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Promoting Political Tolerance among Zimbabwean Youth: An Action Research Study

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Abstract

This study addresses youth political violence in Magwegwe, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, through participatory action research that moves beyond diagnosis toward transformative intervention. The objectives were to examine how youth-led initiatives contribute to social cohesion and empowerment, identify barriers to youth participation, and assess how these experiences inform sustainable interventions in grassroots peacebuilding. Grounded in contact theory, this research engaged 20 purposively selected youth participants to understand political violence and develop context-specific peacebuilding interventions. Through focus groups, key informant interviews, and participatory observation, the study found that youth political violence stems from socio-economic and political factors, including gerontocracy, unemployment exceeding 25%, political manipulation, and lack of tolerance. Five types of violence were documented: election-related violence, factional violence, state-sanctioned violence, gender-based violence, and familial pressure. The collaborative development of peace education workshops, sports-based activities, and communication skill-building resulted in measurable shifts in participants' conflict handling approaches and increased political tolerance. Findings demonstrate that participatory interventions can transform youth from

perpetrators of violence to agents of peace, offering a replicable model for similar contexts across Zimbabwe and beyond. The study recommends institutionalising peace education, youth inclusion in governance, and economic empowerment as core strategies for preventing political violence. The research highlights the power of participatory approaches in transitioning youth from instruments used for violence into active agents of peace and social restoration.

Keywords: *Youth political violence, Participatory action research, Peacebuilding, conflict transformation, Zimbabwe.*

Introduction

Youth constitute the largest demographic group in Africa, with over 60 percent under 25 years old (UNDP, 2020). This presents both challenges and opportunities for peace and development. African youth are typically depicted in policy discourses as either passive victims of social inequality or active threats and perpetrators of violence (Urdal, 2012). However, emerging scholarship highlights young people's agency in peacebuilding contexts, where their creativity, resilience, and commitment to community transformation have become crucial (McEvoy-Levy, 2011; Altiok & Grizelj, 2019). The Zimbabwean context illustrates these dynamics through a persistent socio-political crisis involving economic instability, electoral disputes, and systemic state repression (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012).

Young people, comprising nearly two-thirds of the population, have borne the brunt of unemployment, poverty, and political marginalisation (Maringira & Gukurume, 2022). The National Youth Policy (2020) recognises youth as partners in development and peace, but implementation remains weak. Despite barriers, Zimbabwean youth mobilise in local communities outside formal political structures. Initiatives range from arts-based activism to neighbourhood watch programmes and participation in budget consultations to community conflict mediation. Ward 17, in Bulawayo, provides a microcosm where youth have initiated peacebuilding activities, including conflict mediation, advocacy campaigns, and intergenerational dialogue.

High youth unemployment in Zimbabwe remains a manifestation of structural violence. Several factors drive this crisis: economic contraction from mismanagement and sanctions; industrial collapse following 1990s structural adjustment; limited access to credit and training; and rural–urban migration saturating informal job markets (Kamete, 2020; IMF, 2019). Patronage-based recruitment systems prioritise loyalty over

competence, excluding qualified youth from sustainable employment (Masunungure, 2014). The education system has failed to align curricula with market needs, producing graduates with few viable work pathways (ZimStat, 2022). The result is a generation trapped in underemployment and dependence on precarious informal livelihoods.

Socio-economic pressures directly affect peace and security. Unemployment and social exclusion make youth vulnerable to political manipulation and recruitment into violent networks. Political elites have mobilised unemployed youths as instruments of coercion during elections, offering incentives for participation in intimidation campaigns (Masunungure & Bratton, 2018; Chitiyo, 2019). These recurring electoral patterns in Zimbabwe since the early 2000s fuel instability and compromise the capacity of youth to serve as legitimate peacebuilders. However, the same marginalised youth drawn into political violence often become catalysts for community rebuilding once disillusioned with partisan structures. Understanding these contradictions is essential for reimagining youth not as victims or perpetrators but as central agents of transformation in peacebuilding.

Allport's (1954) Contact Theory and personality framework interrelate in explaining how human interaction and structures evolve within divided societies like Magwegwe in Bulawayo. Allport viewed personality as shaped by social experience and internal motivations, termed 'functional autonomy', where individuals' actions become guided by enduring values rather than external pressures. In divided contexts, these values determine how individuals engage with others, interpret group identity, and respond to norms.

By examining the experiences of youth in Ward 17, this study investigates how participatory interventions can shift their role from tools of political manipulation to active agents of peace. Three key questions guided the inquiry: (1) What social, economic, and political factors shape youth involvement in political violence in Magwegwe, Bulawayo? (2) How can participatory action research facilitate behavioural and attitudinal change among politically divided youth? (3) In what ways do youth-led interventions contribute to tolerance, social cohesion, and sustainable peacebuilding? The study contributes to peace and conflict scholarship in three ways. First, it provides empirical evidence from Zimbabwe demonstrating that youth political violence is socially produced yet reversible through structured participation and contact-based learning. Second, it advances understanding of participatory methodologies in transforming intergroup relations and

fostering civic agency. Third, it offers a replicable community-based framework for addressing political intolerance, showing that inclusive dialogue, peace education, and youth-driven initiatives can lay the foundations for long-term reconciliation and stability.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Allport's (1954) contact theory to understand both the genesis of youth political violence and pathways toward transformation.

Applied to Magwegwe, the theory shows how personal maturity, empathy, and moral orientation among youth influence community organisations across political lines. When individuals possess personalities characterised by openness, tolerance, and motivation for cooperation, traits consistent with Allport's conception of mature personality, they sustain constructive intergroup relations. Contact theory suggests that intergroup encounters reduce prejudice when participants approach as equals, pursue shared objectives, and operate within supportive frameworks.

This perspective explains why some youth choose violence while others reject it under similar circumstances. In Magwegwe, political division persists due to partisan polarisation, patronage networks, and mistrust between rival political actors. Youth are mobilised along party lines during elections, with political allegiance determining access to opportunities. Contact structures that could bridge these divisions, such as civic associations, sports clubs, and community committees, remain weak or politicised. Most youth interactions reinforce segregation rather than cooperation, deepening prejudice. Contact theory provides a foundation for interventions that enable youth to resist manipulation, redefine identity, and engage in dialogue across political boundaries.

Together, Allport's theories shape the governance of community organisations in Magwegwe. Structures encouraging equal participation, collective decision-making, and value-driven leadership mirror Allport's belief that social harmony emerges when inner motives align with ethical principles. Youth groups organised around fairness, inclusivity, and respect create environments in which intergroup contact transforms hostility into cooperation. Contact Theory provides a lens for understanding intergroup hostility and a structured framework for interventions aimed at reconciling youth within divided communities like Magwegwe.

Literature Review

The conceptualisation of youth is contested, with debates on whether youth should be defined by age, socio-economic status, psychological development, or cultural rituals (Abbink, 2005). In Zimbabwe's political context, this ambiguity is problematic where elderly politicians hold youth leadership positions while exceeding official youth age limits (National Youth Policy, 2013). This study uses the Ministry of Youth, Sport, Arts, and Recreation definition of youth as persons aged 18-35, aligning with Zimbabwe's constitution.

To understand violence fully, one must move past oversimplified perspectives and adopt Galtung's (1970) framework, which integrates direct, structural, and cultural dimensions. Direct violence involves harmful actions like physical confrontations and infrastructure destruction (Alsio, 2013), while structural violence stems from power disparities causing discrimination and exclusion (Dube, 2020). Cultural violence uses traditions, ideologies, and norms to justify other violence forms (World Health Organization, 2009). Jones (2018) defines political violence as the use of force to achieve political objectives, typically driven by grievances intended to sway electoral outcomes.

Research across Africa shows youth political violence stems from environmental, demographic, and grievance factors, including population changes, climate impacts, social injustice, political exclusion, and economic inequality (Funmi, 2021). In Zimbabwe, patterns show youth as political vigilantes during crises while marginalised during stable periods (Dodo, 2021). From the 1983-1987 *Gukurahundi* atrocities through elections and the 2008 presidential re-run, elites have used youth as "foot soldiers" offering incentives and exploiting vulnerabilities (Sithole, 2018; Raftopoulos, 2009).

Contemporary Zimbabwean political culture reflects four influences: pre-colonial authoritarianism, colonial oppression, liberation struggle militarism, and ZANU-PF rule, creating an environment where violence is normalised (Mair & Sithole, 2002; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003). The politics of patronage drive recruitment of vulnerable youth through incentives while exploiting their economic marginalisation (Matyszak, 2020). This manipulation involves abduction, indoctrination, and providing alcohol and substances to lower inhibitions (Bradfield, 2013).

Youth political violence spans multiple dimensions. Physical violence includes aggression, assaults, and property destruction to intimidate opponents (Mavedzenge, 2018). Psychological violence manifests

through disinformation, hate speech, and threats (Mlambo, 2017). Economic violence involves coercion through job threats and resource denial (Mutsaka, 2013), while institutional violence manipulates state apparatus for political interests (Kohli, 2012). Gender-based violence targets women through sexual threats and harassment to exclude them from politics (Chirisa, 2017). Cyber violence uses social media for threats and disinformation campaigns (Mwonzora & Helliker, 2020).

Youth political violence's consequences affect multiple levels. Individual impacts include physical injuries, psychological trauma, and social marginalisation that perpetuate vulnerability (Mude, 2014). Community effects involve social fragmentation, erosion of trust, and collapse of collective problem-solving (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003). The normalisation of violence and institutional fragility lead to democratic degradation, ultimately eroding the foundational principles of the rule of law (Ndlovu, 2003).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) design guided by an interpretivist philosophy, recognising participants as co-investigators rather than passive subjects. The choice of PAR was instrumental in enabling the researcher to understand how young people in Ward 17, Bulawayo, make meaning of their experiences of political violence and peacebuilding. By engaging participants as active partners, the research process became a shared space for reflection, learning, and transformation. The cyclical nature of PAR, following Kemmis and McTaggart's (2007) spiral of planning, action, observation, and reflection, facilitated continuous dialogue between the researcher and community members. This created conditions for the collective identification of challenges, testing of solutions, and refinement of strategies in real time.

Action Research (AR) has become important in peace research because it places participation, transformation, and shared learning at the centre of social change. Rooted in the conviction that those most affected by conflict should play a central role in shaping their recovery, AR provides a framework for communities to analyse their realities and co-create practical responses. It moves research beyond detached observation to active engagement with lived experience, producing solutions that are both locally relevant and sustainable. This participatory approach reflects African epistemologies by prioritising communal dialogue and collective reflection as the primary drivers of healing and justice. Within such settings, AR functions not only as a research method

but also as a moral and political commitment to restoring agency and dignity among those historically silenced in dominant knowledge systems (Bradbury & Reason, 2008; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007).

In various African contexts, AR has successfully addressed structural and relational violence by utilising community-led, locally owned interventions. Notable examples include Ngwenya's (2018) *Healing the Wounds of Gukuruhundi in Zimbabwe: A participatory action research*, which used memory work, ritual, and dialogue to support trauma healing in the absence of an official apology; Maphosa's (2017) *Reducing Gender-Based Violence: An Action Research Project with Zimbabwean Youth*; Basabose's (2017) *Anti-Corruption Education as a Way of Building Positive Peace in Rwanda*; Muchemwa's (2017) *Moving Towards Reconciliation Using Action Research: Ndebele and Shona Relations in Zimbabwe*; and Moyo's (2017) *Using Restorative Justice Approaches with Ex-Prisoners and Their Families in Bulawayo*. Together, these initiatives demonstrate AR's adaptability and relevance to African peacebuilding practice, illustrating how collaborative inquiry can generate collective insight, agency, and long-term social transformation.

The qualitative dimension allowed for deep exploration of perceptions, motivations, and power relations that shape youth participation in peacebuilding. Through this approach, the study generated knowledge that was not only descriptive but also emancipatory, aligning with the transformative objective of fostering agency among youth. By integrating inquiry with practice, the methodology contributed directly to building local capacity, strengthening collective action and promoting sustainable, community-led change (Bradbury & Reason, 2008).

The study population comprised youth aged 18–35 years residing in Magwegwe, Bulawayo, reflecting Zimbabwe's national definition of youth (National Youth Policy, 2013). A simple purposive sampling strategy was employed, falling under non-probability sampling because participants were selected based on their relevance to the study objectives rather than random selection. This approach enabled us to identify individuals with direct experience and insight into youth-led peacebuilding and political interaction in Magwegwe. Twenty participants were recruited for the action group, ensuring diversity across political affiliations, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. Of these, ten were selected for deeper engagement in the intervention design and implementation process.

Using purposive sampling allowed the researchers to effectively gather diverse viewpoints regarding both political violence and the reconciliation process. By deliberately including youth aligned with the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF); the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC); and those who were politically unaffiliated, the study created opportunities for structured intergroup contact in line with Contact Theory principles. This method ensured that findings reflected both converging and divergent experiences, allowing the research to test how intergroup dialogue and cooperative engagement could transform perceptions and relationships across political divides.

Data generation employed four complementary methods: focus group discussions, key informant interviews (KIIs), participatory observation, and an action intervention phase. This triangulated approach provided multiple perspectives on the complex phenomenon of youth political violence while allowing for the validation of findings across methods (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Each method contributed uniquely to the study’s participatory action research process.

Three focus group discussions were conducted with 24 youth participants drawn from different political and social backgrounds in Magwegwe. The discussions, consisting of six to eight participants, lasted ninety minutes and were led by a researcher from the community to maintain a high level of trust and familiarity. Guided by semi-structured prompts, the sessions explored experiences of political violence, intergroup perceptions, and possibilities for collaboration (Hennink, 2014). The format encouraged critical reflection and open dialogue, enabling participants to express both shared and divergent experiences. This method helped the researcher capture collective narratives and validate emerging themes such as mistrust, fear, and the aspiration for reconciliation.

Five key informant interviews were conducted with community leaders, former perpetrators of violence, and peacebuilding practitioners to provide contextual depth and expert insights (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasted forty-five to sixty minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. This approach facilitated deeper exploration of sensitive topics such as political manipulation, youth mobilisation, and community-based reconciliation. The flexibility of semi-structured interviewing allowed participants to elaborate freely, revealing complex institutional and interpersonal dynamics that underlie youth political engagement.

Overt participatory observation was carried out with 20 youth participants, allowing researchers to record behaviours and interactions in real community contexts. Observations took place during youth dialogues, political gatherings, and community events, focusing on communication patterns, body language, and power dynamics (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Field notes were written immediately after each session to ensure accuracy and reflexivity. The dual role as participant and observer enhanced contextual understanding while preserving ethical transparency.

Finally, the action intervention phase engaged 10 youth participants from the larger sample in designing and implementing community-based peacebuilding initiatives. Guided by Kemmis and McTaggart's (2007) participatory action research spiral, planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, the intervention operationalised the study's transformative intent. This phase enabled participants to translate findings from earlier stages into practice, creating real-time opportunities for learning, experimentation, and behavioural change (Bradbury & Reason, 2008). The process deepened understanding of how participatory approaches can foster youth agency, build social cohesion, and generate sustainable, locally driven solutions to political violence. Pre- and post-intervention assessments were conducted with the action group members to gauge the effectiveness of the interventions discussed below.

Intervention development and implementation

The intervention in Magwegwe, Bulawayo, unfolded as a collaborative process between the researcher and a 15-member Action Group (AG) composed of politically diverse youth aged 18–30. Following diagnostic discussions, a five-day peacebuilding workshop was held at the local youth centre beginning on 20 June 2024. The sessions introduced nonviolent conflict-resolution methods, empathy development, and civic responsibility. Facilitators used participatory tools such as role-plays, small-group dialogues, and visual models, including the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict-Handling framework, to help participants recognise conflict triggers and adopt cooperative approaches. The workshops addressed conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and communication, anchoring them in practical exercises and locally relevant examples. Sports-based peacebuilding (soccer, netball, and checkers) complemented the training by fostering interaction across party lines and reducing antagonism. The communication and civic-engagement component

further equipped participants with skills in political dialogue, social-media literacy, and nonviolent activism.

Post-intervention evaluations revealed notable behavioural and attitudinal change. Youths reported greater tolerance, enhanced empathy, and improved ability to handle disagreements constructively. Group discussions after the sessions reflected a visible shift from confrontational attitudes toward collaborative engagement. Participants described replacing past hostility with camaraderie and laughter during joint activities, signifying the rebuilding of trust across political divides. While change was primarily internal to the Action Group, participants pledged to uphold non-violence and recommended expanding the initiative through broader community peace initiatives. This demonstrates how the combination of structured peace education, interactive sports, and civic training within a participatory framework can foster socio-political transformation and nurture sustainable peace in conflict-prone communities.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were administered through a transparent and participatory process. Before data collection, the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks were clearly explained to all participants in English and isiNdebele. Written informed consent was obtained, with participants given the option to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all recordings and transcripts. To minimise risk, interviews and focus groups were held in neutral community venues, and discussions avoided politically charged language. These measures ensured voluntary participation, psychological safety, and compliance with the university's ethical approval requirements.

Findings

Causes of youth political violence

The findings from Magwegwe indicate that youth political violence is driven by a multi-layered interaction of social, economic, and political influences within the ecological system.

Socio-economic factors

We noted that socio-economic factors such as unemployment, underemployment, and marginalisation have serious implications for

peace and stability in Magwegwe, contributing to broader patterns of economic crisis and political fragility in Zimbabwe. Weakened livelihoods and shifting perceptions of power and belonging create a framework in which young people become increasingly susceptible to political manipulation.

Unemployment and Economic Marginalisation: Youth unemployment emerged as the primary catalyst for political violence, with participants in key informant interviews noting that “presently, the youth unemployment rate in Magwegwe exceeds 25%, surpassing the 25% threshold identified by a global study as a trigger for youth political violence” (Key Informant 4, 2024). The research established that “there exists a strong correlation between elevated youth unemployment rates and the propensity for youth to engage in political violence” (Key Informant 3, 2024). This economic vulnerability was further explained by one participant who observed that “high levels of unemployment and underemployment prevail in Magwegwe, rendering even tertiary-educated youth susceptible to political manipulation. This creates fertile ground for youth involvement in political violence” (FGD 2, 2024). The International Labour Organisation’s (2016) assessment that Zimbabwean youth are among the poorest globally resonated strongly with participants’ lived experiences. Economic marginalisation created conditions where youth became susceptible to political exploitation through promises of jobs, patronage, or short-term material rewards.

Social Marginalisation: Beyond economic exclusion, youth described feeling systematically excluded from meaningful political participation. Participants expressed that “as young people, we feel side-lined by the political-administrative processes that directly impact our daily lives” (FGD 3, 2024). This exclusion was compounded by what participants described as tokenistic participation, where “senior politicians often exploit us or treat us as mere tokens, reducing our participation to a symbolic gesture... This leaves us disenchanting; our voices are disregarded and undervalued” (FGD 3, 2024). The researchers observed that such exclusion undermines young people’s sense of agency, deepens resentment, and perpetuates a cycle in which political apathy and violent mobilisation become competing expressions of frustration and disempowerment.

Political factors

Gerontocracy and Political Exclusion: Participants reported that “the gerontocracy tendency of the political structures in Magwegwe serves to concentrate power in the hands of the older generation, leaving little room for youth participation and representation in key political structures” (FGD 3, 2024). This exclusionary culture mirrors wider Zimbabwean governance, characterised by decision-making processes that remain firmly in the hands of entrenched elites (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2003). Such concentration of power undermines youth inclusion, perpetuating cycles of dependency and resentment. This systematic exclusion created frustration and resentment, as participants explained that “the exclusion of youth from significant leadership roles and representation can cultivate a sense of resentment and lead to the belief that violence is the sole avenue to make our voices heard” (FGD 1, 2024). The dominance of elderly leadership in political decision-making was further illustrated by participants’ observations that

The politics of patronage and clientelism are mostly dominant in Magwegwe as key political positions are given to older politicians who are way off the definition of youth. An influential politician simply bestows the position to an individual, and no one is expected to argue against the decision (FGD 2, 2024).

These findings reflect the post-liberation structures noted by Mair and Sithole (2002), in which historical liberation status is prioritised over modern democratic processes.

Ideological indoctrination

The study revealed how youth were exposed to polarising political narratives that justified violence against perceived enemies. Participants shared ideological messages they had internalised, such as “the current regime continues to betray our nation, selling out our people and making us vulnerable” (FGD 2, 2024). Conversely, pro-government narratives included statements such as “regime change has no place in Zimbabwean politics. It is the collective responsibility of youth to safeguard our hard-earned independence at all costs” (FGD 2, 2024). We found that such narratives echo the nationalist militarisation of politics described by Bradfield (2013) and Zvaita (2023), where political socialisation cultivates hostility and loyalty simultaneously. This polarisation entrenches a zero-sum mentality that sustains intergenerational control and diminishes prospects for youth-led reform.

Lack of political tolerance

The research documented how political intolerance became institutionalised through party messaging and social practices. Participants explained that “post-2000 youth political violence is intensified by lack of political open-mindedness, as evidenced by party slogans like ‘pasi nemhandu’ (down with the enemy)” (FGD 1, 2024). Documentation occurred through overt participatory observation alongside interviews and focus group discussions. The first researcher, as a Magwegwe resident, attended community meetings, political rallies, and youth gatherings to observe political hostility in natural settings. Notes were recorded after each event, focusing on verbal exchanges, body language, and exclusion of dissenting voices. By validating interview data, these observations exposed unspoken social dynamics like avoidance and conformity that participants were unlikely to disclose voluntarily. Observations also captured moments of tolerance, showing how some youths resisted divisive rhetoric. This systematic observation provided rich, contextual understanding of how intolerance is practised in everyday political life. These findings align with Mair and Sithole's (2002) argument that Zimbabwe's liberation war ethos institutionalised exclusionary political identities. Our reflections showed such intolerance narrows civic engagement, undermines social trust, and normalises violence as political expression.

Manipulation by senior politicians

Youth described systematic manipulation by senior political figures who exploited their vulnerability for political gain. Participants revealed that “senior politicians wield influence over youth political violence as a tactic to maintain their political supremacy” (FGD 3, 2024). This manipulation often involved inducements such as alcohol and drugs, with participants explaining that “political violence is generally influenced by senior politicians who buy us beer... when intoxicated we are ready for any political assignment” (FGD 2, 2024). These accounts are consistent with findings by Maringira and Gukurume (2021), who demonstrate how political elites instrumentalise youth through patronage and coercion to consolidate authority. This manipulation acts as a calculated tactic to convert social discontent into political leverage, ensuring youth remain dependent while their collective agency is eroded.

Imposition of political candidates

The imposition of political candidates emerged as a critical trigger for youth political violence. Participants observed that “the imposition of political candidates... generates feelings of disempowerment and disenfranchisement among the youth” (Key Informant 1, 2024). Similarly, “candidates are not elected transparently through political party consensus; they are imposed by influential politicians. We feel we have no say... Politicians speak on our behalf” (Key Informant 5, 2024). We note that candidate imposition undermines democratic legitimacy and fuels frustration among youth. Such exclusionary practices reinforce a sense of political alienation, pushing young people toward violent resistance as a means of reclaiming agency.

Types and nature of youth political violence

The study identified five distinct but interconnected forms of youth political violence in Magwegwe.

Election-related violence

Findings show that election violence was a calculated tactic designed to deter opposition involvement and foster a climate of fear. Participants explained that “election-related violence is often methodical and targeted to suppress voter turnout or sway votes in favour of a specific political party” (Key Informant 3, 2024). This violence served strategic political objectives by creating climates of fear that extended beyond election periods into everyday community life.

Factional violence

The research shows that political violence occurred both between rival parties and internally as factions vied for power within the same party. Participants described how “as youths, we are consistently enlisted by rival political factions to engage in violent politics and confrontations, leading to internal party conflicts that frequently extend beyond party lines...” (FGD 3, 2024). This documentation was achieved through semi-structured interviews and overt participatory observations conducted during community meetings and political gatherings, where the researchers recorded detailed field notes on interactions, language, and behaviours that reflected emerging tensions. This form of violence

demonstrated how youth became instruments in elite power struggles while bearing the physical and social costs of such conflicts.

State-sanctioned political violence

Ruling party structures were found to be complicit in violence, either through active endorsement or by tolerating attacks on the opposition and activists. The blurring of lines between party and state apparatus enabled this form of violence to occur with impunity, undermining the rule of law and democratic accountability.

Gender-based violence and cyber violence

The study revealed that political violence increasingly involved technological platforms, with participants reporting that “I frequently receive threats of political violence via WhatsApp messages, including threats to my life, putting me in imminent danger” (Key Informant 4, 2024). This cyber dimension of political violence allowed perpetrators to extend intimidation beyond physical spaces into digital environments, creating persistent psychological pressure on targets.

Familial pressure

Perhaps most concerning was the documentation of political violence within family structures, representing a particularly insidious form that undermined individual political autonomy. Participants described how “when you are in the custody of a family, it's very difficult to support a political party of your choice. Family members will decide for you. If you go against their wishes, they will become furious” (FGD 2, 2024). This family-level coercion took various forms, including the manipulation of identification documents to prevent voting: “My parents for sure are aware that I don't support their failed political party, and during the last election, they decided to hide my national identification card and only availed it a day after the harmonised elections” (FGD 3, 2024).

The family dimension of political violence extended to marital relationships, with participants reporting threats of divorce based on political differences: “My husband threatened to divorce me since I support a different political party than his preferred choice. I was told since we support different political parties, it simply means we are two separate bodies and not husband and wife” (FGD 3, 2024).

Consequences of youth political violence

Individual-level impacts

The research highlighted that participants in political violence suffer from significant and lasting physical and psychological harm. Participants noted that “political violence can contribute to victims experiencing disability or scarring due to physical violence” (FDG1, 2024). The psychological impact was equally devastating, with participants explaining that “exposure to violence can exacerbate post-traumatic depression, stress disorder, and anxiety. This exposure does not only impact the individual but also their families and the community at large” (Key Informant 5, 2024).

For perpetrators of violence, the research revealed concerning psychological hardening effects. Participants observed that “repeated acts of violence can contribute to psychological hardening where the perpetrator of violence becomes less empathetic” (FDG 3, 2024). This finding suggested that involvement in political violence created long-term psychological changes that could perpetuate cycles of violence.

Community-level impacts

Political violence fragmented social cohesion and undermined collective problem-solving capacity within Magwegwe. The erosion of social capital manifested as a barrier to cross-political collaboration on essential local development initiatives. Fear pervaded daily interactions, transforming neighbours into potential threats rather than sources of mutual support. A participant in FGD 2 (2024) explained that “people no longer attend community meetings or development projects because politics divides everything we do”, illustrating how partisanship eroded willingness to cooperate. Observations during community dialogues showed that attendance was often sparse, with residents avoiding policy-related discussions for fear of being politically labelled. These patterns revealed a loss of trust in local governance structures and limited participation in policy implementation, constraining opportunities for community transformation and peacebuilding.

Societal-level impacts

The normalisation of political violence undermined democratic institutions and processes, eroding trust in electoral systems and the legitimacy of political authority. The most concerning evidence showed

that violence was creating intergenerational cycles, as children observed and internalised violent political behaviours as normal aspects of civic engagement. One participant noted that “engaging in political violence is perceived as a viable method to compel attention to their issues, indicating a worrying normalisation of violent tactics as a rational approach to seeking recognition and political representation” (FGD 2, 2024). Observations during political gatherings confirmed that youth and even younger observers mirrored the rhetoric and hostility of older participants, reinforcing violent models of participation. This normalisation of violence further discouraged civic engagement, as some residents withdrew from community or policy processes they now viewed as unsafe and politically manipulated.

Intervention outcomes

The collaborative peace education workshop, implemented through participatory action research, produced observable and sustained shifts in participants’ attitudes, behaviours, and relational capacities. Pre- and post-intervention assessments, reflection meetings, and field notes indicated a clear shift from competitive and avoidance-based responses toward cooperative, accommodating, and problem-solving conflict-resolution approaches. The five-day workshop series and subsequent sports-based activities served as both pedagogical and experiential spaces for re-learning social interaction.

Participants repeatedly described how exposure to nonviolent communication, empathy exercises, and role-play altered their perspectives on political opposition and diversity. One participant explained, “The peace-building workshop has made significant contributions to how I handle conflict issues... I now really understand the importance of promoting peace. Peace... must be prioritised in the communities from which we all come” (Action Group member 7, 2024). Reflections from the group showed that participatory dialogue focused on everyday conflicts significantly enhanced both self-awareness and mutual respect among members.

The emphasis on understanding different perspectives proved particularly transformative. As one participant reflected, “The way I now understand youth political violence has changed.... My attitude on how I should treat fellow community members has since changed. I have since learned that different conflict-handling styles are key...” (Action Group member 8, 2024). This sentiment was echoed across focus group sessions, where participants acknowledged a reduction in hostility and

stereotyping between rival political groups. The sports-based interventions, especially mixed-team soccer and netball games, created neutral spaces for engagement that dissolved partisan barriers and fostered camaraderie.

Participants began to see one another less as political adversaries and more as collaborators in a shared peace project. “The training has helped me to understand that we are born different and we view things differently... Our perceptions in the way we view political issues do differ, and we must value that” (Action Group member 1, 2024).

Beyond the interpersonal level, participants described an emerging sense of civic responsibility and confidence to engage in community initiatives. Through the communication and civic engagement component, many developed the language and skills to discuss political issues without confrontation, to use social media responsibly, and to promote nonviolent participation. One participant captured this broader shift: “Outside just enhancing conflict transformation skills and shifting attitudes towards broadmindedness, the intervention assisted me in inspiring broader civic engagement...” (Action Group member 2, 2024).

Several AG members later initiated small peace dialogues in their wards, signalling diffusion of impact beyond the original research group. Collectively, these outcomes suggest that the combination of participatory facilitation, experiential learning, and reflective practice fostered psychosocial transformation and laid the groundwork for community-level peacebuilding.

Discussion

Findings from Magwegwe reveal youth political violence is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by simple causal models or resolved through punitive measures. The interplay of socio-economic marginalisation and political manipulation confirms the ecological theoretical framework while providing insights into Zimbabwe's post-colonial context.

Unemployment, with local rates exceeding 25 percent, aligns with literature suggesting economic grievances as catalysts for youth involvement in conflict (Urdal, 2006). However, the Magwegwe experience shows economic factors alone cannot explain this. Systematic exclusion of youth from decision-making, while they form the majority of party members, creates a volatile paradox that drives political violence. This supports Bronfenbrenner's (2000) ecological model by showing how

microsystem factors like economic needs interact with mesosystem dynamics of family pressure, exosystem structures of political exclusion, and macrosystem cultures of gerontocracy.

The manifestation of gerontocracy across parties suggests youth political violence serves existing power structures by channelling frustration into horizontal conflict rather than vertical challenges to leadership. This instrumentalisation represents what Galtung (1970) would classify as structural violence, where unequal power relations systematically disadvantage groups. Participants' recognition of this manipulation, evident in testimonies about being a "mere token", highlights both structural constraints and potential for interventions.

The success of contact theory-based interventions supports Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) meta-analytical findings about intergroup contact reducing prejudice in polarised environments. The transformation of participant attitudes demonstrates contact theory's applicability in challenging contexts. The key is creating structured opportunities for equal-status contact around common goals, as Allport (1954) proposed.

The five types of youth political violence identified reveal the comprehensive nature of political intimidation strategies used by competing factions. Election-related violence represents the most visible form, designed to suppress opposition and create fear. The documentation of factional violence within parties suggests that political violence serves functions beyond electoral competition, including internal discipline and succession struggles.

State-sanctioned political violence, particularly where state security forces are complicit in partisan violence, represents a troubling finding that undermines the rule of law and democratic accountability. This collaboration between state and party structures creates impunity while signalling the limits of legitimate opposition.

The identification of cyber violence through WhatsApp threats shows how political intimidation has adapted to technological platforms, extending beyond physical spaces. This finding has important implications for interventions, which must address both physical and virtual dimensions of violence.

Most concerning is the evidence of familial pressure as political violence that extends partisan conflict into domestic spheres. Family members hiding identification documents or threatening divorce based on political differences represents how polarisation can undermine civic rights and intimate relationships. This finding challenges conventional

views of political violence as primarily public, revealing how partisan divisions penetrate private social life.

The intervention outcomes provide evidence that participatory approaches can transform patterns of political violence. The shifts in conflict handling from competitive to collaborative strategies demonstrate behavioural changes beyond attitudinal modifications. Testimonies from participants about gaining perspective and tolerance suggest that deep-seated prejudices can be successfully addressed through educational interventions.

The peace education workshop validates social learning theory while offering guidance for intervention design. As participants initially learned violence through observation of politicians and peers, they subsequently learned peacebuilding through structured, positive modelling (Bandura, 1977). Work by Lederach (2015) supports this, showing that peace education, when modelled behaviourally, can replace cycles of aggression with cooperative norms. This confirms that exposure to new role models and interaction fosters behavioural change.

The transformation of participants from passive recipients to active agents of peacebuilding represents a key outcome. This finding supports the argument by Maringira and Gukurume (2021) that youth agency is a latent force that can be activated through structured, participatory engagement. We agree that these shifts demonstrate youth capacity to challenge constraints through self-awareness, reflection, and skill acquisition.

Reports of psychological trauma among perpetrators and victims reveal consequences persisting after physical wounds heal. The recognition that "repeated acts of violence can contribute to psychological hardening where the perpetrator becomes less empathetic" highlights the need for trauma-informed peacebuilding. Studies by Herman (2015) and Kirmayer et al. (2014) show that cycles of violence desensitise individuals, reducing empathy and increasing manipulation susceptibility. Addressing trauma becomes essential to restoring empathy and reintegrating perpetrators and victims into peaceful civic life.

The erosion of social capital in Magwegwe shows how political violence undermines community resilience. The inability to maintain development initiatives across political lines demonstrates how partisan divisions paralyse collective action. This mirrors Putnam's (2000) theory that social trust forms the backbone of community capacity. Low attendance at meetings and avoidance of community events show how fear and mistrust cripple cooperation in neutral spaces.

Testimonies from participants illustrate how political narratives leverage nationalist sentiment and portray opposing groups as threats to mobilise youth toward violence. Messages about “regime change” and “safeguarding independence” demonstrate propaganda that exploits sovereignty anxieties while legitimising violence (Zvaita, 2023). The researcher agrees that counter-narratives rooted in civic values are essential for deconstructing political hostility.

The manipulation of youth through alcohol and material incentives exposes the calculated nature of violence recruitment. This finding supports Gukurume’s (2018) observation that young recruits’ inhibitions are lowered through the strategic use of substances and patronage. The researcher concurs that such manipulation represents exploitation of economic vulnerability, warranting interventions to reduce youth dependency and strengthen ethical political engagement.

Recommendations

The study highlights both the persistence of youth political violence and the transformative potential of participatory peacebuilding. To sustain these gains, youth empowerment should be embedded within local governance systems through inclusive decision-making structures and regular intergroup dialogue forums. Peace education programmes must be institutionalised in schools, community centres, and youth clubs, integrating civic responsibility, conflict transformation, and media literacy. Economic interventions are essential; targeted youth employment schemes, entrepreneurship support, and transparent access to resources can reduce political vulnerability. Political parties should adopt internal democratic reforms to enable meaningful youth representation and leadership. Collaborations between government, civil society, and faith-based organisations can strengthen non-violent activism and address trauma through community-based counselling. Finally, sustained monitoring of youth engagement in peacebuilding will ensure accountability, continuity, and the consolidation of behavioural change achieved through participatory interventions.

Conclusion

This research shows youth political violence is a product of structural inequality and history, rather than an unavoidable outcome. Through participatory action research positioning youth as change agents,

meaningful transformation is possible. The study's integration of contact theory, social learning theory, and ecological model offers a framework for understanding political violence and pathways to peace. Collaborative interventions demonstrate that political divisions can be addressed through structured interaction, skills development, and empowerment.

Transforming participants from perpetrators to peacebuilding agents offers hope for Zimbabwe and similar contexts, highlighting the importance of addressing conflict's root causes. The research reveals youth political violence as a complex phenomenon needing interventions that address individual attitudes, relationships, community dynamics, and structural inequalities.

Peace education workshops and participants' testimonies show entrenched violence patterns can change through proper interventions. This research challenges deficit-based narratives about youth in political violence. Rather than viewing young people as problematic, this study shows their capacity to become social change agents when given participation and skill development opportunities.

Participants' evolution from instruments of political manipulation to nonviolent civic engagement advocates illustrates Zimbabwean youth's potential. Findings suggest sustainable transformation requires genuine participation by affected communities. The Magwegwe interventions show local peacebuilding capacity exists in polarised contexts, needing support rather than external expertise replacement.

Documenting familial pressure and cyberviolence expands understanding of political intimidation across social spheres. The research reveals the importance of addressing economic marginalisation and political exclusion as youth violence drivers. Moving forward requires addressing structural inequalities creating conditions for youth political violence, including reforming political structures, implementing economic empowerment programs, and establishing accountability mechanisms.

The youth of Magwegwe prove that treating young people as active peacebuilding partners makes community transformation possible. Their journey from perpetrators to peace champions provides a model for transformations across Zimbabwe and beyond, offering hope for inclusive societies.

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