

Thinking Children's Rights in Africa: Emerging Issues



Edited By

**Isaac Mutelo OP
Joyline Gwara
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Monica Nyachowe OP**

The Southern African Dominican Series is a joint project led by Southern African Dominican women and men and offers contributions on topics of African Dominican interest and various aspects of Church, theology, culture and religion.

Series editors: Monica Nyachowe OP and Isaac Mutelo OP

Editorial assistant: Donald Kateguru OP

1. *The First Dominican Friars in Boksburg, Brakpan and Springs, South Africa (1917–1927)*, Joseph Falkiner, OP, 2024.

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Adelaide
2025

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ISBN

978-1-923580-10-7 Softcover

978-1-923580-11-4 Hardcover

978-1-923580-12-1 Epub

978-1-923580-13-8 PDF



Published by:



Making a lasting impact
ATF Africa is an imprint of imprint of the ATF Press Publishing Group
owned by ATF (Australia) Ltd.

PO Box 234
Brompton, SA 5007
Australia
ABN 90 116 359 963
www.atfpress.com

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Preface

Children remain among the most vulnerable members of society, and the responsibility of protecting their rights requires ongoing intellectual, legal, religious, cultural and social engagement. Since the adoption of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) in 1990, African states have made significant progress in developing legal frameworks and mechanisms protecting children. However, emerging challenges and deep-rooted structural issues continue to hinder the full realisation of children's rights across Africa. *Thinking Children's Rights in Africa: Emerging Issues* is a response to this reality. It is a multidisciplinary volume that brings together a wide range of voices—academics, practitioners, philosophers, theologians, social workers, and child rights advocates—to reflect on the progress, contradictions, and persistent gaps in Africa's child protection landscape.

The volume consists of fourteen chapters and includes the work of more than nineteen contributors, many of whom have conducted empirical research, engaged with policy and existing literature, and/or drawn from years of practical experience. The book begins by exploring traditional and theoretical foundations of children's rights in Africa, emphasising the relevance and tensions between customary norms and contemporary child protection discourses. It then considers the legal and policy dimensions as well as lived realities and emerging challenges, including child marriage, trafficking, sexual abuse, and the situation of children in street contexts. The role of religion, law, and policymakers in shaping the future of child rights on the continent is emphasised.

This book is not just an academic exercise but a call for deeper reflection, bolder advocacy, and more inclusive action in the field of child protection in Africa and beyond. The contributors have not only analysed major challenges; they have also highlighted opportunities for reform, dialogue, and solidarity. We believe this work will be useful to students, scholars, policymakers, faith-based institutions, civil society actors, governments and all those committed to safeguarding the dignity of every child.

Dr Isaac Mutelo, Dr Joyline Gwara and Dr Monica Nyachowe

Acknowledgements

This work represents the collective efforts of many individuals, institutions, and communities whose contributions have made it possible. First, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the nineteen contributors whose scholarship and dedication shaped this book. Each of them brought a unique perspective and expertise that enriched its thematic depth and diversity. We are equally indebted to our language editors and reviewers, who ensured clarity, consistency, and academic rigour throughout the manuscript. Special appreciation goes to all respondents and communities who participated during data collection for their insights and experiences.

Institutional support from various universities was vital. We particularly acknowledge the Arrupe Jesuit University and the University of Zimbabwe, whose support cannot be underestimated. We are also grateful to scholars and colleagues from other institutions in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, South Africa, and beyond who engaged with this work in various capacities. We also acknowledge the unwavering support of the Mutelo, Gwara, and Nyachowe families. Their love, patience, and encouragement made this endeavour possible. Finally, we are deeply thankful to all those who contributed directly or indirectly, through mentorship, critical feedback, prayers, or logistical help.

We dedicate this work to the children of Africa, whose voices must be heard, whose rights must be protected, and whose future must be safeguarded.

Dr Isaac Mutelo, Dr Joyline Gwara and Dr Monica Nyachowe

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(Muntanga and Muzingili, 2019:671). The infiltration of fishing camps by girls in Binga has its genesis in unstable economic fortunes in the communities, for example, in 2012 nationally child headed households were the largest with an average household size of 7.6 people (Zimbabwe National statistics, 2012:7). There are cases where girl children were awarded scholarships or bursaries though they still lacked other school materials (Muzingili *et al*, 2018:5). Locally, Binga rural district has several children engaging into marriages at a tender age though such cases are often not documented. The problem of child marriages is centred on several factors, including lack of enforcement of marriage laws, poverty, cultural beliefs and the lack of role models (Kalimbuka, 2020:1). In many African societies, child marriages serve to cement family, clan and tribal connections. For example, *Trokosi* is a traditional practice in rural Ghana, Benin and Togo that involves sending a young virgin girl to a shrine as atonement for a crime committed by a family member. Child marriages in the rural areas, such as Binga, require an inter-disciplinary approach to unveil hidden information on child marriages in rural communities.

The participants in Zambezi valley community schools were selected methodically to participate in the research based on registers at the schools. Data was collected from secondary and primary students in Binga rural district who have been participating in sexual reproductive health and rights trainings. The group of students who were involved in school health activities such as health clubs, environmental cleaning and other profitable activities were recruited using school registers, which were collected from the school head. Most participants were beneficiaries of locally based organisations such as Basilwizi Trust and were trained on comprehensive sexual reproductive health and rights trainings (SRHR). These participants knew SRHR issues, health club formation and community health. Over and above, most of the participants had more than 3 years of learning in these schools, and this ensured data collection, which was a true reflection of what is happening in these schools and the communities.

Understanding of Child Marriages

Child marriage is a common problem which has disrupted Zambezi valley communities and throughout Africa. One respondent defined child marriages as:

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Chapter Fourteen

Religion and Scourge of Domestic Servant Syndrome in Some Christian Homes in Southwestern, Nigeria

George Olayeye Olatayo and Abimbola Christiana Ayegboyin

Introduction

Child domestic workers are perceived as one of the antisocial behaviours that are prevalent in modern-day Yoruba societies in the southern part of Nigeria. It is a form of child labour that involves engaging underage children and sometimes young adults in a manner that socially and emotionally deprives those vulnerable children of their growing-up experience in life, owing to their early separation from their immediate families and relations (Rodgers and Standing, 1981:281). Domestic servanthood is adjudged as one of the socially harmful and dehumanising phenomena that is capable of affecting the mental development, and physiological and psychological dispositions of the affected children who are involved in this domestic service. The domestic servant syndrome happens in various forms, scopes and in diverse contexts, depending on the situation in which such children are engaged. In most cases, domestic servants are assigned to look after small children in the home, taking care of aged people, child labour, street hawking, using children for farming or mining activities, taking care of the handicapped in the home, gardening, prostitution, child-trafficking and performing a series of house chores. This is because the process of developing human capital in life begins as early as infancy and continues throughout the life of the individual. The process is incremental, with early choices, inputs and events that have the potential to either debilitate or facilitate development at more advanced stages (Hester, 2010). Concerning the aforementioned areas of the scourge of domestic servant syndromes highlighted, child labour in Christian homes is the focus of this chapter.

However, child labour in this context refers to those young persons who are engaged formally to perform different tasks in the homes outside their immediate family settings. The International Labour Organisation Convention (ILO) classifies domestic work as any form of labour which is performed for a particular household or family in a manner by which the person performing such work is a servant (Hester, 2010). In addition, domestic servants in this context have no freedom of their own and do not have the right to reject the duties assigned to them. On that basis, child domestic servants are commonly referred to as 'house-help'. It refers to children living with families who are neither related by blood nor relatively distant consanguinity but employed to do some wide range of domestic work such as performing house chores, taking care of the children of their master, house cleaning, laundry, going to market, cooking and caregiving to the aged.

The International Labour Organisation Convention (ILO) confines domestic servants as private and personal workers who are providers of caregiving to the homes and families. In this regard, domestic works are performed by underage children below the statutory recommended minimum age to work in any public sector or organisation. It should be noted that this does not necessarily include children who are performing such domestic work and chores under the watch and supervision of their immediate parents. In this context, it is simply the home training to do specific functions under the guidance of the parents or a mature family member who assigns and supervises such duties in the family without being forced or coerced to do it (Bekembo, 1993). This may not necessarily entail any form of abuse or molestation in the course of doing the house chores. Thus, child domestic servant syndrome has been a social mantra in Nigerian homes, especially among the social elites and rich people in the society during the pre-colonial eras and the advent of Christianity.

Domestic Servant Syndrome and Religious Beliefs

As an elusive concept to comprehend, religion can be regarded as a belief and worship of the Supreme Being and superhuman agency (Chinecherem and Ozoh, 2017). Dawkins opines that religious beliefs and teachings are one of the ways by which child abuses are commonly perpetuated in the world today under the guise of helping

less privileged children from socially vulnerable homes (Dwarkins, 2012). In Christian contexts, for instance, one of the supportive doctrines for the engagement in domestic servanthood is religious teaching that compels religious adherents to train up their children in the ways of the Lord. For example, Proverbs (13:24, KJV) says, "Spare the rod and spoil the child". But whose duty it is to perform these sacred family duties in the homes is not clearly stated. Is it the biological parents, adopted parents or strangers? Nevertheless, these theological assertions are distortions of the Biblical teachings as regards the training of children. In the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, particularly the sub-Yoruba dialects in the Southwestern part, adults and those who are categorised as older people are assumed to be persons who have customary rights to control, correct and reprove the wrongdoings of the children and young adults (Fadipe, 1970:3).

However, this position does not generally recognise the view that even some of the adults could be badly raised and uncultured with moral deficiencies. Therefore, lack of such moral effronteries and grounds to perform such social tasks in society. Nevertheless, the traditions in Yoruba society affirm that, so far, such adults are older, the Yoruba culture naturally arrogates such social rights to their mature adults to correct their young ones in the society. That is why an adage in the Yoruba language says, *Bi eyi kekere ko gbon, ewo ni ti eyi to dagba*, meaning that 'if this small child is a novice, what of these fully grown adults'. This assumption seems incorrect and sociologically faulty, error-based and insensitive to the fact that the environment where children are raised, who influenced their growing up and all types of training they received in their formative ages usually define who they would become in the future and perhaps form their social inclinations. Therefore, in some cases, religious dogmas and cultural superstitions encourage the practice of domestic servant syndrome in many Christian homes in Yorubaland. By implication, it is not strange to see some children living with their extended family members, such as uncles, aunties, religious priests, and distant relatives in the family.

In most cases, some domestic servants were brought from far places, and other ethnic tribal groups came to come and perform domestic service in the homes of the rich because their parents could not afford to give them basic education and training due to the poverty level in the country. Nevertheless, it is not unjustifiable for a child to live with other families, because children need to be taught some

aspects of social values, moral beliefs and social practices. However, the problem is that when disciplining and guiding children become abusive, where punishment is meted out accompanied by furious anger and transferred aggression, it, therefore, becomes child abuse. In some cases, domestic servants are mistreated, exploited, assaulted, molested, raped tortured killed for ritual purposes or denied their basic fundamental human rights either directly or indirectly because of religious beliefs, practices and cultural traditions.

The Booming of Domestic Servant Syndrome in Christian Homes

The history of domestic servant syndrome in Nigeria is as old as the country and humanity. To have a grasp of a comprehensive understanding of the domestic servant phenomenon, this chapter traced the historical antecedents of domestic servant syndrome to the precolonial period, colonial eras and contemporary times. During the precolonial time, children would be sent out willingly by their biological parents to go and live with their wealthy family members or distant relations, either to learn a particular trading skill or to be an apprentice under a master artisan (Kaushik, 1998). In some instances, children were forced and used as financial collateral for the family. They were to go and live with the wealthy people in the society whose parents owned large sums of money or valuable property (Akiwowo, 1972:32). Children were used as surety against the indebtedness of the family. This practice in Yoruba traditional social practice is known as '*won fi omo ya owo*', meaning that the child is used as collateral for the family's indebtedness.

The who is indemnified by his or her parents may not gain freedom; perhaps, the debt collected by their parents is neither paid nor written off by creditors. This development implies that their freedom may not be given, and such children would be perpetually in unending slavery. Around that time, domestic servants were usually used to perform domestic works and house chores such as fetching firewood, fetching water, providing fodder for their master's horse or camel, washing clothes, cooking, following their masters to the village market to sell goods and keeping home fronts when their master is not at home. Those families who could afford domestic servants by that time were only rich people, powerful warriors or warlords, as well as community

leaders such as local chiefs and kings (Adegunwa, 1987:41). Therefore, there was no clear way to check the social menace of domestic servant syndrome in the community at that time.

During colonial times, the coming of white Europeans to Africa made the domestic servant syndrome take a different turn. By that time, there was little exposure to education, especially how to read and write, as well as to foreign civilisation. This freely gave some of the colonial masters access to as many domestic servants as they wanted. Then, by that time, it was a positive thing for the native parents to see their children living with the white settlers in their official residence. White Europeans also needed servants who would look after them and perform domestic work and other necessary work in the home. In addition, some educated elites in the society who were public servants also hired domestic servants in their homes. The general practice at that time was that it was better to have a child who stayed with educated people so that he or she would be educated as well. There were limited schools at that time where black African children could acquire formal education.

The only available opportunity is to place their children in the homes of the Whiteman and educated elites to help them in the house and learn the arts of education as well. Therefore, the main reason for giving out the children to the Whiteman and other educated families is to gain new knowledge from them and better living conditions (Akinjogbin, 1988). It should be noted that some of the generous masters of domestic servants could give the parents of their house cleaner some gift items like foreign alcoholic wine, a mirror, gunpowder, a face-cap, an umbrella, a walking stick, clothes and money, depending on how rich the person was. More so, it is reliably informed that many of the domestic servants at that time who lived with Europeans and public civil servants were the early recipients of modern education at least up to the primary school level. This consequently provides available hands for the local administrators to have someone who could help them as clerks, interpreters, messengers and cook (Fafunwas, 1981:35). Thus, it was an aid to relieve the parents of the domestic servants of the burden of caring for their children. More so, in the postcolonial time, the practices of domestic servant syndrome were a bit similar to the colonial times, but the only difference is the way modernity and contemporary civilisation dictate the pace of living of people's lives and their homes.

By this time, there were social mechanisms and formal legal procedures to follow as regards child adoption in society. This is because, in the post-independent eras, the structure of society changed as the social class of the people and families equally changed due to the level of social exposure, education and postmodern civilisation, which made people agitate for better living conditions. In addition, world bodies and regional organisations such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and African Union (AU) are keenly interested in preserving the fundamental human rights of the people (DaSilva, 1994:53). These world organisations and bodies should make necessary recommendations for formal agreements among the countries to enter a treaty on how to regulate and formalise the process of child adoption in the family, with specific conditions to meet (Kaushik, 1998:63). However, due to the level of poverty in the country and the social gap in the class structure in the society, which were created because of the acquisition of the Western education value system, some homes still lag and cannot necessarily provide for their children's needs. Therefore, it is observed that domestic servant syndrome is still booming in some Christian-educated families and homes in some parts of Southwestern Nigeria.

Indeed, reflections on the experience of domestic servants in educated Christian families in contemporary times are very different from what was obtainable in the precolonial and colonial eras. Most of the family who engages in domestic servant syndrome are doing so to have a 'house-help' who would look after their children because of the nature of their job demands, which could not permit them to oversee their family affairs regularly. Hence, because of the trust that people have in ministers of God in society and some Christian believers, many people think that their children are in safe hands to be trained in the ways of the Lord, morally and need the proper education. Nevertheless, the dreams of such parents do not usually come to pass when they later see what their children are going through in the homes of the so-called ministers and believers of God.

Many times, the reports of both print and electronic media are aghast at news of the engagement of the domestic servants. The domestic servants are killed for ritual purposes, sexually molested or seriously tortured for being accused of witchcraft (Aboderin, 1991).

In most cases, the domestic servants would be denied access and the right to learning and formal education. Many domestic servants may not learn any trade or be allowed to be apprentices. The main duties of domestic servants in such homes are to look after the children of their master and do the house chores and cleaning. This, however, by implication, encourages a high rate of out-of-school children and school dropouts in the country. This makes the domestic servants inferior to their peers and sometimes even look like outcasts because they domestic servants are socially stigmatised. This invariably lowers their self-esteem and personal self-worth as a human person. Besides, the majority of domestic servants are abused and their natural fundamental rights are denied in various forms, such as prohibiting them from socialising with other children in the neighbourhood, putting them in confinement, depriving them of food and sexual assaults, among other things (Abdullah, 1995). In addition to this, it is observed that some domestic servants are found to be engaged for very long hours of working with either little or no rest, regardless of sleeping. Thus, these occurrences may have a long time effects on the domestic servant's social and spiritual growth and development. The normal and constant ways of correcting domestic servants in such homes are through verbal and physical assaults when such children make mistakes (Okunade, 2004:67).

Causes of Domestic Servant Abuse

The predisposing factors that propel the increasing rates of domestic servant syndrome in the country are multifaceted, and are different in form and context, but range from demographic conditions through poor income, insecurity, to the poverty level due to the unfavourable economic conditions and hardship, as well as poor living conditions in the country. Demographically, the population growth rate and human densities are undeniable human capital, which makes socio-economic conditions relatively difficult and scarce. The magnitudes of poor economic conditions explain the reasons why available social amenities could not be distributed sufficiently go around or are too expensive for the average homes and families. When a family cannot afford the bare basic needs of life at home, then the children need to fend for themselves, and the best way to go sometimes is to begin to engage in child domestic labour (Bekembo, 1993).

Furthermore, income level and assurance of social security are also parts of the social needs that aggravate the level of unemployment and underutilisation of substantive economic hours daily. This forms serious domestic servant problems and child labour issues in society. This situation comes because of either unemployment or underemployment of parents who need to cater for their dependents in the family. The family income may not be enough and often not even secured, as retrenchment may scare them in the face. To make up for this economic shortage, sending out children for domestic service and child labour is inevitable.

Another very important factor is the level of ignorance on the part of the parents. Some parents push their children to work because they are not aware of the danger or great consequences of the act to the child, the family and society in the future. This condition is often reinforced by the availability of needed resources to cater for the expensive education that seems unaffordable to the parents of those vulnerable domestic servants.

Furthermore, poverty is another factor that causes child domestic servant syndrome. The article of ILO 1992 clarifies and maintains that poverty is one of the greatest single forces, which creates the flow of children into the place while they are supposed to be under the care and love of their parents. The serious economic needs make it nearly impossible for households to invest in their children's social and educational needs. Besides, the money needed to send the children to school for a good education is not available in the family, regardless of the price of education, which is not within the reach of the average home and family. Indeed, it is obvious in the country's socio-economic scenario that the price of good education can be very expensive and unaffordable for poor families. Meanwhile, some of the relatively poor families and households tend to have more children and larger family sizes than they can be catered for. This already provided ample ground for the available children to engage in child labour and domestic service in other homes. This irrevocably lowers the school attendance and completion rates. This directly shows the implication of poverty on many issues that, in turn, create a condition in which the children are engaging in domestic servant work.

Moreover, there is the issue of socio-cultural norms that are associated with domestic servant syndrome (Bashir, 1998:76). This succinctly posits that the decision to send children to work is partly

a matter of socio-cultural traditions and tribal indigenous beliefs of some people that are cherished as their social norms and value system. This is stated that if a parent lives in a society where everyone desires to send their children to work as a domestic servant, it is worthwhile for each parent to send their children to work, and if not everybody sends them to work, each parent may find it not worthwhile. Some societies, especially in Nigeria, tend to hold this view.

The Consequences of Domestic Servant Syndrome on National Development

There are serious effects of child labour and domestic servant syndrome, which transcend personal, family and societal needs. The extent of the consequences of domestic servanthood seems to vary from one level to another other depending on the level of involvement from the individual level to the state level. At the individual level, child domestic services impair the physical and mental development of children. This situation brings about an increase in the number of children who are mentally demented and stunted in society. This condition spells doom for society. According to Bashir, he posits that there is a “child labour trap’ that the family is likely to fall into. He contends that an increase in child domestic labourers frequently causes a decline in the acquisition of human capital in society. He further explains that if a child is engaged all through the day, it is likely that the child will remain uneducated and have low productivity later in life as a grown-up adult. This implies that those domestic servants who work more as teenagers usually have very low social productivity when they become adults. That is, child domestic service is likely to diminish their adulthood productivity due to protracted hours of service as children (DaSilva, 1994). In addition to this, it is observed that many forms of unskilled labour at present practically open children not only merely fail to train, but also to be positively untrained for future needs and productivity.

Solutions and Workouts for Child Domestic Servant Syndrome

Several approaches could be adopted to reduce the menace of the phenomenon of child domestic servant syndrome to the barest minimum in society, and some of the ways include the following. Firstly, there should be concerted efforts to tackle the rate of poverty,

hunger and economic backwardness in African societies. Most of the victims of Child labour are lured into the practice because of the poverty and economic hardship that confront their families. Most families are not economically empowered, and so those families find it difficult to be able to cater for their household's basic needs. The widespread poverty is one of the major causes of the social pandemic of human exploitation in contemporary African societies. If the poverty level of every household were reduced, then child domestic servant syndrome would be reduced drastically.

Moreover, assurance of good quality and affordable education that must be compulsory for all the children who are within the school age in the country, especially in rural areas, will go a long way to solve the problem of child domestic servant syndrome in the country. All children ought to be allowed to go to school and encouraged to have an education as a viable way of preparing them for mental, emotional and physiological needs and development for their future lives (Fafunwa, 1971:34). Perhaps, if all children were in school, learning in the classroom, they would be formally informed about the dangers that are inherently associated with different forms of human exploitation and different kinds of abuses which children are going through in society.

Another solution to the problem of domestic servant syndrome is the provision of support services for children who are currently working as domestic servants in different homes in society. Those children should be allowed and encouraged to go to school and combine schooling with their schedule of work. This is because the immediate and actual causes of some children who are working as domestic servants for other families are unknown. Some are orphans who are still depending extensively on other families for the provision of basic needs for their support and survival, for their livelihood. The domestic servants in this category need to be given some palliative measures like scholarships, good feeding schemes, provision for clothing and other things that can enhance their level of literacy. In addition, another important factor is raising public awareness and enlightenment campaigns against the child domestic servant syndrome in society. This includes improving children's knowledge of work hazards and raising parental awareness of human capital for effective productivity in the future. In addition to this, the public should be sensitised about the dangers that are associated with domestic service done by relatively underage children. For instance, the risk factor

that domestic servants are likely to be sexually assaulted, molested, used for rituals, contracting deadly diseases, trafficking illicit drugs and even become drug addicts, armed robbers, prostitutes and so on are higher than those children who are living with their parents with adequate home training and formal education in school.

Lastly, the government must make efforts to support international organisations and world bodies to make good policies and effective legal instruments, which will enhance children's lives and protect the young ones in society. In addition, the government must make laws that would prohibit child domestic labour and ensure that the laws that would criminalise such practices are domesticated in the country's constitution and applicable to the general use by the populace, and whoever violates such laws should be punished accordingly. This legal framework would regulate child labour and at the same time enforce to stoppage of families from sending their children out to work as domestic servants.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is evident that the phenomenon of child labour and domestic workers' syndromes is an inevitable social menace in different societies today because of the rate of poverty and socio-economic conditions of the families which push children out of their comfort zones to go and get an alternative for survival in the strange homes. However, when there are significant improvements in the living conditions of the people, then this menace would stop or be reduced to the barest minimum. The parents must understand that they own their children's duty of taking good care of their basic needs, home training and getting good and proper education so that they would have all-around development and become acceptable in society. Hence, if parents fail to perform their expected duties of nurturing and providing for their children's needs, then it is a form of breaching social agreement and is bound to the larger society. This is because poor-raised children are likely to be deviant and social miscreants who would eventually become hardened criminals to the larger society (Obinaju, 1996). Besides, several untrained children who do not have proper education and adequate care usually pose a natural threat to the peace of society by becoming ready-made and prepared foot soldiers for insurgency and chaotic civil disorder in society (Ukaga, 2005:16).

Conclusively, this paper has attempted to justify that domestic workers are on the increase, and it is a bane to children's development in some African societies. It presents the history of child domestic workers, its booming in Christian homes, causes, rights of the children and ways out. Among other things, it was discovered that poverty is a major cause of child labour and domestic servant syndrome in the country. However, other causes are peripheral and still linked to poverty rates in society. Thus, the government has a major role to play in making life meaningful for people to live. This is one of the processes by which this social problem could either be reduced or eliminated.

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Thinking Children's Rights in Africa: Emerging Issues

Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, and protecting their rights demands ongoing intellectual, legal, religious, cultural, and social engagement. Since the adoption of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) in 1990, African states have made strides in establishing legal frameworks for child protection. However, emerging challenges and deep-rooted structural issues continue to obstruct the full realisation of children's rights across the continent.

This multidisciplinary volume brings together a diverse array of voices – academics, practitioners, philosophers, theologians, social workers, and child rights advocates – to reflect on the progress, contradictions, and persistent gaps in Africa's child protection landscape. Comprising fourteen chapters contributed by over nineteen experts, the book examines both traditional and theoretical foundations of children's rights in Africa, highlighting tensions between customary norms and contemporary discourses.

The volume also delves into the legal and policy dimensions, as well as lived realities and emerging challenges such as child marriage, trafficking, sexual abuse, and the situation of street children. The roles of religion, law, and policymakers in shaping the future of child rights on the continent are critically emphasised.

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