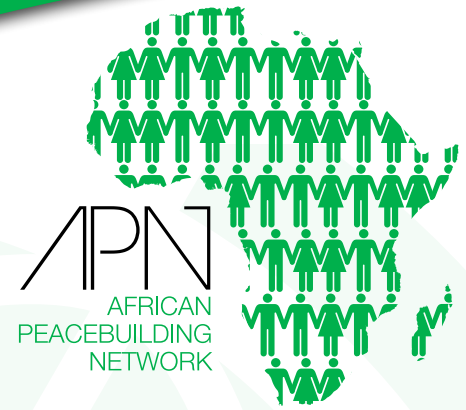




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Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse in Refugee Settlements: A Call for Urgent, Integrated Action in Zimbabwe

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen Legal and Justice Mechanisms:** Amend national laws to explicitly address the vulnerabilities of refugee children.
- **Rectify the current situation** of incomplete records and enable effective tracking, trend analysis, and coordinated responses by investing in a Centralized Data Management System.
- **Increase the value and scope** of humanitarian aid and economic support to refugee families.
- **Shift from siloed programs** to holistic and integrated interventions.
- **Empower communities** and foster local ownership of community-based child protection committees.
- **Strengthen prevention and educational programs** that empower children with knowledge of their rights, bodily autonomy, safe disclosure mechanisms, and expanded opportunities for post-secondary education.
- **Community and religious leaders** must actively speak out against child sexual abuse, cultural taboos, and stigma.
- **Promote participation** in community-led child protection committees to monitor risks, support survivors, and hold perpetrators and institutions accountable.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a profound and often hidden violation of human rights.¹ Within Zimbabwe's Tongogara Refugee Settlement (TRS), this issue is not an isolated phenomenon. Driven by structural poverty, a pervasive 'culture of silence,'² and systemic weaknesses in protection and justice mechanisms, refugee children face heightened vulnerability.³ Research findings in a study carried out in 2024 in the settlement highlight an urgent need to move beyond fragmented interventions towards a holistic, structurally informed approach that addresses the root causes of abuse. This brief proposes a series of actionable recommendations for the Government of Zimbabwe, humanitarian actors, and community stakeholders to build a more resilient and protective environment for children living in refugee settlements.

THE PERVERSIVE THREAT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN TONGOGARA

Structures designed to protect children living in refugee settlements often collapse, leaving them exposed to heightened risks.⁴ Research conducted in Tongogara Refugee Settlement between 2022 and 2024, covering the period 2015–2023, shows that child sexual abuse (CSA) is a persistent reality rooted in the settlement's socio-economic conditions. Using qualitative methods including interviews, focus group discussions, non-participant observation, and documentary review the study found that structural poverty and inadequate humanitarian aid drive families toward harmful coping mechanisms. Practices such as transactional sex and early marriage are often framed as survival strategies, gradually normalizing children's exploitation.

The problem is further entrenched by a pervasive culture of silence. Deep-seated cultural taboos, stigma, and the fear that reporting abuse could jeopardize

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resettlement prospects—the ultimate aspiration for many refugees, often discourages families from speaking out. This silence is reinforced by widespread mistrust in formal justice systems. Survivors and their families often turn to informal community settlements, which typically deny justice and perpetuate cycles of impunity.

Environmental and systemic risks compound these challenges. Overcrowded housing, poor lighting, and other infrastructural deficiencies create unsafe conditions where abuse can flourish. At the same time, systemic weaknesses, such as inadequate data management and the absence of a centralized database for CSA cases, mask the true scale of the problem. These gaps fragment accountability and undermine coordinated protection responses, leaving children vulnerable in an environment where exploitation thrives unchecked.

RESILIENCE AND AWARENESS AMONG CHILDREN

Despite these challenges, there are significant elements of resilience and awareness, particularly among children. Educational programs and child-friendly spaces have empowered youth with knowledge of their rights and have fostered protective peer networks, positioning schools as critical hubs for prevention and disclosure.

CONCLUSION: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The children of Tongogara Refugee Settlement are not merely victims; they are resilient individuals with a right to a safe and protected childhood. The current reality of child sexual abuse is a collective failure that demands an urgent and coordinated response. By centering the lived realities of refugee children and adopting an evidence-based, community-driven approach, we can move from a culture of silence to a culture of safety. There is a need to explore options for building a more accountable, resilient and protective environment where every child can thrive.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: A CALL FOR INTEGRATED ACTION

Addressing child sexual abuse in the Tongogara Refugee Settlement requires a fundamental shift from fragmented interventions to a holistic, structurally informed, and community-centered approach.

¹ World Health Organisation. (2006). Preventing child maltreatment: A guide to taking action and generating evidence. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43499>

² Collin-Vézina, D., De La Sablonnière-Griffin, M., Palmer, A. M., & Milne, L. (2015). A preliminary mapping of individual, relational, and social factors that impede disclosure of childhood sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 43, 123–134.

The Government of Zimbabwe and Policymakers should:

1. Strengthen Legal and Justice Mechanisms: Amend national laws to explicitly address the vulnerabilities of refugee children. Establish mobile, child-friendly courts to operate within the settlement, ensure that birth registration and documentation processes for refugee children are streamlined and accessible, while reducing barriers to justice and mitigating the community's distrust of formal systems.

2. Rectify the current situation of incomplete records and enable effective tracking, trend analysis, and coordinated responses by investing in a Centralized Data Management System in collaboration with UNHCR and partner NGOs.

3. Increase the value and scope of humanitarian aid and economic support to refugee families to reduce the economic pressures that lead to negative coping mechanisms like transactional sex and early marriage.

For Humanitarian Actors (UNHCR and NGOs)

● **Shift from siloed programs** to holistic and integrated interventions that address the root causes of CSA, including poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education.

● **Empower communities** and foster local ownership of community-based child protection committees by ensuring that refugee communities, including children and youth, actively participates in the design, implementation, and monitoring of protection programs.

● **Strengthen prevention and educational programs** that empower children with knowledge of their rights, bodily autonomy, safe disclosure mechanisms, and expanded opportunities for post-secondary education.

For Community Stakeholders

● **Community and religious leaders** must actively speak out against child sexual abuse, cultural taboos, and stigma and foster open dialogue within families and the community about child protection.

● **Promote participation** in community-led child protection committees to monitor risks, support survivors, and hold perpetrators and institutions accountable.

³ Joining Forces for Africa. (2020). Providing protection services to children in refugee camps. <https://joining-forces.org/joining-forces-for-africa/providing-protection-services-to-children-in-refugee-camps/>

⁴ Muller, A., Stavropoulou, M., & Tsoli, S. (2022). A social protection response to child protection risks among refugees and migrants in Greece. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 35 (2), 793-815.