms. Some of these are; children under 18 years of age, people living with disabilities, and some other vulnerable adults. One way of protecting and safeguarding the welfare of such individuals is by formulating policies that will be binding at international and national levels. What is even more urgent is the creation of a safe environment for children. This is also emphasised by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) and the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB). The current argument in many societies is that they already have in place the child protection and safeguarding policies. But the following questions deserve substantiated responses; how effective and efficient are the same already formulated policies? Why do we still have many incidences and cases of child abuse in our different communities and societies? Is there a deliberate move to investigate the adherence to the national and international child protection and

safeguarding policies? And so, this study strongly posits there is a gap between the formulated policies and how effective and efficient they are in combating the vice of child abuse, especially in the case of the most vulnerable children of a given society. With that in mind, the main objective of this study is to find the best possible ways that can aid in strengthening child protection mechanisms and policies in Zambia, specifically in Chipata City.

Therefore, this article argues that; if nations already have child protection and safeguarding policies, we need to find mechanisms that will further strengthen child protection policies and ensure that they prevent the rampant child abuse cases in our societies and so create a safe environment for the vulnerable children.

Furthermore, these policies must be adhered to especially by those that are directly involved in dealing with the vulnerable groups mentioned above. That being the case, my specific interest in this research work is the welfare of the vulnerable children in relation to the formulated policies that protect and safeguard their rights and wellbeing in society. For it is well known and accepted that a true character of a society is revealed in the way it treats its children. The children are national assets that must be taken care of and protected always. In fact, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) states that every child has the right to live free from violence, exploitation and abuse (UNICEF, 2024). This is why it is important today that every responsible government takes an active role in formulating child protection policies and making sure that every citizen and institution abide by the formulated policies for the care of the children. A well-meaning government and its citizenry are supposed to look at the wellbeing and development of children till they reach their full potential in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many authors have researched and written about child welfare and their safety, however, after a thorough review of these works, this study still sees the need to enforce or strengthen even more national policies through certain mechanisms like proper involvement of traditional leaders. This is why it is important that I have read and interacted with individual and groups of authors in my work and writing of this article.

The following are some of the scholarly works and books, that so far have published or written something on the subject matter. Some articles in some of the journals were of great help. All these are current existing literature of my topic concerning child abuse in relation to our national child protection and safeguarding policies.

- i. Child Care and Education – This is a book by Tina and Carolyn Meggitt (1999). It delves into studies that deal with holistic child development, health and education of children, and child safety. The other thing that stands out in this book is the legal issues for childcare and the provisions that have since being promulgated to provide a safe environment for children. It also encourages a close and healthy working relationship between parents and government officers (civil authorities) charged with the duties of caring for the welfare of children.
- ii. Certificate, Child Care and Education - A book that supports childcare, protection and education. It further publishes academic topics with issues that deal with providing a safe and secure environment for children. It also publishes writings on physical care and development of children, and those that promote the care for children who are unwell, especially in terms of their emotional and social development. This is all done with a careful involvement of parents and carers.

Local literature on the subject matter

- i. Sexual Offences in Zambia and How the Police Deal with them, 2004 by Joseph Daka. This is small book with very useful information that presents cases of sexual abuse in general. In relation to my research, it provides information on tangible cases of sexual abuses, and gives useful insights on the approach taken by the Police and other civil Society Organisations to curb the vice.
- ii. The 2023 Child Safeguarding Policy by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services in Zambia. The National Policy explains and addresses the rights of children in the Zambian context with reference to the legal framework. In all this, the National Child Policy aims at addressing the development and welfare of children in the country.

- iii. The Children's Code Act no.12 of 2022 (Zambia) - The Act aims at protecting children in all areas so that they realise their full potential. I highly consider this children's code as an important literature that is positively contributing to a safe environment for children.
- iv. National Policy on Child Labour by Zambia Congress of Trade Unions – This document presents an acknowledgement of cases of child labour in Zambia. More to this, the Trade Union has recognised the need to participate in fighting and mitigating child labour since it is one form of child abuse. This Policy is thus one way of contributing to the fight against child abuse in Zambia.

Looking at the mentioned areas as variables from the literature available, it suffices to say that many theories have been used to find and address matters pertaining child abuse cases. Mainly, with this study, statistics and case studies have been used to help understand what is currently transpiring in our society, and to find best ways of eradicating the vice. To that effect, the theories in question are the statistical theory and case study theory. The two theories give tangible evidence in terms of the numbers of abuse cases, and the actual events of abuse. These studies truly reflect what is happening in human society, the effects on individual victims and families, and how the vice of child abuse can be mitigated (Child Protection Unit, Chipata Central Police, 2025). The theories can thus be considered as theoretical and practical in nature. They provide information that is both theoretical and empirical by giving proper and relevant details of the matter in this field of study.

Specifically, statistical theory engages a researcher in collecting, arranging, and examining data collected. It helps in designing experiments and studies of how to collect relevant and reliable data. For my work, statistics have been drawn from the surveys conducted and conclusions made from the available samples. Generally, statistics usually invigorate the need to pay particular attention to the cases of child abuse, violation of the rights of children as presented in the Children's Code Act 2022 (Zambia), strengthening child protection policies, and the much-needed post-care for the victims of any form of child abuse.

The case study theory, as a method of analysis, is an approach that takes interest in each presented case by examining and analysing in depth the context and issues surrounding the matter or case at hand. With this theory, each case presents unique ways of addressing the vices related to child abuse and the protection or the safeguarding policies that are needed to curb the vice. The focus here is on concrete details of each case that emerges from communities in a particular society. It borders on the "why" and "how" of a case. When the why and how is examined, it takes on another step for the civil authority of "how to prevent" further occurrences. This is where this research is significant, trying to strengthen mechanisms of child protection policy in Zambia, specifically in the city of Chipata.

MAIN CONTENT AND DISCUSSION

From the statistics given by the Gender Division of Zambia (2024), and the data that I have collected for this work, it shows that nearly 1150 children are abused in various ways per year in Zambia. To curb this vice, governments of various countries in Africa and the world at large have risen to support the rights of children in order to create a safe environment for the children. In Zambia, the National Protection and Safeguarding policy has been formulated and revised in the recent past years (MCDSS, *Child Safeguarding Policy*, 2023). This is in order to strengthen the mechanisms for child protection and their various rights. In Africa, Zambia is not an exception to the formulation of policies that protect the rights and dignity of children. In this regard, this study shows to a larger percentage that Zambia has made reasonable strides in the protection of children's rights and freedoms.

Currently, Zambia is using the 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy. However, it is important to note that Zambia's previous governments and the current government have formulated and revised the National Child Safeguarding Policy. This is to strengthen mechanisms for child protection against all forms of abuse; new and old. The gap that seriously remains is to check on the effectiveness of these policies, since reports of children being abused continues to occur. It is clear from this research and findings that Zambia is still facing some pockets of this vice of children being abused and neglected. My particular interest is on the reports and occurrences of child abuse in Chipata a city in the Eastern province of Zambia, and how the officers have so far used and implemented the 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy in Chipata.

Chipata is regarded by many Zambians, informally so, as the capital of the Eastern part of Zambia. In General, Eastern province has a total population of 2, 462, 682. And the total population (approximation) of people under the age of 18 years stands at 1, 367,994 as of the 2022 national statistics (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2022). The total population of people in Chipata District stands at 322,703 as at 2022. So, my target population for this research is that of people (abused) under the age 18 years in Chipata City as recorded and reported at Chipata Central Police Station.

Therefore, from what it is, as a city and from the perspective of this research, Chipata has a number of government and non-governmental activities that affect the welfare of the general public (citizens) such as traditional ceremonies. Hence, the welfare of Chipata residents is affected by the national and the local policies. This being the case, both adults and children are affected by the policies made politically in and for the entire Nation. In the context of this research, as earlier stated, this study has particular interest in the affairs of the children in Chipata in relation to Zambia's 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy. This policy, and those that were formulated before (2006, 2015), have had a lot of positive impact on how Zambia has responded to the problems of child abuse in the southern part of Africa.

For Chipata, this positive impact has been felt in many government and non-governmental institutions like the Church. For reference's sake, the Catholic Church in Chipata continues to play a bigger role in emphasising the need to strengthen the mechanisms for child protection (ZCCB, *Child Safeguarding Policy*, 2017). And so, some of the data for this research was collected from the wisdom and contributions of the catholic church in Zambia, and the Diocese of Chipata in particular. From the Zambian government's perspective, the catholic church remains an important stakeholder in the promotion of human rights, especially those of children through the formulated policies.

In addition, the National Child Safeguarding Policy is also viewed by many other stakeholders in Chipata as a landmark achievement in the realization of the safety of children. These stakeholders, like the faith-based organisations, uphold the importance of human rights in the light of vulnerable children. However, it also important to note that Chipata still faces so many social and economic challenges that in turn affect the proper implementation of the 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy such as poverty, early child marriages, and corruption. These challenges, continue to put so much pressure on the officers entrusted with the implementation of the policy. The officers sometimes have to go an extra mile from their own resources to just make sure the safety of the vulnerable children in the communities of Chipata is assured.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

General statistics show a growing number of cases that have been committed but hidden, and then later reported (Child Protection Unit, Chipata Central Police, 2025). This situation is true of the past, and some cases are quite new and fresh worldwide. Looking at this situation, the need for strengthening child protection mechanisms through effective and efficient policies is an urgent matter. Some of the current penal codes of the law against child abuse are not too stringent to deter some perpetrators. At the same time some child protection policies are not adhered to or strictly followed by organisations and institutions.

From a phenomenological study and survey of the abused children under 18 years in Zambia, it has been discovered that there are various forms and cases of Child abuse that have not been accorded the attention they deserve, and in some cases, the perpetrators of this vice have gone scot-free. At the same time, the victims go through so much trauma of the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse they underwent. A 2024 report by UNICEF shows that nearly 400 million children worldwide experience various forms of violence – be it emotional, physical, psychological or sexual (UNICEF, *Child Protection*, 2024). And a local report from the Gender Division in Zambia gives a clear picture in terms of the numbers of Gender based violence (GBV). The 2024 second quarter gender-based violence data analysis and police report indicates that new cases came to about 9,318 as at July 2024. That data shows that 2,505 child victims were abused, which represented 26.9% of all GBV victims (Gender Division, *Second Quarter Gender Based Violence, Data Analysis*, 2024). This shows that many children are abused, neglected, and exploited in homes and various institutions of our society. Of the above total number of child victims, 2,114 were involved in criminal cases; whereby 552 were boys and 1,562 were girls. In addition to these, 391 children were involved in non-criminal cases, comprising 153 boys and 238 girls

(Gender Division, *Second Quarter Gender Based Violence, Data Analysis, 2024*). This calls for an active and immediate attention to formulate policies that will strengthen child protection mechanisms and so ensure the safety of vulnerable children in society and in the end deterring the would-be offenders. This issue has attracted the attention and interest of many researchers in this field who would like to find out the reasons and the best way possible to address the subject matter.

Hence, it is precisely in this context that this study examined and analysed the data from lived experiences of victims and those who care for the victims of child abuse in the City of Chipata in Zambia. The aim is to bring to the attention of the authorities concerned, the need to strengthen child protection mechanism through effective policies. These policies will in turn ensure the safety of all the children in Chipata but more so in the entire country (Zambia). This further ensures the respect for human dignity and rights that every human being deserves. I firmly hold that every citizen has the duty to uphold the dignity and rights of children as a way of promoting human rights. Without this common responsibility, there will be a constant problem of children being abused without any care, or proper follow up of issues pertaining to the apprehension of culprits in order that they answer for their unpalatable behaviour.

Therefore, it is cardinal to look at the reality of child abuse, its impact on society, and the measures taken to end or mitigate the vice. This study provides a platform on which the importance of child protection policies can be understood, formulated, and effected strongly in our society. The following are other realities on the ground:

First and foremost, I need to acknowledge the presence and availability of two important documents in some government ministries and Institutions like the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, and the police service respectively. These two documents are the 2023 National Safeguarding Policy and Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022. This is also in place to enhance the welfare and safety of children in the country. The government in Chipata (Eastern Province of Zambia), through the Police Service is using and utilizing well the 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy in their operations. For sure, the role that the 2023 child safeguarding policy is playing in the communities and institutions in Chipata cannot be overemphasised. However, there is need to further look into the effectiveness and efficiency of its implementation in various communities of Chipata city.

Looking at the number of reports from the Gender Division (GBV quarterly reports) with their actual figures of child abuse that come through to Chipata Central Police Station, it is indicative that children are abused on a daily basis in Zambia. From these reports, the data collected, the responses during interviews and the questionnaires, an indication is that there are some gaps that need to be filled in to make sure that there is little or no room for child abuse in our communities and in the various institutions that interact with children in Chipata and Zambia as a nation.

Some of the figures and statistics are as follows from the given quarterly reports of 2024 and 2025, from the Gender Division of Zambia on all GBV and other criminal cases: in the 2nd quarter of 2024, the national statistics show that Zambia recorded 642 cases of child defilement, which represented 71.3% of all sexual offenses. Therefore, out of the above 642 cases, 641 were girls defiled and 1 boy. And as a way to help victims of these and others who experienced a certain form of abuse, the police in this quarter counselled 511 girls representing 18.2% of girls, and 220 boys representing 7.8 % boys. Some of the offenders were also given their own counselling sessions. In the 3rd Quarter of 2024, following the Gender Based Data analysis Zambia recorded 2 511 cases against children. Of these, 1, 870 (74.5%) were abused in the criminal case category, which comprised of 490 boys (26.2 %), 1380 girls (73.8%). A record of 956 sexual abuse was reported, which included 679 cases of child defilement (Gender Division, *Third Quarter Gender Based Violence, Data Analysis, 2024*).

In the fourth quarter of 2024, a total of 2666 children were reported as victims of GBV, which represented 21.5% of all victims. Of this number, 1885 (70.7%) were girls and 781 (29.3%) were boys. Eastern province, in which Chipata falls, had a share of 595 (9%) cases of GBV that affected children. In terms of child defilement, Zambia as a Nation recorded 651 cases, with Eastern province having 104 cases out of the total 651 (Gender Division, *Fourth Quarter Gender Based Violence, Data Analysis, 2024*).

In the first quarter of 2025, Eastern Province of Zambia recorded 103 cases of child defilement. Of these, 102 were girl, and then 1 boy. Other types of assaults on children indicate 38 cases; 24 boys and 14 girls. And there was a report of 1 attempted defilement case. In the second quarter of 2025, based on the GBV data analysis, Eastern Province recorded 879 cases, of which 141 were men, 553 women, 30 boys and 155 girls. Hence, we see that a total of 185 children were affected. Furthermore, Zambia recorded 685 cases of child defilement (Gender Division, Data Analysis, 2025).

From these reports and figures, Chipata Central Police Station under the Victim Support Unit (VSU) and Child Protection Unit (CPU), recorded 636 cases of child abuse. From his response to the questionnaire given, Mr Emmanuel Chabamba, a Police officer stated that most of these cases of 2024 fell under physical, emotional, and child neglect.

CONCLUSION

Following from the data collected, analysis and interpretation given in this research, Zambia as a country has made positive strides in making sure that children under that age of 18 have a safe environment where they can actualise their full potential. This is made possible by government's promotion of children's rights and the formulation of the children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022, and later on the establishment of the 2023 National Child Safeguarding Policy. In this policy, many issues of concern are raised such as risk assessment and mitigation, safe recruitment, code of conduct, induction and training, safe program design, communication, social media, and responsibilities of people and ministries involved.

However, still a lot needs to be done to strengthen the mechanisms that aim to fight child abuse completely. It is important to note that strengthening the mechanisms of the National Safeguarding Policy helps the children to feel safe and protected by law and the formulated policy itself. Thus, this research has investigated current cases and numbers of children who have fallen prey to child abuse. This has been in view of establishing and suggesting the best ways to combat the vice of child abuse in the communities of Zambia (by strengthening the mechanisms of the National Child Safeguarding Policy), especially in Chipata – Eastern Province. It is my sincere hope that the following recommendations can be taken seriously for the sake of creating a safe environment for our children today and for future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. **Community integration:** The community where these children are found remains a key factor in the pursuit for a safe environment. It is in the community that various people can participate in mitigating the evils of child abuse. Therefore, there is a serious need of strengthening local ownership by further integrating safeguarding principles into community structures and traditional leadership systems, recognizing that sustainable protection requires alignment with local values and practices. Enhanced collaborative framework is a must.
- ii. **Monitoring systems:** from the analysis of this study, a recommendation is made that Zambia, through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) develops serious monitoring frameworks that track not only compliance with policy requirements but also changes in child protection outcomes, using data to inform continuous improvement of safeguarding approaches.
- iii. **Child participation:** There is also the need to ensure meaningful participation of children in the implementation and monitoring of the policy, recognizing that children themselves are key actors in their own protection and can provide valuable insights into effective safeguarding approaches.
- iv. **Enhanced Awareness Programs:** There is a serious need to implement practical child protection education in schools and communities. These may be in form of community radio programs, roadshows and workshops.
- v. **Resource Allocation:** From this research, it is clear that limited resources have continued to hinder massive progress in child protection. Hence, there is need to ensure adequate funding for district committees that investigate the welfare of children. Government must make sure that there is deliberate adequate funding allocated specifically for policy implementation at district and community levels, recognizing that effective and safeguarding require investing in preventive measures that may not show immediate returns but yield long-term benefits.

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