



RETHINKING THE DEATH PENALTY IN ZIMBABWE: THE HIDDEN TRAUMA OF EXECUTIONERS AND FAMILIES OF THE CONDEMNED

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ABSTRACT: *The global discourse on the death penalty is polarized, with proponents and opponents presenting deeply entrenched arguments. In Zimbabwe, no executions have occurred since 2005, reportedly because of the unavailability of the executioner. On 31 December, 2024, Mnangagwa signed a bill into law abolishing the death penalty for all crimes and Zimbabwe joined other abolitionist states. This study contributes a unique perspective to anti-capital punishment debates, focusing on the psychological and emotional toll on executioners, their teams, and families of the condemned. Drawing on Amnesty International data and other key sources, this research highlights severe trauma and mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), frequently suffered by execution teams, due to exposure to inhumane and brutal execution practices. Previous literature overlooks these impacts, creating an incomplete narrative. This study argues for other African countries to abolish the death penalty on ethical and humanitarian grounds, urging the governments to consider these hidden impacts in their reviews of capital punishment. Moreso, capital punishment does not seem to align well with African cultural values and beliefs about murder and appropriate punishment.*

KEYWORDS: Death penalty, execution, executioner, execution team, condemned inmates, death row, and botched executions.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The debate over the death penalty remains one of the most polarising topics in global discourse. Proponents and opponents continue to advance arguments for and against its practice, each side firmly grounded in moral, legal and pragmatic reasoning. According to Amnesty International (2022), a total of 579 executions were recorded in 2021, across 18 countries. The majority occurred in China, Iran, Egypt, South Arabia and Syria, with China remaining the world's leading executioner. These statistics underscore the continued use of the death penalty as a legal punishment in some jurisdictions.

While the authors of this document do not endorse the death penalty or condone the violence perpetrated by murderers against their victims, this study seeks to advance a novel perspective in the discourse against capital punishment. The aim is to highlight overlooked dimensions of this contentious practice, particularly its hidden psychosocial and emotional impacts on executioners and the families of the condemned inmates.

According to the World Coalition Against Death Penalty (2025), Mnangagwa signed the Death Penalty Abolition Bill into law on 31 December, 2024. The Death Penalty Abolition Act [Chapter 9:26] abolishes the death penalty for all crimes and allows for resentencing of all prisoners on death row. Chapter 9:26 Section 2 (a) of the Act states that no court shall impose a sentence of death upon a person for any offence, whenever committed, but instead shall impose whatever other competent sentence is appropriate in the circumstances of the case.

Following the abolition of the death penalty in Zimbabwe, the legal system no longer prescribes capital punishment for crimes, including murders committed under aggravating circumstances, as previously outlined in Section 48(2) of the 2013 Constitution. Despite its legal existence, Zimbabwe had not carried out an execution since July 2005, reportedly due to the unavailability of the hangman (Amnesty International, 2015). By 2015, more than 100 countries had abolished the death penalty, including 17 in sub-Saharan Africa, such as South Africa, Mozambique and Namibia. In the years leading up to its abolition, the Zimbabwean government had been reviewing its stance, with growing indications of a shift towards ending capital punishment.

The predominant arguments against the death penalty have largely centered on its impact on condemned inmates. Scholars and organizations such as Sticher (2014), Robert (2017), Amnesty International (2022), and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024) have consistently highlighted its cruelty, inhumanity, and irreversible nature. However, this study aims to contribute new insights by examining the often-overlooked psychological trauma endured by those directly involved in the execution process—the executioners and their teams, and the families of the condemned prisoners.

Research reveals that executioners are subjected to horrific, inhumane, and degrading conditions during their duties, often leading to severe psychological consequences. Doshi, Lavleshkumar, and Bastia (2014) describe the traumatic experience of botched executions, such as electrocutions that burn prisoners alive, producing the unbearable smell of burning flesh. Such incidents can cause significant emotional distress to executioners and their teams. Similarly, Amnesty International (2007) observes that participation in executions frequently brutalizes those involved, exposing them to mental anguish and trauma. Botched executions may leave executioners and guards haunted by graphic memories, resulting in symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks and hallucinations.



This study also seeks to address the psychological and emotional toll of executions on the families of the condemned. By critically examining the far-reaching consequences of the death penalty on executioners and the families of executed inmates, the research underscores the need for a broader and more humane critique of capital punishment. The findings aim to contribute to the growing call for the abolition of the death penalty, arguing that its detrimental effects extend beyond the condemned to harm all those implicated in its administration.

Even if the death penalty is abolished in Zimbabwe, it remains critical to reflect on its past implications, particularly for executioners and the families of those executed. Understanding their trauma can contribute to broader discussions on justice reforms. The abolition of the death penalty does not erase the experiences of executioners and affected families. From a psychological and legal standpoint, their trauma remains a critical area of study, helping inform post-abolition policies, such as support systems for those impacted by past executions.

Statement of the Problem

Opponents of the death penalty have advanced numerous arguments against its use. However, these debates predominantly focus on the effects and impacts of executions on the condemned inmates, emphasising the violation of their human rights and the degrading, inhumane nature of such punishments. The experiences and trauma faced by executioners and their teams are rarely, if ever, examined. Similarly, the emotional and psychological toll on the families and close associates of the condemned prisoners remains largely unexplored, leaving a significant gap in the discourse.

Without addressing these overlooked aspects, the arguments against the death penalty remain incomplete. A more holistic assessment of the impact of executions—encompassing not only the condemned inmates but also their family members, as well as the prison and justice officials who facilitate these executions—could strengthen the case against the death penalty. Such comprehensive findings might also persuade policymakers to remove the death penalty from their countries' penal statutes.

Research Objectives

The study aims:

- to demonstrate that the death penalty and executions negatively affect prison officials, including executioners and their teams
- to examine the negative effects of executions on the family members and friends of condemned inmates
- to explore the psychological and emotional effects of executions on condemned inmates.



Justification of the Study

This study is justified on both ethical and policy grounds. While the abolition of the death penalty has gained momentum globally, discussions often neglect the unseen and hidden impacts on those involved in the process, particularly executioners and the families of the condemned. By shedding light on the psychological, emotional, and social consequences experienced by these groups, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the death penalty's ripple effects.

The findings will provide critical insights to policymakers, human rights advocates, and justice officials, enabling them to make more informed decisions regarding the abolition of the death penalty. Additionally, this research will add to the limited academic discourse on the trauma faced by executioners and the families of condemned prisoners, addressing an often-ignored dimension of capital punishment.

Limitations of the Study

Zimbabwe last carried out executions in 2005, and since then, the country did not have an executioner (hangman). This historical gap made it challenging to obtain primary data on executions in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, executions are conducted in strict secrecy, and it was not possible to interview prison guards who might have participated in the last execution. Many of these officials are likely retired, given that Zimbabwean prison guards typically retire at the age of 50 or after 20 years of service, whichever comes first.

Additionally, the lack of funding for this study constrained the researchers from conducting fieldwork in other African countries that continue to carry out executions. Despite these limitations, desk research was conducted at minimal cost, and the study provides valuable insights into the broader impacts of the death penalty. The findings may serve as a foundation for further research into the hidden trauma of executions and contribute to global debates on the abolition of capital punishment.

LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Conceptualising the Death Penalty/Execution Phenomenon

This study adopts a humanistic approach, emphasising the importance of prisoner rehabilitation and framing the death penalty as a violation of the fundamental human rights—particularly the right to life, as enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948). The death penalty also contravenes Article No 5, which prohibits torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Executions, especially botched ones, often cause severe pain to the condemned, amounting to torture and inhuman treatment.

Moreover, the death penalty inflicts emotional and psychological harm not only on the condemned but also on the executioners and prison staff tasked with carrying out these state-sanctioned killings. The act of killing a fellow human being can have long emotional consequences, causing trauma to the execution team. Families of the executed prisoners are not spared; they often experience profound grief, stigmatization and social isolation.



This study challenges the belief that the death penalty serves as a more effective deterrent than other long-term sentences, including life imprisonment. Research by Amnesty International has consistently failed to produce convincing evidence supporting this claim. Amnesty International also highlights that the death penalty disproportionately targets the poor, marginalised and powerless. In some cases, it is used as a tool for political repression, silencing dissent and eliminating perceived threats to authority.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024) concurs, noting that death penalty cases are often marred by systematic biases. Marginalised groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, are disproportionately affected due to limited access to quality legal representation. Errors in the justice system further exacerbate this issue, leading to wrongful executions. Tragically, once carried out, these mistakes are irreversible, and no form of compensation can rectify the loss of innocent lives.

The death penalty in Zimbabwe reflected both legal and cultural contradictions. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), exempted women, individuals under 21 years at the time of the offense, and men aged 70 years and above from capital punishment. This gender-specific exemption underscored the discriminatory nature of the death penalty. Moreover, Zimbabwean cultural values have traditionally emphasised restorative justice-offering compensation to victims' families over retributive measures like execution. The practice of capital punishment in Zimbabwe traces its roots to the colonial era, contradicting the restorative justice principles inherent in Shona and Ndebele traditions.

Abolishing the death penalty also aligns with the constitutional mandate of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service's (ZPCS), which prioritises rehabilitation and integration of offenders. Section 227 of the Constitution tasks ZPCS with protecting society, rehabilitating prisoners, and ensuring their successful reintegration—responsibilities that inherently exclude execution. This further highlights the fundamental incompatibility of the death penalty with Zimbabwe's evolving justice system.

Prisoners' Execution Methods

This assertion examines contemporary execution methods, drawing heavily from the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) (n.d). Each method—hanging, firing squad, electrocution, and lethal injection—is analysed to reveal its physical and psychological effects on both the condemned and those tasked with carrying out these executions.

Death by Hanging

Historically, hanging was an authorised method of execution in several U.S. states, including Delaware and Washington, before they abolished the death penalty in 2016 and 2018, respectively (DPIC, n.d). In Zimbabwe, hanging remained the sole method of execution until the abolition of the death penalty in December 2024. The process involved weighing the prisoner and using a sandbag to rehearse the drop, ensuring the rope length was correctly calculated. However, miscalculations could result in decapitation or prolonged strangulation, causing immense suffering to the condemned prisoner.

Beyond the condemned, the execution process also took a heavy toll on the execution team, who had to prepare the rope, restrain the prisoner, and witness the often-gruesome consequences. Historical accounts, such as the botched hanging of Williams in 1906, highlight



the psychological and emotional burden on executioners, particularly when procedures went wrong (Bessler, 2004).

Firing Squad

In some U.S. states, such as Utah and South Carolina, an authorised firing squad has been used as an alternative method of execution. The prisoner is restrained, hooded and targeted by executioners aiming rifles at the heart. If the shots fail to be immediately fatal, the prisoner may suffer a slow and painful death due to excessive bleeding. The executioners, witnessing the gruesome aftermath, including the destruction of internal organs, may also experience lasting psychological trauma.

Electrocution

Execution by electric chair involves strapping the prisoner to a chair and administering high-voltage electric currents DPIC (n.d). The process often results in severe physical trauma, including swelling, burns and, in some cases, the body catches fire. Witnesses, including the execution team, are exposed to the distressing sights, sounds and smells of burning flesh, which can be deeply traumatic (Doshi, Lavleshkumar & Bastia, 2014).

Lethal Injection

First introduced in the U.S. in 1982, lethal injection involves administering a combination of drugs to induce paralysis and ultimately cause death. While often considered a humane method, botched executions can lead to severe pain and prolonged suffering (Doshi, Lavleshkumar & Bastia, 2014). Such failures not only inflict agony on the condemned but also expose executioners, medical personnel, and witnesses to significant emotional distress, underscoring the psychological burden of capital punishment (DPIC, n.d).

Legal Instruments Protecting Prisoners

Legal protections for prisoners are established through both domestic and international instruments.

Domestic Instruments

(a) The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013

Right to Life

Section 48(1) of the Constitution affirms that every person has the right to life. However, subsection 2 permits the death penalty for individuals convicted of murder committed under aggravating circumstances. Specifically, Section 48(2)(c) prohibits imposing the death penalty on anyone who was under the age of 21 at the time of the offense or individuals above the age of 70. Additionally, subsection 2(d) explicitly forbids the imposition of the death penalty on women.



Right to Human Dignity

Section 51 asserts that every person possesses inherent dignity in both their private and public lives, and this dignity must be respected and protected.

Freedom from Torture or Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Section 53 guarantees that no person shall be subjected to physical or psychological torture, nor to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

Section 56(1) establishes that all persons are equal before the law and have the right to equal protection and benefit of the law. Subsection 56(3) further states that every person has the right to be free from unfair discrimination based on various grounds, including nationality, race, color, tribe, place of birth, ethnic or social origin, language, class, religious belief, political affiliation, opinion, custom, culture, sex, gender, marital status, age, pregnancy, disability, economic or social status, or birth status.

However, the death penalty provisions in the Constitution appear discriminatory based on age and gender. Specifically, the Constitution prohibits the execution of women and men above the age of 70. Additionally, men under the age of 21 at the time the crime was committed are exempt from the death penalty. As of December 2024, Zimbabwe abolished the death penalty, rendering the provision absolute.

International Instruments

International human rights instruments establish fundamental protection for individuals, including prisoners.

(a) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the UDHR sets out fundamental human rights to be universally protected. Key provisions include:

- *Article 3*: 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of a person.'
- *Article 5*: 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.'

These articles underscore the inherent rights to life and protection from inhuman treatment, forming a basis for arguments against the death penalty.

(b) Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)

The CAT, adopted in 1984, aims to prevent torture and other acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 1 defines torture as:

"Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as ... punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed...."



This definition highlights the international community's commitment to prohibiting acts that inflict severe pain and suffering, reinforcing the stance against practices like the death penalty.

Collectively, these international instruments emphasise the protection of individuals from torture and uphold the right to life, challenging the legitimacy of the death penalty and advocating for the humane treatment of all individuals, including prisoners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Ethical Considerations

Adherence to ethical standards is paramount in research, guiding every phase of the process. As emphasised by Booth, Colomb, and Williams, as cited in Davis and Lachlan (2017), ethical researchers must uphold integrity from inception to conclusion.

In alignment with these principles, this study ensured the accurate reporting of all findings, consciously avoiding data fabrication. Proper attribution was meticulously practised upholding academic integrity and minimizing plagiarism risks, reflecting the nature of desk research that extensively relies on existing scholarly contributions. Moreover, the research report was crafted with clarity and accessibility in mind, facilitating comprehension and appreciation of the study's findings by readers and fellow scholars.

Research Methods

This study utilised qualitative desk research, also known as secondary research, which involves analysing data initially collected by others for purposes distinct from the current study (Owa, n.d). Unlike primary research that gathers data directly from participants, secondary research draws upon pre-existing data sources. For this study, data were sourced from online encyclopaedias, academic journals, government reports, and publications from non-governmental organisations.

A narrative analysis method was employed, focusing on examining stories and narratives within texts and testimonials. This approach enables researchers to explore how individuals interpret their experiences, express their emotions, construct identities, and cope with challenges (Owa, n.d). Given the study's focus on the hidden trauma experienced by executioners and the families of the condemned prisoners, narrative analysis was particularly pertinent.

Desk research was chosen due to its cost-effectiveness, efficiency and accessibility, allowing researchers to gain insights without extensive primary data collection. This approach was especially relevant in Zimbabwe, where no executions have occurred since 2005 due to the unavailability of an executioner, making direct engagement with relevant participants, such as a hangman or prison officials involved in executions, unfeasible.

Despite its advantages, desk research has inherent limitations, including the potential biases and the risk of using incomplete, outdated or irrelevant data due to the perspectives or agendas of original sources. To mitigate these weaknesses and enhance the validity of the findings, the researchers employed triangulation by consulting multiple data sources. This approach helped



validate and corroborate the findings, ensuring a more robust and comprehensive analysis of the research problem.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Prison Guards and Prisoners' Executions

Prison officers working in maximum-security facilities housing death row inmates face significant occupational hazards, including potential attacks from these prisoners. In Zimbabwe, such inmates, before the repeal of the death penalty, were confined at Chikurubi Maximum and Harare Central Prisons. Death row inmates, having received the maximum penalty, often lacked motivation to adhere to institutional rules. Penal Reform International (2015) notes that these prisoners on death row are frequently considered among the most dangerous and are placed under the highest security conditions.

Prolonged incarceration and the psychological burden of impending execution can lead to mental health deterioration among death row inmates. The use of solitary confinement, as observed in countries like Jordan and Japan, can exacerbate these issues, rendering inmates more hazardous to prison staff (Death Penalty Worldwide Database as cited in Penal Reform International (2015). Penal Reform International (2018) emphasises that prison guards working in such environments must remain constantly vigilant, viewing their workplace as inherently dangerous.

In Zimbabwe, death row inmates were not informed of their execution date, leading to prolonged periods of uncertainty. Amnesty International (2021) reports that in Japan, executions are conducted in secret, with inmates informed only on the day of their execution. Similarly, in both the United States and Japan, some prisoners have been executed over 15 years after their sentencing, a practice condemned by the European Union as inhumane (The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). While delays in executions allow for appeals, the prolonged wait leads to intense mental anguish for inmates. In Zimbabwe, condemned inmates could wait for years, living in perpetual fear. Some reportedly mistake prison guards for the executioner, even when guards are merely bringing food or escorting them for daily activities. Such conditions violate Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which prohibits torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The psychological impact extends beyond inmates to the prison staff involved in executions. Executioners and guards often experience job-related trauma, with some developing empathy towards inmates due to prolonged interactions. Jerry Givens, who administered the death penalty in Virginia, noted that correctional officers may spend more time with death-row prisoners than with their own families, leading to complex emotional bonds. This emotional toll underscores the hidden casualties of the death penalty system, affecting not only the condemned but also those tasked with carrying out the executions.

The abolition of the death penalty in Zimbabwe in December 2024 marked a significant shift in the country's criminal justice system. President Emmerson Mnangagwa, himself a former victim of the death penalty, played a central role in this historic decision. This legislative change has led to the resentencing of 48 inmates previously condemned to death, signaling an end to a system that saw 105 executions since independence, with the last taking place in 2005 (sundaymail.co.zw, 2025). This move aligns Zimbabwe with the growing global trend towards



the abolition of capital punishment, reflecting a commitment to upholding human rights and addressing the psychological well-being of both inmates and prison staff.

Emotional Impact on Prison Guards

Prison guards who interact daily with death row inmates often develop emotional connections, especially during prolonged incarcerations. These interactions occur during routine activities such as delivering meals, escorting inmates to showers, or accompanying them to court appearances. Jerry Givens, who served as an executioner in Virginia for 25 years, noted that correctional officers might spend more time with death row inmates than with their own families, leading to the development of empathy towards these prisoners (Penal Reform International, 2015). To mitigate potential emotional bonds, some correctional systems assign separate teams to conduct the actual executions (Penal Reform International, 2015).

The act of escorting condemned inmates to the execution chamber can be particularly distressing for prison guards. An inmate who resists or hesitates to move may need to be physically restrained and led to the execution site, adding to the guards' emotional burden. Regardless of any resistance or pleas for mercy, executions proceed unless intervened by higher authorities, such as a presidential pardon. This process underscores the psychological complexities surrounding the death penalty and its enforcement.

Some condemned prisoners maintain their innocence or plead for mercy until their final moments. Others may exhibit extreme distress, such as crying or losing control of bodily functions before execution. Bessler (2004) recounts the case of Williams, a prisoner who remained defiant on the gallows, declaring his innocence. Botched executions can result in violent physical reactions, further traumatising witnesses and guards (DPIC, n.d). These distressing experiences can haunt prison staff for years, with some developing PTSD. For instance, a 2022 investigation found that correctional officers involved in executions experienced symptoms akin to those of war veterans, including insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, personality changes, and substance abuse. Similarly, a study in Washington State revealed that nearly 19% of prison employees reported PTSD symptoms comparable to those of veterans who served in conflict zones like Iraq and Afghanistan (Herzog, cited in Penal Reform International, 2015).

These findings highlight the profound emotional and psychological toll that executions impose on correctional staff, emphasising the need for comprehensive support systems to address their mental health challenges.

The Hidden Burden on Executioners

Executioners and other personnel directly involved in carrying out death sentences bear the emotional and psychological burden of their roles. Although the death penalty is sanctioned by the state, it is real individuals who carry out the act of killing. This responsibility leaves them with "blood on their hands" and enduring memories of the events. A culture of secrecy surrounds executions, preventing those involved from seeking emotional support for fear of societal judgment or victimization. This lack of support often leads to untreated stress, depression, and other mental health issues.

One of the authors, during his tenure as a prison officer, encountered an emotionally unstable guard at Chikurubi Maximum Prison, reportedly involved in some past executions. His



condition underscored the profound impact of this duty on mental health. Guards and executioners, as innocent participants in state-sanctioned killings, are left to grapple with their actions, often without adequate psychological support or counseling.

The emotional burden on staff before and after executions can be overwhelming. Studies have explored the emotionally damaging effects experienced by correctional officers who establish connections with prisoners. Research indicates that the aftereffects can be devastating and lead to symptoms of PTSD among staff involved in executions.

Furthermore, a 2022 NPR investigation found that corrections officers faced symptoms such as insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, personality changes, and substance abuse—all hallmarks or comorbidities of PTSD. Of the 16 people interviewed who participated in executions, none supported the death penalty in its aftermath. These findings highlight the severe mental and emotional toll on those involved in executions and underscore the need for comprehensive support systems for executioners and prison staff.

The Executioner and Prisoners' Executions

An executioner is an official tasked with carrying out the death penalty by executing condemned inmates within the confines of the prison system. In Zimbabwe, the prescribed method of execution was left hanging, as stipulated in Article 339(2) of the *Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act (1929)*, cited by Sato (2018). Execution by hanging involves suspending the condemned prisoner by the neck until death occurs, as required by law.

In contrast to some countries where prison staff or volunteers are tasked with carrying out executions, Zimbabwe employed a professional executioner, commonly referred to as a hangman, as an official employee of the ZPCS. Their sole duty was to execute condemned prisoners. At the time of abolishment of the death penalty, Zimbabwe had no active hangman, highlighting a hiatus in the death penalty process.

Globally, literature reveals that the role of an executioner or those involved in carrying out executions is often harrowing. In many jurisdictions, prison staff, including guards or medical personnel, may be ordered to conduct executions, especially in the absence of willing volunteers. This often leads to significant psychological trauma. Penal Reform International (2018) highlights that such staff may require psychological support due to the emotional toll of working on death row. For example, guards ordered to participate in executions may experience deep mental anguish, compounded by societal and internal conflicts about their actions.

Executioners must suppress emotions inherent to all human beings, adopting an almost mechanical detachment to carry out their grim duties. This suppression, however, comes at a cost. Literature documents show that executioners often suffer from mental health issues, including hallucinations, flashbacks, and prolonged guilt. Kiangiosekazi Wa-Nyoka, in an interview with a Tanzanian prison officer (Penal Reform International, 2015), revealed that the officer suffered sleepless nights for a week after participating in an execution, before regaining emotional stability. Similarly, Chiappetta and Johnson (2021) argue that execution team members frequently struggle to rationalise their role, leading to internal conflict and heightened stress. These psychological burdens underscore the hidden trauma endured by those involved in the administration of the death penalty.



This raises an ethical dilemma: if some people lack the courage to kill an animal for consumption, how can society expect individuals to execute defenseless human beings? The executioner's role forces one to confront the fragility of human conscience, often leaving profound and long-lasting scars on those involved.

Botched Executions and Their Consequences

Botched executions not only intensify the physical and psychological suffering of the condemned but also profoundly affect the execution team. When an execution fails to proceed as planned, the distress experienced by the prisoner can be severe, infringing upon their fundamental human rights. Such incidents also impose significant emotional and psychological burdens on the personnel involved. For instance, during Clayton Lockett's botched execution in Oklahoma in 2014, the execution team made multiple unsuccessful attempts to sedate him, resulting in a prolonged and distressing procedure. This event exemplifies the potential for severe suffering inherent in lethal injection executions.

The psychological impact on executioners and prison staff involved in such procedures can be profound. They may experience symptoms akin to PTSD, including insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, and depression. A 2022 NPR investigation found that corrections officers involved in executions reported such symptoms, highlighting the emotional toll of their participation. These experiences underscore the need for comprehensive support systems and mental health resources for individuals tasked with carrying out capital punishment.

Execution by Lethal Injection

Reports of botched executions by lethal injections highlight the challenges stemming from inadequate training and expertise among executioners. Typically, these individuals are not trained in human anatomy or the proper administration of medicines and injections. Doshi, Lavleshkumar, and Bastia (2014) emphasise that medical ethics prohibit doctors from participating in executions, leaving the responsibility to untrained execution team members, often prison guards. As a result, errors can occur, such as difficulty locating a vein, which can delay the procedure for hours, while the condemned prisoner remains strapped in place awaiting execution.

Arie (2011) corroborates this observation, reporting that non-medical execution staff have been responsible for botched procedures involving issues such as excessive drug doses, adverse reactions, or prolonged suffering. For instance, in 2006, the execution of Joseph Clark in California was reportedly delayed by 90 minutes because the execution team struggled to find a suitable vein for the lethal chemicals. During the ordeal, Clark reportedly called out twice that the procedure was failing, experiencing intense pain before witnesses were blocked from viewing the execution chamber. Eventually, a vein was located, and the execution was completed (Provance & Hall, cited in Dieter, 2008).

Similar instances have been documented. In 1988, during the execution of Raymond Landry in Texas, the syringe dislodged, causing lethal drugs to spray across the execution chamber, horrifying witnesses. The syringe had to be reinserted, prolonging the execution to 40 minutes (DPIC, 2024). In the same year, the execution of Stephen Peter Morin in Texas revealed further flaws in the process. Execution technicians failed to locate a vein and resorted to probing both arms and legs, requiring 45 minutes to find a viable vein.



These examples underscore the frustration and emotional toll experienced by executioners and their teams, who must persist with a trial-and-error approach until the condemned prisoner succumbs. For the prisoner, repeated piercing and prolonged waiting constitute both physical and emotional torment, practices that contravene the UDHR of 1948, which explicitly prohibits torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Execution by Electrocutation

Execution by electrocution is fraught with reports of botched procedures that cause significant physical suffering for the condemned and emotional trauma for the executioners. Doshi, Lavleshkumar, and Bastia (2014) note that improper administration of electrocution can result in conscious prisoners being burned alive, producing the smell of cooking flesh and bright red, overheated skin. Similarly, DPIC, (2024) highlights a case from Georgia in 1984 where Alpha Otis Stephen endured eight minutes of agony after the initial jolt of electricity failed to kill him. Physicians eventually recommended a second jolt, which proved fatal.

Another harrowing account is provided by DPIC (2024), detailing the 1982 electrocution of Frank J. Coppola in Virginia. Two 55-second jolts were required to execute him. During the second jolt, burning flesh produced an overpowering odor, and flames erupted from Coppola's head and leg. Smoke filled the execution chamber, creating a haze that further compounded the horror for witnesses.

In cases where the initial jolt fails, the executioner and their team must administer subsequent shocks until the prisoner dies. Medical personnel continually assess the prisoner's condition, requesting additional electrical power as necessary. The process can involve graphic and distressing occurrences, such as the prisoner defecating, urinating, or vomiting blood, all of which are witnessed by the execution team (DPIC, n.d.).

The physical and psychological toll of botched electrocutions is immense. Prisoners experience unbearable pain, often amounting to torture. This violates the UN (2005:2) prohibition against torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, which states unequivocally, "No one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. There are no exceptions." Burning prisoners alive until their bodies catch fire epitomizes such inhumane treatment, contravening the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Executioners and their teams are not immune to the trauma. Witnessing prolonged suffering, wails of agony, and the physical destruction of another human being can leave them psychologically scared, increasing their risk of developing PTSD. The death penalty, especially in cases of botched executions, proves to be a profoundly traumatic and degrading experience for both the condemned and the executioners.

Execution by Hanging

Hanging, often perceived as a more straightforward method of execution, is also susceptible to severe botching, resulting in slow, agonizing deaths. Bessler (2004) recounts the botched hanging of Williams in 1906, carried out by Sheriff Miesen. The hangman miscalculated the rope length, causing Williams to fall to the floor instead of being suspended. The execution team hastily seized the rope and forcibly pulled it upward, holding Williams aloft for fourteen and a half minutes until he died from strangulation.



According to DPIC (2024), a rope that is too short causes strangulation rather than a quick fracture-dislocation of the neck. Strangulation results in a slow, painful death. The prisoner's face may become engorged, their eyes may protrude, and their body may involuntarily defecate, adding to the grotesque nature of the event.

Such incidents inflict severe emotional and psychological strain on the executioner and accompanying guards, leading to burnout, stress, and depression. If left unaddressed, these experiences can culminate in PTSD over time. Witnessing prolonged suffering and the brutal deaths of condemned prisoners places prison staff in morally and emotionally distressing positions, exacerbating their anguish.

Botched executions also violate fundamental human rights. The UDHR (1948) explicitly prohibits torture, inhuman, or cruel treatment in Article 5. The slow and torturous deaths caused by botched hangings clearly breach this principle, highlighting the inherent cruelty and psychological consequences of the death penalty for all involved.

Prison Chaplains

In Zimbabwe, condemned inmates were permitted to read a Bible for emotional and spiritual support. Some inmates underwent baptism in prison, experiencing profound personal transformation. One notable example is the late Stephen Chidhumo, a notorious Zimbabwean robber, who was reportedly baptised before his execution by hanging in 2002. Prison chaplains are responsible for attending to the emotional and spiritual needs of inmates, including performing baptisms upon request.

Most condemned prisoners come to terms with their fate and seek solace, hoping for divine intervention. Ironically, the prison chaplains are also tasked with praying for the condemned prior to their execution. This presents a moral dilemma, as it is challenging to reconcile the chaplain's role as a person of faith with their participation in the execution process. The involvement of chaplains in executions raises questions about potential emotional and spiritual conflicts arising from their participation.

Modern Christian values and beliefs hold that taking a life, for any reason, is morally unacceptable. Contrary, the death penalty is rooted in the retributive philosophy of "an eye for an eye," fundamentally contradicting these values. This article argues that prison chaplains who participate in executions are unfairly subjected to emotional and spiritual distress, as their involvement conflicts with their religious beliefs against killing.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2024) notes that the death penalty was prescribed for various crimes in many sacred religious texts and was widely practiced with the support of religious hierarchies. However, there is now no consensus among religious faiths regarding its use. In the latter half of the 20th century, religious leaders, particularly from the Roman Catholic and Jewish communities, began to campaign against the death penalty. Pope John Paul II, for example, condemned it as "cruel and unnecessary."

Consequently, the death penalty is increasingly losing acceptance and support among religious leaders. Yet, despite this shift, prison chaplains continue to be required to participate in executions, creating a profound ethical and spiritual conflict for those involved.



The Impact on the Condemned Inmate's Close Associates (Relatives, Friends, Spouses, and Children)

It is important to recognise that condemned inmates maintain relationships beyond the prison walls. Their close associates—relatives, friends, spouses, or children—often endure emotional and psychological suffering from the moment the inmate is sentenced to death, continuing long after the execution.

Costanzo (2007) highlights that those sentenced to death are not merely criminals; they are also sons, brothers, fathers, and husbands. Jonnie Waner, as cited in Amnesty International (2021), asserts that the death penalty has profound consequences for the families of condemned inmates. She notes that her mother has never recovered from the execution of her son, and the emotional toll on their family, including the children, is immense and difficult to comprehend. The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) (2012) emphasises on the psychological burden on children who witness a parent's execution. These children may experience intense internal conflict when one protector/provider—typically the father—is killed by another protector/provider, the state. This can lead to a profound sense of alienation and betrayal, with families often reporting feelings of violated trust. The death penalty, therefore, creates numerous victims—those who are left behind.

In some cases, the condemned prisoner may be the primary breadwinner, compounding the emotional and financial hardship experienced by their dependents. These families often face material deprivation, with children being forced to drop out of school due to an inability to pay fees or purchase necessary supplies, leading to a decline in their quality of life. Moreover, depending on the nature of the crime, relatives and friends of the condemned may struggle to accept the reality of their loved one's conviction, especially if they did not participate in the crime. These innocent individuals suffer the consequences of an offense they did not commit.

In Zimbabwe, some inmates have been on death row for more than 20 years due to the lack of a hangman, creating an environment of perpetual fear for their families and friends. These individuals lived in uncertainty, not knowing when or if their loved one will be executed. This prolonged state of suspense is emotionally draining. In some cases, family members of the condemned are ostracised by the community, enduring societal stigma. King (2006) asserts that family members often feel as though the entire community has turned against them. This feeling of alienation can further exacerbate the emotional toll on the family, with death penalty cases sometimes causing rifts within the family itself. For instance, in the case of Maria Hines, her brother Jerry was murdered by Dennis Eaton, who was sentenced to death. While Maria's sister-in-law supported the death penalty, Maria opposed it, advocating for life imprisonment for the murderer. This disagreement caused a significant divide within the family, eventually leading to Dennis Eaton's execution.

The emotional stress caused by the death penalty can trigger high levels of anxiety and depression among family members, especially if they are not provided with adequate psychological support. King (2006) argues that the death penalty has detrimental effects on the families of both the murder victim and the condemned prisoner. Moreover, the death penalty teaches children that killing is an acceptable way to resolve conflicts. QUNO (2012, p. 25) questions, "What do children learn from this?" suggesting that the death penalty, as state-sanctioned violence, perpetuates the idea that violence can resolve disputes.



In Zimbabwe, a common misconception persists that condemned prisoners were beheaded. However, according to the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013, as amended), the method of execution was hanging by the neck until death. Despite this, it is not uncommon to hear people refer to condemned inmates as “beheaded,” using the term ‘*akatogurwa musoro uyo*’ in Shona, a vernacular language in Zimbabwe, meaning “that one has already been beheaded.” This misinformation adds to the anguish experienced by the families and friends of the condemned. Imagine the distress a child might feel upon hearing that their parent has been “beheaded” in prison. The death penalty causes unnecessary suffering for innocent relatives and friends, who are forced to endure the consequences of crimes they did not commit.

Death Penalty and Zimbabwean Cultural Values and Beliefs

In Zimbabwe, the predominant Shona and Ndebele cultures, traditionally opposed the execution of individuals, even for serious crimes like murder. The death penalty was introduced during the colonial era, with British colonial rule formally instituting it in Zimbabwe. This aligns with the perspective that in many African cultures, including the Shona and Ndebele, execution was not the standard response to capital offenses; instead, communities often chose to ostracise the offender (Sato, 2018; Mangena & Chimakonam, 2018).

Within Zimbabwean traditional culture, there is a belief that killing a person, regardless of the reason, can invoke avenging spirits that may affect not only the perpetrator but also their family lineage. Consequently, taking another person’s life was generally avoided, except during wartime when survival necessitated such actions. Agulanna, writing from Nigeria and cited in Mangena and Chimakonam (2018), supports this perspective, arguing that, according to Igbo cultural values, the death penalty is not only immoral but also incongruent with African ideals. In pre-colonial times, offenses like murder were addressed through compensation, such as the payment of cattle or, in extreme cases, offering a child to the victim’s family. This practice aimed to appease the avenging spirits and prevent harm to the offender’s family. However, it is important to note that offering children as compensation constitutes child abuse and violates children’s rights. These cultural practices indicate that the Shona and Ndebele did not adhere to a retributive “eye for an eye” philosophy. Instead, they focused on reconciling and repairing relationships between affected families. In contrast, the death penalty, introduced during the colonial era, is rooted in retributive justice, emphasising punishment over reconciliation. This system can perpetuate enduring enmity and a cycle of violence between families.

During the colonial era, the death penalty was also employed as a tool to suppress dissent against colonialism and oppression of black people by the Rhodesian government. Notably, Amnesty International (2007) holds that the death penalty and executions can be used to suppress political opposition. Notably, Mbuya Nehanda, a prominent Zimbabwean spirit medium, was hanged in Salisbury (now Harare) during this time. Similarly, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the current President of Zimbabwe, narrowly escaped execution after being sentenced to death for sabotage during the country’s war of independence in the 1960s; his sentence was later commuted to ten years in prison. Emmerson Mnangagwa’s personal experience has significantly influenced his steadfast opposition to the death penalty. He has publicly expressed his desire for its abolition and has used presidential amnesties to commute death sentences to life imprisonment. This stance reflects a recognition of the death penalty’s cultural inappropriateness and its historical use as a political instrument in Zimbabwe.



The findings of this study underscore the profound human cost of executions, which not only subject condemned prisoners to suffering but also expose executioners and prison staff to lasting trauma. The inherent inhumanity and psychological harm associated with capital punishment challenges its ethical and practical viability in modern society.

IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The following recommendations emerge from this study:

i. Prioritising Prison Staff Well-being: Authorities in nations retaining the death penalty should recognise the psychological distress experienced by personnel involved in executions. These individuals often face significant mental health challenges, including symptoms akin to PTSD. For instance, a 2022 NPR investigation revealed that corrections officers involved in executions reported insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, personality changes, and substance abuse—all indicators of PTSD. Abolishing the death penalty could mitigate such adverse effects on staff well-being.

ii. Advocating for Abolishing of the Death Penalty: Legislators in countries practising capital punishment should consider its abolition, favouring life imprisonment for those on death row. In Zimbabwe, before the abolishment of the death penalty in 2024, capital punishment had already been outlawed for women and certain categories of men. The Constitution of Zimbabwe, amended in 2013, Section 48, Subsections 2(c) and (d), stipulate that all women, and men aged below 21 at the time of committing a crime, and those above 70 years were exempt from the death penalty. Zimbabwe has been taking steps to remove the death penalty entirely from its penal statutes, as it is inhumane and degrading, not only for the condemned individual but also for those who carry out the execution.

iii. Encouraging Comprehensive Research: Academics and researchers are urged to conduct in-depth studies on the impact of executions on the families of the condemned, executioners, and the entire execution team. Such research could strengthen arguments against the death penalty and influence policymakers to reconsider and potentially abolish its practice.

iv. Realigning with the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) Mandates: Executing prisoners contradict the core mandate of the ZPCS, as outlined in Section 227, Subsections 1(a) and 1(b) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. These provisions assign the ZPCS the responsibility to protect society by incarcerating and rehabilitating convicted individuals, facilitating their reintegration into society. The Constitution does not endorse the execution of inmates by ZPCS. Therefore, it is recommended that the ZPCS focus on rehabilitation and reintegration. State-sanctioned executions foster a culture of violence and fail to heal the deep wounds experienced by affected families.

v. Providing Psychosocial Support for Families: Families of both the condemned individuals and the victims require comprehensive psychosocial support to cope with the trauma of execution and the loss of a loved one. This support is essential for helping them navigate the emotional and financial aftermath of these tragedies. Organisations like Loved Ones of Prisons (LOOP) offer support to families with incarcerated loved ones, helping them feel less isolated and providing practical assistance.



vi. Offering Livelihood Support for Affected Families: Government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) should provide livelihood assistance to the families left behind by executed prisoners and murder victims. Special attention should be given to children, women, and the elderly who may be most vulnerable. In many cases, both the condemned individuals and the murder victims were primary breadwinners, and their deaths can lead to severe financial hardship and social challenges. Implementing livelihood projects can help mitigate poverty and support families in rebuilding their lives.

Implementing these recommendations could alleviate the hidden trauma experienced by executioners and the families of the condemned, fostering a more humane and just society.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article offers new insights that challenge the prevailing discourse surrounding the death penalty, suggesting the need for a paradigm shift. While existing arguments against capital punishment predominantly focus on its impact on condemned individuals, little attention has been given to the psychological and emotional toll on executioners, prison guards, and other officials involved in carrying out executions.

This oversight renders the anti-death penalty argument incomplete, as the mental health and overall well-being of those who participate in executions are often neglected. The occurrence of botched executions further highlights the inherent cruelty, degradation, and inhumanity of the death penalty. These failed executions not only cause suffering for the condemned prisoners but also inflict significant trauma on the executioners and their teams, who are required to exert greater effort and patience in an already morally and emotionally taxing process. Moreover, the death penalty is shown to be degrading, inhumane, and psychologically traumatic for prison staff involved in the process. Considering these findings, this study recommends the abolition of the death penalty for all individuals convicted of murder, advocating for life imprisonment as a more humane and effective alternative. It is further suggested that the sentences of all prisoners currently on death row should be reviewed, with a view to substituting their death sentences with life imprisonment.

In conclusion, this article presents a comprehensive case against the death penalty, aiming to influence authorities and supporters of capital punishment to reconsider their stance and potentially advocate for its abolition.



Contribution to Scientific Knowledge

Opposition to the death penalty often centers on the condemned prisoners, highlighting its inhumanity and violation of fundamental rights. However, this perspective frequently overlooks the psychological burden borne by executioners and prison staff involved in these executions. This study broadens the anti-death penalty discourse by examining the impacts on executioners and their teams, adding a critical dimension to abolitionist arguments.

Research indicates that individuals involved in executions may experience severe psychological distress, including symptoms akin to PTSD, such as insomnia, nightmares, panic attacks, and substance abuse. These findings underscore the necessity of considering the mental health of all parties affected by capital punishment.

Future research, incorporating primary data through surveys, interviews, and observations, is essential to explore this emotionally sensitive and secretive phenomenon in greater depth. Understanding the psychological and social repercussions of executions on all stakeholders will provide a more comprehensive basis for advocating against the death penalty.

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