

TOWARDS A LOCALIZED UNDERSTANDING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN AFRICA

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Abstract: Despite global and African continental efforts to curb violence against children (VAC), it is the fourth leading cause of death for young people aged 15 to 19 in Africa, according to a 2021 UNICEF report. In introducing this special issue on VAC in Africa, I contend that violence prevention and response efforts ought to be situated in local understandings of how violence is inflicted and experienced. Sociocultural and political ideals and values present in Africa nurture an atmosphere in which adults exercise power over children's lives and can inflict harm upon them if they choose. Age-based power (adultism) facilitates VAC. Therefore, this special issue is underpinned by childism as a framework for challenging adultism in an effort to achieve a contextualized understanding of VAC in Africa, and how best to respond to and ultimately prevent it.

Keywords: violence against children, children's rights, childism, adultism, child protection

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Violence can be broadly described as a manifestation of power (Churchill, 2011) between two groups or individuals. According to the World Health Organization (WHO; 2014):

Violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, or against a group or community that either results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” (p. 2)

Violence against children (VAC) includes corporal punishment, sexual violence (rape/forced sex), child marriage, female genital mutilation, murder, and child labour (Vohito, 2017). Other forms of VAC are consensual sex involving a child (“defilement”), child neglect, verbal abuse, emotional violence, cyberviolence, and so on. VAC can be categorized as overt (e.g., corporal punishment) or covert (e.g., child neglect), and as physical or psychological (Churchill, 2011). VAC happens wherever children are to be found: in homes, schools, communities, care institutions, on the streets, and online. Although VAC is sometimes associated with harmful cultural practices, this is not always the case. Violence also occurs within a legal framework that legitimizes oppression (Tamale, 2020).

VAC affects approximately one billion children aged 2 to 17 worldwide every year (WHO, 2020, p. 12). Over the past decades, there has been a surge in global attention on the importance of eradicating VAC. Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; 1989) addresses VAC and the specific protective measures that states party to the CRC must undertake. Additionally, *General Comment No. 13 (2011)* on the CRC addresses the need for children to enjoy the right to freedom from all forms of violence, including protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011, pp. 8–9). In 2016, the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) launched Africa’s Agenda for Children 2040, which promotes ending all forms of VAC (ACERWC, 2016). Target 16.2 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, torture, and all forms of VAC (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 25). In addition, a wide array of pan-African regional and national strategies, action plans, policies, and laws aimed at eradicating violations of children’s rights have been put in place by governments across sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity [OAU], 1990) came into force in 1999. In 2016, the African Partnership to End Violence against Children (APEVAC)¹ was created as a pan-African platform to promote a continent-wide movement and conversation around preventing and responding to VAC.

¹ <https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/our-international-work/international-partnerships/african-partnership-to-end-violence-against-children/>

The continent of Africa is currently home to over 20% of the world's children (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020); it is also home to the highest number of children deserving a better childhood. Despite global and continental child protection efforts, VAC annually impacts at least 82% of African children aged 2 to 17 years (Better Care Network, 2017, p. 10). Recent studies suggest that cases of VAC skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Haffejee & Levine, 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Sserwanja et al., 2021). Violence ranks as the fourth highest cause of death for young people aged 15 to 19 in Africa (UNICEF, 2021).

Before proceeding to an overview of the articles in this special issue, I will give a general description of the theoretical framework within which they are situated.

The Case for Childism

Childism is an extension of childhood studies that is critical of developmentalist conceptions of children as “becomings” instead of “beings” (Qvortrup, 1985). According to childism, we can only understand childhood properly if we look at society differently (Warming, 2020). Childism is a lens “for critiquing the deeply engrained adultism that pervades scholarship and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive research and social imaginations” (Wall, 2019, p. 257). Childism views adults as able to exploit the lesser age of children and youths to exercise control over their lives. Such control is a source of adultism, which is a form of oppression and discrimination against children and young people (Alderson, 2020; Wall, 2019). I agree with Christensen (2010), who asserted that an individual's location within a hierarchically structured society determines their susceptibility to harm. For African children, simply being young increases their exposure to violence and negatively impacts their agentic abilities with regard to VAC. The African sociocultural and political context gives adults decisive control over children and youth irrespective of their evolving capacities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires adults to recognize that children's competencies evolve as they grow (Lansdown, 2005). Limited recognition of evolving capacities blocks children's agency (Sami, 2022) and ratifies generational power inequalities.

Following Wall (2019), I contend that VAC in Africa is rooted in the unequal power relations between children and adults. Those power relations are, in turn, ingrained in formal attitudes (e.g., adultism, colonialism) as well as social institutions (e.g., schools, judiciary), which sustain systemic violence (Curtin & Litke, 1999). Hence, adultism facilitates the violation of children's right to a safe and secure environment free of corporal punishment, sexual violence, child/forced marriage, female genital mutilation, child sacrifice, and other harmful cultural practices and beliefs. Africa has a diversity of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts that directly and indirectly dictate how violence is experienced, responded to, and prevented. The contextual factors that disempower children are crucial in sustaining violence. They shape the extent and range of VAC and the existence and implementation of child protection legal frameworks (Vohito, 2017), or lack thereof. To boost Afrocentric VAC prevention and response mechanisms, all stakeholders should take a childism stance on children's rights policy, programs, practice, and research.

Therefore, this special issue is underpinned by childism as a framework for challenging adultism, which is necessary if Africa is to achieve a contextualized understanding of VAC, and how best to prevent and respond to it. Additionally, this issue is grounded in the contention that addressing VAC in sub-Saharan Africa will require “unpacking the cultural discourses through which children’s everyday lives, *as children*, are constructed on an ongoing and mundane basis” (James, 2011, p. 168). To this end, the creation of the APEVAC by the African Child Policy Forum to advance the implementation of Target 16.2 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be viewed as a step in the right direction.

An abundance of scholarly work has been done on violence in African childhoods over the past decades (see Artz et al., 2018; Kaawa-Mafigiri & Walakira, 2017; Vohito, 2017; Wangamati et al., 2018). However, scholars have focused on children’s experiences of violence and how it impacts their well-being with only limited reference to prevention and response initiatives. While highlighting the magnitude of violence is crucial, it is not enough to bring about the desired changes in policy and programming. This special issue gives prominence to the localized dimensions of VAC prevention and response to shed light on future possibilities for African children and adolescents. The issue spotlights work that has been done or reviewed on the continent by Africans to bring to the fore localized understandings of VAC prevention and response. Throughout this issue, the authors demonstrate that the prevention of and response to violence should be put into an African childhood contextual perspective.

Overview of the Articles

In the first article, Julie Ada Tchoukou explains that, while some studies underscore the relevance of social norms to the persistence of violence against girls in Nigeria, those norms are not the only factor. Tchoukou uses a critical legal studies lens to reveal the organizational structures of control in which ideologies confronting girls are embedded, and how norms are used as an excuse for inaction by the government and political elite. She asserts that remedies to violence against Nigerian girls must focus on institutional change as well as social transformation.

Two of the articles in this volume address the childism movement’s concern in regard to age-inclusivity in research by focusing on children’s participation in VAC research. The article by Clare Ahabwe Bangirana and colleagues is situated in discourse that foregrounds the importance of children’s involvement in research to the development of policy and interventions that fully benefit them instead of reflecting the interests of adults. Bangirana et al. discuss how the interconnectedness between the forms of violence observed in various local contexts is central to identifying common risks and protective factors for VAC; these can form the basis for more effective prevention and response initiatives. In a related article, Mathew Amollo et al. demonstrate how research based on participatory learning and action can empower community members to take ownership of solutions to VAC, thereby reducing its prevalence and impact. The

authors highlight the importance of scaling up positive parenting as a strategy for fostering a community intolerance of VAC.

The article by Harriet Murage et al. (2022) discusses psychotherapy dropout among survivors of child sexual abuse in Kenya. The study identifies parents' income status, perpetrators' relationship with the survivor or their family, lack of knowledge about psychotherapy, and parental involvement as contributing to psychotherapy adherence or attrition. The authors highlight the centrality of parental and community support to achieving successful psychotherapy for survivors of child sexual abuse.

There are two articles focusing on children's safety online. Sylvia Tuikong discusses cyber-violence induced by publishing children's pictures online, with a focus on Kenya. The article recommends strengthening the implementation of safety measures to enhance children's safety while online, and suggests that parents and caregivers refrain from publishing their children's photographs. The concern for children's safety online is reiterated in Roseline Olumbe's article, which analyzes cybercrimes in a sample of 125 children aged 13 to 17. Olumbe discusses children's exposure to the risk of pornography, cyberbullying, viewing harmful content, hateful messaging, and sexualized violence. She recommends strengthening measures for enhancing children's safety in both urban and rural areas.

The article by Rongedzayi Fambasayi and Rejoice Shamiso Katsidzira discusses the role of cities in ending VAC. This is a timely topic given the centrality of city governments in child protection, particularly in a context where the number of children and adolescents living in cities is constantly growing. Focusing on city-level violence prevention and response strategies in South Africa, Fambasayi and Katsidzira review laws, policies, and strategies in relation to VAC. They argue that having policy strategies localized at the city level is essential for protecting children from violence.

Special Section: Networking for Prevention of and Response to VAC in East Africa

The special section of this special issue focuses on networks and networking to prevent and respond to VAC in East Africa. According to WHO (2020), strengthening ties between child protection actors is necessary for accelerating the elimination of VAC. Nevertheless, approaches to VAC in East Africa are often disconnected and sporadic. Networking for VAC prevention and response has not been well understood because it has hitherto received little attention in scholarly work. CivSource Africa (2020), an independent advisory organization, conducted a study to understand the functionality and connectivity of existing networks and their impact on the prevention of VAC and the realization of children's rights in East Africa. The results of that study reveal how East African networks operate at national, sub-national, and grassroots levels and comprise ties between state and non-state actors. The four articles in the special section present findings on grassroots networks in East Africa, networking dynamics in Tanzania, the dichotomy between formal and informal networks in Uganda, and state actors in Kenya.

The first paper in this special section, by Doris M. Kakuru, Annah Kamusiime, Kylee Lindner, and Jacqueline Asiiimwe, examines the role of grassroots networks in VAC prevention and response work in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The authors are critical of the fact that while grassroots network actors do the bulk of VAC prevention and response work, formal networks receive the lion's share of recognition in policy decision-making, programming, and social science research. Consequently, VAC philanthropy is informed by a blurry and limited conceptualization of networking as a form of existence rather than a function. In order to achieve enduring consolidated success in VAC prevention and response, the authors prescribe the centring of grassroots networks in programming and philanthropic efforts for East Africa.

The next article, by Annah Kamusiime and colleagues, discusses the dynamics of VAC networking in Tanzania. Kamusiime et al. show how various actors make strategic decisions to create a stronger voice, with improved visibility, increased resources, and enhanced impact. The benefits of networks notwithstanding, Tanzanian VAC networks face challenges that call for joint reflexivity and deliberate strategies to strengthen their ties.

In the third article in this section, Doris M. Kakuru, Annah Kamusiime, Martha Kibukamusoke and colleagues question the unequal access of dominant and subordinate actors to recognition and resources in Uganda. While formal networks are better resourced, more visible, and more widely recognized, informal networks are invisibilized in government plans, philanthropic efforts, and scholarly research. The authors assert that a more collaborative and inclusive VAC networking landscape is instrumental to enhancing VAC prevention and accelerating response.

The final article by Jacqueline Nassimbwa et al. analyzes the involvement of state actors in VAC networks in Kenya, where non-state actors dominate the child protection networking environment. The authors challenge the absence of government actors in the VAC networking discourse and contend that, despite the loose ties between state and non-state networks, VAC state actors should not be relegated to the periphery.

The articles in this special issue speak to the importance of working towards a contextualized understanding of VAC. The involvement of children, families, and communities in generating knowledge about and remedies for VAC based on local understanding is pivotal. Since unequal power relations between young people and adults underlie the perpetration of VAC, policies, programs, practices, and research for VAC prevention and response will be beneficial to the extent that adultism can be addressed. Future research could explore how generational power inequities can be exploited to prevent rather than perpetuate VAC.

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