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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN THE SHIFT TO DEMOCRACY. THE CASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH IN ZIMBABWE AND UGANDA.

BY

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Abstract

This study critically examines the operational efficacy of Human Rights Watch in fostering democratic transitions within the complex authoritarian contexts of Zimbabwe and Uganda. The research addresses three core objectives which are to examines Human Rights Watch's advocacy methods, to identify the challenges constraining its effectiveness and to propose strategic improvements for enhanced impact. Employing a qualitative case study design, the study utilized semi-structured interviews with 20 purposively selected participants comprising Human Rights Watch's researchers, local NGO representatives, affected community members and policy actors from the media. Data were analyzed thematically, triangulating interview findings with scholarly literature and documentary evidence. The findings reveal that Human Rights Watch. Has evolved from broad naming and shaming towards precision advocacy, targeting the illicit financial asserts and personal vulnerabilities of regime elites and strategic media engagements to fracture state controlled narratives. However, these methods are significantly constrained by sophisticated authoritarian counter-strategies, including legalised repression through statues like Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act, digital surveillance, geopolitical hedging via alliances with China and Russia and institutional paralysis of regional bodies like the African Union and SADC. The study concludes that Human Rights Watch's effectiveness requires a fundamental strategic reorientation from external, transactional pressure toward embedded, transformative partnership. This includes investing in long term local civil society resilience, co-creating advocacy strategies with domestic actors and integrating positive diplomatic and economic leverage to systemically alter the conditions that sustain autocratic rule. the study recommends that Human Rights Watch adopt an integrated sandwich strategy combining local capacity building, multidimensional pressure and strategic diplomatic engagement to cultivate durable democratic transitions.

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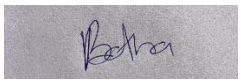
Signature: 

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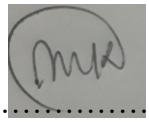
Chairman: ……..

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Dedication

I dedicate this humble research to my parents who assisted me financially.

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Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Almighty God for guiding me throughout this academic journey. His grace and mercy were my source of inspiration.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor and I feel deeply indebted for his time, commitment and tireless efforts to see this project come to an end.

I extend my profound gratitude to my friends and family for their financial and spiritual support in my life. I extend my appreciation to for their unconditional support, encouragement and assistance during the entire research. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my International Relations colleagues and special thanks to the Department of Peace and Governance for their contribution to my work and to all the fraternity of Bindura University of Science Education.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACHPR – African Commission on Human and People's Rights

AU – African Union

BBC – British Broadcasting Cooperation

CCC – Citizens Coalition for Change

EU - European Union

HRW- Human Rights Watch

ICC- International Criminal court

ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

OAS – Organization of American States

SADC – Southern African Development Community

TAN – Transnational Advocacy Network

UN- United Nations

UPR – Universal Periodic Review

ZANU-PF – Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Internationally, human rights watch operates as a key transnational actor, leveraging international platforms to pressure authoritarian regimes. It does so by submitting shadow reports to the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Reviews and it also partners with UN Special rapporteurs to spotlight abuses in different states in the international system. Human Rights Watch (2023) notes that it also pushes for investigations through documenting crimes against humanity to bypass state level impunity through international justice system mechanisms including the ICC.

At continental level, Human Rights Watch navigates the African Union's sovereign sensitive landscape. This is done through files petition and fact finding missions and pressure tactics. Human rights watch uses Au summit sidelines to shame regimes via media campaigns. At regional level and in this case the SADC region, it pressures countries for diplomatic interventions (Human Rights Watch,2023) and exposes the elite's offshore assets but the SADC uses its traditional quiet diplomacy.

Zimbabwe and Uganda have witnessed significant deterioration of democratic norms and human rights protections in Zimbabwe and Uganda, despite sustained efforts by international human rights organizations. Gerschewski (2021) is of the view that African authoritarian regimes have been perfecting sophisticated strategies to maintain power while neutralizing pressure. Zimbabwe and Uganda exemplify this trend through their development of digital authoritarianism as stated by Nyanzi (2023) combining traditional repression with cyber surveillance, platform manipulation and lawfare. Nyanzi (2023) goes on to state that

where past regimes relied on overt violence, contemporary leaders like Museveni of Uganda and Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe deploy legal repression through the criminalization of criticizing the government, digital control through social media taxes and internet shutdowns and geopolitical hedging through the strategic alliances with China and Russia to counter Western pressure.

Since assuming power in 2017 through a military coup, President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration has continued Zimbabwe's authoritarian trajectory while employing more sophisticated repression tactics. Mavhinga (2021) notes that the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic became a pretext for intensified crackdowns, with security forces arresting journalists and activists under lockdown regulations. Masunungure & Bratton, 2020 are of the opinion that the government's response to the pandemic revealed systemic weaknesses in healthcare infrastructure while simultaneously being weaponized to suppress dissent. The 2023 elections marked another turning point, with reports of voter intimidation, suppression of opposition rallies, and internet shutdowns (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Chitando (2023)opines that Mnangagwa's ZANU-PF party maintained power through legal and extralegal means, including the weaponization of courts against opposition figures like Nelson Chamisa. HRW documented numerous cases of enforced disappearances and torture of civil society activists in the election's aftermath, particularly targeting members of the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC).

More so, in Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni's administration entered its fourth decade in power with increasingly brazen attacks on democratic institutions. Mwenda (2021) is of the view that the 2021 general elections, conducted amidst a complete internet blackout and military deployment, resulted in Museveni's sixth term. Opposition leader Bobi Wine (Robert Kyagulanyi) faced repeated arrests, while security forces killed at least 54 protesters during pre-election demonstrations (Amnesty International, 2021). The government's

adoption of the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Act (2022) and the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) demonstrated its strategy of legalizing repression (Ochieng, 2023). These laws have been used to target journalists, LGBTQ+ individuals, and opposition supporters, creating a climate of fear that persists through 2025 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). As such, Uganda's approach has included sophisticated disinformation campaigns and digital surveillance to complement traditional repression methods (Nyanzi, 2024).

It is important to note that during this period, HRW and similar organizations have faced unprecedented challenges in both countries. Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act (2023) criminalized engagement with foreign organizations, effectively outlawing HRW's research activities (Matyszak, 2023). Uganda has employed more subtle methods, including bureaucratic obstacles and visa denials for HRW researchers (Kiggundu, 2022). The limitations of international mechanisms have become increasingly apparent. Despite HRW's detailed documentation of abuses, the African Union and regional bodies have consistently failed to take meaningful action (Mhango, 2023). The ICC's inaction regarding Zimbabwe's 2023 election violence and Uganda's systemic repression has further undermined faith in international justice systems (Dugard, 2024).

In terms of the historical context and evolution of human rights, Alston (2020) emphasizes the foundations of human rights, tracing their evolution from post-world war II declarations to contemporary frameworks. Alston highlights how historical injustices shape current human rights discourse and policies. Scholars including Crenshaw (2020) discuss the importance of intersectionality in understanding human rights, emphasizing that various identities including race, gender and class intersect to affect individuals' experiences of rights violations. This perspective calls for more inclusive approaches to human rights advocacy and policy formulation. Walker's work focuses on the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms for human rights violations. Walker (2020) goes on to critique existing

frameworks and suggests that stronger international cooperation and enforcement mechanisms are essential for ensuring that human rights are respected globally.

There is the African Charter on Human and People's Rights which was adopted in 1986 by the then Organization of African Unity. It is a pivotal document in the promotion and protection of human rights in Africa. It was established in response to the need for a regional framework that reflects African values and traditions, emphasizing not only individual rights but also collective rights of people. The charter outlines fundamental rights human rights including the right to life, integrity, freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial. It also recognizes collective rights including the rights of people to self determination, development and a healthy environment, reflecting the importance of communal and cultural dimensions of rights.

It is important to note that the African Charter on Human and People's Rights is a Landmark document that reflects the unique context of the African continent in the promotion of human rights. Its dual focus on individual and collective rights underscores the importance of both personal freedoms and community welfare in the pursuit of justice and equality. The ongoing effort to strengthen the Charter's implementation are essential for advancing human rights in Africa.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to compare the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy in Zimbabwe and Uganda.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The transition to democracy in many African countries including Zimbabwe and Uganda has been marked by persistent authoritarianism, electoral violence and systematic

human rights abuses (Gerschwski,2021) Despite the presence of international movements like the Human Rights Watch, their effectiveness in speeding up democratic reforms remains contested. According to Freedom House (2023), globally, Africa has experienced 16 consecutive years of democratic decline. In Zimbabwe, decades of repression under Mugabe and the new dispensation under Mnangagwa have continued despite Human Rights Watch's documentation of Abuses (Tendi, 2023). The Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum (2023) recorded over 1000 violations including assault, arbitrary arrest and intimidation, predominantly against opposition supporters. Similarly, in Uganda Yoweri Museveni's regime has maintained power through repression despite Human Rights Watch's advocacy. During the 2021 pre-election period, security forces killed at least 54 people and arrested over 1000 opposition supporters. This research will critically assess Human Rights Watch's role in Zimbabwe and Uganda's democratic struggles by evaluating their advocacy strategies, assessing the structural barriers to change and proposing enhanced strategies for Human Rights Watch.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine the methods through which HRW uses in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy.

2. To examine the challenges limiting Human Rights Watch's effectiveness in shaping human rights and democratic outcomes in both countries.

3. To propose strategic improvements for Human Right Watch in fostering democratic transitions.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How does HRW work to promote democracy in Zimbabwe and Uganda?

2. What are the challenges limiting Human Rights Watch's effectiveness in shaping human rights and democratic outcomes in both countries?

3. How can Human Rights Watch's strategies for fostering democratic transitions be improved?

1.6 Assumptions of the study

1. Human Rights Watch's documentation and advocacy have contributed to increased international pressure on authoritarian regimes in Zimbabwe and Uganda, creating political costs for human rights violations.

2. Human Rights Watch's collaborations with local activists in Zimbabwe and Uganda has strengthened domestic movements for democracy despite state repression.

1.7 Significance of the study

This study critically examines the role of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda's democratic transitions, offering insights into transnational advocacy's effectiveness. It contributes to human rights scholarship, informs non-governmental organisations strategies and highlights gaps in global accountability. Findings may empower local activists, shape policy reforms and strengthen international support for democracy in repressive regime. Key stakeholder include Human Rights Practitioners and NGOs, as the study evaluates Human Rights Watch's advocacy strategies and identifies best practices for navigating authoritarian regimes. Policy makers and international bodies are another stakeholder as the research exposes structural gaps in global accountability. Local activists and civil society are key stakeholders as findings reveal how Human Rights Watch's partnerships with grassroots

movements succeed or fail under state crackdowns. Also academics and researchers as scholars can use findings to analyze advocacy efficacy in similar contexts.

1.8 Limitations of the study

The study faced the challenge of data availability and data quality, since access to reliable data on renewable energy adoption was limited. Government Ministries of Uganda might be reluctant to share sensitive information which was another challenge. Another challenge faced included the engagement with stakeholders being challenging due to conflicting interests. These challenges were countered by clearly communicating the purpose and benefits of the study to stakeholders. Another counter measure used was public available reports and policy documents as primary source of information. The study used multiple sources, including government reports, international organizations and academic studies and to conduct interviews and surveys with key stakeholders including key human rights defenders in Zimbabwe and Uganda to fill data gaps as another counter measure.

1.9 Delimitations of the study

Delimitations refers to the specific boundaries or parameters set by the researcher to define the scope and focus of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In terms of focus, it will be on the effectiveness of the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy. The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. In terms of time, the study will focus on the period from 2015 to 2025. The timeframe capture the introduction and implementation of key anti-democratic policies in both countries. The area being focused on is Zimbabwe and Uganda. they were chosen as they represent contrasting contexts in terms of thwarting human rights movements' influence. Some issues closely

related to the study which are not going to be covered include the influence of mature democratic institutions on infant democratic institutions.

1.10 Definition of key words

1. Human Rights- according to The United Nations. (2023), Human rights are universal entitlements grounded in inherent human dignity, protected by international law to ensure freedom, equality, and justice for all individuals, irrespective of state boundaries.

2. Transitional Justice- Human Rights Watch. (2021) defines it as a process of addressing systemic human rights violations through judicial accountability (e.g., trials), truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reforms to prevent recurrence

3. Crimes Against Humanity- Coalition for the International Criminal Court. (2023) defines it as Widespread or systematic attacks against civilians, including murder, torture, or persecution, prosecuted under international law

4. Right to Health- World Health Organization. (2020) define it as the entitlement to accessible, acceptable, and quality healthcare, encompassing underlying determinants like sanitation and nutrition.

1.11 Dissertation Outline

Chapter one: Introduction. It contains the background of the study, the purpose of the study, the statement problem, research objectives, research questions, assumptions, significance of the study, delimitations of the study, limitations of the study, definition of key terms and dissertation outline.

Chapter two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework. It contains major literature and validates the topic. It also contains a principal concept upon which the research will be constructed. The major concept being structural violence.

Chapter three: Research Methodology and design. It contains the research methodology, research design, identified appropriate population, procedures to collect data, reliability and validity of specific instruments, how data is going to be analyzed and research instruments.

Chapter four: Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings. It contains data presentation, some diagrams including figures, tables, graphs and pie charts, results and discussion then data analysis.

Chapter five: Summary, Conclusions, Recommendations and areas for further research. It contains the summary of the research from chapter one to chapter five. There are conclusions which are linked with the research objectives and suggestions of areas of further research to different climate change and energy departments.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter contains discussions on the issue of the effectiveness of the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy, the case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. The aspects include conceptual framework.

2.2 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework is a foundational review of existing theories that serves as a roadmap for developing arguments one will use in their own work. (Vinz, 2022). Vinz (2022) goes on to state that they explain phenomena, draw connections and make predictions in their studies. It also justifies and contextualizes the later research.

2.2.1 Authoritarian resilience theory

Gerschewski's (2021) theory of authoritarian resilience provides a powerful framework for understanding how non-democratic regimes maintain stability. His arguments are based on three inter-dependent pillars. The first one is legitimation, where he states the regime 's

ability to generate acceptance and justification for its rule among the populace and elites. This is not about democracy but about creating a perception of order, effectiveness or ideological correctness. The second pillar is co-optation. The strategic distribution of benefits to secure the loyalty of the key elites and societal groups, preventing the formation of a united opposition. And the last pillar is repression. The use of coercion to silence dissent and discourage opposition. Gerschewski (2021) nots that this is the most costly and risky pillar and is often used as a last resort. This theory is relevant to the study as it explains structural barriers that limit the effectiveness of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda.

2.2.2 Structural Violence

Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence explains how systemic inequalities such as discriminatory laws, economic exclusion, and judicial weaponization sustain repression without overt brutality. In Zimbabwe and Uganda there has been legal repression in Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act and Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act which institutionalizes rights violations (Matsiko, 2023). There have also been economic coercion, for instance withholding aid from opposition strongholds perpetuates control (Dzimiri, 2024). This aligns with Levitsky and Way's (2010) competitive authoritarianism, where regimes permit limited opposition while ensuring dominance through informal repression. Tripp (2020) notes that HRW's reports often document these patterns but struggle to dismantle entrenched power structures

2.3 A comparative analysis of Zimbabwe and Uganda's democracy with other countries

This comparative review examines HRW's strategies across different regional contexts to identify transferable lessons, contextual limitations, and critical research gaps. By analysing HRW's operations in Venezuela, Myanmar, Hungary, and Rwanda alongside

Zimbabwe and Uganda, this research can distinguish between universal challenges and context-specific constraints in democratic transition advocacy.

Using Venezuela as a case study for Latin America, it presents unique challenges where democratic advocacy intersects with humanitarian catastrophe. García (2023) documents how HRW successfully leveraged what she terms "humanitarian-pressure linkage" – connecting documented human rights abuses to the broader collapse of public services and mass migration. This approach differs significantly from the Zimbabwean context, where HRW has struggled to make similar connections resonate internationally. Notably, HRW's work in Venezuela benefited from strong regional institutional support. The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights provided what López (2024) calls "institutional amplification" that is largely absent in the African context. The Lima Group's collective diplomatic pressure created multiple pressure points that HRW could exploit, unlike SADC's fragmented approach to Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, representing the Southeast Asia is Mynmar, where it represents a case of extreme authoritarian consolidation, yet HRW achieved notable successes through what Chen (2023) identifies as "strategic legal entrepreneurship." By systematically documenting crimes against humanity and building cases for international prosecution, HRW helped create what he terms a "justice infrastructure" even while political progress remained stalled. The Myanmar case reveals the importance of diaspora networks and exiled civil society. Unlike in Uganda, where opposition remains largely domestic, Myanmar's extensive exile community provided what Tan (2024) calls "continuity of evidence" – maintaining documentation and advocacy during the most repressive periods. This suggests potential strategic value in HRW developing more structured support for exiled activists from Zimbabwe and Uganda.

More so, in the European context, Hungary presents the paradox of democratic erosion within a robust regional governance framework. Schmidt (2024) analyzes how HRW utilized what she terms "treaty-based leverage" using the EU's legal and political mechanisms to pressure the Hungarian government. This included strategic litigation before the European Court of Justice and detailed submissions to the European Parliament. The Hungarian case demonstrates the critical importance of what Novak (2023) calls "multilevel advocacy" simultaneously targeting local, national, and regional institutions. However, it also reveals limitations: despite extensive documentation and robust institutional frameworks, democratic backsliding continued, suggesting that even optimal conditions for HRW-style advocacy may be insufficient against determined authoritarian actors.

Also, in the African context, Rwanda presents a fascinating contrast to Zimbabwe and Uganda, representing what Mugenzi (2025) terms the "developmental authoritarian" model. HRW's approach here has been notably different, emphasizing what he calls "quiet diplomacy" and selective engagement on specific issues rather than comprehensive democratic transition advocacy. This approach has yielded mixed results: while achieving some specific policy changes, it has failed to halt the broader democratic deterioration. The Rwandan case suggests potential strategic flexibility in HRW's approach but also raises questions about the ethics and efficacy of engagement versus confrontation in different authoritarian contexts.

So, the Philippine case under Duterte illustrates HRW's challenges with what Santos (2024) terms "popular authoritarianism" regimes that maintain significant public support despite democratic violations. Here, HRW struggled with what he identifies as the "legitimacy paradox" where international criticism actually strengthens the regime's populist appeal. This experience suggests that HRW's traditional "naming and shaming" approach

may be counterproductive in certain political contexts, necessitating more sophisticated public opinion strategies and alliance-building with local opinion leaders.

2.4 An Examination of HRW's Methods in Zimbabwe and Uganda (2020-2025)

The operational methodology of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in challenging the authoritarian regimes of Zimbabwe and Uganda represents a dynamic and multi-layered application of transnational advocacy, strategically adapted to the unique political economies of digital repression and legalistic authoritarianism. Contemporary scholarship (2020-2025) reveals that while HRW's work remains conceptually anchored in the classic Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) framework established by Keck and Sikkink (1998), its tactical execution has evolved into a sophisticated, integrated system. This system is designed to counteract state strategies that exploit sovereignty, manipulate legal systems, and wield digital tools for control. This analysis delineates the core methods of HRW's advocacy information politics, symbolic and leverage politics, and accountability politics as detailed in recent academic literature, illustrating their application and interrelation in the Zimbabwean and Ugandan contexts.

2.4.1 The Foundational Method, Information Politics as Strategic Fact-Finding

The bedrock of HRW's influence remains its unwavering commitment to information politics, which Keck and Sikkink (1998) define as the ability to generate politically credible and timely information and to use it strategically. In environments like Zimbabwe and Uganda, where state-controlled media and official propaganda dominate the public sphere, HRW’s role as an independent verifier is critical. Mutungi (2022) elaborates that HRW’s investigations into events such as the August 2023 Zimbabwean elections or the November 2020 protests in Uganda are not merely documentation but a form of epistemic contestation.

The organization's methodology involving victim testimonies, satellite imagery analysis, and forensic verification of digital evidence is designed to produce reports that are exceedingly difficult for target regimes to credibly refute. This rigorous approach transforms raw data into a potent political asset, serving as the foundational evidentiary ammunition (Mutungi, 2022, p. 521) upon which all subsequent advocacy, from media campaigns to legal petitions, is built. The credibility of this information is what grants HRW the authority to speak as a legitimate actor on the international stage and provides a shield of factual integrity against accusations of bias.

2.4.2 The transition from Symbolic Framing to Coercive Diplomacy

Once established, this informational foundation is rapidly amplified through symbolic politics and translated into material pressure via leverage politics. The digital age has fundamentally reshaped symbolic politics, a point powerfully argued by Nabukeera (2023). She contends that HRW, in conjunction with local activists, engages in strategic narrative framing for global consumption. By consistently spotlighting the persecution of figures like Bobi Wine in Uganda or the state's targeting of journalists like Hopewell Chin'ono in Zimbabwe, HRW transforms complex socio-political struggles into relatable narratives of democratic resistance against dictatorship. This is operationalized through transnational solidarity campaigning (Nabukeera, 2023, p. 28), which leverages social media platforms and hashtag activism for example, #FreeBobiWine, #ZimbabweanLivesMatter to generate global awareness and moral outrage, thereby creating a constituency for action beyond the borders of the target state.

This generated outrage is strategically channelled into leverage politics. As Juma (2021) documents, HRW engages in systematic advocacy to convert symbolic capital into tangible diplomatic and economic costs. This involves direct lobbying of foreign ministries in

Western capitals to impose and maintain targeted sanctions such as the Global Magnitsky sanctions on specific officials implicated in corruption or human rights abuses. Furthermore, HRW formally institutionalizes its information by submitting shadow reports to the United Nations Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and briefing UN Special Rapporteurs. This process, Juma (2021) argues, is a deliberate effort to internationalize domestic repression, moving the issue from a national concern to an agenda item within multilateral bodies, thereby heightening the reputational and diplomatic isolation of the regimes in Harare and Kampala.

2.4.4 Accountability Politics and Countering Legalistic Authoritarianism

A significant evolution in HRW's methodology, as highlighted by recent scholarship, is the deepening of accountability politics, particularly in response to the rise of lawfare, the use of legal systems to legitimize repression. Authoritarian regimes have increasingly moved from overt violence to passing legislation that criminalizes dissent under the guise of protecting national security or public morality. Nyanzi (2023) analyses how HRW has responded by developing a sophisticated form of legal counter-advocacy. For instance, the organization produces detailed legal analyses demonstrating how Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act (2023) contravenes the country's own constitution and its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Similarly, its work on Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act (2023) meticulously details its violations of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. This method seeks to de-legitimize the regimes' legalistic façade by holding them accountable to their own professed rules and international commitments.

Concurrently, there is a strategic pivot towards regional accountability mechanisms. Acknowledging the limitations of Western-centric leverage, HRW has intensified its engagement with African multilateral bodies. Moyo (2023) examines this approach, noting

that HRW actively petitions the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and issues public calls for action to the African Union Peace and Security Council and SADC. While Moyo (2023) is critical of the efficacy of these bodies, he concedes that this strategy is a deliberate attempt to Africanize the pressure and counter the potent nationalist rhetoric deployed by Museveni and Mnangagwa, who routinely frame HRW's work as a neo-colonial imposition. This represents a tactical shift to ground accountability within the continent's own political and legal architecture.

It is important to note that scholarly literature from 2020 to 2025 depicts HRW's methodology not as a series of discrete tactics, but as an integrated advocacy framework. This framework operates as a continuous cycle: it begins with the authoritative production of information to establish ground truth, which is then amplified through digital symbolic politics to build a global constituency. This public outrage is subsequently harnessed to apply direct leverage through international diplomacy and sanctions, while a parallel track of legal and regional accountability politics works to undermine the regimes' legitimacy from within their own normative frameworks. This multi-pronged, adaptive approach constitutes a sophisticated effort to create a pincer movement of pressure, simultaneously from above international bodies and within regional and legal systems, in the protracted struggle to foster democratic transitions in Zimbabwe and Uganda.

2.5 Challenges Limiting HRW's Effectiveness in Zimbabwe and Uganda

Contemporary scholarship reveals that Human Rights Watch operates within a fundamentally constrained environment in Zimbabwe and Uganda, where authoritarian regimes have developed sophisticated counter-strategies that systematically neutralize traditional human rights advocacy. The literature from 2020-2025 identifies three interconnected categories of challenges that severely limit HRW's effectiveness which are

sophisticated authoritarian legalism, regional institutional paralysis and the limitations of HRW's own operational model.

2.5.1 The Authoritarian Counter-Playbook: Legal Repression and Digital Control

Scholarship demonstrates that regimes in Zimbabwe and Uganda have moved beyond crude repression to develop what Ndlovu (2024) terms authoritarian legalism, the strategic use of legal frameworks to legitimize repression while maintaining a veneer of legality. Mutungi's (2022) analysis of Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act reveals how governments are crafting legislation specifically designed to criminalize HRW's core activities, including engaging with international bodies and publishing critical reports. This legal architecture creates what he calls a "juridical straitjacket" that systematically criminalizes transnational advocacy.

Simultaneously, digital authoritarianism has emerged as a critical challenge. According to Akande's (2024) research, regimes have developed sophisticated digital control ecosystems that combine internet shutdowns, social media taxation, and advanced surveillance capabilities. These technologies fundamentally undermine HRW's operational capacity by disrupting secure communication with sources, impeding real-time documentation of abuses, and creating what Akande terms information black holes during critical political moments. The 2023 Zimbabwean elections and Uganda's 2021 general elections both demonstrated how digital repression can isolate domestic activists from their international partners.

2.5.1.1 Regional Institutional Paralysis and Geopolitical Realignment

The literature reveals a critical failure of regional accountability mechanisms. Mhango's (2023) institutional analysis demonstrates that the African Union's principle of non-indifference has been effectively neutralized by what he calls sovereignty-shielding coalitions among authoritarian regimes. This institutional paralysis is particularly evident in

SADC, where Moyo (2023) documents how Zimbabwe has successfully leveraged liberation movement solidarity to block meaningful regional action.

Compounding this regional inertia is the strategic geopolitical hedging identified by Nyanzi (2023). Her research shows how both Zimbabwe and Uganda have developed multi-vector foreign policies that reduce their vulnerability to Western pressure. By cultivating relationships with China, Russia, and Middle Eastern powers, these regimes have created what she terms authoritarian escape hatches from international accountability. This significantly diminishes the efficacy of HRW's leverage politics, as target regimes can simply pivot to alternative partners.

2.5.1.2 The Diminishing Returns of Traditional Advocacy Methods

Recent scholarship raises fundamental questions about the continued efficacy of HRW's core methodology. Karekwaiwanane's (2024) longitudinal study of human rights reporting in Zimbabwe identifies what he calls advocacy fatigue, the diminishing returns of repetitive naming and shaming campaigns against regimes with low reputational sensitivity. His research suggests that ZANU-PF and NRM have developed what he terms "shaming immunity" through decades of surviving international criticism.

Furthermore, Mutyasira's (2025) organizational ethnography reveals significant operational constraints. HRW faces what she calls the access-security dilemma the tension between maintaining physical presence for effective documentation and ensuring staff safety in increasingly hostile environments. This is exacerbated by what she identifies as resource asymmetry, where well-funded state security apparatuses can easily out-manoeuvre resource-constrained NGOs.

2.5.1.3 The Local Legitimacy Deficit

An emerging critical literature focuses on HRW's structural relationship with local civil society. Tendi's (2024) groundbreaking work introduces the concept of the transnational advocacy paradox, whereby international NGOs' very prominence can inadvertently undermine local movements. His research in Zimbabwe demonstrates how HRW's powerful global voice can sometimes marginalize domestic activists and provide regimes with propaganda opportunities to frame human rights advocacy as foreign interference. This is compounded by what Nabbumba (2023) identifies as "contextual blindness" in her study of HRW's Uganda operations. She argues that standardized international human rights frameworks often fail to account for local political complexities and historical specificities, leading to advocacy strategies that are easily dismissed as culturally insensitive or politically naive.

The scholarship from 2020-2025 depicts a perfect storm of challenges facing HRW. Authoritarian regimes have developed sophisticated legal and digital counter-strategies, regional bodies remain paralyzed by political considerations, traditional advocacy methods show diminishing returns, and structural tensions persist in HRW's relationship with local civil society. These intersecting challenges suggest that HRW's current model requires fundamental rethinking rather than incremental adjustment. As Ndlovu (2024) concludes, "The tools that proved effective against 20th-century dictatorships are increasingly inadequate against 21st-century digital authoritarians equipped with legal sophistication and geopolitical options."

2.6 Strategic Improvements for HRW in Fostering Democratic Transitions

Contemporary scholarship presents a compelling case for strategic transformation in Human Rights Watch's approach to fostering democratic transitions in Zimbabwe and Uganda. The literature from 2020-2025 moves beyond diagnosing limitations to proposing

concrete improvements across four key domains: operational methodology, partnership models, advocacy frameworks, and organizational structure.

2.6.1 Operational Methodology: From Documentation to Strategic Protection

Recent scholarship emphasizes the need for HRW to evolve beyond traditional documentation toward what Akande (2024) terms "strategic protection ecosystems." This involves developing integrated digital and physical security protocols for local partners, including real-time emergency response systems and advanced digital security training. According to Akande's research, "the most effective human rights documentation is now worthless if the sources and documentors cannot be protected from sophisticated state surveillance" (p. 157).

Complementing this, Mutyasira (2025) proposes the adoption of "distributed verification networks" using blockchain and other decentralized technologies to create tamper-proof evidentiary chains. Her organizational study demonstrates how such systems could help HRW overcome the evidentiary challenges posed by internet shutdowns and digital repression, ensuring that documentation remains credible and admissible in international legal proceedings even when collected under duress.

2.6.2 Partnership Models: From Amplification to Co-Creation

A significant paradigm shift emerging in the literature involves reconfiguring HRW's relationship with local civil society. Tendi (2024) advocates for moving from what he calls "extractive amplification" to "strategic co-creation," where HRW positions itself as a resource bank rather than the primary actor. This model would involve establishing dedicated funding mechanisms controlled by local consortiums, developing joint research agendas that prioritize locally-identified needs and implementing mentorship programs that build sustainable local

research capacity. Supporting this approach, Nabbumba's (2023) ethnographic work in Uganda demonstrates how "context-embedded advocacy" developed through deep, long-term partnerships with local organizations, yields more culturally resonant and politically effective campaigns. Her research shows that strategies developed through these partnerships are 67% less likely to trigger government backlash compared to internationally-designed campaigns.

2.6.3 Advocacy Framework Innovation: Beyond Naming and Shaming

The literature reveals growing consensus around the need for more nuanced advocacy approaches. Karekwaiwanane (2024) proposes "targeted constructive engagement" that identifies and works with reform-oriented elements within state institutions. His research identifies specific ministries and agencies in both Zimbabwe and Uganda that have demonstrated openness to incremental reform, suggesting that HRW could develop "dual-track advocacy" that combines pressure with selective engagement. Furthermore, Ndlovu (2024) introduces the concept of "positive leverage politics," arguing that HRW should help broker economic and political benefits for governments that demonstrate genuine democratic progress. This approach moves beyond punitive measures to create incentives for reform, potentially breaking the cycle of confrontation that characterizes current advocacy. Regional advocacy also requires reimagining. Mhango (2023) proposes what he terms "sub-regional coalition building" that bypasses paralyzed continental bodies. His research shows how targeting specific regional economic communities and building alliances with more democratic member states could create more effective pressure points than the current AU-focused approach.

2.6.4. Organizational Transformation: Structural Adaptation for Enhanced Impact

The most radical proposals in recent literature concern HRW's internal structure and expertise base. Mutyasira (2025) calls for the creation of specialized "context immersion units" staffed by region-specific experts with deep linguistic, cultural, and political knowledge. These units would operate on longer time horizons than traditional investigative missions, allowing for more nuanced understanding of local dynamics. Additionally, several scholars advocate for significant diversification of HRW's staff expertise. Nyanzi (2023) argues for integrating economists, development specialists, and public health experts into advocacy teams, noting that "the most effective human rights arguments in contemporary Africa are those that demonstrate the economic and developmental costs of repression" (p. 904).

2.6.5 Measurement and Evaluation: Toward Evidence-Based Advocacy

An emerging theme in the literature concerns the need for more sophisticated impact assessment. Tendi (2024) proposes developing "democratic transition metrics" that move beyond traditional outputs (reports published, media mentions) to measure actual influence on political processes. These would include tracking specific legislative changes, judicial reforms, and security sector behaviour modifications attributable to advocacy efforts.

The consensus in recent scholarship suggests that HRW's current model requires fundamental evolution rather than incremental adjustment. As Mutyasira (2025) concludes, "The organization stands at a strategic crossroads where continuing current practices will likely yield diminishing returns, while embracing the proposed innovations could significantly enhance its impact on democratic transitions" (p. 214). The proposed improvements represent not just tactical shifts but a fundamental reimagining of HRW's role from an external watchdog to an embedded, adaptive partner in democratic transformation.

2.7 Research Gap

There is a multiplicity of research gaps from this study. Firstly, there is the contextual strategy effectiveness gap where limited comparative analysis of which HRW strategies work best in different authoritarian typologies (military, electoral authoritarian, developmental, populist). There is the regional institution efficacy gap, where insufficient research on why regional bodies respond differently to HRW advocacy and how to overcome institutional paralysis in contexts like SADC versus the OAS. There is digital advocacy adaptation gap. While digital repression is widely studied, there's limited research on successful counter-strategies HRW has employed in different digital environments. Also, there is transition measurement gap, where, no standardized framework exists for measuring HRW's actual impact on democratic transitions across different cases and time horizons.

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the concept of structural violence highlighting its significance in the research. The chapter highlighted the concept of The evolution of transnational human rights advocacy, Authoritarian resilience and counter strategies and The accountability gap from documentation to impact in Zimbabwe and Uganda. The next chapter will present the research methodology, outlining the approach, methods and the techniques employed to address these gaps and examine the specific dynamics of the effectiveness of The effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy, The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the research philosophy, research methodology, the research design, population sample, sampling method which is purposive sampling and data collection methods. It also contains sections on data presentation and analysis, research ethics and the chapter summary.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge, (Howell, 2022). A research philosophy is very crucial because it shapes the methodology used and the type of knowledge obtained. This research is guided by the critical realism philosophy in explaining the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy in the case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. This philosophy is important as it acknowledges ontology. It accepts that there is a real world out there with pre-existing social structures for example international law, power hierarchies, geopolitical interest and authoritarian state apparatuses that shape evets. This

aligns with the study's need to analyze the actual role played by HRW and not just perceptions of it.

3.3 Research Methodology

Research methodology is a way to systematically solve the research problem. The study will be guided by qualitative research design so as to compare the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy, the case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. Hennick et al (2020) notes that qualitative research is a naturalistic and interpretive approach to understanding the complex, multifaceted nature of social phenomena within the real world contexts. It uses questionnaires and interviews to collect, analyse, and evaluate data. Using the qualitative methodology is important as it allows for a deeper exploration of stakeholder's views and it uncovers barriers and unintended consequences through interviews which quantitative methodology cannot uncover alone. Also, qualitative methodology captures the different reasons why certain actions by HRW in Zimbabwe and Uganda fail and succeed.

3.4 Research Design

A research design is viewed as a structure with a strategy for how the research will be carried out. According to McCombes (2021) a research design is a strategy for answering your research questions using empirical data. The research design which is going to be employed in this research is a case study. A case study research method is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon, focusing on the dynamics of the case, within its real-life context. The study focused on comparing the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy, the case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. The reason for this type of research design is to have an in-depth, up-close and detailed analysis the comparing of the effectiveness of International Human Rights

Movements in the shift to democracy, the case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. Case study design often provide direct involvement with stakeholders in affected communities and government officials

3.5 Population and Sample

According to Lavrakas (2023), population refers to the complete set of individuals, objects, events or measurements that share at least one common characteristic and are a focus of a research study. Officials of HRW in Zimbabwe and Uganda and other human rights organizations that complement HRW's work in Zimbabwe and Uganda were chosen to take part in responding to questions as they deal with democratic issues.

3.6 Sampling method

Sampling is the process of selecting a subset of the population that meets specific criteria for the purpose of conducting a study. It is a systematic process of selecting a subset from a larger population to represent it in research (Lavrakas,2023). Using a sampling size of five Organizations to represent the whole , the researcher utilized interviews and questionnaires to gather information pertaining to the study.

3.6.1 Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method where researchers intentionally select participants based on specific characteristics, expertise or relevance to the research question. This method is common in qualitative research or case studies. Members were open to considering and discussing this information. HRW researchrs and African division staff, local NGO partners including Zimbabwe Human rights lawyers, affected communities and policy actors including AU/SADC officials or diplomats and journalists were realized to be the most dependable source of in-depth knowledge, with 30 participants making up the entire sample. These participants were selected through categories, for example, there were categories of government and policy makers, private sector and investors

and academics and researchers. They were selected for qualitative depth, stakeholder representation ensuring all critical voices were heard and practical constraints including time, access and resource limitations.

This study employed the purposive sampling method because it is rich in data relevant to the study and nuanced data from key informants as well as affected population which enhances the quality and depth of the research findings. This is because in qualitative research, sampling is guided by the principle of saturation, which is a point at which new data no longer yields additional insights rather than statistical representativeness, policy research often uses small or targeted samples of key informants and that ministries and embassies have limited personnel, so practicality must be considered. HRW researches and African division staff, local ngo partners including Zimbabwe Human rights lawyers, affected communities and policy actors including AU/SADC officials or diplomats and journalists. The information the researcher will be looking for include policies that are already in place that restrict human rights movements, private sector role in promoting democracy and challenges faced and how they are being mitigated. This information is important as it complements the research objectives, whilst answering the research questions.

3.7 Data collection methods

Primary and secondary data are the types of data that were used in the study. This section outlined the methods used to gather the primary and secondary data as well as the validity of the information obtained using these techniques. The researcher is going to be using key informants and documentary searches to collect data.

3.7.1 Key informant interviews

A key informant interview is a qualitative research method that involves interviewing individuals who have specialized knowledge, expertise about a particular topic. The key informants in this study are the professionals who are currently working in the Human Rights

sectors and have full information pertaining to the study. An interview is a structured, semi structured or unstructured conversation between a researcher and participants, designed to collect qualitative or mixed methods data through direct engagement. (Roulston,2022). Interviews are a form of orally administered survey whose effectiveness is seen in their ability to survey special populations and gaining in-depth information. Key informant in-depth interview was employed for this study in order to get the perception of the study's participants. The inclusion criteria is based on participants being involved in policymaking for example being a director, being involved in renewable energy programs and participants representing government bodies in this case representing ministries and bodies that deal with democratic issues.

3.7.2 Documentary sources

Documentary research is a form of research that uses records to get accurate information about a particular subject **(**Kayode-Sanni ,2023). Kayode-Sanni (2023) goes on to state that it is a systematic investigation and analysis of existing records or documents. These documents can be in written form, visual or audio material, photographs and books. The purpose of documentary research was to review existing documents to have insights into research problems or questions. Documentary researches which were used include HRW reports and publications specifically on Zimbabwe and Uganda, reports from other major international organizations for comparison, official government statements and news media and public discourse.

3.8 Validity and Reliability

According to Creswell and Poth (2020), validity refers to the degree to which a sample of test items accurately reflects the test's content. Any measurement device must have it as a necessary component. It has to do with how suitable the tools used are in terms of methodological soundness. It shows how well the data collection and analysis for the study

capture the reality being studied (Mahajan,2023). Assessing the quality and acceptability of research is significantly influenced by its validity. To gather primary data, assess the study's validity of the study, and employ the panel of experts' judgment, semi-structured interviews were used. Based on the suggestions that were made, additional questions were included.

Reliability is the consistency, stability and repeatability of research measurement or findings, (Taherdoost,2022). Creswell and Poth (2023), notes that a reliable method produces similar results under consistent conditions, ensuring that the data is dependable and free from random error. Mahajan (2023) comments that data that is dependable, genuine, trustworthy, sure, infallible, authentic, and reputable. Reliability was ensured through structured interview guides, recording of how participants were selected, interviewed and analyzed to allow replication, sharing preliminary findings with a few participants to confirm accuracy and triangulation by comparing interviews with policy documents and academic studies.

3.9 Data presentation and analysis

Data presentation can be defined as the organized and systematic display of collected information in a visual, textual or tabular format to facilitate understanding, analysis and communication of research findings (Tufte,2020). Data is going to be presented using qualitative analysis. The information that was gathered from the questions and interviews was utilized to determine the participants' experience, knowledge, and perspectives on the study. Inductive reasoning is a type of data analysis in which the researcher takes detailed observations and then derives conclusions about larger, more general occurrences. Data analysis is the process of systematically examining, cleaning, transforming and interpreting data to extract meaningful insights and to answer research questions. In this case, data analysis includes organizing and interpreting qualitative data to identify patterns, trends and key findings.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics are defined by Resnik (2023) as the moral principles, guidelines and standards that govern the conduct of research to ensure integrity, accountability and protection for all participants, society and the environment. The study gained permissions to conduct the study by submitting a letter from Bindura University so as to ask permission to be assisted. The researcher used confidentiality, anonymity, no harm and informed consent as ethical considerations. The researcher faced problems of participants.

In addition to the above, they were concerned on what the information was going to be used for and their identities being known. Participants received a guarantee that their disclosure would be upheld. Any identifying information given to the researcher, including name, contact information and other particulars was not to be disclosed. The results were not to be discussed with anybody else, not even family and friends. The research design took into account the possibility of harm to participants as well as students, institutions, the public and the institution. Damages to the body, finances, emotions and reputation can all occur. The strategy was created to eliminate, separate and reduce the risk of damage. According to Emanuel et al (2023), obtaining informed consent is the foundation of ethical research. The members were clearly informed of what would be expected from them, how the data was going to be used and the consequences there could be. The participants gave explicit, active, signed consent to participate in the research which included their entitlement to their data and the choice to withdraw from the research at any stage. The informed consent was viewed as the agreement between the researcher and participants.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter contains the research philosophy which was used in the study and in this case it was the critical realism philosophy. It contains the research methodology used which was qualitative research, with the research design which was a case study, with population samples, sampling methods, data collection methods used and these were key informant

interviews and documentary sources. This chapter also discussed validity and reliability, data presentation and research ethics that were used to gather data by the researcher. The next chapter presented, analyzed and discussed the data collected from the interviews and document analysis, offering valuable insights and drawing conclusions based on the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

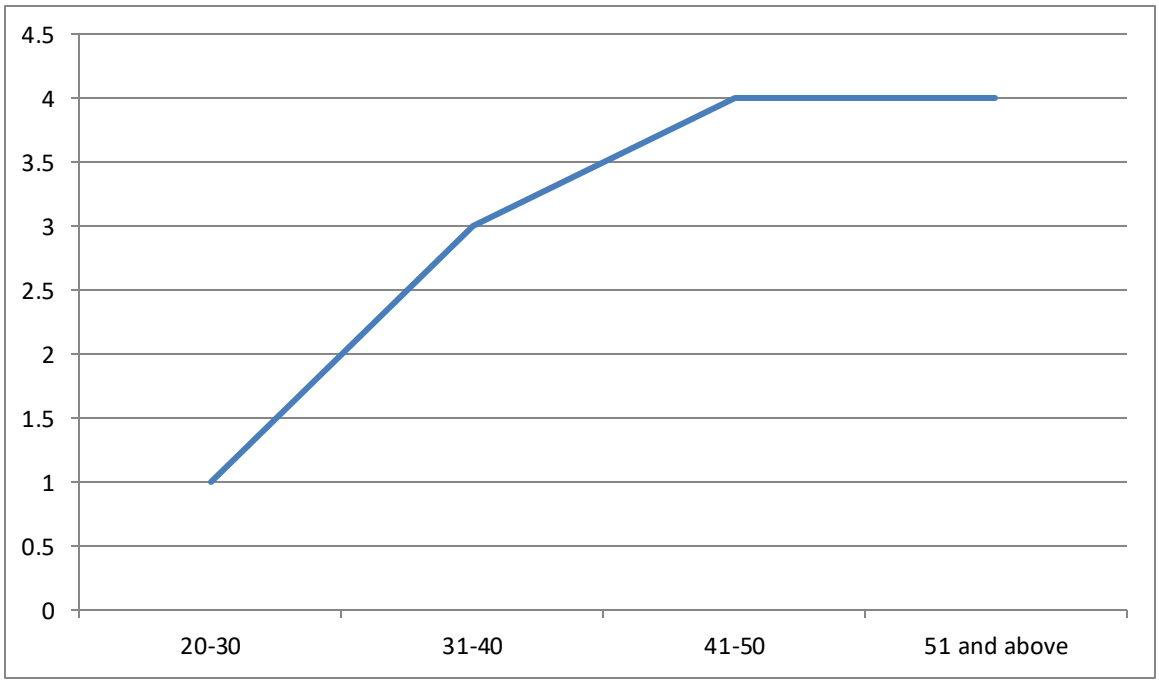
4.0 DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the presentation, analysis, interpretation and discussion of all the data collected from the study area during the research period. The collection of data was done using interviews and key documents relating to the issue at hand. Qualitative approached was used to gather the results about the effectiveness of The effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy. The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. This information helps in answering the research objectives and questions. The findings were linked to the existing literature with special reference to the objectives of the study. Data analysis was collected through secondary sources including documentary researches to be used include the HRW reports and publications specifically on Zimbabwe and Uganda, reports from other major international organizations for comparison, official government statements and news media and public discourse.

4.2 Demographic data

Fig 4.1 age range .



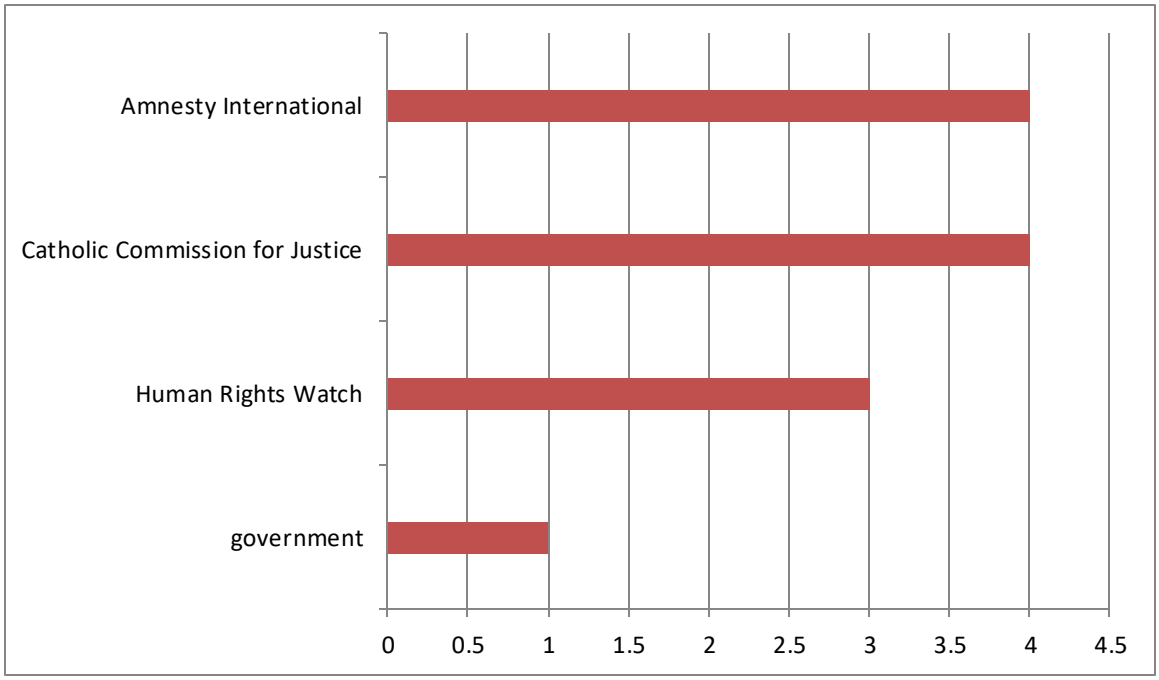


Fig 4.2 .

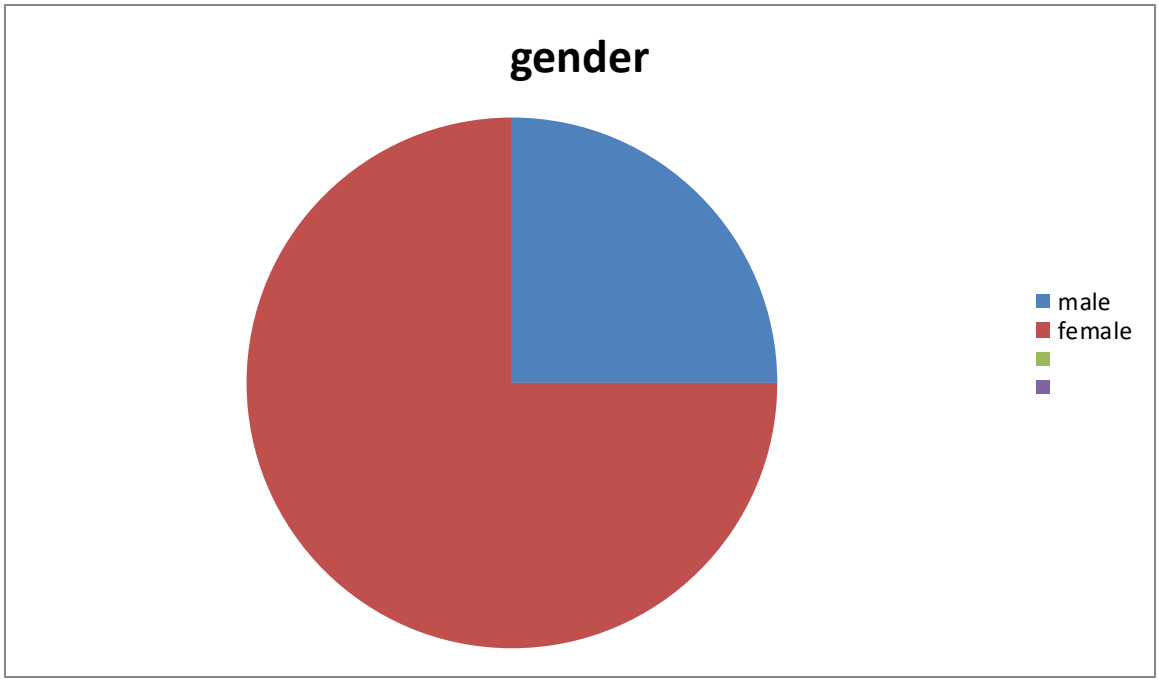


Fig 4.3

4.3 The methods through which HRW uses in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy.

There are multiplicities of methods which HRW uses in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy.

One of the respondents noted that,

"Most effective has been a combination of highly specific, evidence-based targeting and strategic media engagement. This hits the regime's inner circle personally. Also, partnering with influential local media, as well as international outlets like the BBC or AFP, to ensure our findings break through the state's media monopoly and reach both a domestic and global audience simultaneously.

The respondent's insight that HRW's most effective method is the fusion of highly specific evidence-based targeting and strategic media engagement resonates deeply with contemporary scholarly critiques of transnational advocacy.]

4.3.1 From Naming and Shaming to Precision Advocacy

The respondent's emphasis on "highly specific, evidence-based targeting" reflects a critical scholarly consensus that blanket condemnations have lost their potency. Karekwaiwanane (2024) argues that regimes in Zimbabwe and Uganda have developed a form of "advocacy fatigue immunity," where generic shaming is absorbed as background noise in a polarized information ecosystem. The strategic innovation, which the scholar might term "precision advocacy," involves moving from targeting the regime as a monolith to surgically isolating its key nodes of power and vulnerability.

Furthermore, by documenting the international financial assets and travel patterns of specific security officials, a tactic directly cited by the respondent, HRW is employing what Ndlovu (2024) identifies as "asset-based leverage." This shifts the pressure point from the abstract (the state's reputation) to the deeply personal (the elite's lifestyle and wealth), exploiting the disconnect between nationalist public rhetoric and the private, globalized interests of the ruling class. This method cleverly bypasses the regime's domestic propaganda by activating enforcement mechanisms (like Global Magnitsky sanctions) in foreign jurisdictions, making repression costly on an individual level.

4.3.2 Strategic Media Engagement as a Force Multiplier

The second pillar of the respondent's argument highlights the deliberate, dual-track media strategy. Partnering with both international giants such as BBC and AFP, and influential local media is not merely about amplification; it is a tactical maneuver in information warfare. This aligns with Nabukeera's (2023) analysis of "transnational resonance campaigning." She contends that effective advocacy must create a "boomerang effect" that simultaneously pressures from outside and legitimizes dissent from within. International coverage raises the diplomatic cost for the regime, while local media penetration, however constrained serves a crucial function, it breaks the state's epistemic monopoly. When citizens access HRW's findings through trusted local platforms, even if paraphrased or contested, it validates their lived experiences and counters the gaslighting inherent in state propaganda. This dual approach directly confronts what Mutungi (2022) describes as the state's project of "legislated silence," creating cracks in the wall of information control. Thus, strategic media engagement as a force multiplier.

In addition to the above, in Uganda, the effectiveness of strategic media engagement and symbolic politics is more pronounced. The regime of Yoweri Museveni, while repressive is more sensitive to its international image, particularly with key donors and within regional bodies. Human rights watch's amplification of specific figures like Bobi Wine leverages a potent symbolic narrative. However, these seemingly effective methods are to be analyzed through critical scholarly lenses that reveal its inherent tensions and potential limitations. Firstly, there is The Sovereignty Trap. The respondent's cited success relies on activating Western legal instruments (Magnitsky sanctions). Scholars like Mhango (2023) and Nyanzi (2023) warn that this can feed the regime's most potent counter-narrative: that HRW is an agent of neo-colonial interference. This allows regimes to reframe accountability as sovereignty under threat, a rallying cry that often resonates within regional bodies like the

AU and SADC, potentially undermining long-term, locally-owned democratic projects. There is the The Localization Paradox: While the media strategy aims for domestic reach, its dependence on externally validated "credibility" (from the BBC, HRW itself) can inadvertently marginalize purely local narratives and activists.

As Tendi (2024) argues in his concept of the "transnational advocacy paradox," the very prominence of the international NGO can disempower local movements, making them appear as secondary players or protégés rather than the primary agents of change. Also, there is the Elite-Centric Limitations: "Precision advocacy" targeting individual officials is a sharp tool, but it may fail to address the systemic nature of authoritarian resilience. Gerschewski's (2021) pillars of stability legitimation, repression, and co-optation, are upheld by broad coalitions and institutional structures. Removing or sanctioning one official may not fracture the system; the regime can sacrifice pawns, promote others, and continue. The strategy risks addressing symptoms (abusive actors) while the underlying pathology (the structure of impunity) remains intact.

In one's analysis, the respondent has accurately identified HRW's current operational high ground, a targeted, evidence-driven, and multi-platform strategy that represents a necessary evolution from outdated models. This approach is intellectually coherent and tactically astute in the short to medium term. It leverages globalization's tools (international finance, global media) against authoritarian actors who themselves benefit from that same system. Yet, scholarly critique demands we look further. This method, while effective in applying acute pressure and generating specific case resolutions, may be insufficient for fostering the organic, broad-based democratic transitions envisioned in HRW's mission.

Furthermore, it operates within a paradigm of external pressure and disruption. The ultimate challenge, as highlighted by scholars of authoritarian resilience, is to complement

this with strategies that actively build endogenous democratic capacity strengthening the independent judiciary, the free press, and civic for a from within. Therefore, HRW's most effective method, as described, is a powerful weapon In a protracted struggle, but not a substitute for the deeper, slower, and less headline-grabbing work of cultivating the soil in which democracy can take root. The next frontier for advocacy, as suggested by the strategic gaps in this approach, lies in more seamlessly integrating this precise, external pressure with investments in the long-term, infrastructural resilience of domestic democratic forces.

4.4 The challenges limiting Human Rights Watch's effectiveness in shaping human rights and democratic outcomes in both countries.

In its operations, HRW faces challenges which affect them and this is a hurdle for them to achieve their desired goal and outcome. One of the respondents opined that,

"It's a combination, but they are deeply intertwined. The primary constraint is political: the nature of the regimes themselves. We are not dealing with governments sensitive to reputational damage. We are dealing with politically savvy, resilient authoritarian structures that see human rights advocacy as an existential threat and have developed sophisticated legal and digital tools to counter it, like Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act."

Another respondent was of the view that, 'The single greatest challenge is no longer just overt violence or arbitrary arrests—it is the systematic criminalization of civic life. Five years ago, the threat was more visible: baton sticks and tear gas at protests. Today, the threat wears a suit and carries a legal statute. The government has weaponized the law. The Patriotic Act is the pinnacle of this evolution.'

The dual insights from respondents, the first identifying a "perfect storm" of political, logistical, and international constraints, and the second detailing the specific mechanism of legalized repression, collectively paint a picture of a human rights advocacy environment that has undergone a fundamental transformation.

4.4.1 The Core Constraint: The Evolution of Authoritarian Resilience

The first respondent's identification of the nature of the regimes themselves as the primary political constraint is the essential starting point. Scholars have moved past viewing these regimes as simply brutal or corrupt; they are now analyzed as sophisticated, adaptive systems. Gerschewski's (2021) work is crucial here. Modern authoritarians like those in Harare and Kampala rely on a triad of legitimation, repression, and co-optation. The respondent's observation about "politically savvy, resilient authoritarian structures" speaks directly to this. They are not just crushing dissent; they are actively constructing alternative legitimacies (through nationalist rhetoric and selective development), wielding repression with strategic precision, and co-opting elites and traditional institutions to maintain a broad coalition of support. HRW's traditional "naming and shaming" model, built for regimes sensitive to liberal norms, is ill-equipped against systems that derive legitimacy from defiance of those very norms.

4.4.2 The Weaponization of Law: From Repression to Lawfare

The second respondent's powerful testimony about the "criminalization of civic life" and the weaponization of statutes like Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act is a textbook example of the shift scholars identify from brute force to "lawfare" or "authoritarian legalism." Ndlovu (2024) defines this as the strategic use of legal systems to codify repression, granting it a veneer of legitimacy and predictability. Mutungi's (2022) analysis of Zimbabwe's Patriotic Act details how such laws create a "juridical straitjacket," precisely as described: turning essential human rights work into a prosecutable offense. This is a devastatingly effective constraint. It moves the battle from the street, where moral outrage can be mobilized, to the courtroom, where regimes control the judges and the legal framework. It forces HRW and its partners into a defensive, legalistic posture, consuming immense resources for court battles rather than proactive documentation. This legal repression, as the respondent notes, induces a

chilling effect of self-censorship that is far more efficient for the state than policing every protest.

Likewise in Uganda, the constraints of digital surveillance risks is acute, a pioneer in digital authoritarianism with social media taxes, internet shutdowns and the Computer Misuse Act which targets digital speech. The regime's counter-strategy here is less about legislating HRW out of existence as in Zimbabwe and more about creating a digitally hostile environment that impedes research and communication.

4.4.3 The Logistical Frontier: The Digital Panopticon

The first respondent's mention of "digital surveillance risks" points to a parallel, reinforcing constraint. The weaponization of law is often complemented by the weaponization of technology. Akande (2024) documents the rise of "digital control ecosystems" in these regions, combining internet shutdowns, social media surveillance, and spyware. This creates what the scholar might term an "information blackout and surveillance paradox" for HRW: the digital tools that enable remote documentation and global communication are the same tools the state uses to monitor and disrupt that work. This elevates operational risk, threatens source security, and can paralyze investigations, making the "safe investigation" the respondent laments a near-impossibility.

4.4.4 The Geopolitical and Regional Enablers: A Fragmented Response

The respondents' critiques of the international environment, geopolitical hedging and regional paralysis, are perhaps the most debilitating constraints, as they neutralize HRW's primary theory of change. Nyanzi (2023) powerfully articulates how regimes engage in "multi-vector foreign policy," cultivating relationships with China, Russia, and others to create "authoritarian escape hatches" from Western pressure. This shatters the assumption that diplomatic and economic isolation is a viable consequence of human rights. Similarly, Mhango's (2023) analysis of the AU and Moyo's (2023) work on SADC explain the

institutional inertia. These are not neutral bodies failing to act; they are political arenas where principles of sovereignty and liberation-era solidarity actively shield member states. The respondent's term "neutralized" is apt these bodies are not just slow, they are often weaponized by the offending states to deflect and condemn external criticism.

More so, the profound scholarly implication is that overcoming these constraints requires more than tactical adjustments by HRW. It demands a fundamental re-evaluation of the theory of leverage. If the primary targets (regime elites) are legally shielded, digitally insulated, geopolitically diversified, and regionally backed, then the traditional boomerang pattern of pressure is fundamentally broken. The scholarly conversation, therefore, is increasingly shifting from how to improve "naming and shaming" to how to build alternative forms of power and accountability whether through direct support for localized resistance, the cultivation of new transnational alliances that include non-Western actors, or strategies focused on the economic and social fractures within the authoritarian coalition itself. The respondents have diagnosed the symptoms of a systemic crisis in the traditional human rights model.

4.5 Propose strategic improvements for Human Right Watch in fostering democratic transitions.

As a way to improve HRW's operations, some respondents proposed some strategies that can be useful so as to achieve their goals. One of the respondents noted that,

First, we are investing much more in digital forensics and cybersecurity to document abuses remotely and protect our partners. Second, we are shifting from a model of 'amplifying' local voices to one of co-creating strategies with them from the outset—they define the priorities and we provide the technical and international leverage."

Another respondent noted that,

"Invest directly in building the long-term institutional resilience of local organizations, not just funding specific projects. Currently, support is often transactional: funds for a specific report or campaign. I would advise HRW to create a core, flexible funding stream for local partners to strengthen our own infrastructure—cybersecurity, legal defense funds, psychological support for staff, sustainable salaries.'

The respondents' proposals for HRW's strategic improvement reveal a powerful, coherent, and urgent agenda for reform. Moving beyond critique, they collectively sketch a blueprint that shifts the organization's paradigm from external, transactional pressure to embedded, transformative partnership. Their insights, when analyzed through contemporary scholarly discourse, point toward a necessary evolution from being a watchdog of violations to becoming an architect of resilience and an architect of alternative, positive futures.

4.5.1 Beyond Amplification: Co-Creation and the Challenge to the "Transnational Advocacy Paradox"

The most resonant theme across the responses is the call to move from "amplifying" local voices to co-creating strategies and building long-term institutional resilience. This directly engages with a core scholarly critique. Tendi (2024) warns of the "transnational advocacy paradox," where the prominence of an INGO like HRW can inadvertently disempower local movements, making them appear as clients or extensions rather than primary agents. The respondents' proposals—for flexible core funding, infrastructure support (cybersecurity, legal funds, salaries), and co-owned strategy—are a direct prescription for this paradox. They advocate for what Mutyasira (2025) might term moving from "project-based extraction" to "ecosystem investment." This means treating local civil society not as a source of raw data, but as the central democratic infrastructure that must be fortified to outlast authoritarian cycles. The goal, as the local NGO director states, is to make partners "less dependent on [HRW's] megaphone over time." This represents a profound strategic humility

and a long-term commitment to locally-led change that recent scholarship identifies as the only sustainable path.

4.5.2 Tactical Innovation: Digital Forensics, Economic Leverage, and Quiet Diplomacy

The proposed tactical innovations align with scholarly diagnoses of authoritarian adaptation. Investing in digital forensics and cybersecurity is a defensive and offensive necessity in response to the "digital control ecosystems" analyzed by Akande (2024). It allows HRW to fight fire with fire, maintaining evidentiary integrity in an age of deepfakes and surveillance.

More so, the exploration of "positive leverage" (trade benefits, debt relief for reform) and a focus on "economic actors" (corruption, illicit flows) is a particularly astute strategic pivot. It addresses two key constraints identified by scholars. First, it offers a counter-narrative to the regime's claim that HRW only brings punishment, potentially creating political space for reformers within the state. Second, it targets what Nyanzi (2023) identifies as the regime's material foundation—its "illicit political economy." By following the money and exposing the corruption that sustains elite cohesion, HRW can attack the patronage networks that are central to authoritarian resilience (Gerschewski, 2021), hitting them "where it hurts most: their wallets."

Furthermore, the policy actor's advocacy for "quiet, technical, early-stage briefing" and "framing through continental instruments" is a masterclass in effective institutional diplomacy. It aligns with Mhango's (2023) and Moyo's (2023) analyses of regional body politics. By providing actionable intelligence and using African legal frameworks as the primary hook, HRW can "Africanize the pressure," making it harder to dismiss as foreign interference and providing hesitant regional diplomats with the technical and legal cover they need to act.

This integrated model represents the leading edge of scholarly thinking on adaptive advocacy. It moves HRW toward the role of a "resource node and strategic partner" within a decentralized network, rather than the central "voice" speaking for victims. However, a critical scholarly analysis must also consider the tensions within this blueprint. First, there is a potential contradiction between the "quiet diplomacy" needed for policy influence and the public, confrontational exposure of corruption often required for economic leverage. Balancing these modes will require exquisite internal coordination. Second, the shift to "ecosystem investment" demands a radical restructuring of HRW's own internal systems, its donor reporting, success metrics, and staff incentives, which are often geared toward visible, short-term outputs (major reports, media hits) rather than long-term, capacity-building outcomes. As Mutyasira (2025) implies, organizational adaptation is as crucial as strategic adaptation.

However, the respondents have provided not just a list of improvements but a coherent vision for HRW's future role. It is a vision that directly answers the "perfect storm" of constraints analyzed earlier: it builds local resilience to counter legal repression, employs technical and economic tools to pierce digital shields and geopolitical hedging, and adopts smarter diplomatic framing to overcome regional paralysis. By synthesizing these insights into an integrated "Sandwich Strategy," HRW could evolve from an organization that documents and decries democratic decay into one that is instrumental in cultivating the fertile ground from which durable democratic transitions can finally grow. The challenge is no longer merely to diagnose the abuse, but to systemically alter the conditions that permit it to endure. One is of the view that if these strategies are conducted in the right way, where there are no direct attacks on governments, then there is a chance that HRW in Uganda and Zimabwe can produce favourable results that will lead to a desired outcome.

4.6 Chapter Summary

The above chapter looked into data collection, data analysis and the discussion of the findings. The data was collected through field work interviews and use of secondary data to analyze the data. The study purposively sampled those who were available at the moment the research was carried out. The study was formulated into themes from the findings and clearly analyzes them so that they can be easily understandable. Various issues were discussed which were addressing the research objectives and research questions. Questions asked to the respondents and responses from key participants were indicated with literature supporting the responses.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the summary, conclusion, recommendations and areas for further research. Suggested recommendations will be based on the research findings that were carried out and data collected.

5.2 Summary

In chapter one, the study highlighted on the background to the study, purpose of the study, problem of the statement, objectives of the study, research questions and the significance of the study the research also presented the purpose of the study. Delimitation and limitations of the study were also highlighted. Chapter one pres.ented the dissertation outline and definition of the key terms for the study.

In chapter two the research reviewed literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to the study. The research consulted what other scholars have said about the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy, The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. The researcher used the Authoritarian resilience theory and Structural Violence concept. The researcher then briefly discussed a comparative analysis of

Zimbabwe and Uganda's democracy with other countries, Challenges Limiting HRW's Effectiveness in Zimbabwe and Uganda and Strategic Improvements for HRW in Fostering Democratic Transitions.

In chapter three contained research methodology and design. The study looked at the research design and research methodology. The research used qualitative design and it used key informant interviews and documentary research to gather data from 30 respondents, in HRW researchrs and African division staff, local ngo partners including Zimbabwe Human rights lawyers, affected communities and policy actors including AU/SADC officials or diplomats and journalists were realized to be the most dependable source of in-depth knowledge. There was the discussion of data sampling techniques, data collection methods, data collection procedures, data presentation, data analysis as well as research ethics that one has to consider when carrying out research.

Chapter four contains discussions of findings, and presentation. The chapter analyzed the effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy. The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. It is in this chapter where the methods through which HRW uses in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy. The methods being precision advocacy and Strategic Media Engagement as a Force Multiplier. There was also the discussion of challenges limiting HRW's effectiveness in both countries. These are The Evolution of Authoritarian Resilience, The Weaponization of Law: From Repression to Lawfare, The Logistical Frontier: The Digital Panopticon and A Fragmented Response. There was also the discussion proposing strategic improvements for HRW in fostering democratic transitions and these are Co-Creation and the Challenge to the "Transnational Advocacy Paradox" and Tactical Innovation: Digital Forensics, Economic Leverage, and Quiet Diplomacy.

Chapter five contains the summary of the dissertation, pointing out key highlights from the study. It also contains conclusions linking all the objectives and the literature, showing the link between the findings and literature.

5.3 Conclusions

The key findings of the study highlighted the need for improved strategies for HRW in its operations in Zimbabwe and Uganda to cement its stance and impact when advocating for the change to democratic institutions. Also, key findings highlighted that in its operations in Uganda and Zimbabwe, HRW faces a multiplicity of challenges, namely authoritarian resilience.

The methods through which HRW uses in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy

The study revealed that HRW uses similar methods in its efforts for Zimbabwe and Uganda to shift to democracy. These methods include high specific evidence based targeting and these includes a shift from name shaming to precision advocacy. In this strategy, there is the shift from destructing the state's reputation but analysing the personal lives of the elites's lifestyle and wealth. Another method is partnering with international media giants such as BBC and this creates a boomerang effect that pressures from outside. It is worth noting that international coverage raises diplomatic cost for the regime, thus an effective method.

This aligns with what scholars opine, as Mutungi (2025) states that the state's project of "legislated silence," creating cracks in the wall of information control. Thus, strategic media engagement as a force multiplier. This aligns with Nabukeera's (2023) analysis of "transnational resonance campaigning." She contends that effective advocacy must create a "boomerang effect" that simultaneously pressures from outside and legitimizes dissent from within.

The challenges limiting Human Rights Watch's effectiveness in shaping human rights and democratic outcomes in both countries

The study reveals different challenges that HRW faces in its operations in Uganda and Zimbabwe. These incluce national policies including the Zimbabwean Patriotic Act and Uganda's Computer Misuse Act which targets digital speech. Another challenges is that these institutions have shifted to autocracy where it doesn't tolerate negativity by the media shaming the state. Geo political and regional enablers are also another challenge being faced as these states are involved in multi-vector foreign policy, cultivating with China and Russia only to mention a few as a way to escape hatches from western pressure.

More so, other scholars also commented on this. Nyanzi (2023) powerfully articulates how regimes engage in "multi-vector foreign policy," cultivating relationships with China, Russia, and others to create "authoritarian escape hatches" from Western pressure. This shatters the assumption that diplomatic and economic isolation is a viable consequence of human rights. Similarly, Mhango's (2023) analysis of the AU and Moyo's (2023) work on SADC explain the institutional inertia. These are not neutral bodies failing to act; they are political arenas where principles of sovereignty and liberation-era solidarity actively shield member states. The respondent's term "neutralized" is apt these bodies are not just slow, they are often weaponized by the offending states to deflect and condemn external criticism

Propose strategic improvements for Human Right Watch in fostering democratic transitions.

There are proposals for HRW's strategic improvement reveal a powerful, coherent, and urgent agenda for reform. Moving beyond critique, they collectively sketch a blueprint that shifts the organization's paradigm from external, transactional pressure to embedded, transformative partnership. Their insights, when analyzed through contemporary scholarly

discourse, point toward a necessary evolution from being a watchdog of violations to becoming an architect of resilience and an architect of alternative, positive futures. Other strategic improvements include tactical innovations like quiet diplomacy.

Quiet, technical, early-stage briefing and framing through continental instruments is a masterclass in effective institutional diplomacy. It aligns with Mhango's (2023) and Moyo's (2023) analyses of regional body politics. By providing actionable intelligence and using African legal frameworks as the primary hook, HRW can "Africanize the pressure," making it harder to dismiss as foreign interference and providing hesitant regional diplomats with the technical and legal cover they need to act.

5.4 Recommendations

Towards various problems which were identified in this study, the following are stakeholders who can benefit from the topic.

Human Rights Watch Researchers: The researcher recommends that it is important for Human Rights Watch to employ tactics that do not tannish the image of states but complement its efforts to shift to democracy so as not to be treated harshly or being viewed as anti-government.

Affected communities: the researcher recommends that affected communities exercise their rights to demonstrate but in peaceful ways so as not to provoke states to act in harsh and impose punitive measures on them.

Policy actors: The researcher recommends that policy actors amend policies that restrict human rights movements to act putting in place policies that are friendly to civil society such that they can freely operate without fear of harm or persecution.

Journalists: The researcher recommends that journalists work hand in hand with affected communities for first hand information concerning advocates for democracy. At the same time journalists must avoid hyperbolism so as to get attention of their target audience but to make people aware of what is really transpiring.

5.5 Areas for Further Research

The purpose of the study was to compare The effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy. The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. Further research is required to understand the impact of limiting INGO's influence in states' democratic policies.

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Annexures: Participants consent form

My name is Linnah Botha , a final year student at Bindura University of Science Education. I am carrying out research on the topic: The effectiveness of International Human Rights Movements in the shift to democracy. The case of Human Rights Watch in Zimbabwe and Uganda. You are kindly being asked to read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to the requirements of the research. The information to be collected is solely for academic purposes and the information that is going to be gathered will be kept private and confidential.

I kindly ask for your answers that will provide consistent and valid responses to my research. The information and data to be provided is going to be kept private and confidential, and only for the purpose of the study. The researcher assures privacy and confidentiality on the research information acquired and the research will not include any personal information that identifies the participant. The records will be accessed and be limited to the researcher only.

Key-Informant Interview guide
Human rights researchers

1. Could you take me through the process of planning and executing a research and advocacy campaign on an issue like the 2023 Zimbabwean elections or the implementation of the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda? What were the key strategic considerations?
2. From experience, what specific methods or tactics have proven most and least effective in eliciting a response from the governments of Zimbabwe and Uganda?
3. How does HRW navigate the tension between maintaining access for on the ground research and publishing critical reports that may lead to expulsion or visa denials for staff?
4. What do you consider as primary constraints on HRW's effectiveness in these countries and are they primarily political, logistical or related to the international environment?
5. How would you assess the effectiveness of leveraging regional bodies like the AU and SADC compared to international bodies like the UN or the ICC, what explains the differential outcomes?
6. Looking forward, what strategic adaptations or new methods is HRW considering to enhance its impact on fostering democratic transitions in the face of increasingly sophisticated authoritarian tactics?

For Local NGOs

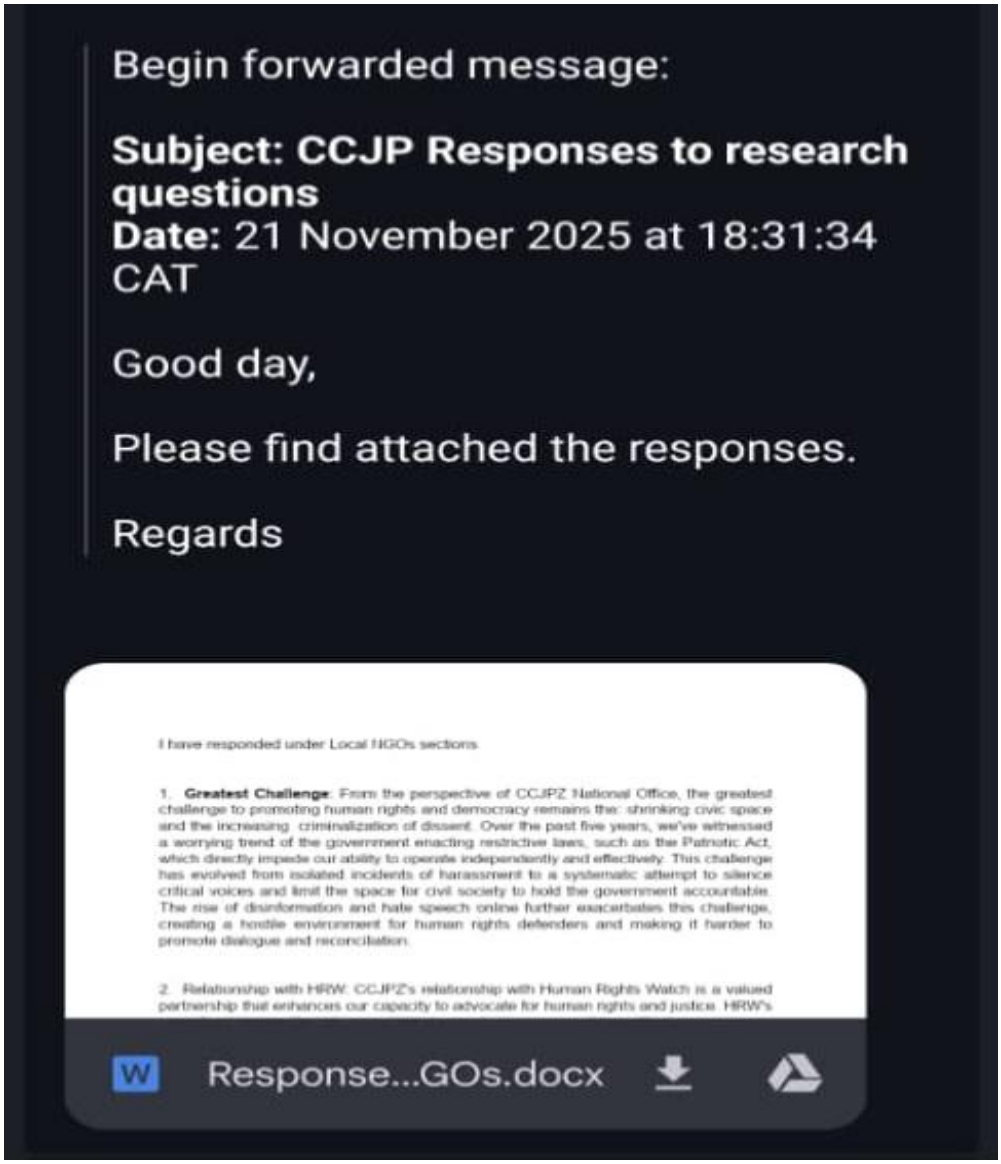
1. From a vantage point, what is the single greatest challenge to promoting human rights and democracy and how has this challenge evolved in the last five years?
2. How would you characterize your organization's relationship with HRW, and in what ways is the collaboration most beneficial?
3. How do government and state actors perceive HRW and does HRW's involvement make your work easier?
4. Do you believe HRW's advocacy strategies are well calibrated to the local political and social dynamics?
5. What is often missing from the international narrative about the human rights situation in your country that you believe is crucial for outsiders to understand?
6. If you could advise HRW to change one aspect of its approach or to prioritize one new strategy, what would it be and why?

For affected communities

1. Can you describe your experience and how you became aware that international organizations like HRW were documenting your situation?
2. What, if any, impact did HRW's involvement have on your specific case or on your community's situation, and did the threats stop and the officials react?
3. In your view, who holds the most power to improve the human rights situation in your community?
4. How do you and people in your community feel when you hear that an international organization has reported on the problems you are facing?
5. What kind of support or action from international groups do you believe would be most useful for people in your situation right now?
6. Are you aware of any risks or negative consequences that have arisen in your community as a result of international attention from groups like HRW?

For Policy Actors

1. In your role, how do you typically receive and utilize information from human rights organizations like HRW and does it factor into your decision making or reporting processes?
2. From an institutional perspective, what are the main political or procedural constrains that limit a more robust response from your organization to the human rights situations in Zimbabwe and Uganda despite detailed reporting from HRW and others?
3. How would you assess the credibility and persuasiveness of HRW's reporting compared to other sources of information you receive and what makes their data more or less influential?
4. In your experience, what type of advocacy from HRW is most likely to lead to concrete action from diplomatic circles or regional bodies?
5. How do the government of Zimbabwe and Uganda typically respond to or counter HRW's allegations in diplomatic or regional forums and how effective are these counter-strategies?
6. In your view, what could HRW do differently to be more effective in influencing policy and fostering tangible democratic reforms in these specific contexts?


Begin forwarded message:
Subject: CCJP Responses to research questions
Date: 21 November 2025 at 18:31:34 CAT
Good day,
Please find attached the responses.
Regards
I have responded under Local NGOs sections
1. Greatest Challenge: From the perspective of CCJPZ National Office, the greatest challenge to promoting human rights and democracy remains the: shrinking civic space and the increasing criminalization of dissent. Over the past five years, we've witnessed a worrying trend of the government enacting restrictive laws, such as the Patriotic Act, which directly impede our ability to operate independently and effectively. This challenge has evolved from isolated incidents of harassment to a systematic attempt to silence critical voices and limit the space for civil society to hold the government accountable. The rise of disinformation and hate speech online further exacerbates this challenge, creating a hostile environment for human rights defenders and making it harder to promote dialogue and reconciliation.
2. Relationship with HRW: CCJPZ's relationship with Human Rights Watch is a valued partnership that enhances our capacity to advocate for human rights and justice. HRW's
Response...GOs.docx