

Corporal Punishment of Children in Rural Homes in Zomba, Southern Malawi: Moral Socialisation or Child Abuse?

MAYESO CHINSEU LAZARO

University of Malawi, P.O Box 280, Zomba, Malawi.

Email: mlazaro@unima.ac.mw

Abstract

The paper draws on data from a more extensive qualitative study that explored grandfathers' role in orphan care in rural Zomba, southern Malawi. The use of corporal punishment emerged as a culturally appropriate method for children's moral socialisation, thus contradicting the child rights discourse. Therefore, I interrogate what constitutes 'appropriate' disciplining and to/for whom it is 'appropriate'. Using an interpretivist framework, I engaged 142 participants (80 males and 62 females, aged between three and 92 years) in an eight-month ethnography to share their views on child disciplining methods. The participants included 59 children, 21 grandparents, 36 parents, five chiefs, three representatives of community structures, four representatives of religious groups, 12 government officers, and two NGO staff. The findings indicate a pervasive endorsement and normalisation of corporal punishment within the participating communities. This highlighted a dissonance between local conceptions of 'appropriate' moral socialisation of children versus the legal frameworks operationalised by the government and development partners through child rights campaigns and interventions aimed at eradicating corporal punishment. The article argues that such a mismatch may engender social dilemmas for children, who receive conflicting messages regarding disciplinary practices. Thus, it highlights the need for policymakers and practitioners to promote children's rights and welfare by recognising this cultural dissonance and tailoring child rights campaigns and interventions in ways that circumvent hostility with the local people.

Keywords: Children, corporal punishment, cultural dissonance, moral socialisation, qualitative research, rural southern Malawi.

1. Introduction

The use of corporal punishment (CP) as a disciplinary method for the moral socialisation of children is ubiquitous in homes across various cultural contexts, often initiated as early as two years of age (UNICEF, 2017). Its use for child disciplining dates back to time immemorial (Straus, 2010). The practice, however, remains contentious, particularly regarding its efficacy in promoting moral socialisation. Critics argue that CP constitutes a violation of children's rights (UNICEF, 2017) and correlates with various adverse developmental outcomes. An increasing body of global evidence suggests that CP, whether in domestic settings or educational institutions, is not only ineffective but also has detrimental effects on children's health and development (UNICEF, 2017; Cuartas, 2021; Gershoff, 2017). It is posited that children who endure CP are at an elevated risk for a range of detrimental outcomes that may severely impact their psychosocial well-being and overall development. For instance, UNICEF (2017: 24) states that children aged 3-5 years who experience physical punishment are "less likely to reach some social-emotional development milestones" and have an increased likelihood of demonstrating emotional dysregulation and antisocial behaviours, such as aggression toward peers.

Empirical evidence indicates that CP can result in physical injuries, lowered self-esteem, hyperactivity (Gershoff, 2017; Lansford, 2010), developmental delays (Cuartas, 2021), diminished academic performance (Gershoff et al., 2019; Visser et al., 2022), heightened aggression (Simons & Wurtele, 2010), and increased risk of depression, cognitive deficits, and other mental health disorders (Sege et al., 2018). Further, studies indicate a strong correlation between CP and the emergence of antisocial behaviours (Burt et al., 2021) and juvenile delinquency (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2019). The repercussions can extend into adulthood (Gershoff, 2002), with individuals showing a greater propensity for criminal behaviour (Lansford et al., 2021), suicidal ideation, substance abuse (Sege et al., 2018), and involvement in intimate partner violence, including the manifestation of sadomasochistic tendencies (Straus & Donnelly, 2017).

Despite this, evidence also indicates that CP is often perceived as an appropriate method for the moral socialisation of children, with some arguing that it is beneficial to child development (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016). In various cultural contexts, CP is considered inevitable for child-rearing practices, serving as a deterrent for undesirable behaviour and preventing the recurrence of such behaviour—ostensibly aiming to eliminate perceived naughtiness. This viewpoint reflects broader societal beliefs aimed at preventing children from becoming 'spoilt,' 'haughty,' or 'unruly,' and avoiding the development of a 'superiority complex' (Boydell et al., 2017: 1006). According to UNICEF (2017), approximately 80% of children globally (about 1.76 billion) are subjected to CP, with 75% (approximately 1.1 billion) of caregivers endorsing physical punishment as a necessary means of moral socialisation.

Notably, research also suggests a correlation between religious beliefs and the acceptance and practice of CP (Gershoff, 2010; Engulu & Harris, 2017). This raises pertinent questions regarding its prevalence in predominantly religious contexts like Malawi. In Malawian culture, akin to some Western contexts, it is common for parents and guardians to invoke the adage ‘spare the rod and spoil the child,’ derived from the Book of Proverbs (Chapter 13 verse 24 and Chapter 23 verses 13 and 14), to justify the use of physical punishment. Consequently, use of CP for children’s moral socialisation in the country is prevalent, with 42.4% of girls and 64.5% of boys reporting experiencing physical violence during their childhood (Government of Malawi, 2014a). This widespread practice has led to substantial adverse outcomes for children. For instance, Madhlopa et al. (2020) identified a correlation between physical discipline and the onset of attention-related disorders, as well as both internalising and externalising behavioural problems among Malawian children. Research examining the link between adolescents’ experiences of violence in Malawi and their gender-based attitudes has also revealed that physical abuse was positively associated with the development of internalised violent attitudes, depression, and bullying (Ameli et al., 2017). Sherr et al. (2016) also found that exposure to physical punishment detrimentally impacted educational outcomes, affecting both school enrolment and academic performance.

The preceding discussion demonstrates the predicaments regarding child socialisation in Malawi and other societies worldwide. The quotations provided below, which are from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) concerning CP and one of the parents in this study in rural southern Malawi regarding the moral socialisation of children, highlight this dissonance and serves as the central argument of this paper.

Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence and the state must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate them (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], General Comment Number 8 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN General Assembly, 2006).

If the child is disobedient, you must beat them, take a stick and beat them, and when they feel the pain, it means they will stop doing the bad things or being disobedient, fearing that if I do it again, they will beat and hurt me. So, the child grows up with good morals (Adult female, 49 years old).

2. Legal Framework for Child Protection in Malawi

In 1989, world leaders committed to children’s rights by endorsing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), establishing an international framework for child welfare. The CRC has since emerged as the most widely ratified human

rights treaty, significantly impacting the lives of children worldwide. Its adoption has catalysed increased advocacy, programmes and services against punitive disciplinary practices, thus aligning with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 Target 16.2, which seeks to eradicate all forms of violence such as CP. However, only 62 countries have prohibited all forms of CP in all settings, leaving half of children globally (i.e. 732 million) without legal protection and at risk of being exposed to CP (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021). Only about 13% of the global child population is legally protected by law from all forms of CP, both in the home and at school (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2021). This inadequacy highlights the ongoing prevalence of harsh disciplinary practices, particularly within domestic spheres.

Malawi's strong commitment to children's rights is evident through its ratification of the UNCRC in 1991 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1999. The country has established legal frameworks to address CP and other forms of harsh punishments. The Constitution of Malawi, particularly Chapter 3, Section 13(h), articulates the state's obligation to foster environments conducive to the comprehensive development of children, ensuring they grow into healthy, productive, and responsible members of society (Republic of Malawi, 1994). Furthermore, Section 19(3,4) explicitly prohibits torture and any form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, including CP, within judicial and state proceedings (Republic of Malawi, 1994). Additionally, Section 25(4) underscores the imperative to protect children from punitive practices that may disrupt their education or adversely affect their health, as well as their physical, mental, spiritual, or social development (Republic of Malawi, 1994). This legal framework positions Malawi as a nation prioritising safeguarding children's rights and welfare.

The government's commitment to child welfare is epitomised by the enactment of the Child Care Protection and Justice Act (CCPJA) in 2010, which established a comprehensive policy and legal framework for child protection. This legislation led to the establishment of the Child Panel (Section 116), Child Justice Courts (Section 132), and Case Review Board (Section 150), aimed at operationalising the Act and ensuring equitable treatment in proceedings involving juvenile offences (Government of Malawi, 2014b). Moreover, a multi-sectoral approach adopted by multiple ministries—including Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, Education, Justice, Labour, and Homeland Security—highlights a collaborative effort to safeguard children's welfare. For instance, the establishment of One Stop Centres at the district level and Police Victim Support Units (VSUs) within communities serve to provide medical, legal, and psychological support services to child victims, reinforcing the nation's protective mechanisms.

Despite this progress in the legal framework and instruments regarding child protection, many children in Malawi still face adverse conditions, such as being

subjected to CP in their homes. While enforcement to outlaw CP in schools is evident, these protections have hardly been effectively extended to the home environment. Consequently, many children remain exposed to CP because the practice is commonly practised and condoned in some Malawian homes. Thus, the enforcement and efficacy of existing legal instruments aimed at safeguarding children's rights are challenged.

While acknowledging developments in the contemporary international context highlighted in section 1, this paper examines the discord between local people's conception of appropriate moral socialisation versus that of the government and its development partners. Drawing on research involving rural Malawian children, parents, grandparents, and other guardians, we highlight that this dissonance may create a moral dilemma. Specifically, this may have implications for child rights and the implementation of disciplinary measures, as well as child rights-related programmes concerning the moral development of children and appropriate discipline. This presents significant obstacles to the realisation of the UNCRC. The paper raises pertinent questions about the rights that need to be safeguarded, specifically the tension between children's rights to protection from harm and parents' rights to discipline their children, and whether international organisations' positions should be more flexible or culturally specific or if local attitudes and behaviours need to evolve.

3. Methods

The study adopted the interpretivist framework articulated by Denzin and Lincoln (2018a) to ground this research. This paradigm centres on comprehending the intricate nature of lived experiences from the perspectives of those who embody them (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). It employs a naturalistic approach to data collection, emphasising the subjective, multifaceted, and socially constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018a). Subsequently, the findings of interpretivist research do not yield universally applicable theories or laws; instead, they provide nuanced, contextually rich insights (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019).

Despite its limitations, such as subjectivity, reflexivity challenges, generalisability constraints due to small sample sizes, and the labour-intensive nature of data analysis, the interpretive framework offered a nuanced approach to understanding CP within the rural Malawian context. The framework allowed the contextualisation of the study by acknowledging that contextual influences may shape individual and collective experiences (Hiller, 2016). The framework proved instrumental in elucidating the complexities of child disciplining practices in rural southern Malawi, highlighting their subjective, diverse, and socially constructed nature within particular historical, social, and cultural contexts. This approach facilitated the recognition of alternative social constructions surrounding CP across various participants, for instance, parents versus government officers and NGO staff.

The framework also allowed an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences, yielding rich qualitative insights that illuminated their everyday realities (Pascale, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2018). It positioned the research participants as active agents in knowledge creation rather than mere subjects of inquiry. This enhanced an understanding of CP from the participants' perspective and allowed for an inclusive approach representing diverse viewpoints such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status thereby enhancing the validity of the findings. Moreover, research designs rooted in interpretivism are inherently flexible, accommodating emergent themes and unanticipated findings throughout the research process (Babones, 2016). This provided a lens with which to accommodate emerging findings, even those deemed contradictory across participants.

In the data analysis stage, the study applied interpretivist concepts and terminology to substantiate the empirical evidence derived from the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018b; Morse, 2018). To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study used the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Ultimately, situating this study within an interpretivist paradigm enriched data collection process and enhanced the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the findings. This allowed for a more complex and nuanced exploration of CP in communities in rural southern Malawian that generated comprehensive theoretical insights.

3.1 Sample

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit 142 research participants from 12 rural villages in Zomba. The participants included 59 children (15 preschool children, eight preteens, 36 teens), 15 grandfathers, six grandmothers, 36 adult community members, five local leaders, three representatives from community structures, four representatives from religious groups, and 14 professionals comprising nine teachers, two Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs), one Child Protection Worker (CPW), and two staff from NGOs (Table 1). The participants comprised 80 males and 62 females, aged three to 92 years.

Table 1: Data collection methods, participants, sample sizes, gender and age

| Data collection method | Number | Details of the participants |
|-------------------------------|---------------|---|
| Drawing-elicited interviews | 23 | 15 preschool children (8 males, 7 females; average age 4.4 years), 8 preteens (2 males, 6 females; average age 8.9 years) |
| Photo-elicited interviews | 8 | 8 preteens |
| Focus group discussions | 9 | 8 preteens (2 males, 6 females; average age 8.9 years), 36 teens (19 males, 17 females; average |

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|--------------------------|----|---|
| | | age 14.4 years), 36 adult community members (17 males, 19 females; average age 43.0 years) |
| In-depth interviews | 21 | 15 grandfathers (average age 76.0 years), 6 grandmothers (average age 69.2 years) |
| Key-informant interviews | 26 | 3 representatives of community structures (2 males, 1 female; age range 32-69), 4 representatives of religious groups (all males; age range 29-74 years), 5 chiefs (4 males, 1 female; average age 44.4 years), 14 professionals, comprising of 9 teachers, 2 HSAs, 2 NGO staff, 1 CPW (8 males, 6 females; average age 34.0 years) |
| Stakeholder meetings | 2 | 36 adult community members (17 males, 19 females; average age 43.0 years), 3 representatives of community structures (2 males, 1 female; age range 32-69), 4 representatives of religious groups (all males; age range 29-74 years), 5 chiefs (4 males, 1 female; average age 44.4 years), 14 professionals, comprising of 9 teachers, 2 HSAs, 2 NGO staff, 1 CPW (8 male, 6 female; average age 34.0 years) |
| Dissemination meetings | 2 | 36 adult community members (17 males, 19 females; average age 43.0 years), 3 representatives of community structures (2 males, 1 female; age range 32-69), 4 representatives of religious groups (all male; age range 29-74 years), 5 chiefs (4 males, 1 female; average age 44.4 years), 14 professionals, comprising of 9 teachers, 2 HSAs, 2 NGO staff, 1 CPW (8 males, 6 females; average age 34.0 years) |

The study involved a nine-month ethnography to gather data from a diverse group of participants, including children and adults. The extended period of fieldwork allowed for meaningful engagement with participants, leading to robust relationships and effective data collection. Multiple participatory methods were employed, including 21 in-depth interviews, 26 key-informant interviews, eight photo-elicited interviews, 23 drawing-elicited interviews, nine focus group discussions, two stakeholder meetings, and two dissemination meetings, to capture a broad range of perspectives and triangulate the data.

Regarding photo-voice and drawing-elicited interview methods, the study equipped children with digital cameras and drawing materials to document their daily interactions with their parents and guardians. This documentation took place over five to seven months, during which the children used photography and artwork as triggers for conversations, enabling them to contemplate the significance of their experiences. These discussions were meticulously recorded and transcribed and included relevant field notes as supplementary information.

The principle of ‘data saturation’ (Braun & Clarke, 2021) determined the sample size for interviews and group discussions. The aim was to reach a stage where the identified categories and themes in the data were substantial and held significant conceptual depth, rendering further data collection and analysis redundant in generating new insights (Charmaz, 2014). Scholars widely regard data saturation as the ‘flagship of validity’ (Constantinou et al., 2017: 585) and the ‘gold standard’ (Hancock et al., 2016: 2025) for determining sample size in qualitative research. The study prioritised the richness and conceptual significance of participants’ accounts over data frequency. This approach to data saturation is recognised as a frequently recommended measure for ensuring qualitative rigour and is aligned with the guidance of Charmaz (2014) and Morse (2018).

3.2 Data Management and Analysis

The audio recordings of interviews and meetings were transcribed verbatim and organised using NVivo software for analysis. Thematic analysis, specifically an inductive approach, was employed to thoroughly examine the data and systematically identify, extract, and organise themes into relevant codes and categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018b) around CP.

3.3 Ethical Issues

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Geography, Environment and Earth Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of Hull, United Kingdom, and the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) in Malawi. Permission to engage participants was granted by local authorities at district and community levels. Adult participants provided voluntary consent, while parents and guardians provided consent for their children to be included in the study, with older children providing assent.

4. Theoretical Framework

CP is a multifaceted term that has stirred considerable debate regarding its meaning and application in the moral socialisation of children (Fréchette & Romano, 2017). While many physical disciplinary methods employed on children are often not explicitly categorised as CP, they conform to the definition established by UNCRC. According to UNCRC General Comment No. 8, CP constitutes “any punishment in

which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light” (UNCRC, 2006: 4, par 11). CP encompasses various forms of hitting—such as smacking, slapping, and spanking—whether with an open hand or an implement, including a whip, stick, belt, shoe, or wooden spoon (UNCRC, 2006: 4, par 11). It includes actions such as kicking, shaking, throwing, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair, and boxing ears, forcing a child into uncomfortable positions, as well as burning, scalding, or coercing ingestion of substances (UNCRC, 2006: 4, par 11). This comprehensive definition underscores that physical punishment, a common practice in Malawi and elsewhere, intrinsically falls within the realm of CP.

The study adopted and operationalised UNCRC’s definition of CP. This ensured alignment with local policies and legal frameworks for child protection in Malawi, given that the country ratified the CRC. This comprehensive definition enabled us to explore wide-ranging CP-related issues, yielding in-depth and nuanced data that locates the local and international debates surrounding CP.

4.1 Intersectionality Perspective

The study drew on the Intersectionality Perspective. Intersectionality can be conceptualised in three ways: one-category, which analyses social phenomena through the lens of a single social difference (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013); additive, which posits that “social inequality increases with each additional stigmatised identity” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 314); and multiple categories, which recognises the interplay of various social identities in shaping lived experiences (Carastathis, 2014). Both one-category and additive approaches are problematic. They fail to capture the intricate ways in which social identities are interwoven, as theorising based on a singular category or its hierarchical salience reduces the complexity of lived realities. This is highlighted by the assertion that “multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalised practices and lived experiences” (Carastathis, 2014, p. 307). Consequently, scholars argue that no single social category can independently or sufficiently elucidate individuals’ experiences; rather, multiple intersecting categories significantly influence their social realities.

The multiple-categories intersectional framework was deemed most fitting for this research. Characterised by its inherent complexity and multiplicity (Bowleg, 2012; Anthias, 2013), this approach facilitated the identification of intricate intersections across dimensions such as culture, religion, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment in the daily lives of both adults and children in rural southern Malawi. The exploration of these intersectional dynamics provided a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the participants’ lived experiences around CP.

During data collection, analysis, and interpretation, this framework allowed for a holistic examination, avoiding the pitfalls of a one-category approach, which might singularly attribute the influence of, say, culture on the utilisation of CP in the moral

socialisation of children. Unlike an additive approach that elevates one factor while tacking on others, the multiple-categories framework enabled a robust consideration of how the interplay among the aforementioned factors collectively shaped the phenomenon of CP as it manifested in the participants' daily routines. The additional analytical layer afforded by this framework was critical in elucidating the complexities surrounding the practice of CP in the rural Malawian context, aligning with the interpretivist framework.

Adopting a multiple-category intersectional framework was crucial for avoiding a reductive analysis centred solely on a singular identity dimension, such as culture. This framework allowed for a more comprehensive examination of the intersecting categories of gender, culture, religion, generation, socioeconomic status, and education. Moreover, careful consideration was given to identifying which categories were most pertinent to the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. This diligence mitigated the risk of engaging in an "infinite number of cross-cutting categories... and endless specification" (Anthias, 2013), which could dilute the study's significance. Consequently, this research prioritised the dimensions of gender, culture, religion, generation, poverty, and education within the intersectionality framework, providing a nuanced exploration of the experiences of both adults and children in rural southern Malawi regarding CP.

The integration of intersectionality with the qualitative interpretive research design employed in this study proved highly effective. As Shields (2008: 306) articulates, "the connection between intersectionality theory and qualitative methods suggests they are inherently linked." This inherent linkage stems from intersectionality's focus on the multifaceted nature of identity, which makes qualitative inquiry an appropriate and necessary approach for such investigations (Shields, 2008). Additionally, qualitative methods naturally accommodate the implicit complexities and multiplicities of lived experiences, enabling deep exploration of the micro-level intricacies within people's lives (Acker, 2012). Thus, these features of intersectionality were pivotal in examining the complexities of CP in rural southern Malawi.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Common Behaviours and Punishments Used for Moral Socialisation in Rural Southern Malawi

We explored common children's behaviours that triggered punishments from parents and guardians in rural southern Malawi. We found that, like their counterparts across the world, children in the participating communities may engage in various undesirable behaviours triggering different forms of discipline, including neglecting household responsibilities, refusing to bathe, truancy, tardiness to and from school, being disrespectful, and engaging in antisocial behaviours. Misbehaviours such as

theft, premarital sexual activity, and using vulgar language were also reported. These child behaviours generally resonate with Boydell et al.'s (2017) study on the use of CP by mothers in Uganda, which found children's behaviours such as not doing domestic chores properly or following hygienic practices as some of the triggers for the parents to subject the children to CP (Boydell et al., 2017). Straus (2010) also documents that parents and guardians use CP supposedly to correct and control a child's misbehaviour, such as being stubborn and rebellious. Thus, the findings echo previous studies, suggesting common child-rearing practices in Malawi and elsewhere.

In the Zomba rural communities, children's behaviours that contradicted the expectations of their parents and guardians prompted three disciplinary approaches based on the parents' and guardians' own upbringing: non-physical punishments, CP, and seeking external intervention or help. These methods were applied sequentially, simultaneously, or progressively and escalatingly. The paper focuses on CP only.

5.2 Corporal Punishment in Rural Southern Malawi

The moral development of children is a significant aspect of family life across diverse cultures and societies globally. Child disciplining is universally recognised as a crucial element of child-rearing, contributing to establishing socially acceptable behaviours in children (UNICEF, 2017). It is the responsibility of parents and guardians to provide children with a moral and social foundation and compass through various disciplinary approaches, thereby ensuring their conformity to societal norms and values. However, research conducted in rural southern Malawi revealed that certain disciplinary measures employed by parents and guardians towards children, such as CP, could qualify as child abuse under international frameworks such as the UNCRC and local legal frameworks and instruments, including The Constitution of Malawi (Republic of Malawi, 1994) and the Malawi Child Care, Protection and Justice Act 2010 (Government of Malawi, 2014b). The UNCRC General Comment Number 8 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly condemns various forms of punishment, including CP, as a violation of the fundamental rights of all children worldwide (UNCRC, 2006).

Parents and guardians in the Zomba rural communities commonly used CP to instil moral values in their children. These included shaking or shoving the child, spanking, smacking or slapping with bare hands, whipping or hitting with bare hands or an object (e.g. a stick or cane), pinching or twisting ears, and pulling or twisting lips. These disciplinary methods were typically used when non-physical punishments were ineffective. For instance, if a child persistently disregarded a rule, such as returning home before sunset, parents and guardians resorted to physical discipline, such as spanking, slapping, or using a cane. Although these forms of discipline may appear severe, the parents and guardians viewed them as inevitable to ensure the child's safety and well-being.

The use of CP as a disciplinary method by parents and guardians reflects common parenting practices in the country, sub-Saharan Africa and other regions worldwide. Government of Malawi (2014a) documents similar experiences of physical violence by children in Malawi, including punching, kicking, whipping, beating with an object, choking, smothering, trying to drown, and burning intentionally. The Malawi VACS Report (2015) indicates that 5.3% of girls and 6.5% of boys experience their first incident of physical violence by the age of five or earlier (Government of Malawi, 2014a). Between the ages of six and 11, the prevalence rises significantly, with 52.3% of girls and 63.8% of boys reporting experiences of physical violence (Government of Malawi, 2014a). Among adolescents aged 12 to 17, the figures show that 42.4% of girls and 29.7% of boys encounter physical violence (Government of Malawi, 2014a).

Rather than being viewed as abusive, these forms of punishment are considered necessary for the moral socialisation of children (UNICEF, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). UNICEF (2010: vii) emphasises that CP is “socially condoned and widely perceived as a needed form of discipline.” This approach is deeply ingrained in ‘wider philosophies of socialisation’ (Montgomery, 2009: 161), ‘pervasive around the world’ (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010: 229) and prevalent ‘in almost all cultures’ (Bartholdson, 2001: 5). Breen et al. (2015: 132) note that in South Africa, ‘at a societal level, cultural norms approving violence, the legality of CP in homes and schools, and cultural beliefs about the necessity and effectiveness of physical punishment can contribute to its use.’ Similarly, Hecker et al. (2014) found that 95% of Tanzanian children experienced at least one instance of CP by their parents or caregivers during their lifetime.

Recently, UNICEF conducted multisite studies in various regions around the world that revealed consistent approaches to moral socialisation. Most parents (63%) resorted to physical punishment, while 67% employed psychological aggression as disciplining methods (UNICEF, 2017). Additionally, UNICEF (2017) found that these disciplining methods were prevalent in Malawi, even among toddlers as young as one to two years old. While severe physical punishment was less common for children of this age, many still experienced psychological aggression and other forms of physical discipline.

Despite variations in CP use across different cultures, this practice remains prevalent in many societies worldwide (Grogan-Kaylor et al., 2019). Thus, findings of the study in rural southern Malawi are not unique; they reflect a common practice observed in many regions around the world. Despite this prevalence, both CP and violent psychological discipline are regarded as violations of children's rights by child-centred international organisations (UNICEF, 2014).

5.3 Discourses on Harsh Punishments: Correction or Child Abuse?

The use of harsh punishment to discipline children reported in this paper is in contrast with government policy and child rights campaigns being promoted in many parts of Malawi, including the communities studied. The policy and related interventions aim to eradicate harmful punishments in homes and schools, including CP. The Government of Malawi and local and international development partners have intensified efforts to advocate for the prohibition of physical punishment in schools and homes through policies, frameworks, and instruments drawn from the CRC. However, while CP is illegal in the penal system and public institutions such as government schools, it is still practised and condoned in some Malawian homes, thus hindering substantial progress in ending CP in the country. Many parents and guardians did not view physical punishment as inappropriate or a form of child abuse but rather as a means of ‘correction’ and part of the moral socialisation process as summed up by one of the guardians: “When you flog the children, and then another day you flog them again, then they stop being disobedient, that is the end of their bad behaviour” (Grandfather, 71 years).

Through conversations with local people, it emerged that they perceived child rights campaigns as reflective of orthodox mainstream Western values of child socialisation, which they deemed inappropriate for the local child-rearing practices. This, in turn, created hostility towards child rights ideologies and campaigns being promoted by the Government of Malawi and local and international NGOs as people viewed these campaigns as an infringement on the local ways of moral socialisation of children.

The conflict between advocates for children’s rights and local people’s perspectives resonates with findings from other studies in sub-Saharan Africa (Portela & Pells, 2015). For example, Archambault (2009: 299) observes that parents and educators in Kenya “are apprehensive about certain aspects of the discourse on children’s rights,” and that “granting entitlements to young individuals, who are not yet fully integrated into society, is perceived as challenging adults’ conceptions of childhood and ideas about children’s development as well as their authority over their children.”

Mturi et al. (2005: 46) write about intergenerational conflict triggered by the mismatch between the older generation’s view of rights and that of the younger generation in South Africa, stating that “apparently children do not listen and have no respect towards adults because they say they have rights and think that they can do anything they like.” Boersch-Supan (2012: 40) reports that chiefs and elders in Sierra Leone “complained that youth and children rely much on human rights in disobeying their parents and elders.” Wessells (2015: 15) highlights resentment and frustration from parents in Sierra Leone who expressed that “child rights had undermined their parenting since they could no longer use CP to teach children good values and behaviour.” Twum-Danso (2010) highlights social resistance to children’s rights

campaigns in Ghana that were advocating the elimination of CP in both the home and the school, as well as legal measures prohibiting parents and guardians from using CP. She writes that local people are taking that stance “because of a fear that their children will turn into ‘Western children’ or ‘white children’ if such laws were introduced into society” (Twum-Danso, 2010: 55), thus echoing the label of ‘modern colonialism’ stated by the participants in the study in rural southern Malawi. Similarly, in her critique of the importation or universalisation of child-rearing practices from the Global North, Monaghan (2012: 57) interrogates whether it “constitutes ‘intervention’ or ‘interference’ in the world’s childrearing practices.” Thus, the use of harsh disciplining methods, such as CP, in the moral socialisation of children remains widespread and controversial worldwide. This shows that the discord between local citizen and child rights campaigns permeates many societies across sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the cultural similarities that characterise the social life in this region of the world.

Additionally, our research in rural southern Malawi reveals that parents and guardians prioritised preventing physical harm over considering the emotional and psychological impacts of their actions when disciplining children. Even in cases of physical punishment, their concern was only evident when it led to excessive injury, as determined by the severity of the injury. Conversations revealed that they believed the discipline they administered was not severe, although they did assertively raise their voices, as one of the guardians expressed:

Well, the punishment is not severe... it’s just like a little bit, like you’re removing dusting from them (Researcher: with a stick?) yes, but not beating them too hard, just gently like this [demonstrating] and shout at them like, “hey, why are you doing [this]?”, but don’t hit them hard, no! (Grandfather, 71 years old).

It was observed that within rural southern Malawi, using CP to inflict a certain degree of pain was condoned, implying that parents and guardians endeavoured to strike a balance between leniency and harshness when it came to CP and abuse. This observation aligns with the notion of ‘reasonable chastisement’ described in Boydell et al. (2017: 1000) and is commonly seen in other Afrocentric contexts, where it is considered constructive rather than abusive (Fréchette & Romano, 2017). Archambault (2009) points out that while physical punishment is widely accepted in Kenya, parents and guardians take care not to cause injury to the child, often using a thin leather strap. One notes, however, that the severity of pain is ambiguous and may be interpreted differently across cultures. What may be considered moderate punishment in Africa may be considered harsh or abusive in Europe and America (Boydell et al., 2017).

It emerged clear in our study in rural southern Malawi that parents and guardians were increasingly concerned about inadvertently causing physical harm or even death to a

child due to fear of facing legal repercussions. This finding is consistent with Twum-Danso's research in Ghana in 2010, which highlighted a shift in attitudes towards physical discipline following instances where parents caused injuries to their children, necessitating medical attention. It appears that parents and guardians are mindful of the potential of medical costs and legal implications and, consequently, take deliberate steps to ensure that disciplinary actions do not lead to excessive harm. In rural southern Malawi, while concerns about medical expenses were not as prominent, many participants expressed apprehension about the prospect of facing arrest and imprisonment. For example, David, an 80-year-old participant, mentioned that he refrained from using severe CP on his two granddaughters (aged 13 and 15) out of fear of causing harm that could result in imprisonment. During a discussion with David, he recounted a recent incident in his community where an individual caused the death of a child and was serving a life sentence in prison. David elaborated on his cautious approach to avoid such a situation despite occasionally resorting to CP. Other parents and guardians echoed similar concerns. For instance, one of them stated that "if the child is very mischievous, it is wrong for you to beat them daily because one day you may end up killing them for not heeding discipline" (Young adult, 32 years, male).

Furthermore, research revealed that although parents and guardians were knowledgeable about the immediate and long-term effects of physical discipline on children, there was limited recognition or concern regarding the emotional and psychological impact of harsh punishments on children. This observation is consistent with findings from other studies conducted in Southern Africa, including those in South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (Chigiji et al., 2018; Breen et al., 2015). Although parents and guardians in our study in rural southern Malawi often failed to recognise the negative emotional and psychological effects on children, some children raised this concern. For instance, during a group discussion, a 13-year-old boy expressed feeling depressed after being scolded, stating that "sometimes, they don't say nice things to us, they say things that I never expected to hear in my life, and I become depressed" (Child, 13 years, male).

This indicates that even though parents and guardians may not fully recognise the emotional and psychological impact of non-physical punishments, the children who experience them may still suffer. This underscores the need to sensitise parents and guardians on the detrimental impact of CP on children's emotional and psychological well-being.

5.4 Unintended Outcomes of Corporal Punishment

The study indicates that certain disciplinary actions taken by parents and guardians can lead to unintended outcomes, including driving children towards risky behaviours that expose them to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, which is

consistent with the findings of Chigiji et al. (2018) in Zimbabwe. In this study, some boys mentioned that when they were deprived of food or expelled from their homes, they resorted to stealing from others' sugarcane and cassava fields to survive. Girls shared that they entered clandestine transactional sexual relationships with boys or men in their community or engaged in unprotected commercial sex in the nearby trading centres to earn money for food. For example, during a group discussion, a 13-year-old girl noted that "these punishments are bad because when they chase you away from home, you have nowhere to go, so you start doing bad things like having sex to have money to buy food" (Child, 13 years, female). This signifies the detrimental and unintended outcomes of certain disciplinary methods on children.

Despite this, parents and guardians viewed CP as appropriate. They justified its necessity to address the growing indiscipline among 'children of today', hence viewing it as the normative child-rearing method. The widespread social acceptance and normalisation of CP was a prevalent phenomenon in the research communities, mirroring other parts of sub-Saharan Africa and the globe (Lansford et al., 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). In rural southern Malawi guardians reported that they were not the only ones resorting to harsh discipline to address children's misbehaviour; parents also employed similar methods due to their perceived increase in problematic behaviour among 'children of today'. This suggests a sense of nostalgia among the older generation for the conduct of modern children, as expressed by one grandfather:

Physical punishments cannot be ruled out because children do anger you and without being patient, you just realise you have lashed the, yeah [...] These children sometimes are arrogant and don't take heed of advice or discipline, particularly 'these years'. Most of these children are not like the way we used to be in the past, no! The children of 'this generation' and that of the past generation are very different (Grandfather, 80 years).

The study suggests that children in rural southern Malawi are accustomed to considering these disciplinary measures as normal due to their widespread use and social acceptance. Interestingly, some of the children interviewed expressed similar sentiments to those of adults. They mentioned that while they were apprehensive about the punishments, they did not necessarily perceive them as abusive or cruel. Instead, they saw them as a form of moral upbringing intended for their benefit. Despite differing opinions, there was a consensus among children and young people regarding the inevitability of such disciplinary actions, and they did not harbour any resentment towards their parents and guardians for employing these measures: "The punishments are good because when they punish me, they intend to teach me a lesson so that I do not repeat the same bad thing" (Child, 13 years, female); "It's a good thing to be punished..." (Child, 15 years, female).

The findings in rural southern Malawi regarding the acceptance, normalisation, and internalisation of CP among children and young people align with similar research

conducted in sub-Saharan Africa and other global regions. For instance, a study in rural and urban Ghana revealed that 77% of participants disagreed with outlawing physical punishment in the home, and 66% considered it crucial for their moral upbringing (Twum-Danso, 2010). Twum-Danso Imoh (2013: 478) later noted that Ghanaian children viewed physical correction as “part of their training to become members of their societies.” Multinational studies conducted by UNICEF (2017) demonstrated that while cultural attitudes toward CP may differ by country, children in certain nations regard CP as beneficial for their moral development. These findings indicate that the outcomes of the Malawi study are not uncommon.

However, experience in rural southern Malawi also revealed that some children disliked physical punishments regardless of the offence committed. For instance, a 13-year-old boy unequivocally stated that: “We don’t like them [the physical punishments].” When faced with unavoidable punishment and preference, many children said they would choose certain types of disciplinary actions rather than CP, which is consistent with Twum-Danso’s (2010) findings among Ghanaian children. Several children interviewed in the study expressed a clear aversion to physical punishments and preferred non-physical forms of discipline, such as verbal reprimands, while others simply preferred to avoid punishment altogether. One child emphasised that “they should scold or shout at us, but they should not beat us” (Child, 13 years, female). Another had this to say: “When I have done something wrong, sometimes they tell me to go and fetch water, and sometimes they beat me. I don’t like it. They should just leave me alone” (Child, male, 10 years).

5.5 Perspectives of Professionals Regarding Corporal Punishment

While some children, parents, and guardians viewed certain disciplinary actions as appropriate, none of the professionals interviewed (i.e. CPWs, HSAs, and teachers) endorsed this practice. They unequivocally classified such punishments as child abuse. For instance, a 43-year-old teacher stated that “the punishments you have mentioned, such as withholding food and pinching ears, I consider them to be [child] abuse.” This perspective is not surprising, as these professionals usually collaborate with the government and NGOs in campaigns against CP. Additionally, other parents and guardians, along with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), Child Protection Committees (CPCs), and Community-Based Childcare Centre (CBCCs), viewed CP as a form of child abuse and preferred alternative forms of discipline, such as advice and withdrawing privileges: “Beating a child is child abuse. What you have to do is to advise the child that, ‘don’t do this, rather do this and that” (Grandfather, 74 years). Another respondent state that “we [CBO members] always tell them [parents and guardians] during community meetings that taking a rod to whip a child is abuse. It is better to counsel the child” (Grandfather, 69 years).

5.6 Government and NGOs Advocacy for Ending Corporal Punishment: A Form of ‘Modern Colonialism’?

In an effort to promote children’s rights, there have been various challenges in shifting societal attitudes. The government and development partners have been actively pursuing this objective. However, participants raised concerns about these interventions, viewing them as a form of ‘modern colonialism’. They argued that these interventions, such as those advocating for outlawing CP, are rooted in Western concepts of childhood that are incompatible with local cultural norms. They perceived these initiatives as conferring excessive rights and liberties upon children, leading to behaviours that were deemed unacceptable in the local culture (e.g. immodest dressing and smoking), echoing other studies in Africa (e.g. Boersch-Supan, 2012; Zuilkowski et al., 2019). The participants expressed the following: “Some children are smoking *chamba* [hemp], and when their parents confront and reprimand them, they say, ‘leave me alone! It’s my freedom and right” (Child, 14 years, female). Another respondent worried that “the thighs are exposed in public, the breasts are exposed in public, everything is exposed in public! And, if you dare to confront them about it, they say, You want to deny me my rights?” (Grandfather, 73 years). Echoing similar remarks, another stated that “nowadays, children have lots of freedom... that’s the reason I fear for their indiscipline. This freedom is what is making the children rude” (Adult, 42 years, female).

There was a prevalent belief among parents, guardians, and other stakeholders that Western interventions to promote children’s rights, including prohibiting CP, were interfering with local child-rearing practices. This was perceived as undermining their efforts to socialise ‘their children’ in the ‘proper way’. For instance, while CP was considered a normative socialisation method, some refrained from using it out of concern that their children might report them to child rights-focused organisations. This apprehension stemmed from the potential for conflict with authorities such as the police or human rights workers like CPWs, a finding reflecting Wessells et al.’s (2015) study in Sierra Leone:

Some of the children listen to the radio and they hear that children have rights. If you try to discipline them, they take the issue further and you end up in trouble even though the child is yours because they say, ‘*a child has rights*’. Parents are failing to discipline their children because of these organisations. Organisations are ‘polluting’ our culture (Adult, 41 years, male).

In the research communities in rural southern Malawi, there was a noticeable sentiment of frustration, disempowerment, and nostalgia for an idealised past, along with a moral panic among some parents and guardians. Their resistance to interventions that support children’s rights was evident, reflecting their attitudes towards Western values and advocacy for children’s rights, as well as their perspectives on children’s discipline. Parents and guardians expressed concern that

their cultural practices, including the use of strict discipline for children's moral development, were being infiltrated, eroded, and supplanted by a new culture – a Western culture that sought to eliminate CP:

Our culture is diminishing before our eyes. It's like a river washing away your clothes down the stream, in a swirl, and you just stand watching helplessly, shouting, 'oh, my gosh! My clothes are being washed away!' (Young adult, 28 years, male); *Swagger* is copied from technology and the children are disregarding our culture (Young adult, 32 years, male).¹

Such sentiments underscore the discord between the local people, on the one hand, and the government and child-centred NGOs and professionals (child rights ideology), on the other hand, regarding the appropriate moral socialisation of children. Evidently, local people's views around CP contradict the provisions of Malawi's legal framework for child protection.

6. Conclusion

This article contributes to the discourse on child disciplining practices in sub-Saharan Africa, utilising data from a larger study that explored grandfathers' orphan care in rural southern Malawi (Lazaro, 2018, 2023). This study aimed to expand on the discussion regarding the discord between the local people and the government and child rights advocates vis-à-vis what constitutes the moral socialisation of children in contemporary rural southern Malawi. The study particularly drew on CP as a method of correcting undesirable behaviours.

The study reveals that the use of CP was widespread and accepted by most parents and guardians, reflecting common childrearing practices in other parts of Malawi and sub-Saharan Africa more generally. However, the sanctioning of CP and other harsh disciplinary measures for the moral socialisation of children seems contentious, particularly when viewed through the lens of recent international perspectives on child rights and the country's legal frameworks for child protection. This suggests that such a discord may hinder child rights interventions, as local communities may resist or not fully embrace them, leaving millions of children vulnerable to rights violations as construed by the UNCRC and the country's legal framework for child protection. This could have detrimental effects on children, particularly when their views on moral socialisation differ from those of their parents and guardians.

Drawing on the findings from other studies in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Zuilkowski et al., 2019; Frankenberg et al., 2014), the study recommends reconciling parental

¹ *Swagger* is term commonly used by the youths in Malawi to refer to a kind of self-centred lifestyle that is concerned with being stylish (e.g. dressing) at the expense of other important things, as well as being boastful and bragging.

authority and child rights using a context-specific approach. Wholesale importation of childrearing practices grounded in the naturalisation of Western notions of childhood via the CRC may fail or yield limited impact if imposed on the local people. A context-specific approach could secure local support and lead to gradual shifts in attitudes and parenting practices. This gradual process of change may be more acceptable to local communities, allowing for the promotion of child rights without being perceived as a threat to long-standing cultural child-rearing practices. Ultimately, this gradual approach may help mitigate resistance from parents and guardians to child rights initiatives, fostering social change regarding the moral socialisation of children without alienating local cultural practices.

The perception of emotional and psychological punishments by parents and guardians as innocuous is a significant concern. Given the potential effects of such punishments on children, the study suggests that children may experience both short-term and long-term consequences from these methods of moral socialisation. Therefore, awareness campaigns could address this issue as part of their intervention strategies, in addition to focusing on CP and other harsh punishments, such as withholding food.

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