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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF ZIMBABWE
FOR THE 54TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) was founded in 1998 and is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe) for the 54th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

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Status of Human Rights in Zimbabwe for the 54th Session of the Universal Periodic Review

Background

1. Zimbabwe is a country located in southern Africa and has a population of approximately 16.1 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Christian, with 85.3% of the population identifying as Christian, 8.3% having no religious affiliation, 5% adhering to traditional African beliefs, 1.5% identifying with either Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism.²

2. Zimbabwe's last review was held on January 26, 2022.³ As a result of the review, Zimbabwe received 264 recommendations, 168 of which it accepted.⁴ It was recommended by Ireland, and supported by Zimbabwe, that the government "[a]dopt the Marriages Bill and the Children's Amendment Bill criminalizing child marriage."⁵ No recommendations were made regarding religious freedom. In our last report, we also expressed concern over child marriages in Zimbabwe where approximately 34% of girls are married before they turn eighteen, and 5% are married before they turn fifteen.⁶ Further, much of the information in the report was obtained through our affiliated office that is working on the ground in Zimbabwe to protect religious freedom.

Legal Framework

Freedom of Religion and Belief

3. Under Article 60 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, freedom of religion including religious instruction (even if subsidized by the State) is protected.⁷

4. Zimbabwe amended the Private Voluntary Organization (PVO) Act, which regulates the operations of PVOs.⁸ As amended in January 2025, the Act defines a PVO as following:

[A]ny legal person, legal arrangement, body or association of persons, corporate or unincorporate, or any institution, the objects of which include or are one or more of the following—

- (a) the provision of all or any of the material, mental, physical, or social needs of persons or families;
- (b) the rendering of charity to persons or families in distress;
- (c) the prevention of social distress or destitution of persons or families;
- (d) the provision of assistance in, or promotion of, activities aimed at uplifting the standard of living of persons or families[.]⁹

5. Further, while the law does state that religious bodies are excluded, the activities of the religious bodies must be solely "confined to religious work."¹⁰

6. Under Section 6, PVOs that seek funding from within or outside Zimbabwe or collect public contributions must register as PVOs unless they are exempt. Existing charitable entities that fall within the amended definition are also required to register within the prescribed period.¹¹

7. Section 20A requires that PVOs identify their donors and ensure that funds are only used for their stated charitable purpose. Further, PVOs are prohibited from politically partisan activities, must respect local cultural values, and demonstrate economic and social benefits to the communities they serve.¹²

8. Further, Section 21 allows the High Court to suspend the leadership of a PVO and appoint trustees to take control if there are concerns about mismanagement, illegal activities, departure from its stated objectives, or if it is in the interests of the public.¹³

Abortion

9. Like Article 6 of the ICCPR, Article 48 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, states that “[e]very person has the right to life.”¹⁴

10. Zimbabwe’s Termination of Pregnancy Act allows abortion only when the continuation of pregnancy is a serious threat of permanent impairment of the mother’s physical health or life, there is serious risk of severe mental or physical handicap of the baby, or rape.¹⁵

11. Zimbabwe also has a responsibility to uphold protections for the lives of preborn babies under other international agreements such as the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development.

Child Marriage

12. The Constitution of Zimbabwe prohibits children from being pledged in marriage and requires free and full consent.¹⁶

13. Article 3 of the 2022 Marriages Act prohibits anyone under the age of 18 from marrying, reiterates child marriages are prohibited, and criminalizes the act (excluding the child).¹⁷

14. Zimbabwe is a party to both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).¹⁸ The CRC defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years,”¹⁹ and Article 16 of the CEDAW prohibits child marriage.²⁰

Regulating Religious Charitable Organizations

15. Churches and faith-based organizations play a key role in Zimbabwe by providing humanitarian aid, education, and healthcare. Many of these organizations rely on foreign and domestic donations to carry out their mission to help people who are most in need. The newly enacted Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Amendment Act, 2025, has created concerns that the government will now interfere with the charitable work that the organizations do.

16. The PVO Amendment Act introduced regulatory requirements for various organizations that provide crucial humanitarian and charitable services.²¹ The new law requires organizations to comply with extensive reporting and registration requirements that impose a

burden on organizations, specifically smaller organizations. Religious leaders and members of civil society groups have expressed concern that the new law grants the government broad discretionary authority over the registration, operation, and governance of civil society organizations, including churches.²²

17. We are especially concerned about Section 21 of the law, as it grants the Minister the ability to apply to the High Court to suspend the leadership of a PVO and appoint trustees to take control of the PVO if it is deemed that the PVO was acting contrary to the law or that it would be in the public interest to do so. This allows for the government to interfere with PVOs on broad grounds, including the vague concept of “public interest.” This undermines the independence of PVOs and their ability to govern themselves.

18. Churches and religious organizations are apprehensive about this law and worry about the implications it has on their ability to provide humanitarian assistance. Religious leaders are concerned that charitable trusts and faith-based organizations that carry out humanitarian and social welfare activities could be forced to close down if they are unable to comply with the newly enacted registration requirements or even if it is deemed that their activities fall within the definition of a PVO.²³

19. For example, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, Pontifical Mission Societies, and numerous other lay religious associations have provided critical charitable assistance, poverty relief, education, and community support without having to register as PVOs. Under the newly enacted law, there is uncertainty about whether such organizations will be required to register as PVOs and submit themselves to increased government oversight.²⁴

20. The law has already had a disastrous impact in just the first year of its enactment. Civil society organizations and NGOs across the country have been crippled. According to a spokesperson for the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, “most NGOs have almost closed shop due to the PVO Amendment Act.”²⁵

Abortion

21. Abortion across Africa has slowly been expanding since 1994, And unfortunately Zimbabwe is the next target. In 2024, Zimbabwe proposed amended to its current law, that would have allowed for abortion on demand up until twelve weeks. Further the amendments would have also allowed for abortions to be carried out up until the twentieth week of gestation if the pregnancy would pose a risk to the mother’s health, mental well-being, or socioeconomic status.²⁶ Thankfully, the amendment to expand abortion was rejected.

22. Unfortunately, even though parliament did not expand abortion, the courts have now taken it upon themselves to do so. Two recent landmark rulings in 2024 and 2025 by the High Court of Zimbabwe represent a deeply concerning step toward dismantling the statutory protections that have historically safeguarded unborn human life. For nearly five decades, the Zimbabwe *Termination of Pregnancy Act* maintained a highly protective framework designed to defend preborn babies, permitting exceptions only under strict, objectively verified medical circumstances of physical danger or certified rape. By expanding the definition of “mental health” to a valid justification for termination, the judiciary has set a troubling precedent.

23. Introducing subjective, difficult-to-verify grounds like mental distress acts as a legal loophole which can lead to abortion on demand. Lowering these clinical barriers risks

normalizing the practice, reducing the legal and moral value assigned to preborn babies, and ultimately triggering a significant increase in the overall number of abortions in the country. Both decisions are still pending approval from the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe before taking effect.

24. Although some advocates characterize abortion as healthcare, abortion intentionally ends the life of a preborn baby and therefore cannot be equated with medical care that preserves or heals life. By permitting abortion only in extremely limited circumstances, Zimbabwe is able to protect the lives of both mothers and preborn babies.

25. Zimbabwe's abortion law plays an important role in protecting the lives and well-being of both preborn babies and their mothers. In addition to preserving the lives of preborn babies, restrictions on abortion also prevent women from being exposed to serious physical complications associated with abortion. Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa, where Zimbabwe is located, shows that women who have had an abortion can experience potentially life-threatening complications, while others have suffered "severe maternal outcomes," including near-miss cases and death.²⁷ This reinforces the importance of laws like Zimbabwe's that prioritize the protection of life.

26. Zimbabwe is under no obligation to expand access to abortion because international law does not recognize the right to abortion. By contrast, the right to life is firmly established in international human rights agreements and is protected. The ICCPR uses language similar to Zimbabwe's Constitution, providing that "[e]very human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life."²⁸ Likewise, the UDHR states that "[e]veryone has the right to life."²⁹ These foundational human rights instruments affirm the universal nature of the right to life.

Child Marriage

27. In our previous report we recommended that Zimbabwe amend its Marriage Act to align it with its Constitution and the international treaties to which it is a party. While Zimbabwe amended the Marriage Act in 2022, child marriage remains a significant human rights concern. Across Africa, approximately 700,000 children are married every year, with Zimbabwe ranking among the top twenty worst offenders.³⁰ This problem was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as economic hardship and school closures resulted in many girls being vulnerable to early marriage. Today, approximately 34% of girls are married before they turn eighteen, with 5% being married before the age of fifteen. These statistics have largely remained unchanged since 1994, despite child marriage being illegal.³¹

28. The primary contributing factor to child marriage is poverty. It is estimated that girls from poor families are six times more likely to be married before they turn eighteen than girls who come from wealthier families.³² Marriage is viewed by families as a way to ease financial hardship through the payment of bride price called a lobola. Further, by marrying off their daughters, families have one less person that they need to provide for, which further incentivizes poor families to marry off their daughters. In some cases, girls voluntarily give themselves up to marriage in hopes that they will have a better future and can escape poverty. As one woman shared, "I married too early because of poverty with the hope that I would get a better life. Therefore, for me, poverty was the reason I got married."³³

29. Traditional and cultural practices also play a significant role in the prevalence of child marriage. These include Khomba, a rite of initiation; Musengabere, a form of bride abduction; Chimutsamapfiwha, in which a deceased bride is replaced by a sibling; and Kuzvarira, a practice where girls are married away in exchange for food, livestock, or other resources.³⁴

30. To help combat child marriage, Zimbabwe enacted the Marriage Act of 2022. This law expressly prohibits all marriages involving individuals under the age of eighteen, including customary and religious marriages. This closed a loophole that had previously permitted child marriages in traditional and ceremonial contexts.³⁵ Unfortunately, despite this newly enacted law, enforcement remains uneven and child marriage rates unchanged.

31. Enforcing child marriage laws is critical to protecting girls from the harm that child marriage can have on girls. Girls who get married at a younger age are at risk for pregnancy complications, which is the leading cause of death for girls age 15-19. Further, child marriages put girls at an increased risk of suffering domestic violence and sexual abuse. Many girls also leave school once they get married or pregnant, which can result in the loss of access to education and reduce their ability to acquire future employment, as well as perpetuating a life of poverty.³⁶

32. Girls also suffer from psychological and social consequences from getting married young. Child brides are often isolated from their peers and their support network, resulting in depression and a feeling of shame.³⁷ One girl described how getting married at the age of seventeen affected her life: “All I wanted was to play and think of my future. Suddenly I had to be a mother and wife, I didn’t even know what to do.”³⁸ Another victim shared how at the age of fourteen, she was sent to work at a man’s house without knowing that she was being prepared for marriage. Soon after, she was forced into marriage and gave birth to her first child at the age of fifteen. She also suffered physical abuse by her husband.³⁹

Recommendations

33. Zimbabwe should amend the PVO Amendment Act, 2025, to ensure that it does not restrict the legitimate humanitarian and charitable activities being carried out by churches and faith-based organizations. Any regulatory framework governing religious organizations should be narrowly tailored, transparent, and implemented in a manner that respects the rights to freedom of religion, association, and expression. Further, we ask that the government consult with religious leaders, humanitarian groups, and civil society organizations to ensure that this law does not hinder their ability to provide necessary services to members of vulnerable communities.

34. We are pleased to see that Zimbabwe ultimately rejected amendments that would have expanded access to abortion. We want to encourage Zimbabwe to uphold protections for life and continue reject any measure that would expand access to abortion. Additionally, we ask that Supreme Court of Zimbabwe overrule the lower court’s ruling that seeks to expand access to abortion without going through the legislature.

35. While we commend Zimbabwe for amending its Marriage Act of 2022, Zimbabwe must strengthen its efforts to combat child marriage by ensuring the full and consistent enforcement of the Marriage Act of 2022 throughout the country. To do this, Zimbabwe must educate both its police force and the population on the new law to ensure that it is enforced and followed. This can be done through training law enforcement on recognizing cases of child marriage as

well as public outreach campaigns to educate the population of the new law, particularly in rural areas. We also ask that Zimbabwe thoroughly investigate and prosecute all individuals who are involved in facilitating, arranging, or participating in child marriages. We also ask that the government invest in strengthening support services for victims of child marriage, including access to education, healthcare, legal assistance, and shelter.

¹ Kenneth Bradley et. al, *Zimbabwe*, BRITANNICA (July 15, 2026), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zimbabwe>.

² Nina Evason, *Religion*, CULTURAL ATLAS (2017), <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/zimbabwean-culture/zimbabwean-culture-religion>.

³ *Universal Periodic Review – Zimbabwe*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/zw-index>.

⁴ *Zimbabwe – Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/zw/2022-12-23/Zimbabwe.pdf>.

⁵ OHCHR, UPR of Zimbabwe (3d Cycle – 40th Session), *Thematic List of Recommendations*, ¶ 139.4, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/zw/2022-09-22/UPR40_Zimbabwe_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.doc.

⁶ *Zimbabwe*, GIRLS NOT BRIDES, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/zimbabwe/>.

⁷ CONSTITUTION OF ZIMBABWE (2013) art. 60, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20Consolidated%20%282023%29.pdf.

⁸ PRIVATE VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS ACT, <https://zimlil.org/akn/zw/act/1966/63/eng%402025-04-11>.

⁹ *Id.* at § 2 ¶ 1.

¹⁰ *Id.* at § 2 ¶ h.

¹¹ *Id.* at § 6.

¹² *Id.* at § 20A.

¹³ *Id.* at § 21.

¹⁴ CONSTITUTION OF ZIMBABWE (2013), art. 48, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20Consolidated%20%282023%29.pdf.

¹⁵ Termination of Pregnancy Act art. 4, <https://zimlil.org/akn/zw/act/1977/29/eng@2016-12-31>.

¹⁶ CONSTITUTION OF ZIMBABWE art. 26, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Constitution%20Consolidated%20%282023%29.pdf.

¹⁷ Marriages Act 2022 art. 3, https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/MARRIAGES%20ACT%20No.%201%20of%202022.pdf.

¹⁸ *Ratification Status for Zimbabwe*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=195&Lang=en.

¹⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 1, *adopted* Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

²⁰ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women art. 16, *adopted* Dec. 18, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>.

²¹ *Zimbabwe: Detrimental Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill Enacted*, INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (June 13, 2025), <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/zimbabwe/zimbabwe-detrimental-private-voluntary-organisations-amendment-bill>.

²² *Id.*

²³ *PVO Amendment Act 2025: The Learning Points for the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe*, NEWSPACK ZIMBABWE (Apr. 30, 2025), <https://newspackzim.com/2025/04/30/pvo-amendment-act-2025-the-learning-points-for-the-catholic-church-in-zimbabwe/>.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Zimbabwe's New NGO Law Threatens to Turn Civil Society Watchdogs into "Lapdogs"*, EQUAL TIMES (Nov. 24, 2025), <https://www.equaltimes.org/zimbabwe-s-new-ngo-law-threatens?lang=en>.

²⁶ *Zimbabwe is Due to Reform its Abortion Law*, SAAF (NOV. 18, 2025), <https://saafund.org/zimbabwe-is-due-to-reform-its-abortion-law/>.

²⁷ Estelle Pasquier et. al, *High Severity of Abortion Complications in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings: A Cross-Sectional Study in Two Referral Hospitals in Sub-Saharan Africa (AMoCo Study)*, BMC PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH (Mar. 27, 2023), <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4669351/>.

²⁸ ICCPR art. 6.

²⁹ Universal Declaration, art. 3, G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, U.N. Doc. A/810 (1948).

³⁰ Ropafadzo Muchawaya, *The Lived Experiences of Survivors of Child Marriage*, 4 NOYAM 992, 993, (Aug. 8, 2023), <https://noyam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EHASS2023488.pdf>.

³¹ UNICEF, ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN ZIMBABWE 10 (2025), <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/16556/file/Ending-Child-Marriage-Zimbabwe-Strategy-Note.pdf>.

³² *Id.* at 12.

³³ Muchawaya *supra* note 30, at 997.

³⁴ UNICEF *supra* note 31, at 14-15.

³⁵ Emmanuel Kafe, *Child Marriages Persist Despite New Laws*, ZIMBABWE SITUATION, Mar. 12, 2026, <https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/child-marriages-persist-despite-new-laws-report/>.

³⁶ EQUALITY NOW, AN ANALYSIS OF THE LAWS AND POLICIES IN PLACE FOR THE PROTECTION AND SUPPORT OF VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE STUDY FOR EPWORTH 14 (June 6, 2025).

³⁷ Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi, “*Our Options are Limited, So We Get Married: ” Girls, Early Marriage and Health Risks in Rural Zimbabwe*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13698575.2025.2492870#abstract>.

³⁸ *Zimbabwe Girls Revise Past Tradition to Fight Child Marriage*, FREEDOM UNITED (Oct. 14, 2025), <https://www.freedomunited.org/news/zimbabwe-girls-fight-child-marriage/>.

³⁹ EQUALITY NOW *supra* note 36. At 42.