



## A comparative study on child preferences among selected rural and urban households in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

Due to various reasons, traditional African societies have largely been patriarchal, preferring the boy child to the girl child, with the marginalisation of the girl child resulting in various costs to her and to society at large. In light of the above, and given the globalization and modernization trends across the continent, this study sought to comparatively establish current child preferences of husbands as household heads in an urban area and a rural area in Chipinge District, Zimbabwe. The reasons and impacts of the established child preferences were also assessed, and recommendations suggested based on the study findings. A questionnaire, key-informant interviews and group discussions were used in gathering primary data in the study communities. The study revealed a preference for more boys to girls as children in both study communities, though this seemed to be more pronounced in the rural area compared to the urban area. Among the reasons for the preference for more boys to girls in the study sites included: perpetuation of the family name; inheritance of family assets; leadership in society; and guaranteed family labour especially in the rural area. The preference for more boys has resulted in some marital instabilities in the study areas, particularly in the rural area, evidenced by increased incidences of divorce and polygamy as husbands search for sons whom their first wives would have failed to bear. The preference for boys has also seen some household heads sending only boys to school or sending girls only up to grade seven. Such marginalisation of the girl child retards the socio-economic development of the country as girls will not realise their full potential. The study recommends the need for government, in collaboration with non-governmental organisations involved with gender issues, to come up with policies that more effectively enhance gender equity in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** child preference, gender, boy child, girl child, patriarchy, male dominance, women marginalisation, traditional culture, modernisation, chipinge

### 1. Introduction

Children are very important to every society. Among traditional African societies, there seems to be some special importance attached to the male child. In the African traditional culture, the boy child is considered more important than the girl child, and this is supported and enhanced by African culture, which attaches norms and standards of behaviour to children. There are stereotypical traits that are assigned to boys and girls, which are traditionally fashioned so as to justify the importance of the boy child in a family <sup>[1]</sup>. Traditional African culture is a highly gendered society <sup>[2]</sup>. Sex refers to physical differences of the body, while gender concerns the physiological, social and cultural differences between males and females <sup>[3]</sup>. Categorisation of people in traditional African societies is based more on gender rather than sex, whereby a child is defined by the qualities, standards, norms and expectations of the society <sup>[4]</sup>. A boy is accorded power, privilege and prestige in the patriarchal traditional African society. Patriarchal culture is about control and domination in almost every area of human existence, and this power to control others, events and resources is accorded to the male child <sup>[5]</sup>. This dominance is instilled in male children from very tender ages until they develop into adulthood <sup>[6]</sup>. On the other hand, the girl child is socialised into a polite, submissive, tender and motherly person.

However, the gender concept is not unique to African societies, but is found across races and cultures worldwide <sup>[7, 8, 9, 10, 11]</sup>. For example, even in modern society, the toys that are bought for children show the elements of dominance versus submissiveness, in which the boy child is given the gun, pistol or other weaponry toys, while the girl child is given dolls and cooking utensils <sup>[12]</sup>. The above notwithstanding, the gendered culture seems to be more pronounced in Africa, and other similarly cultured regions of the world. Various reasons have been put forward in support of the preference for, and dominance of, male children in traditional African culture. First, and probably most importantly, a male child is regarded as the heir, an inheritor and successor of the lineage. Male children are taken as perpetuators or preservers of the family line. In traditional Shona culture in Zimbabwe, a beast can actually be slaughtered when a wife gives birth to a son while none is slaughtered when a girl child is born, as it is believed that female children tend to cause the extinction of the family name <sup>[13]</sup>. Similar views are also upheld among West African societies where, if a wife fails to produce sons, she would be marginalised and the husband would marry another wife <sup>[14]</sup>. A woman is expected to go on bearing until she bears a boy child, and if she fails, she would be regarded as a social outcast. It is generally agreed among these societies that the history of society is the history of a man, and that the blood of

the male line perpetuates this history [15].

Second, traditional African societies are largely agro-based. As such, muscles are needed to work in the fields, and these muscles only exist in males according to societal norms [16]. It is, therefore, imperative for a married couple to have children as they are regarded as economic assets as well as sources of prestige, especially if the children are male [17].

The preferential societal treatment offered to the male child has resulted in the marginalisation of the girl child in various ways in many African societies [18]. In spite of efforts by national governments, non-governmental organisations and other international organisations to eradicate gender stereotypes, patriarchy is still evident within Zimbabwean, African and other societies across the globe. The gendered or binary culture seems to be persistent, and has been transmitted from generation to generation through socialisation at family level and in the society at large through the media, education and various other platforms. This has seen many households preferring to have more boys than girls as children. Against this background, this study comparatively analyses child preferences among selected rural and urban households in Zimbabwe. In pursuing the study objective, the following research questions were used as a guide:

- What are the child preferences by household heads in the study communities?
- What are the reasons for the identified child preferences in the study communities?
- What are the differences in child preferences between urban and rural households?
- What are the impacts of the established child preferences in the study communities?
- What measures can be adopted so as to have a less gendered society?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Study sites

Chipinge District is one of the seven administrative districts in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe (Figure 1). It is situated in the south-eastern part of the country, and is bordered by Mozambique. Chipinge falls within Zimbabwe's agro-ecological Region I, characterised by a high average annual rainfall exceeding 1000mm. The District is densely populated largely due to its favourable climatic conditions, which support vast commercial farms and plantations. According to the 2012 National Population Census, Chipinge District had a total population of 326 467 inhabitants [19]. However, due to the persisting politically motivated socio-economic challenges in Zimbabwe, and also due to Chipinge's border location, many people have since left the district either for South Africa or Mozambique.

Chipinge Town constitutes the urban part of Chipinge District and, according to the 2012 National Population Census, the town had a population of 25 675 people [19]. Chipinge is a small town surrounded by many communal areas interspaced with some commercial farming areas. One of the communal areas surrounding Chipinge Town is Mapungwana, located about 40km to the south-east of the town. The communal area, together with the town, were selected as case studies for analysing child preferences among rural and urban households in the district. It is important to note that Chipinge District is

one of the country's areas with relatively more conservative traditional societies, hence its choice for this particular study.

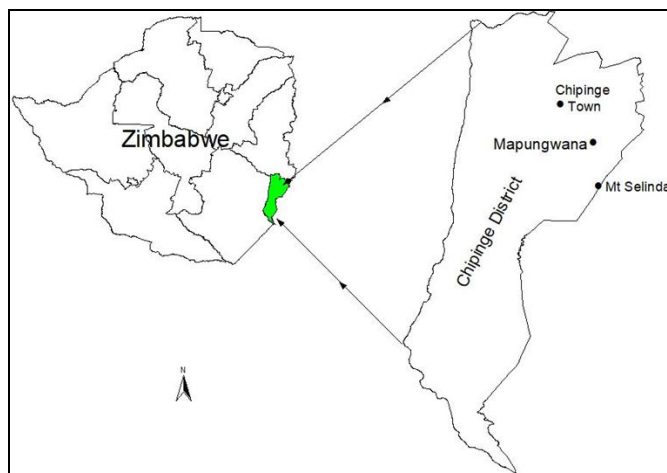


Fig 1: Location of Chipinge Town and Mapungwana communal area

### 2.2 Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire, key-informant interviews and group discussions were used for collecting primary data on child preferences in the study communities. The questionnaire targeted the male household heads (fathers) in Chipinge Town and Mapungwana communal area. Fathers were targeted as these are the ones often concerned with maintaining and perpetuating a patrilineal society, and often have the final say on a couple's child preferences. Stratified random sampling was used in selecting households for questionnaire interviews, with the town and the rural area constituting the two study strata. A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed within the target communities, 50 in Chipinge Town and another 50 in Mapungwana communal area. The key informants for the study were selected purposively, and these included representatives from the Girl Child Network, Simukai, Plan International and the Ministry of Gender, all of which deal with gender issues in Zimbabwe. The key informants provided in-depth information on child preferences in the study areas and the Zimbabwean society at large. Such data is largely unobtainable through the questionnaire. Unlike the questionnaire which targeted only males, the key informants and group discussants included both males and females so as to capture the gender issues and debates in the study areas and in Zimbabwe at large.

The quantitative data obtained through the questionnaire were analysed through descriptive statistics and tabulated, while qualitative data from the interviews and group discussions were analysed into meaningful emerging themes guided by the study objectives and research questions. The two data sets were then used corroboratively through triangulation. A constant comparative approach was used in the presentation and discussion of the results from the rural and urban study respondents.

## 3. Results and discussion

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the child preferences of household heads. Table 1 summarises the child preferences of interviewed questionnaire respondents. As the

table shows, the majority of the questionnaire respondents in both Mapungwana (71%) and Chipinge Town (51%) preferred to have more boys than girls as children, with the overall preference for boys for the two study areas combined being 61%. There were some slight differences in child preferences between the urban and rural questionnaire respondents, with 20% and 23% of the respondents in Mapungwana and Chipinge Town, respectively, preferring more girls than boys, while 9% in the rural area and 26% in the town said they had no specific child preference. Comparatively, the results seem to display a higher tendency for patriarchy in the rural area than in the urban area. This could probably be due to the fact that traditional cultural values are still more widely upheld in rural areas than urban areas, with the latter affected by modernisation more, leading to some cultural dilution. The contrast between the rural area and the urban area on child preferences was put across more clearly by two male group discussants in the two study areas. The group discussant in Mapungwana noted that:

*“A man without a son is a dead man, girls would enrich other people’s families”.*

In contrast, the group discussant in Chipinge Town highlighted that:

*“Whether it’s a boy or a girl, I do not mind. A child is a child, and a gift from God”.*

The above sentiment from the town was echoed by most of the urban group discussants who seemed to be detached from the traditional conventions preferring more boys to girls, except for a few who still held such traditions on gender.

**Table 2:** Reasons for preferring more boys than girls (in %): multiple responses per respondent were permitted

Reasons for preferring more boys than girls	Mapungwana communal area (n=36)	Chipinge Town (n=26)	Total (n=62)
Men more important in society than women	80	63	71.5
Boys perpetuate the family name	100	100	100
Boys inherit assets as heirs	100	70	85
Boys guarantee family labour	84	52	68
Boys will look after parents in old age while girls are married off	73	56	64.5
Boys will become the leaders in society not women	90	51	70.5

**Note:** Only those preferring more boys than girls were interviewed hence reduced n values

The study, again, went further to establish the reasons for preferring more girls as children by some questionnaire respondents in both study areas (Table 3). A quick comparative glance at the responses in Table 2 and those in Table 3 on the reasons for the desired child preferences reveals a striking difference. While there were more reasons put forward by respondents favouring more boys than girls (Table 2), there were only two reasons put across by those preferring more girls than boys (Table 3). This further highlights a highly patriarchal society in the study areas. The most popular reason for preferring girls to boys as children was the bride price paid when a daughter gets married, with all the questionnaire respondents (100%) in Mapungwana, and 68% in Chipinge Town preferring more girls than boys citing

**Table 1:** Child preferences among respondents (in %)

Child preferences by respondents	Mapungwana communal area (n=50)	Chipinge Town (n=50)	Total (n=100)
More boys	71	51	61
More girls	20	23	21.5
Any child	9	26	17.5
Total	100	100	100

The study went further to ascertain the reasons behind the established child preferences in the study communities. Table 2 shows the reasons put forward by questionnaire respondents preferring more boys than girls as children. The majority of the questionnaire respondents in both Mapungwana (80%) and Chipinge Town (63%) highlighted a higher importance attached to men in society, compared to women, as the reason why they preferred more boys as children. The questionnaire respondents in both study sites highlighted strongly the importance of boys as perpetrators of the family name (100%), as well as being heirs over family assets. There was a more pronounced importance of boys as guarantors of family labour in the rural area (84%) compared to the urban area (52%). Most probably, this is due to the higher prevalence of chores requiring more manual labour in rural settings compared to urban areas, hence the need for more boys. While the majority of the questionnaire respondents in the town also supported the various reasons for preferring more boys to girls as children just as their rural counterparts (Table 2), there was stronger support for such reasons among the rural respondents. Again, this shows a still higher degree of patriarchy in the rural area compared to the urban area, in addition to, most probably, being indicative of more successful efforts in creating equal opportunities for boys and girls in the urban area compared to the rural area.

this as a reason. This appears to be a self-centred reason for desiring more girls as children, with the girl child merely viewed as a source of income. The other reason for preferring more girls was also equally self-centred, with girls perceived to look after their parents better compared to boys later in life. In spite of the fact that girls get married and move away to stay with their husbands, the majority of the questionnaire respondents in both study sites indicated that girls look after parents better than boys, though, comparatively, fewer respondents in the rural area (52%) concurred with this assertion than those in the urban area (62%). The reasons put across in Table 2 for preferring more boys to girls seem to benefit the boys far much more compared to the reasons put across for preferring more girls than boys in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Reasons for preferring more girls than boys (in %): multiple responses per respondent were permitted

Reasons for preferring more girls than boys	Mapungwana communal area (n=10)	Chipinge Town (n=12)	Total (n=22)
Get lobola (bride price)	100	68	84
Girls look after parents better than boys	53	62	57.5

**Note:** Only those preferring more girls than boys were interviewed hence reduced n values

The other objective of the study was to examine the impacts of the established child preferences in the study areas. The information to address this objective was obtained through interviews and group discussions. One of the effects of the greater preference for boys to girls as children revealed in both study sites was the divorcement of wives who would have failed to give birth to at least one boy child. This was clearly articulated by one female group discussant in Mapungwana who lamented that:

*“I was divorced by my husband because I failed to give birth to sons when my fifth child was still a girl”.*

The above highlights the need for women to bear more sons as a way of safeguarding their marriages. For some ‘lucky’ women failing to have sons, while they may not be divorced, their husbands may take other wives to bear sons for them. Under such circumstances, preference for more boys to girls will now act as a driver for polygamy. Increased cases of polygamy due to failure of first wives to bear sons were highlighted by key informants and group discussants in both study sites. This was succinctly summarised by a male group discussant in Mapungwana who unashamedly, and with a broad smile on his face, noted that

*“I now have three wives after my first two wives failed to bear me sons. My first two wives had a total of 10 daughters without any son, which forced me to take a third wife who, fortunately, finally bore me three sons”.*

The strained marriages evidenced by the above cases of polygamy and divorce due to the failure of first wives to bear sons, clearly highlight the importance still attached to boys within Zimbabwean society. An additional consequence of the preference for more boys to girls is the high number of unplanned children resulting from extra births in search of boys, which ultimately makes the parents fail to give adequate care for them, thereby perpetuating the vicious poverty cycle throughout the generations of such families.

It was also revealed through the interviews and group discussions, especially in Mapungwana, that some parents were not very keen to send their daughters to school. Among the reasons raised within group discussions and also interviews, especially in the rural area, for fathers preferring to send boys to school than girls included the idea that girls would get married and enrich other people’s families; education would make girls to become prostitutes; and that girls are dull in school. Some fathers were reportedly sending their daughters only up to grade seven, with only boys proceeding to secondary school and beyond. While the above reasons for not sending girls to school were obviously no

longer supported by the majority of the people in Zimbabwe as evidenced by the high literacy rate in the country (which is rated among the highest in Africa), the study shows that there are some pockets of communities still upholding such views. The findings of the study echo those by other researchers <sup>[20, 21]</sup> who highlighted that, in spite of efforts by government in promoting gender equity in education, girls and females still lag behind in all levels of education in Zimbabwe.

#### 4. Conclusion and recommendations

In spite of government efforts since independence to promote gender equity, the study has revealed a preference for more boys to girls as children in both study communities. This shows that the study areas are still largely patriarchal, characterised by a dominance of males. Comparatively, though, preference for boys seemed to be more pronounced in the rural area than the urban area. The difference could most probably be due to the more modern environment in the urban area, which has resulted in some cultural dilution compared to the rural area where cultural values and norms are relatively still more intact.

The study recommends for the government, and also non-governmental organisations involved in gender issues, to double their efforts in conscientising couples, and especially husbands, on gender equity. The boy child and the girl child are of equal importance to society. Parents should therefore be satisfied with the children God would have blessed them with, be they boys or girls. The children should be accorded equal opportunities in terms of access to, *inter alia*, education and employment. In addition, parents should know that by law, all children, both boys and girls can inherit assets from their parents. This would eradicate most of the reasons for a higher preference for boys to girls by husbands as highlighted in the study communities. Additionally, this will also address the social costs associated with a preference for boys, including the increased cases of divorce and polygamy highlighted in the study. It is important to note that both the girl child and the boy child are equally important to the socio-economic development of the country, and hence the nation is losing a lot from the continued marginalisation of the girl child who will never reach her full potential in terms of her contribution towards the socio-economic development of the country. This study, however, does not advocate for the equality of males and females in the strictest sense, as they were created different by the Creator. A woman will always be a wife and mother, while a man will always be a husband, father and head of the family. A recognition of these distinctive and inalienable roles within the two sex categories will bring much needed stability in the family and society at large. Rather, the study advocates for equal access to opportunities between the boy child and the girl child in terms of, among others, education, employment and asset inheritance from parents.

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