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## COMMUNITY-BASED, ENDOGENOUS AND UBUNTU INSPIRED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISMS: CASE OF THE GIRL POWER PROGRAM IN ADDRESSING SCHOOL-RELATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CHIBOMBO DISTRICT OF ZAMBIA

CHILWALO, Michelo

### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to argue the relevance of community-based child protection mechanisms to address school-related gender-based violence, through the Girl Power Programme in Zambia implemented by Plan International, specifically in Chibombo District. Community based child protection mechanisms, although not heavily recognised and acclaimed, are one of the most significant ways of addressing an array of community problems in many parts of Africa, Zambia inclusive. Results revealed that these local level structures are easily accessible in communities, community members have trust in these structures because they are informed by local norms and practices and undoubtedly, these structures are sustainable after those who either helped to strengthen or establish them are long gone from the communities. A plethora of evidence to justify and support the relevance of these structures from various perspectives has been provided in this article.

**KEY TERMS:** Child protection, child protection systems, Community based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs), school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), endogenous

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This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled Ubuntu Social Work. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.
- Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.
- The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (yumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leone (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.

## INTRODUCTION

This article brief article reports part of a larger study that used a variety of qualitative methods which helped to capture multiple perspectives to understand child protection systems and it uses the Girl Power Programme as a case study. A background will be provided first before the case study is briefly described followed by a discussion focusing on the endogenous, community based and ubuntu nature of the project. A conclusion to recapitulate the significance of Community based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs) in addressing child protection problems, particularly school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) has been provided.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In Zambia, as well as in most African countries, prior to an era of child protection system strengthening in 2008, most agencies focused on one problematic issue affecting children such as street children, child labour, child prostitution, without considering the spiral effects those problems may engender on children in future (Wessells, 2015; UNICEF, 2008). Child protection interventions then were haphazard, resulting in a scenario that was challenging to grapple with topical issues affecting children and how to address them effectively. A multi-agency conference on child protection held in Senegal in 2013 resulted in the publication to “Call to Action” aimed at strengthening child protection systems in sub-Saharan Africa. It was observed that focus was mainly placed at national level actors as well as focussing on international level standards without paying much focus on local level actors to address child protection problems. In instances where local-level actors were integrated, it was mainly in a top-down fashion. The emphasis on local actors to enforce standards adopted at international level rather than adopting a bottom-up approach that builds on ordinary people lived experiences have been pervasive in many African countries (Wessells, 2015; Wessells, 2012; Columbia Group, 2011). This has resulted in hesitation of interventions to acknowledge indigenous knowledge, and traditional forms of problem solving, which has had a negative bearing to develop and deliver services in an effective, acceptable, and culturally appropriate manner on local institutions, mechanisms, norms and practices (Columbia Group, 2011; Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird, 2008).

Chibombo District is situated in Central Province of Zambia. It is 99.2 kilometres from the capital city Lusaka along the Great North Road. According to the 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Chibombo had the largest population in Central Province at 303, 519, of which 151, 155 were male and 152, 364 were female. Chibombo also had the largest rural population at 290,115 as compared to the 13, 404 urban population. Though English is the official language, the main local languages spoken in Chibombo are Lenje, Bemba and Nyanja (Central Statics Office, 2012). The main economic activities practiced by local people are farming and animal rearing, which are mainly done at a low scale, thus rendering meagre economic benefits realised from these ventures. Emanating from this, the area is riddled with high poverty levels among most families which is a key driver to early marriages and school dropout among children, especially girls.

## ENDOGENOUS AND COMMUNITY-BASED CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISMS (CBCPMs)

Martin and Sunley (1996) asserts that the word “endogenous” is synonymous to “locally-based” or “locally-developed”. The word endogenous emanates from endo (inside) and gene (which engenders). Thus, endogenous literally means ‘that produces itself internally’. Alternatively stated, it entails that which originates within a homogeneous unity, group or society and carries their key distinctive features. Endogenous child protection practices can be described as “attitudes, behaviours and actions aiming to protect children from beliefs, knowledge and ways of doing things deriving from tradition or experience” (Feneyrol 2011, cited in Dottridge, 2013, p. 15).

Community-based child protection mechanisms are networks, groups of people or community managed arrangements, at local or grassroots level that prevent and respond issues of child protection and vulnerable children both in normal times and in emergencies, who are at risk (Wessells, 2015; Wessells et al., 2012; Columbia Group, 2011). These mechanisms include, but not limited to Child Protection/Welfare Committees, traditional or village courts wherein a Chief/headman and/or elders adjudicate or respond to violations against children, women groups, faith-based groups that support vulnerable children, youth groups in schools and communities that work to sensitise children on how to protect themselves from sexual abuse, drug abuse and other vices that can put their lives at risk. These mechanisms can be created and supported internally under the mixed influence or support of local traditional representatives and externally by national and international non-governmental organisations (UNICEF, 2015; Columbia Group, 2011).

## CASE STUDY: STRUCTURAL INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS SRGBV IN CHIBOMBO DISTRICT

To address problems that affects school going children, two committees were established, the Anti-pregnancy and Child marriage committee. These committees comprised of men and women from the communities and the schools and the members were 15 in each. Local people in these communities have taken it upon themselves to report cases of child violence, child marriages and teen pregnancy to these Committees. This enabled the Community Crime Prevention Unit (CCPU) and paralegals to follow up cases of teen pregnancy and child marriage in the communities and address them with the engagement of local leadership. This demonstrate the importance of community mechanisms who are essential component of the wider child protection system, specifically the child protection committee because they interconnect different levels of the child protection system (Wessells, 2012). Traditional leaders, in collaboration with the CCPU also, established paralegal desks in schools to work with the schools, specifically the office of the Careers Guidance Teachers to dissuade girls from child marriage and teen pregnancies, to keep records of teen pregnancies; and counsel parents and girls who become pregnant against early marriage. The committee also liaised with the government through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare, specifically the Social Welfare Department to establish a sponsorship scheme for girls, who could not afford school fees to return to school after they were retrieved from early marriage or after giving birth due to early pregnancies. The committees working with the traditional leaders were also mandated to mete out punishments to those who violate the rights of children such as sexual abuse or those who impregnate school going children. To date, this committee has remained functional and still meet once every month to address issues of SRGBV, especially early pregnancies and marriages. Stakeholders in addressing early marriages and teen pregnancies included traditional leaders, school staff and parents.

## DISCUSSION

In most African countries and other countries in the Global South, local people, especially in rural areas have a different world view and set of narratives, meanings, customs and social rules than those that underlie the formalised national or international child protection systems. Thus, indigenous models are considered effective because they are based on local knowledge, hence they are relevant to local realities and are highly supported and rich in potential child protection resource such as teachers, parents, traditional leaders (Mabeyo and Kiwelu, 2019; Wessells, 2015). Imported concepts such as “child protection/safeguarding” and “children’s rights” among many others in that realm, represent contested areas in which international norms do not reliably coincide with local perceptions and realities in Zambia. In most African countries, Canavera et al. (2016) have argued that:

child protection practices have been defined by the international community with rare consultation even in a cursory way; the inclusion of community perspectives is a particularly weak element of these efforts and a key gap impeding systems strengthening efforts (p. 366).

The western notion of child protection is at variance with those that prevail in Africa and Zambia in particular which embeds children’s welfare in the context of families, clans and communities as opposed to the western notion which tends to be individualistic. King (2018) argues that the focus on approaches that emphasises on individuals have not worked well in Africa because most African countries endorse collective problem solving as opposed to the individualised one. In the Zambian context, children are socialised to respect elders, interact with peers both at family and community level and have a sense of responsibility as they grow which is based on communal approach to address child protection problems. This endogenous form of child protection is considered to be associated with the norms and values in society which are rooted in the pre-colonial African rural setting which illustrate how Africans are anchored within the community and connected to community members. Therein lies the concept of “togetherness/cohesiveness” or “Ubuntu”, that which binds local people together is reverberated. Etymologically, the term Ubuntu emanates from the Nguni (Zulu-Xhosa) and Sotho versions of an African traditional dictum, “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu and Motho ke motho ka batho babang*”, respectively, which literally means, “*A person is a person because of or through other persons*”. Ubuntu is a combination of *Ubu* and *ntu*, of which the latter is a common word in most Sub-Saharan African languages, resulting in variations based on context such as Muntu, Bantu, Shintu, Wuntu, Kantu, Buntu, Untu, the list goes on. Thus, Ntu simply means “human” (Van Binsbergen, 2003, p. 428). Ubuntu refers to, “a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another” (Mangaliso, 2001, p. 23). In Zambia, local people at community level protect children from harm regardless of

their identity, parental lineage and other attributes. Spitzer (2014) asserted that African countries still struggle to overcome the legacy of imported Western-based models of intervention, including in child protection, which are unsuitable with regards to distinctiveness of the African cultures and terrain. The inter-Agency Group (2013) has similarly argued that:

Local culture, tradition, knowledge, attitudes and practices shape how these different elements work together at the community level to prevent and respond to *child* protection risks. Patterns of socialisation, approaches to child rearing, and the relationships between children and adults also influence their interaction (p. 3).

In Zambia, different communities have instituted community-based child protection mechanisms. These have been working through traditional structures that exist in communities especially in rural areas where they have formed groups of youths, men and women. Community-based child protection groups have been described as:

[A] collection of people, often volunteers, who aim to ensure the protection and wellbeing of children in a village, urban neighbourhood or other community—for example, a camp or temporary settlement for internally displaced people. These groups operate at the grassroots (such as village) or district level, although they are often linked to groups at the national level (Wessells, 2009, p. 2).

In Chibombo District, traditional values, beliefs, and cultural practices are widespread and normally put children, especially girls in a precarious situation as they are expected to go through initiation ceremonies when they become of age. Most girls do not see the need to continue with their education when they have undergone this process of initiation as they are perceived as grown up in society. They are encouraged to get married as a way of making money especially from families who are living in poverty. Young girls are married off early, mostly to elderly men who can easily pay money or animals as bride price (Plan International, 2008). It is in such instances, that CBCPM become relevant because child protection issues frequently arise at grassroots level and are resolved at community level through customary law systems which is critical to deter such vices especially in rural areas. This is partly to the inability of governments to protect children because government departments such as the department of social welfare and the police service are far away, cannot be easily accessed or hardly exist in rural areas. Thus, communities and extended family systems have assets and resources and are often able to protect children at local level. These endogenous mechanisms are influential, helpful and strong because they are heavily supported by influential local leaders such as chiefs and headmen/headwomen. This assertion can be couched in Mabeyo and Kiwelu (2019) as they state:

These models are also strong since they are available whenever necessary, people recognise and respect them, they can make very positive contributions to the development of the respective community, and they reduce the isolation of beneficiaries from their families and local communities; hence, people in need are helped while being able to stay within their communities. The approaches also ensure that common ways and values of life are maintained (p. 107).

Furthermore, CBCPMs not only do they provide a low cost means of supporting large numbers of children, but they also engage community resources, values, and support and are a key element in the national child protection systems. Community mechanism to child protection have actually thrived because they encourage and open up opportunities for discussions within the community. Thus, because of the sense of “community ownership” they optimise, these mechanisms are very helpful, sustainable, owned by people and context-specific (Mabeyo and Kiwelu, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

The article has discussed the relevance of CBCPMs to address SRGBV. It acknowledges that local level intervention to child protection should be premised on community ownership, build on community assets and resources, and upholds the role of children, families and communities as change agents. It has been found that despite the western models of child protection in countries in the Global South, Zambia inclusive, local people tend not to use these formal child protection systems and rely mostly on nonformal child protection practices. Clearly, this demonstrates the relevance and dominance of CBCPMs in these countries coupled, with the tenets that they embrace which are mainly derived from local knowledge. Efforts to enhance child protection should ensure that local people voices are included in the development of child protection strategies and priorities. When communities themselves drive the process to address child protection problems, local people develop the sense of ownership for these services and a strong sense of partnership among themselves. It is therefore prudent that to reorient towards child protection systems strengthening that acknowledges local level participation, new strategies

must allow for endogenous concepts of child protection to emerge, which the CBCPM through its bottom up approach considers.

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