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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### Visit to Zimbabwe

#### Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls\*

##### *Summary*

The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls visited Zimbabwe from 28 July to 8 August 2025. In the present report, the Working Group assesses the situation of women's and girls' human rights, noting achievements, challenges and pathways to progress. This assessment is made in the context of the country's current legal, institutional and policy framework for promoting gender equality and the participation of women in family, economic, social, political and public life, paying particular attention to the rights of girls and their futures. The Working Group also makes recommendations for further progress in eliminating discrimination and promoting gender equality.

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\* The summary of the report is being circulated in all official languages. The report itself, which is annexed to the summary, is being circulated in the language of submission only.



## Annex

### Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls on its visit to Zimbabwe

#### I. Introduction

##### A. Visit

1. The Working Group, represented by the Chair and Vice-Chair, Laura Nyirinkindi and Claudia Flores, visited Zimbabwe from 28 July to 8 August 2025, respectively, at the invitation of the Government. The Working Group expresses its sincere appreciation to the Government for its cooperation and fruitful exchanges during the visit.

2. The Working Group met with representatives of central and local authorities, parliamentarians, international organizations, civil society and women and girls in Harare, Mutare, Masvingo and Bulawayo. In Harare, the Working Group met with representatives of the following Ministries: Foreign Affairs and International Trade; Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development; Youth Empowerment and Development and Vocational Training; Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development; Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services; Sports, Recreation, Arts and Culture; Primary and Secondary Education; Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare; National Housing and Social Amenities; Information, Publicity and Broadcasting Services; Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development; Environment, Climate and Wildlife; Health and Childcare; Local Government and Public Works; Finance, Economic Development and Investment Promotion; Industry and Commerce; Tourism and Hospitality; Mines and Mining Development; Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs; Home Affairs and Cultural Heritage; and Defence and War Veteran Affairs. In addition, they met with representatives of the Attorney General's Office, the National Prosecuting Authority, the Judicial Service Commission, the Prisons and Correctional Service and Chapter 12 Commissions, including the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, Gender Commission, Media Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission and Electoral Commission. In Harare, the Working Group visited the Louise Mountbatten Primary School, the Parirenyatwa hospital group, the Chikurubi women's prison and a civil society-run one-stop centre for survivors of gender-based violence. In Mutare, Masvingo and Bulawayo, the Working Group met with Ministers of State, and representatives of Town Councils and Rural District Councils, as well as local and regional representatives of the above-mentioned ministries, departments and agencies. Furthermore, they visited the remand prison in Mutare; the Ndarama High School and a civil society-run one-stop centre and shelter in Masvingo; and the Mpilo hospital in Bulawayo. The Working Group expresses its sincere appreciation to all interlocutors for their engagement and valuable input.

3. The Working Group also met with representatives of the United Nations country team in Harare and of civil society in the four cities. The Working Group sincerely thanks the women and girl human rights defenders for taking time from their important work and travelling long distances to share with the Working Group their insightful testimonies and experiences.

##### B. Context

4. Zimbabwe is a lower-middle-income country in Southern Africa with a distinctly young demographic profile, with more than half of its population under the age of 25.<sup>1</sup> The country ranks 140th out of 172 in the United Nations Development Programme gender inequality index, and 19th out of 46 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2013, Zimbabweans laid a strong constitutional foundation for the protection of the rights of women and girls by

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/en/topics/young-people-2>.

affirming gender equality as a founding national value. Since then, the Government has made significant progress in adopting implementing legislation as well as policy and programmatic measures to give effect to this commitment.

5. Despite these advancements, substantial challenges in achieving substantive gender equality remain due to inadequate implementation and allocation of resources, as well as patriarchal attitudes within society. Social norms that perpetuate the undervaluing of girls, resulting in violations of their rights through child marriage, restricted educational opportunities and pervasive gender-based violence both online and offline, demand urgent attention.

## II. Legal, policy and institutional frameworks

### A. Ratification of international instruments

6. Zimbabwe has ratified or acceded to seven of the nine core United Nations human rights treaties and is a Party to several International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions,<sup>2</sup> the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and several regional treaties, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and its Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the 2016 revised Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development.

7. However, Zimbabwe has yet to accede to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and its Optional Protocol, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).

### B. Domestic legal and institutional framework

8. With a few exceptions, Zimbabwe has an impressive Constitution that aligns closely with its international gender equality obligations and requires the State to promote women's full participation in all areas of society on an equal basis with men, including by implementing gender parity at all levels of government in accordance with section 17. Section 56 guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex, gender, pregnancy, marital status and other grounds. Section 80 provides that women have equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities, and that all laws, customs, traditions and cultural practices that infringe the constitutional rights of women are void to the extent of the infringement.

9. Notwithstanding this strong constitutional framework, certain provisions – specifically the prohibition of same-sex marriage (sect. 78) and restrictions on access to abortion (sect. 48) – remain misaligned with international human rights standards and continue to result in gender-based discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

10. Government initiatives to advance women's and girls' rights include the 2025 national gender policy; the high-level political compact on ending gender-based violence and harmful practices (2021-2030); the national action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) (2023-2027); the climate change gender action plan (2023); the national strategy to prevent and address gender-based violence (2023-2030); and the new National Development Strategy 2 (2026-2030), which includes gender as one of its key pillars, marking progress from the previous Strategy, which named gender only as a

<sup>2</sup> Including the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

<sup>3</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 2, 26; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, art. 12; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art. 12.

cross-cutting theme. The Working Group remains concerned, however, that the national action plan on ending child marriage lapsed in 2021 and has yet to be reviewed and renewed.

11. Zimbabwe has adopted gender-responsive budgeting as a fiscal strategy to mainstream gender through the national budget, requiring ministries to outline gender priorities in response to budget call circulars. Nonetheless, implementation has faced several challenges, including limited technical capacity for gender analysis and planning; weak monitoring systems, especially at the local government level; and underresourcing and delayed allocations to ministries, departments and agencies due to fiscal constraints. A lack of gender-disaggregated data, non-compliance by ministries, departments and agencies and the absence of legal mandates in the Public Finance Management Act to enforce such budgeting have also hindered full implementation.

12. Despite its broad mandate of promoting gender equality, combating gender-based violence and ensuring women's participation in all spheres of life, the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development is allocated less than 0.5% of the national budget.<sup>4</sup> This figure is particularly concerning given recent cuts to donor funding, which have adversely affected direct service provision for survivors of gender-based violence, including through domestic violence shelters.

13. The appointment of directors of gender mainstreaming, inclusivity and wellness in each ministry, department and agency is a welcome step towards mainstreaming the needs of women and girls into all sectors. Its full potential will be realized when focal points are equipped with sufficient authority, resources and training and when gender mainstreaming is embraced as a shared responsibility across the civil service rather than solely that of the designated officials.

14. Chapter 12 of the Constitution provides for the establishment of independent commissions, including the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, the latter being tasked with ensuring gender equality by investigating gender-based discrimination and policy recommendations. While the establishment of these mandates is laudable and the independent commissions have undertaken important policy, research and investigative work to promote gender equality, the Working Group regrets that they lack enforcement power for their recommendations, contrary to the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles), and remain understaffed and underresourced, each receiving just 0.06% of the national budget.<sup>5</sup>

### III. Public and political life

#### A. Elected and appointed positions

15. Constitutional gender quotas from the 2013 reform have led to significant gains in women's political representation. Women currently hold 30.1% of the seats in the National Assembly, 44.3% of seats in the Senate and 31.3% of local government positions.<sup>6</sup> According to data from the Zimbabwe Public Service Commission, among appointed positions, women comprise 24% of cabinet ministers,<sup>7</sup> 20% of ministers for provincial affairs, 30% of ambassadors, 24% of permanent secretaries, 33% of chief directors and 24% of director positions in public service. Women, however, remain underrepresented among traditional leaders and chiefs, who are predominantly men.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See [zimtreasury.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/The-2025-National-Budget-Speech.pdf](https://zimtreasury.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/The-2025-National-Budget-Speech.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://zimcodd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Analysis-of-the-2025-Executive-National-Budget.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/ZW/ZW-LC01/data-on-women/>; and <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-11/undp-zwe-zimeco-2023-elections-gender-observatory-report.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://localgov.unwomen.org/country/ZWE>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://zgc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/National-Women-in-Leadership-and-Decision-Making-Strategy.pdf>, p. 6.

16. More than a decade later, the limitations of the quota system have become apparent. Women only occupy 11% of contested seats in Parliament, where candidates are elected directly by constituencies.<sup>9</sup> The Working Group learned that political parties discourage female aspiring politicians from standing as candidates for directly elected positions and instead consign them to designated quota seats under party lists. Women legislators without a direct constituency reportedly command less respect than their directly elected peers and are often perceived as token members with limited influence over legislative agendas. They also remain underrepresented in leadership roles within Parliament, holding only 8 of 29 committee chair positions. Furthermore, political parties are not subject to legislative or otherwise formal, gender parity requirements, rendering women marginalized in party leadership structures.

17. Financial barriers and violence against women in politics continue to impede women's political participation and leadership. In the 2023 elections, the Zimbabwe Gender Commission found that the \$1,000 nomination fee for parliamentary candidates was prohibitively high for many women wishing to run for office, who often have access to fewer resources and less institutional support. In total, 92% of the female candidates running for Parliament who responded to a Commission survey reported that they had experienced one or more types of such violence during the 2023 election, including psychological intimidation, sexual harassment, economic violence and verbal abuse, both offline and online.<sup>10</sup>

## **B. Justice and security**

18. The Working Group commends Zimbabwe for the strong representation of women in the judiciary, where women comprise 58% of all judges, including 63% of magistrates and 67% of judges on the Labour Court.<sup>11</sup> However, further progress is needed, as women are largely concentrated in the lower courts. It was also encouraged to have met women in leadership roles within the Zimbabwe Prison and Correctional Service during the visit, although women remain underrepresented in the law enforcement sector overall.

19. According to information provided by the Government, women represent 33% of positions in the Ministry of Defence but only 10% of combatant positions in the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. Proactive measures to promote women's recruitment, retention and promotion across the justice, law and order, and security sectors are needed to achieve gender parity.

## **C. Women and girl human rights defenders**

20. Women's and girls' organizations play a key role in promoting gender equality in Zimbabwe by documenting abuses, advocating for reforms and providing critical services. The Working Group is concerned by reports of threats, arrests, surveillance and persecution of women human rights defenders, journalists and activists, particularly those working on LGBTQI+ rights, land and environmental advocacy or political reform, as raised in multiple communications sent by special procedure mandate holders to the Government.<sup>12</sup>

21. The increasing restrictions on civil society organizations – such as the Private Voluntary Organizations Amendment Act of April 2025 and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act, dubbed the “Patriotic Act”, enacted in March 2024 – are gravely concerning. These laws risk stifling freedom of expression and association, foster

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-11/undp-zwe-zimeco-2023-elections-gender-observatory-report.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://zgc.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ZGC-National-study-on-violence-against-women-in-politics-in-Zimbabwe.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-09/undp-unwomen-women-in-justice-in-africa.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> See [ZWE 1/2024](#), [ZWE 1/2021](#), [ZWE 2/2021](#), [ZWE 1/2020](#), [ZWE 3/2020](#) and [ZWE 4/2019](#). All communications mentioned in the present report are available from <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/Tmsearch/TMDocuments>.

self-censorship among activists and place a disproportionate burden on smaller, community-based organizations that may be unable to meet extensive reporting requirements, with heavy penalties for non-compliance. The Working Group welcomes the High Court's decision to strike down provisions of the "Patriotic Act" as unconstitutional on the grounds of disproportionate penalties and vagueness and urges Zimbabwe to reform the Act in line with international human rights law.

## IV. Economic and social life

### A. Women's participation in the labour force and entrepreneurship

22. Zimbabwean women actively participate in the economy as entrepreneurs, farmers, vendors, miners, cross-border traders, labourers and professionals. Despite their vital contributions, women are largely concentrated in the informal sector and face structural barriers to equal participation, decent work, social security and economic stability. In 2024, the labour force participation rate among women was 59.6%, compared to 71.2% for men.<sup>13</sup> Zimbabwean women are less likely than men to be in paid employment (39.4% versus 48.9%).<sup>14</sup> As of 2023, women held only 33.4% of positions in senior and middle management in the public and private sector.<sup>15</sup> Despite equal pay laws, the gender wage gap persists, with women employees earning on average about two thirds the wage of their male counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Women are also disproportionately concentrated in lower-remunerated fields, including services, sales, care and domestic work, education, health and social services.<sup>17</sup> Those in male-dominated industries, such as mining, face particular challenges, such as discriminatory attitudes, widespread sexual harassment and limited access to productive assets, titles and resources.

23. According to the Government, Zimbabwe has taken several commendable steps to support women's economic empowerment, such as encouraging Ministries to hire women-owned companies in procurement; partnering with women's mining associations to combat gender stereotypes in the industry; providing skills training and agricultural inputs for rural women; and cash transfers for households in vulnerable situations. Nonetheless, the Working Group remains concerned that poverty continues to impact women and girls disproportionately: over 9.9 million Zimbabweans – more than 60% of the population – live on less than \$4.20 per day, with female headed households and rural women and girls among the most affected.<sup>18</sup>

24. Poverty and women's economic dependence on men often compromises their ability to enjoy their rights in other areas, increasing their risks of gender-based violence, unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Economic circumstances have also compelled women and girls to enter sex work or child and/or forced marriages. In that regard, the Working Group urges the Government to strengthen women's economic empowerment as a key strategy to combat violations of women's rights and recognize their central role in sustainable development. The lingering impacts of unilateral coercive measures, combined with insufficient prioritization of women's economic empowerment, have also had a

<sup>13</sup> See <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/zimbabwe>.

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe\\_narrative\\_report.pdf](https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe_narrative_report.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> See <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sl-emp-smgt-fe-zs>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/04/29/persistent-gender-disparities-hinder-women-s-safety-and-productivity-in-afe-zimbabwe>.

<sup>17</sup> See <https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Brandded%20Women%20and%20Men%20in%20Zimbabwe%20Report%20FINAL%201%20Oct.pdf>, page 60; and [https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/landscape\\_of\\_care\\_-\\_zimbabwe.pdf](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/landscape_of_care_-_zimbabwe.pdf), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> See <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/bae48ff2fec5a869546775b3f010735-0500062021/related/mpo-zwe.pdf>.

disproportionate effect on women and women-headed households, exacerbating low wages, unemployment and informality.<sup>19</sup>

25. Women's entrepreneurship is a key driver of Zimbabwe's economy, with reportedly 56% of small and medium-sized enterprises in Zimbabwe being women-owned.<sup>20</sup> Yet women continue to face difficulties accessing capital and financing from banking institutions due to limited financial literacy, lack of collateral and lower income. To address these challenges, Zimbabwe has established the Women's Microfinance Bank, which provides crucial character-based loans without collateral and at low interest rates and has taken efforts to decentralize its services and increase accessibility. However, the Working Group was informed that services remained inaccessible to many rural women and loans were too small to support larger entrepreneurial projects.

26. Gendered expectations regarding unpaid care and support work continue to limit Zimbabwean women's equal participation in the workplace. Women in Zimbabwe spend 25.9 hours per week on unpaid caregiving activities for young children and family members, compared to 16.1 hours for men.<sup>21</sup> Girls also report significantly greater care and support responsibilities than boys within their households. The Working Group commends Zimbabwe for having removed the restrictions for entitlement to 98 days of paid maternity leave under the Labour Act, although it regrets that there is no parental leave offered to fathers.

27. The Working Group welcomes Zimbabwe's national information and communications technology (ICT) policy (2022-2027), which aims to ensure equal access to ICT services for all citizens. Zimbabwe however faces a gender digital divide, with female-headed households less likely than male-headed households to have access to various ICTs, including the Internet, radio, television, mobile phones and computers.<sup>22</sup> The divide remains wide particularly in rural areas, limiting girls' access to education and women's ability to participate in the digital economy.

## B. Education

28. Zimbabwe has a strong legal framework guaranteeing the right to basic education. The Education Act (amended in 2020) entitles every child to compulsory basic education up to the fourth form (lower secondary education). In practice, however, gender and socioeconomic disparities significantly affect access and completion. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), girls exceed boys in primary school completion rates – which stands at 92% for girls and 86% for boys – but completion rates drop to 54% for both genders for lower secondary school. Gender gaps emerge in upper secondary school, with completion rates of 14% for girls and 17% for boys.<sup>23</sup>

29. Among children in the poorest income bracket, completion of upper secondary education is alarmingly low at just 1%, with pronounced disparities between urban and rural areas.<sup>24</sup> At the tertiary level, as of 2023, only 0.9% of women had attained at least a Bachelor's degree or equivalent,<sup>25</sup> compared to 1.5% of men,<sup>26</sup> although recent university enrolment trends from government data suggest progress, with more women enrolling than men.

<sup>19</sup> See A/HRC/51/33/Add.2.

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.undp.org/zimbabwe/blog/empowering-women-entrepreneurs-africa-view-undp-zimbabwe>.

<sup>21</sup> See [https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/landscape\\_of\\_care\\_-\\_zimbabwe.pdf](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/landscape_of_care_-_zimbabwe.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> See [https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Census/Zimbabwe\\_2022\\_PHC\\_Gender\\_thematic\\_FINAL\\_DRAFT\\_Jan\\_25.pdf](https://www.zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/Census/Zimbabwe_2022_PHC_Gender_thematic_FINAL_DRAFT_Jan_25.pdf), p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> See <https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Zimbabwe-MICS-EAGLE-Education-fact-sheets-2021.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.CUAT.BA.FE.ZS?locations=ZW>.

<sup>26</sup> See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.CUAT.BA.MA.ZS?locations=ZW>.

30. The Working Group was encouraged to learn from the Government that female students currently constitute 43% of those studying science, technology, engineering and mathematics and that over 600 female students benefit from the work-for-fees programme, which helps by covering their university tuition costs. Furthermore, in Masvingo, the Working Group appreciated the inclusive approach to education at Ndarama High School, including providing continuing education for pregnant girls, domestic workers and older women.

31. The Working Group commends the Government's basic education assistance module, intended to support disadvantaged students. However, it received reports that hidden costs for materials such as uniforms, stationery and other school supplies posed significant barriers for children from rural and low-income households, that the benefits of the module did not always reach intended beneficiaries and that payments to schools were often delayed, sometimes by years. As a result, supported students were often asked to pay supplemental costs or levies to attend classes.

32. Girls continue to face significant and intersecting barriers to education, including high rates of teenage pregnancy, child marriage, disproportionate care and support responsibilities, financial hardship, limited access to menstrual hygiene products and services, and lack of sanitation facilities at school. These factors contribute to higher dropout rates among girls. Stigma further entrenches these disparities, and some schools still refuse to enrol pregnant girls, despite the Education Act's laudable prohibition on discrimination against pregnant pupils.

33. The Working Group also heard troubling accounts that families, even when financially able to do so, choose not to support their daughters' education. These decisions are often rooted in entrenched gender norms that treat investment in girls' learning as yielding limited returns. Sons are viewed as future contributors to the household, while daughters are perceived as destined for marriage and eventual departure from the family. These discriminatory beliefs continue to undermine girls' right to education and reinforce cycles of gender inequality.

### C. Women's access to land, property and credit

34. Ensuring women's equal property and land rights is critical to advancing gender equality, economic empowerment and climate resilience. Under Zimbabwe's civil law, women have access to property and land ownership on an equal basis as men. The Working Group was pleased to learn from the Government that women, including those in polygamous marriages, can be registered on men's land titles as spouses, enabling widows to inherit land when they are jointly listed as owners.

35. Despite these legal entitlements, gender disparities remain, with only 12% of women reporting land ownership with a title or deed listing their name, compared to 23.8% of men. Similarly, 17.5% of women report owning a house with a title or a deed listing their name, compared to 24.7% of men.<sup>27</sup> The Working Group was informed that many women are not fully aware of the importance of securing property and land titles and some are asked during administrative processes to sign documents only as witnesses rather than as co-owners. Limited ownership of assets that can serve as collateral also restricts women's access to loans and credit, further constraining their economic autonomy. In this regard, the national housing and human settlements policy, including its 10% housing allocation for women, represents a positive step towards addressing gender gaps.<sup>28</sup>

36. While women are often permitted to use communal land, they are frequently excluded from ownership and inheritance rights, particularly affecting the rights of rural women. The Communal Land Act (1982) and Traditional Leaders Act (1998) place communal land under the custodianship of traditional leaders – chiefs and village heads – who are almost

<sup>27</sup> See [https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023\\_24\\_report.pdf](https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023_24_report.pdf), pp. 420–427.

<sup>28</sup> See [https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe\\_narrative\\_report.pdf](https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe_narrative_report.pdf).

exclusively men. These inequalities contribute to poverty, food insecurity and vulnerability to climate-related shocks and hazards, particularly for women-headed households.

## V. Family and cultural life

37. Throughout the visit, the Working Group consistently heard from men and women that Zimbabwe's societal norms reflect entrenched patriarchal attitudes based on conceptions of male dominance. Women are widely expected to assume traditional roles as primary caregivers and nurturers, in the family and private sphere, limiting their participation in public, political and economic life. Within households and communities, women are often excluded from decision-making due to entrenched gender norms.

38. Girls and young women in Zimbabwe face systemic barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights due to prescriptive gender roles assigned by families. They described to the Working Group instances of parental and guardian reluctance to support their education, pressure to enter child and/or forced marriage and the imposition of heavy domestic and care responsibilities. Girls from poor, disadvantaged and rural backgrounds are forced into child labour, including as domestic workers, and denied education in favour of boys. Inadequate child protection services have left girls – especially unaccompanied migrant girls and those left behind by migrating parents – vulnerable to neglect, abuse, exploitation and harmful practices. In some cases, these girls are compelled to assume parental and household responsibilities for younger siblings, with profoundly detrimental impacts on their rights and well-being.

39. The Working Group was also informed of a growing backlash against gender equality efforts, including claims that men and boys are being “left behind” as women's and girls' participation is prioritized. The Working Group emphasizes that this framing is misguided. Persistent gender inequalities create and reinforce restrictive gender norms for everyone, including men and boys, and these norms contribute to negative educational, health and social outcomes across society. Advancing gender equality therefore broadens opportunities and improves well-being for all members of the community.

### A. Family law

40. Under the Marriages Act (2022), Zimbabwe recognizes both civil and customary marriages, as well as polygamous and monogamous unions, granting them equal legal status. Same-sex marriage, however, remains prohibited. Despite this formal parity, significant disparities persist. Customary law marriages often reinforce male authority, and women in these unions face greater challenges in exercising their health and reproductive rights, accessing property upon separation, claiming inheritance or securing custody without the support of male relatives. These challenges are further exacerbated by the widespread non-registration of customary unions, which, like cohabiting relationships, leaves women without legal standing or effective remedies before formal courts. In this context, the Working Group considers the Act's efforts to mandate registration and harmonize marriage systems commendable. Nonetheless, it remains concerned that enforcement is uneven and substantial gaps remain between constitutional guarantees of gender equality and the realities women face in customary or informal unions.

### B. Child marriage and polygamy

41. The Marriages Act (2022) establishes a minimum age of 18 and explicitly criminalizes child marriage, following a Constitutional Court declaration in 2016 that child marriage was unconstitutional. However, the practice remains widespread in Zimbabwe, with limited enforcement and accountability. According to a 2022 UNICEF report, 1.4 million women in Zimbabwe were first married or in a union before age 18, including 241,000 before the

age 15.<sup>29</sup> Child marriage rates are significantly higher in rural areas, with girls from the poorest households being six times more likely to be married than those from the wealthiest.<sup>30</sup> Many of these marriages occur under unregistered customary law unions and within apostolic sects, leaving girls with limited rights to inheritance, property and custody rights upon dissolution or widowhood.

42. Throughout the visit, the Working Group heard that child marriage, often entered by coercion, seriously hinders the realization of girls' rights, particularly in relation to health, education and freedom from violence. The Working Group was informed that there had been no convictions under the legal provisions relating to child marriage but that prosecutors had prosecuted such cases under legal provisions relating to rape or sexual intercourse with a child to, which carry significantly higher sentences. The Working Group remains deeply concerned by the persistent prevalence of coerced child marriage, the absence of effective mechanisms to prevent and address it and the failure to recognize how it impedes the full enjoyment of the rights of women and girls.

43. Child marriage is driven by multiple, interrelated factors that require coordinated responses, including poverty, lack of access to education due to school fees, parental pressure and harmful religious and cultural norms. Addressing it requires concerted action by a wide range of stakeholders, including local leaders. In this regard, the Working Group welcomes efforts to engage traditional leadership, such as bylaws to end child marriage drafted in concert with the chiefdoms of Bushu and Nyamaropa.<sup>31</sup>

44. Approximately 10% of women in Zimbabwe report that they are in a polygamous marriage,<sup>32</sup> although the Working Group was informed that its prevalence is likely higher. Women in polygamous marriages often have fewer legal protections over property and inheritance rights than those in civil monogamous unions. The Working Group also heard that first wives hold considerable influence over subsequent wives, creating an environment prone to abuse. Under these circumstances, polygamy has grave consequences on the health, well-being and socioeconomic opportunities of women, children and communities as a whole,<sup>33</sup> and the Government must promote and protect the rights of women in polygamous marital relationships in accordance with the Maputo Protocol.

### C. Nationality and birth registration

45. Despite the legal obligation under the Births and Deaths Registration Act (1986) to register every child, access to birth and identity documents remains uneven, with significant populations remaining unregistered. Estimates indicate that up to 300,000 people in Zimbabwe, many of whom are survivors and descendants of victims of the Gukurahundi massacres and descendants of undocumented migrant communities, are at risk of statelessness.<sup>34</sup>

46. According to a national inquiry by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, multiple barriers – such as requirements for paternal presence or consent, parental documentation, proof of nationality and registration fees – impede birth registration.<sup>35</sup> These challenges disproportionately affect unmarried mothers and women in customary or informal unions, including cohabiting relationships. In rural areas, limited legal awareness and access to administrative facilities further hinder women's ability to register their children. The lack

<sup>29</sup> See <https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Child-Marriage-in-Eastern-and-Southern-Africa-June-2022-UNICEF-web.pdf>, p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/reports/transforming-masculinities-gender-equality-and-end-child-marriage>.

<sup>31</sup> See [https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe\\_narrative\\_report.pdf](https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe_narrative_report.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> See [https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023\\_24\\_report.pdf](https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023_24_report.pdf), p. 75.

<sup>33</sup> See CEDAW/C/GC/31/Rev.1 - CRC/C/GC/18/Rev.1.

<sup>34</sup> See [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1083634/1930\\_1476866982\\_57f650ee4.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1083634/1930_1476866982_57f650ee4.pdf); and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AFR4639322021ENGLISH.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.veritaszim.net/node/4547>.

of registration in turn limits the children's access to essential services, including education and healthcare.<sup>36</sup>

## D. Harmful practices

47. Various harmful practices – including female genital mutilation (e.g. labia elongation), *lobola* (bride price), *kugara nhaka* (inheritance of wife by a male relative upon the husband's death), *kuripa ngozi* (marriage as a remedy for crime), virginity testing and witch hunting – continue to be practised in Zimbabwe. The Working Group was deeply disturbed to hear reports that girls who are perceived to engage in sexual relations may be seen as having compromised the family's honour and are coerced into marriages, sometimes even with perpetrators of sexual violence, as a form of remedy. The Working Group also heard reports that some traditional healers direct businessmen and influential male leaders to sleep with a virgin child to solicit success, encouraging child rape. There were also alarming reports that girls are seen as transactional commodities to families due to the practice of *lobola*, for which a higher amount can be charged if she is a virgin.

48. Certain harmful practices are particularly widespread among the apostolic sects, which encourage child marriage, non-education of the girl child, polygamy and women's subjugation in the home. Despite widespread knowledge among government officials and society as a whole that such sects engage in harmful practices, reportedly no significant action has been taken to sanction them. In that regard, the Working Group reminds the Government that freedom of religion or belief should never be invoked to justify human rights violations, including discrimination against women and girls.<sup>37</sup>

## VI. Health

### A. Access to healthcare

49. Zimbabwe has made important commitments to healthcare, including through constitutional guarantees and public health initiatives. According to the Government, policies to provide free or subsidized healthcare are in place for children under the age of 5, persons over 65 and survivors of sexual abuse. Nonetheless, significant implementation gaps continue to limit women's and girls' access to essential services. While Zimbabwe has highly qualified senior medical consultants, many have left the country in search of better opportunities, particularly since the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As of 2024, only approximately 3,500 medical consultants remain to serve a population of 15 million.<sup>38</sup> Hospitals and clinics face shortages of staff, medicine, equipment and supplies, particularly in rural areas. The Working Group also repeatedly heard concerns about petty corruption within the healthcare system, including the imposition of hidden fees and the use of private referrals by medical workers at public health facilities, significantly increasing the cost of services and rendering them inaccessible for many.

50. HIV/AIDS remains a major public health challenge, with 1.3 million people living with HIV.<sup>39</sup> Women and girls are disproportionately affected, with a prevalence rate of 12.1% compared to 7.4% among men.<sup>40</sup> In a 2025 report, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) concluded that the cost of failing to provide youth-friendly adequate sexual and reproductive health and HIV services would amount to nearly \$3.7 million, or

<sup>36</sup> See [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1083634/1930\\_1476866982\\_57f650ee4.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1083634/1930_1476866982_57f650ee4.pdf); and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AFR4639322021ENGLISH.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> See A/HRC/38/46; and A/HRC/29/40.

<sup>38</sup> See [https://zimbabwe.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/UNCT\\_ZW\\_CommonCountryAnalysis\\_2024.pdf](https://zimbabwe.un.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/UNCT_ZW_CommonCountryAnalysis_2024.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> See [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/2024-unaids-global-aids-update\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2024-unaids-global-aids-update_en.pdf), p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> See [https://www.unaids.org/en/countries\\_zimbabwe\\_data](https://www.unaids.org/en/countries_zimbabwe_data).

12.9% of Zimbabwe's gross domestic product.<sup>41</sup> The Working Group was informed by health professionals that access to antiretroviral therapy and services for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV/AIDS is provided free of charge in government hospitals and prisons. Recent cuts in international funding, however, have reportedly curtailed accessibility and affordability of life-saving HIV/AIDS treatments for key populations such as sex workers and LBTQI+ women.

## B. Sexual and reproductive health rights

51. Zimbabwe has made significant progress in reducing the maternal mortality rate, which declined from an estimated 651 deaths to 212 deaths per 100,000 live births.<sup>42</sup> This achievement reflects increased access to skilled birth attendants, improved antenatal care, including through maternity waiting homes, and strong partnerships between the Government, development agencies and civil society organizations on maternal health. Despite these gains, maternal mortality in Zimbabwe remains higher than in many other countries in Southern Africa.<sup>43</sup>

52. Under the Termination of Pregnancy Act, abortion is prohibited except in the circumstances of rape, incest or danger to the mother's life. During its visit, the Working Group heard that, even in cases of rape, survivors often face significant delays in obtaining the magistrate's order required to lawfully terminate their pregnancy, pushing them beyond the legal time frame.

53. The Working Group was thus pleased to learn that, subsequent to its visit, the National Assembly on 23 October 2025 approved amendments to the Act, permitting girls under 18 to request a termination up to 12 weeks on demand and up to 20 weeks upon justification, without parental consent; expanding access to abortion up to 20 weeks for adults in cases of threats to maternal health or foetal abnormalities; and removing administrative barriers to abortion. Given the estimates that approximately 65,000 induced abortions occur annually in Zimbabwe,<sup>44</sup> most in unsafe conditions, these reforms are a critical step towards addressing this preventable public health crisis. The Working Group urges Zimbabwe to ensure the final adoption and effective implementation of the amendments, expanding access to safe and affordable abortion services and information.

54. Maternal health services remain insufficient overall, although the Working Group observed innovative pilot projects run by civil society organizations in collaboration with government health facilities. At the Parirenyatwa hospital, for example, SALT Africa provides psychosocial support to mothers, including through a bereavement suite offering a space for mourning pregnancy and infant loss, thereby destigmatizing mental health counselling for women and their families. The Working Group was also encouraged that hospital leadership recognizes the importance of safe abortion services and that conscientious objection is not permitted to obstruct care. The Working Group further welcomes the provision of free cervical and breast cancer screenings, while noting that treatment remains unaffordable for many.

55. Zimbabwe has reduced the unmet need for family planning among women to 8.8%, and the United Nations Population Fund indicates that 84.6% of women in Zimbabwe have their needs satisfied with modern methods.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, antenatal care, labour and delivery and post-natal care are offered free of charge at Government-run clinics (after an initial, one-off fee) according to the Ministry of Health and Childcare. Nonetheless, the Working Group received reports that many women are unable to access these services due to chronic

<sup>41</sup> See [https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/JC3130E-cost-of-inaction-south-africa-zimbabwe\\_en.pdf](https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/JC3130E-cost-of-inaction-south-africa-zimbabwe_en.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> See <https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/en/news/zimbabwe-releases-key-findings-2023%E2%80%9324-zimbabwe-demographic-and-health-survey>.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sh-sta-mmrt>.

<sup>44</sup> See <https://www.afro.who.int/news/enhancing-capacity-zimbabwes-health-system-reduce-abortion-related-maternal-deaths>.

<sup>45</sup> See [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20Supplies%20Performance%20Measurement%20Report%202023\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20Supplies%20Performance%20Measurement%20Report%202023_WEB.pdf).

shortages of essential medicines and supplies. For example, some women who face childbirth complications were reportedly required to buy fuel for the ambulances needed to transport them to another medical facility for treatment. The Working Group also heard troubling reports whereby patients had been expected to pay unofficial fees or bribes to receive care or whereby women had been encouraged to undergo caesarean sections that may not have been medically necessary.

56. Healthcare access for women and girls with post-birth complications remains a challenge, including treatment for obstetric fistula. In total, 1% of women have suffered from obstetric fistula, 55% of whom being from rural areas and 59% from the lowest wealth quintile.<sup>46</sup> Due to severe stigma and discrimination from their communities, affected women and girls often face social isolation, economic hardships and significant obstacles in accessing accurate health information, timely care and rehabilitation services.

57. The national teenage pregnancy rate in Zimbabwe remains high at 23%, and 43% of women report becoming sexually active by the age of 18.<sup>47</sup> The Working Group was told that pregnant adolescents face stigma and discrimination in accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare and that healthcare providers and adolescent girls themselves often erroneously believe that parental consent is required to receive contraceptive and HIV/AIDS services.

## VII. Gender-based violence against women and girls

### A. General manifestations

58. Gender-based violence, exacerbated by COVID-19, remains a serious and pervasive challenge to women's and girl's equality and basic human rights that demands sustained and coordinated action. Approximately 27% of Zimbabwean women report having experienced physical violence and 9% report having experienced sexual violence since the age of 15.<sup>48</sup> Child sexual abuse remains a serious concern, with child-headed homes, unaccompanied migrant girls, girls with disabilities, orphaned girls and girls belonging to religious sects being particularly vulnerable. The Working Group was told that, in some provinces, the risks of such violence are further heightened by a growing crisis of drug and substance abuse, largely among young men. Online spaces are often unsafe for women and girls, with cyberbullying, revenge porn, victim blaming and gendered disinformation being prevalent forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

59. Sexual harassment is widespread. A 2017 study found that, among those suffering violence or harassment at work, 90% had experienced sexual harassment.<sup>49</sup> Allegations of sexual harassment against high-profile individuals have reportedly not resulted in proper investigations or accountability but instead led to victim-shaming. The Working Group was told that sexual harassment is particularly commonplace in the police force, military, private security firms, tertiary educational institutions and religious institutions. Relatedly, "sextortion", or sexual bribery, is reportedly widespread, with women being asked to give sexual favours in exchange for jobs and access to public services.<sup>50</sup>

60. Gender-based violence is further exacerbated by Zimbabwe's multi-hazard humanitarian crisis, marked by severe drought, cholera outbreaks, widespread water scarcity and food insecurity. Climate shocks have increased economic stress on households, resulting in higher rates of intimate partner violence.<sup>51</sup> In drought-affected areas, women and girls who walk long distances from home to collect water have faced such violence en route and at

<sup>46</sup> See [https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023\\_24\\_report.pdf](https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023_24_report.pdf), p. 185.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>49</sup> See

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099062823005529216/pdf/P1799111824c0f0fe1998d1786a3ba8c074.pdf>, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> See <https://www.tizim.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Gender-and-Corruption-in-Zimbabwe-2019.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> See <https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/en/topics/humanitarian-0>.

communal boreholes. Food insecurity has also led some women, girls and their families to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, including skipping meals, transactional sex and resorting to child marriage.

## **B. Legal framework on gender-based violence**

61. Zimbabwe has a robust legal framework to address gender-based violence. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act (2006) criminalizes numerous forms of sexual violence, including marital rape and sex trafficking. The Domestic Violence Act (2007) criminalizes domestic violence – including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological and economic abuse – and bans harmful practices such as forced virginity testing, female genital mutilation and forced wife inheritance. The Trafficking in Persons Act (2014) criminalizes human trafficking and mandates government support for victims.

62. Zimbabwe has introduced mandatory sentencing laws for rape and aggravated indecent assault, including a minimum 10-year prison sentence for those convicted of rape and a presumptive penalty of 20 years for “aggravated indecent assault”.<sup>52</sup> The Cybercrime and Data Protection Act prohibits non-consensual filming and sharing of intimate images, child sexual abuse and cybergrooming, among others.

63. Section 8(h) of the Labour Act prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace as an unfair labour practice, although it does not define the act. Zimbabwe has also adopted a public service sexual harassment policy and similar policies applicable to higher education. However, in the absence of comprehensive legislation addressing sexual harassment in all spheres, existing laws and policies provide protection only within limited contexts.

## **C. State responses to gender-based violence**

64. Zimbabwe has 19 shelters for survivors of gender-based violence and 17 one-stop centres, including 7 that are State-run, that bring together the police, lawyers, healthcare workers, social workers and counsellors to offer comprehensive support to victims.<sup>53</sup> The Working Group was pleased to learn about collaboration between Musasa, a leading civil society organization providing trauma-informed services to survivors, working with legal aid service providers, community leaders and local chiefs who lease land free of charge, and traditional leaders, engaging in dialogue on gender-based violence and providing security to shelter premises.

65. The Government is heavily reliant on civil society organizations for the delivery of essential services to survivors of gender-based violence, including in the operation of one-stop centres, adult rape clinics, shelters and the provision of legal aid. Organizations have worked tirelessly to fill the gaps in State services, yet diminishing State and donor funding currently presents and is likely to increasingly present insurmountable barriers to providing adequate assistance. The Working Group also regrets that the Anti-Domestic Violence Council, a key national mechanism established to monitor and coordinate the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act, has not been operational for at least four years.

## **D. Access to justice**

66. Zimbabwe has established 419 victim-friendly units in police stations across the country, in which specially trained officers record and investigate cases of gender-based violence, including domestic violence.<sup>54</sup> At least 22 victim-friendly courts have also been established to provide child-sensitive and victim-centred legal proceedings for survivors of gender-based violence, including through the use of video links, in camera proceedings and

<sup>52</sup> Criminal Procedure (Sentencing Guidelines) Regulations, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> See <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/a-79-500-submission-zimbabwe-en.pdf>.

<sup>54</sup> See [https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe\\_narrative\\_report.pdf](https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/gender-poverty-social-policy/beijing-30/zimbabwe_narrative_report.pdf), p. 34.

the involvement of social workers. According to the Government, pretrial diversion of children has also resulted in fewer girls being remanded or imprisoned.<sup>55</sup>

67. Despite noteworthy initiatives to address access to justice for survivors, significant gaps persist. Less than half (44%) of women who experienced physical or sexual violence in Zimbabwe seek help, often deterred by fear of reprisals and stigma from family and perpetrators and economic dependence on abusers.<sup>56</sup> Many survivors are unaware of existing protection mechanisms, and, in rural areas, one-stop centres, police stations and shelters are difficult to reach. Limited capacity among service providers and weak coordination further hinder access to justice, and DNA testing is rarely used even where equipment exists, restricting evidence-gathering. Victim-friendly units also remain underfunded, with frequent staff turnover and insufficient training on gender-sensitive investigations.

68. Survivors also frequently report negative attitudes among law enforcement officials, who normalize gender-based violence in family settings and divert victims to counselling or traditional chiefs. The Working Group also heard that police rarely conduct active searches for perpetrators and that the absence of clear national guidelines or timelines for investigations into such violence results in significant delays. As cases cannot proceed to court without the suspect being in custody, many complaints stall at the investigative stage. Low conviction rates for such violence further deter survivors from reporting it, and many perpetrators reportedly escape accountability, including by fleeing to neighbouring countries.

69. The Working Group remains particularly concerned by the lack of access to justice for sex workers and LBTQI+ women and girls, stemming from the prohibition of same-sex conduct and of activities associated with sex work (e.g. solicitation, brothel-keeping, living off the earnings of prostitution), as well as widespread stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Women and girls in these communities are frequently subjected to arrest, harassment or violence by law enforcement officials and others, and their reports of sexual and gender-based violence are often dismissed without proper investigation. The decriminalization of same-sex conduct and sex work-related activities, alongside the adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, is urgently required to uphold their human rights and ensure protection from violence.<sup>57</sup>

## VIII. Women and girls facing intersecting forms of discrimination

### A. Women and girls deprived of liberty

70. The Working Group thanks the authorities for facilitating access to the Chikurubi women's prison and the Mutare remand prison. The Working Group observed positive cultures of correctional and rehabilitative care during the visits. At both prisons, children born to imprisoned mothers can access free care up to the age of 3, after which they are transferred to family members or placed in a facility arranged through social welfare services. At Chikurubi, a dedicated creche provides free childcare and education while mothers attend other activities. Women at Chikurubi can access a range of educational classes, including sewing, farming, anger and stress management, and substance abuse rehabilitation. Mutare reportedly offered a narrower range of activities, including sewing, farming and sports.

71. However, at both prisons, facilities were basic, worn, overcrowded and in need of repair, and both lacked adequate sanitation, insulation and capacity. Women were confined to overcrowded cells for over 15 hours a day at Mutare and 14 hours at Chikurubi, with inadequate toilets facilities. At Mutare, women were assigned to tight quarters adjacent to the men's prisons, with no separate facilities for healthcare, cooking and education. At Chikurubi, girls in conflict with the law and those facing deportation for immigration offences were detained in the same facility as adults. Despite committed and resourceful staff, the prison clinic lacked essential medicines and did not have adequate services for emergency

<sup>55</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/stories/victim-friendly-courts-empower-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-victims>.

<sup>56</sup> See [https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023\\_24\\_report.pdf](https://zimstat.co.zw/wp-content/uploads/demography/zdhs/zdhs2023_24_report.pdf), p. 443.

<sup>57</sup> See A/HRC/WG.11/39/1.

births or an ambulance. Furthermore, although the Prisons and Correctional Services Act required the appointment of a gynaecologist, Chikurubi had no such specialist on site, and inconsistent practices among officials regarding women prisoners' access to medical practitioners of their choice had, at times, impeded access to healthcare, including for prenatal care.

72. The Working Group was also informed that prisons were often designed for men and that the regulations and supply schedules lacked gender sensitivity, resulting in numerous challenges for women. Essential toiletries, underwear and sanitary products were reportedly excluded from standard provisions for women, compromising their health and dignity. Although the Working Group was informed that sanitary pads were provided at the two prisons they visited, the officials acknowledged that women received additional supplies from relatives and charities due to limited State-provided supplies. Moreover, even in colder weather, many women prisoners were reportedly required to wear dresses, while their male counterparts were given long trousers, reflecting gender bias in the treatment of prisoners. Standard food provisions for infants and breastfeeding mothers also appeared inadequate, and officials at Chikurubi acknowledged that infant formula had run out and relatives often brought additional food.

73. Although not included in the visit agenda, the Working Group commends the establishment in 2021 of the Marondera female open prison as a good practice to be replicated in other provinces. Alternatives to custodial sentences, in accordance with the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules), should be further explored.

## **B. Rural women and girls, including Indigenous Peoples**

74. Over 60% of Zimbabwe's population lives in rural areas, where women form the backbone of household and community well-being.<sup>58</sup> Despite their central role in sustaining families and communities, rural women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, including crop failures, water scarcity and extreme weather events, that undermine food security, income and caregiving capacities. Environmental degradation and pollution caused by mining and other extractive activities have further jeopardized their livelihoods, contaminated local water sources and led to forced displacement. These hardships are compounded by structural gender inequalities, manifested in their limited access to land and productive resources, as well as exclusion from financial systems and decision-making.<sup>59</sup>

75. Rural girls also face additional challenges, including limited access to education, high rates of child marriage and barriers to healthcare. Child marriage is twice as likely in rural areas than urban areas, leading to school dropouts, early pregnancies, increased risk of gender-based violence and economic disempowerment.<sup>60</sup> Access to menstrual hygiene products continues to be a challenge due to affordability and availability, as well as limited sanitation facilities, including at schools. Legal and public services also remain largely inaccessible for rural women and girls, with interlocutors noting that police stations were remote and often sparsely staffed, limiting access to justice.

76. Indigenous women and girls, including those belonging to the Tjawa and Doma communities, often reside in rural areas. The Working Group regrets that Indigenous Peoples are not formally recognized in Zimbabwe through national legislation, which has limited the realization of their individual and collective rights.<sup>61</sup> Indigenous women and girls are affected by poverty and extractive and development projects, which in some cases has led to eviction

<sup>58</sup> See <http://www.ilo.org/media/68896/download>.

<sup>59</sup> See [https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/unw\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_the\\_gender\\_gap\\_in\\_agricultural\\_productivity\\_in\\_zimbabwe0606202301web.pdf](https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/unw_the_cost_of_the_gender_gap_in_agricultural_productivity_in_zimbabwe0606202301web.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/8541/file/Transforming%20Masculinities%20for%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20to%20End%20Child%20Marriage.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> See E/C.12/ZWE/CO/2, para. 60.

from their ancestral lands.<sup>62</sup> Child abuse, exposure to gender-based violence and school dropouts affect many Indigenous women and girls, and the lack of birth and identity documents hamper their access to public services, including healthcare.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, they have limited opportunities to access education in their own languages and culturally appropriate curricula and remain largely unrepresented in decision-making processes and positions in their communities and in Government.<sup>64</sup>

### C. Women and girls with disabilities

77. In Zimbabwe, cultural beliefs associating disability with witchcraft or a curse reinforce social isolation and stigma, particularly for children. Girls with disabilities face heightened risks of sexual violence and difficulty in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and the justice system. A government survey found that they are twice as likely to experience sexual abuse compared to girls without disabilities.<sup>65</sup> The Working Group also heard that women and girls with disabilities face compounded barriers, including inaccessible health facilities, lack of assistive information and communication tools and limited accessible transportation and inclusive education.

78. The Working Group welcomes the recent adoption of the Persons with Disabilities Act (2025), which explicitly recognizes the need to eliminate discrimination against women and girls with disabilities and ensure their right to education, decent work, sexual and reproductive health and freedom from gender-based violence. The Act creates a national disability affairs board to monitor its implementation, although this minister-appointed body falls short of meeting the requirements of an independent mechanism required by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Furthermore, the Working Group remains concerned that the 2021 national disability policy, which sets out clear objectives (e.g. free education and healthcare, reasonable accommodations in the workplace and accessibility of public institutions), has yet to be meaningfully implemented, owing to limited resources and disability-aggregated data.<sup>66</sup>

### D. Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls

79. Zimbabwe hosts over 23,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Rwanda and Burundi, many of whom reside in the Tongogara refugee settlement.<sup>67</sup> Due to poverty, difficulty in accessing work permits and food insecurity, harmful coping strategies such as transactional sex and child marriage are prevalent among women and girls, leading to teenage pregnancy and vulnerability to gender-based violence.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, migrant women and girls in transit both to and from Zimbabwe, especially those who are undocumented or unaccompanied, are reportedly vulnerable to trafficking, rape and exploitation by armed gangs and other actors. Many have apparently gone missing with limited investigation into their whereabouts.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., para. 12.

<sup>63</sup> See <https://iwgia.org/en/zimbabwe/5070-iw-2023-zimbabwe.html>; <https://iwgia.org/en/zimbabwe/4646-iw-2022-zimbabwe.html>.

<sup>64</sup> See E/C.12/ZWE/CO/2, para. 60; and <https://minorityrights.org/country/zimbabwe>.

<sup>65</sup> See [https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fmptf.undp.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocuments%2F25000%2Fzim\\_unprpd\\_project\\_document\\_final\\_7.12.2017.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fmptf.undp.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocuments%2F25000%2Fzim_unprpd_project_document_final_7.12.2017.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK).

<sup>66</sup> See <https://campaigning.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Equal-Zimbabwe-policy-brief-February-2024.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Zimbabwe%20ARR%202024.pdf>, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> See <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/news/empowering-and-restoring-dignity-vulnerable-girls-refugee-camps-zimbabwe>.

## **IX. Conclusions and recommendations**

### **A. Conclusions**

80. The Working Group commends Zimbabwe for its constitutional, legal and policy commitments to gender equality, as well as the important programmatic measures undertaken to advance women's rights. These steps lay a meaningful foundation for progress. Nevertheless, significant implementation gaps persist, and the Government must fulfil its gender equality commitments through an intersectional approach that addresses the full range of structural and systemic barriers that women and girls face.

81. As one interlocutor noted during the visit, in Zimbabwe, "gender equality is not a choice, it is a constitutional obligation". Fulfilling this obligation requires more than legislative progress – it demands transformative action, adequate and sustained resources and the political will to ensure commitments translate into concrete change in the lives of women and girls. In particular, urgent action is required to address gender-based violence, shrinking civic space, corruption and the mounting impacts of the climate crisis.

82. Zimbabwe must actively confront and dismantle the patriarchal norms and attitudes that continue to undervalue girls and undermine their rights. Harmful traditional practices, particularly child marriage, rob girls of their agency, education and life potential and must be eradicated. Achieving gender equality in the future requires bold action in the present – action that protects, empowers and invests in girls as full rights-holders, decision-makers and agents of change.

### **B. Recommendations**

83. Regarding the legal framework, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Ratify the Convention against Torture and its Optional Protocol, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) and Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189);

(b) Amend the constitutional provisions prohibiting same-sex marriage and restricting access to abortion;

(c) Adopt legal provisions requiring gender-responsive budgeting across all ministries;

(d) Revise the Termination of Pregnancy Act and other relevant legislation in order to fully decriminalize abortion and ensure the final adoption and enforcement of the amendments;

(e) Enact comprehensive legislation that criminalizes sexual harassment in all contexts and ensure the robust enforcement of existing legislation and policies applicable in the workplace and in higher education;

(f) Strengthen anti-corruption legislation, including by the explicit outlawing of "sextortion", sexual corruption and any other form of coercive sexual bribery;

(g) Harmonize all laws with the constitutional provisions on gender equality and international human rights law.

84. Regarding policy and institutional frameworks, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

- (a) Ensure the implementation of the National Development Strategy pillar on social development, gender and social protection, by developing gender equality targets and monitoring indicators;
- (b) Expedite the review and renewal of the national action plan on ending child marriage;
- (c) Collect and make accessible gender-disaggregated data, including for the monitoring and evaluation of gender-related expenditures in the national budget and their impacts;
- (d) Strengthen the gender focal point system in each ministry, department and agency and ensure all civil servants are trained on gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive budgeting;
- (e) Allocate sufficient human, technical and financial resources to the Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, and Small and Medium Enterprise Development at the national and local levels;
- (f) Ensure independence of the Chapter 12 Commissions, including through the transparent selection of senior leadership, strengthen their authority to enforce recommendations and allocate sufficient human and technical resources in accordance with the Paris Principles.

85. Regarding political and public life, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

- (a) Ensure that political parties implement the constitutional requirements of gender parity, both within their organizational structures and in their electoral practices;
- (b) Adopt regulations mandating women's equal representation in political party leadership;
- (c) Provide adequate resources, including financial support and capacity-building, to women seeking electoral office;
- (d) Engage traditional and religious leaders to eliminate gender stereotypes and dismantle barriers to women's participation in traditional and community leadership;
- (e) Prevent and address all forms of violence against women in politics, both online and offline, ensuring accountability for perpetrators;
- (f) Implement the constitutional guarantee of gender parity in all government institutions, departments and agencies and in the private sector, with an effort to increase the number of women in managerial and decision-making positions, including through temporary special measures, training, mentorship and advancement opportunities for women civil servants;
- (g) Expand pathways for women to enter and advance in the justice, law enforcement and security sectors, including as police officers, military officers, judges and lawyers, through temporary special measures, scholarships and increased networking and mentorship opportunities;
- (h) Repeal unduly restrictive provisions that undermine civic space, such as the Private Voluntary Organizations Amendment Act and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Amendment Act;
- (i) Address all forms of gender-based harassment, intimidation and threats against women human rights defenders, including online harassment, doxxing and cyberstalking, through prompt investigation, prosecution and sanctions;
- (j) Provide robust support to women's and girls' organizations, particularly given recent disruptions in donor funding, and include them in law and policymaking.

86. Regarding economic and social life, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Increase women's access to formal work and protect informal workers' rights to fair remuneration, social security, maternity leave, health and safety;

(b) Ensure effective enforcement of equal pay laws and close the gender pay and pension gap, including by adopting measures to reduce occupational segregation;

(c) Encourage more women to take up and retain senior leadership positions in the public and private sector, including in the mining industry, through temporary special measures, targeted recruitment initiatives and mentorship and career advancement services;

(d) Establish paid parental leave for men in the public and private sector to match maternity leave and promote men's awareness of their shared responsibility for child-rearing and domestic work;

(e) Expand State-run care and support services for children, older persons and persons with disabilities;

(f) Support women's entrepreneurship by investing more resources in the Women's Microfinance Bank and ensure that women from marginalized backgrounds, of various political affiliations and from rural areas can equally benefit;

(g) Continue to promote the selection of women-owned businesses for government contracts and ensure non-discrimination and non-partisanship in the selection of beneficiaries of government programmes;

(h) Prioritize women's access to land, housing, property and other productive resources and eliminate barriers to obtaining ownership documentation, including within the ongoing digitalization of land deeds and titles;

(i) Increase funding for the basic education assistance module and improve its administration to eliminate the hidden costs of education;

(j) Ensure that girls enrol and remain in school, through such measures as providing academic coaching, supplying free meals and ensuring their safety on their way to and from school, and design targeted interventions to tackle the causes of school dropouts among girls, including pregnancy and/or child and/or forced marriage;

(k) Improve access to and the affordability of menstrual supplies for all women and girls, as well as access to clean sanitation facilities in schools;

(l) Combat discriminatory attitudes within families and communities that undervalue and limit girls' potential through education, public awareness campaigns and community dialogues that centre on girls' voices;

(m) Continue to enhance women's and girls' access to science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, including through temporary special measures, scholarships and mentorship opportunities;

(n) Incorporate human rights education at all levels of the school curriculum and provide comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education based on scientific evidence in schools;

(o) Intensify efforts to close the gender digital divide and ensure that women and girls acquire the technological skills needed to participate fully in the digital space.

87. Regarding health, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Expand access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, especially for low-income, Indigenous, migrant, stateless, refugee and rural women and girls, including confidential access to affordable modern contraceptive methods and family planning services without parental consent;

(b) Increase domestic health expenditures to ensure that all women and girls have timely access to medical care, essential medicines and supplies, including obstetric gynaecological care;

(c) Ensure continuous and equitable access to HIV prevention and treatment services, particularly for women and girls, and strengthen efforts to combat discrimination against those living with HIV/AIDS;

(d) Expand access to safe and affordable abortion services and information, ensuring that all women and girls can realize their right to the highest attainable standard of health;

(e) Address corruption in healthcare and public service provision through reporting mechanisms, whistleblower protections and improved working conditions;

(f) Combat stigma against women and girls suffering from obstetric fistula through awareness-raising campaigns, and provide timely, free and accessible treatment.

88. Regarding family and cultural life, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Ensure robust enforcement of the Marriages Act and ensure that women in customary or informal unions, including cohabiting relationships, enjoy equal protection of their rights in practice;

(b) Nullify and reform customary laws and practices under traditional or religious legal regimes and authorities (e.g. on divorce, marital property, inheritance, personal status) that contravene women's rights guaranteed under the Constitution;

(c) Enforce prohibitions under the Domestic Violence Act, the Marriages Act and relevant provisions of the Criminal Code to end harmful practices, including child and/or forced marriage;

(d) Challenge the prevailing sociocultural and religious discourse on child marriage, polygamy and other harmful practices through awareness-raising campaigns and community dialogues;

(e) Provide comprehensive support services for girls already in child marriages and survivors, and protect their rights to marital property, maintenance and child custody upon separation;

(f) Expand mobile birth registration in remote areas with targeted outreach to Indigenous, migrant, stateless and refugee communities, and ensure that birth and identity documents are issued in a non-discriminatory manner;

(g) Conduct awareness-raising campaigns to combat divisive narratives on gender equality in line with article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

89. Regarding gender-based violence, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Invest significant domestic funding to provide services for survivors of gender-based violence, including shelters, one-stop centres and adult rape clinics, and establish medium- and long-term shelters, including in rural areas;

(b) Conduct robust awareness-raising and public outreach campaigns on the importance of ending gender-based violence near borders, destigmatizing survivors and educating them on resources for assistance;

(c) Protect unaccompanied minors, migrant, refugee and stateless women and girls, as well as cross-border traders, from trafficking and all forms of gender-based violence, including by armed groups;

(d) Re-institute the Anti-Domestic Violence Council and provide sufficient human and technical resources to monitor the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act;

(e) Establish a comprehensive State-funded legal aid system for all survivors of gender-based violence, including migrant, stateless, refugee and Indigenous women and girls, those with disabilities, women miners, cross-border traders and sex workers, providing, where relevant, child-friendly and disability-inclusive accommodations, access to women lawyers and language interpretation;

(f) Ensure timely prosecution and accountability for all perpetrators of gender-based violence, including religious or traditional leaders and high-profile individuals, and ensure protection from reprisals for witnesses and survivors;

(g) Increase the number of women police officers and prosecutors and ensure that all law enforcement and legal personnel are duly trained to handle cases of gender-based violence;

(h) Provide compulsory and regular gender-responsive training to all relevant actors, including police, healthcare providers, social workers and the judiciary, particularly in rural areas, and ensure continuity of staff and resources for victim-friendly units and victim-friendly courts;

(i) Continue to implement and expand victim-centred approaches in the justice system, including through in camera hearings, witness protection and expedited hearing at specialized courts.

90. Regarding women and girls facing intersecting forms of discrimination, the Working Group recommends that the Government:

(a) Expand rural and Indigenous women's and girls' access to social services, healthcare and birth registration, including through sustained mobile service delivery initiatives;

(b) Implement gender-responsive climate policies and investments that prioritize the empowerment of rural and Indigenous women and girls, and ensure their full participation in decision-making within their families and communities;

(c) Address structural barriers that women and girls with disabilities face, including by increasing their participation and representation in decision-making processes at the local and national government levels; ensuring their access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, education and economic opportunities; and combating stigma and discrimination against them through public campaigns;

(d) Implement the national disability policy and the Persons with Disabilities Act and revise the Act to allow for the full independence of the National Disability Affairs Board;

(e) Improve the living conditions of women prisoners in compliance with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules), to address overcrowding, nutrition, sanitation and menstrual hygiene and to ensure separate facilities for men and women to the maximum extent possible;

(f) Devise alternatives to incarceration for women, especially pregnant women and mothers, in accordance with the Bangkok Rules, and expand the use of open prisons, where appropriate;

(g) Continue to allow and facilitate unimpeded access by independent monitoring bodies, including the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, to conduct unannounced visits to all places of detention and hold confidential interviews with prisoners;

(h) Decriminalize the actions of women engaging in sex work and include them in legislative processes and policymaking on sex work;

(i) Decriminalize same-sex conduct and combat discrimination, harassment and hate speech against LBTQI+ women and girls, including by adopting comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation.

91. **The Working Group recommends that Zimbabwe’s technical and financial partners, including United Nations entities:**

(a) **Apply an intersectional gender lens across their programmes and take a holistic approach to promoting gender equality;**

(b) **Strengthen partnerships with women’s rights organizations and address funding gaps in gender-based violence services and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment;**

(c) **Assist the Government in implementing the recommendations contained in the present report.**

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