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THE TIME FOR REFLECTION: FOSTER CARE AS A CHILD PROTECTION MODEL IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

With continued child vulnerability in Zimbabwe, many alternative forms of child care systems need to be strengthened to enhance the plight of vulnerable children in the society. Foster care remains one of the child care systems which is yet to get much attention in Zimbabwe's child protection discourse. Against this backdrop, the study sought to identify the opportunities of foster care as an alternative child care model. Using qualitative research design, the study collected data through exploratory tools such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The results of the study confirmed that foster care had many benefits which included de-institutionalisation and was much cheaper as compared to institutionalisation. The article concluded that foster care, if well-coordinated, can be a substitute of the biological family in child protection endeavors in Zimbabwe. In order to make the system vibrant, government as a chief custodian of children can work with other child protection players to improve the visibility of foster care in Zimbabwe.

KEY TERMS: *hope, foster care, child protection, Zimbabwe*

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, orphans in Zimbabwe used to be taken care of by the extended family (Muchenje, 2014). However, many scholars (Grant & Yeatman, 2012; Vinga, 2016; Young, 2016) argue that extended families are quickly slipping into oblivion as a result of Westernisation and its accompanying individualistic lifestyle. Orphan-hood and the exponential rise in the number of vulnerable children is a world-wide phenomenon. UNICEF (2012) estimates that there are about 140 million children who have lost either one or both parents worldwide. Despite imprecise statistics of children in foster care in Zimbabwe (Vinga, 2016), scholars like Grant and Yeatman (2012) argue that families are failing to absorb children in need of care due to continued exponential increase in poverty in Africa's sub-Saharan region. Poverty, high levels of unemployment, HIV and AIDS and the increased incidence of diseases such as cancer further incapacitates the extended family in providing care for orphans. The scourge of orphanhood has been also necessitated by the consequential impact of environmental crisis such as droughts, famine and health challenges (Muzingili, 2016). This has seen many orphans being sent to institutions despite the negative impact that these institutions have on social and cognitive development of the child, together with their ability to re-integrate into the community (Clarke, 2014; Muzingili and Gunha, 2017).

The adverse impact that institutionalisation has on children has led to formal foster care gaining more significance and is increasingly being recognized as an ideal alternative safety net for orphans. This is because it provides a family set up with embedded values, morals, ethics and effective socialisation that build an exemplary citizen. While child foster care system cannot substitute the biological family (Kinsey and Serra, 2000; UNICEF, 2008); several scholars (e.g Chipingu and Bent-Goodley, n.d.) observe that it almost resembles the functions of the biological family. Despite these noted advantages, the adoption of foster care as a model of alternative care in Zimbabwe has not gained much recognition in the child protection system. Against this background, this paper seeks to unpack the opportunities which can be harnessed by the wider adoption of foster care as an alternative model of child care in Zimbabwe.

FOSTER CARE AS A CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN ZIMBABWE

Foster care is defined as a temporary placement of a child in a family that is not biologically theirs when the original home situation warrants their removal (Government of Zimbabwe, 2015). This is operationalised through the issuance of a court order by the children's court and the Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services (DCWPS) have the statutory mandate over the process. The quest for the adoption of foster care is presented in Zimbabwe's six tier National Orphan Care Policy (NOCP) of 1999. Chronologically, the policy states that the effective child care environment should start with biological family and end with institutionalisation. These six tiers (presented according to level of importance) include the biological family, extended family, community, foster care, adoption and institutionalisation. While foster care is rated 4th in child care system, scholars like (Grant and Yeatman, 2012; Sherr et al., 2017) believe that fosterage can replace immediate family if well coordinated and supported. Many studies have proved that children's developmental needs are better met when they grow up within a stable family set up (Brown, 2015; UNICEF, 2017). The family further provides psychosocial support, moral fiber in the form of socialization where values, respect, self-discipline and necessary social skills are imparted to the child. Despite the superiority of foster care compared to adoption and institutionalisation (Cigada et al., 2010); many children in Zimbabwe are placed in institutions. Cigada et al., (2010) argue that Zimbabwe has many families that have absorptive capacity of taking care of vulnerable children. Despite these opportunities, this paper argues that foster care as an alternative model of child care is overlooked in the country. It is against this background that the study sought to investigate the opportunities of foster care as an alternative child care system in Zimbabwe.

In a bid to strengthen foster care in Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Public Service, Labor and Social Welfare (MPLSW) through the Department of Child Welfare and Protection Services (DCWPS) came up with a foster care handbook. The handbook acts as a guideline that outlines clear steps to be taken by child welfare officers, foster parents and non-state actors in the whole fostering process. Though the arrangement is meant to be short term, Haugaard and Hazan (2002) propound that foster children usually remain in the care of foster parents for some time thereby becoming integral members of their foster family. Therefore, fosterage alternative care model is still viewed favorably by communities and authorities (Cigada et al., 210; Powell et al, 2004). In spite of the challenges associated with institutionalisation, such as its failure to provide familial bonds and socialization of children (Clarke et al., 2014, UNICEF, 2017), foster care has not gained popularity in Zimbabwe. As noted by Vinga (2016), most of the children in Zimbabwe are sent to institutions than into the foster care system. Despite the fact that foster care can shift family responsibilities, Kinsey and Serra (2000); Grant and Yeatman (2010) argue that foster care can be best in both crisis and less crisis situations compared to adoption and institutionalisation. In Zimbabwe, less reliance on foster care is not based on its shortcomings rather on intricacy of varied factors which include; reluctance by government to invest in it (Mpambela, 2017; Vinga, 2016) and lack

of its publicity to altruistic community members. This has consequently led to institutionalisation gaining much significance despite its limitations. Foster care, if well managed, is an effective way of doing away with negative impact of institutions (Bebbington and Miles, 2012) and it provides an opportunity for orphans and other vulnerable children to grow up in loving homes where they have a better chance of experiencing healthy development (Berridge and Cleaver, 2013).

In Zimbabwe, like elsewhere in the world, children may be removed from the care of their biological parents because of neglect, abuse, incarceration of the parents or substance abuse rather than orphanhood (Mpambela, 2017; UNICEF, 2017). In such scenarios, biological parents are entitled to be visited by their children in foster care. However, Mpambela (2017) argues that in many instances the biological family meddles in the life of the child and tries to control how the foster family cares for the child. Foster care is often criticised for being transitory in nature, yet studies (Grant and Yeatman, 2010; Morantz and Heyman, 2010) established that children from the foster family also develop everlasting emotional development experience similar to that of children living with the biological family. This anecdotal evidence proves that orphans and other vulnerable children can be effectively cared for within foster families. However, this is not an argument to vilify the indispensability of the biological family or other child care systems, rather to tap in the opportunities associated with foster care in Zimbabwe. Even if Zimbabwe has been seen turning to formal foster care as the best alternative care system for orphans and other vulnerable children, the utilisation of this system remains unexploited in the country. Therefore, the major aim of the study was to investigate the reasons and opportunities associated with foster care as an alternative child care system in Zimbabwe.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilised qualitative research design. This methodology was specifically chosen because the phenomenon under investigation is more explicitly expressed and interrogated using a qualitative approach. The study focused on three suburbs in Bulawayo. These are Northend, Saurcetown and Mzilikazi. The researchers chose these areas because most registered foster families in Bulawayo reside in these suburbs. Both Northend and Saurcetown are low density areas while Mzilikazi is one of Bulawayo's oldest high density suburbs. The target population for the study was 9 foster parents and 13 children under foster care residing in selected suburbs of Bulawayo. To get this information, the researchers used a foster register from DCWPS. The study also targeted 3 field officers from the DCPS, Save Our Soul (SOS) children's villages and Zimbabwe Childline. Considering the small size of the target population of foster parents, the study used census approach with complete enumeration of all foster parents as participants. Out of the 13 children who were under foster care, 6 children aged between 12 and 17 were selected using judgmental sampling as the rest were not old enough to respond to questions. For expert knowledge, three key informants were purposively selected for the study and these consisted of a child welfare officer from the Bulawayo Fort Street DCWPS, one field officer from Childline and one field officer responsible for foster care at SOS Children's Villages. Key informants were selected because they provided expert knowledge on issues under inquiry.

The researchers collected data using in-depth interview guides for foster parents and fostered children as well as key informant interview guides for the key informants. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 9 foster parents with the aid of in-depth interview guides. The use of open ended questions allowed the researchers to probe for more information and seek clarity on issues which were not clear. The researcher utilised thematic content analysis in analysing data. The researchers sought the consent of the participants before presenting any questions to them. Introductions were made to research participants and detailed explanation of what the study was all about was given. The respondents' privacy and confidentiality were highly observed by not collecting their names and personal information.

FINDINGS

Reasons for considering fostering a child

Altruism and social responsibility

The study gathered that foster parents fostered a child out of altruism and social responsibility. Despite having their biological children they felt the urge to reach out to a less fortunate child and give them a comfortable life. One of the foster parents, Miss T, noted that:

I think it's natural for us human being to care for other vulnerable in the society. I feel it's my responsibility to care for other children because they need care like other children.

Findings revealed that some people foster children as their natural responsibility to care for other vulnerable people. Foster parents admitted that they were not forced to foster children but it was something which happened naturally. In literature, the issue of pro-social behavior has caused many divisions among social and physical scientists. Scholars like (Koster et al, 2016; Schuhmacher et al., 2017) argue that people's pro-social behaviour was influenced by social forces such as gender socialisation, peer influence, parental role and other cultural influences. This might explain the reason why all foster parents who participated in the study were female. Giner-Torens and Kartner (2016) argue that biological forces such as inheritance are critical in helping behaviour. To this end, helping behaviour is shaped by both nature and nurtured by society. Policy makers should harness people's pro-social behaviour in strengthening foster care system in Zimbabwe.

Infertility

The study also gathered that infertility was one of the reasons which motivated people into fostering a child. One of the respondents, Mrs N, said that:

Having a child is one of the things which defines a woman in our African culture, without a child you are not respected, you still remain a 'girl' not a woman that is why I ended up taking up foster care after 6 years without a child.

From the study, it was deduced that foster care was also driven by underlying cultural mechanisms, which though invisible, were highly influential. Foster care acted as a strong stress relief and psycho-social influence on the part of the people who partake in it. It was discovered that foster care eased psychosocial challenges of naturally not having children. Many scholars including Greil et al (2010) and Laningham (2012) observe that the experience of infertility has a great bearing on making a decision to rear a child. Similarly, Mpambela (2017) found out that some parents decided to foster children due to the experience of infertility. However, Greil et al (2010) believe that women's attitudes, parental background and marital status also influenced the decision to foster children in the society.

Religion

Religious beliefs and support from the church were a driving factor for potential foster parents. Despite having children, some foster parents highlighted that it was biblical that people should care for the children. One of the foster parents noted that:

Our pastors always encourage us to take care of poor people in the society. The most affected are children because most of them are living in the streets and we need as Christians to show love by taking of them.

From the above, religion was an important determinant of foster care. The study revealed that pastors and other religious leaders preached the gospel of care and empathy towards the poor. Some key informants confirmed that most of foster care parents were Christians. Due to the gospel of empathy and care, some people decided to venture into foster care in order to help the vulnerable in the society. Contrary to these findings are the results by Jacobs et al (2005) who discovered that in South Africa fostering a child was being used as a poverty alleviation strategy. They noted that the increasing numbers of poverty stricken families are caring for orphaned children relying on foster care placement as a way to access the more substantial financial support offered by the foster care grant provided by the government. In Zimbabwe this might not be the case considering the fact that disbursed foster care grants were a meager US\$15 which was far from being enough to cover the child's basic needs. To ascertain one's suitability and capacity to become a foster parent, they also undergo a rigorous assessment where their employment situation, source of income and number of dependents are looked into. Muzingili and Mushayamunda (2015) argued that Churches were active child protection players in Zimbabwe. While scholars (e.g. Grant and Yeatman, 2015) cite poverty as a major reason for venturing into foster care, the chances of one turning to foster care for financial benefit were very slim due to the tedious vetting process required.

Need for psycho-social companionship

Findings revealed that parents fostered children because they had a natural feeling of providing care to others. It was discovered that people fostered in order to continue socialisation after their biological children had grown up. One of the foster parents, Mrs Nc, noted that:

I fostered because when my children left for the UK, I was left alone, I felt so lonely and at times when I arrived home late from work I had to sit alone, prepare my own food and sleep without anyone to talk to.

From the above, it can be noted that fostering brought an avenue for social interaction. Key informants highlighted that foster care has also hidden connotation where foster parents got an opportunity to get helpers to assist with their domestic chores. However, some foster parents highlighted that the issue of domestic help was a very insignificant factor towards fostering a child. In this regard it can be deduced that the need for social interaction is a major driving factor for people choosing fostering as an option. Human beings are social beings; they thrive on social interaction and psycho-social support from family members (Mpambela, 2017). As the study gathered, one of the motives for fostering was that of the need for social interaction and socialising.

Opportunities in the foster care system

The study established several opportunities arising from foster care in Zimbabwe. These can be utilised by custodians of child protection in the country.

De-institutionalization

The study discovered that foster care was another way of removing children from 'harmful institutions' to safe, conducive and loving homes. All the key informants raised concerns about the harm that institutions were causing on orphans and vulnerable children as this is the most known formal child care system to the public in Zimbabwe. One key informant, Mr S, noted that:

It has long been discovered that institutionalisation, especially in dormitory styled set up is not good for these children. This is mainly linked to lack of attachment with their Caregivers who are expected to give attention to more than 20 children simultaneously.

Another key informant, Mr T, also commented that:

Though well meaning, institutions are not the best for children. When discharged from the institutions most of them resort to criminal activities and prostitution. The root cause of this is the upbringing that these institutions offer. They are not taught about survival skills, being confined in the institutions stifles their social growth.

Foster care ensures the removal of orphans and other vulnerable children from such an environment and offers them a family where the caregiver is in a position to give them maximum attention and does not only focus on the physical needs. Findings revealed that, in foster care a child is exposed to the real world and they are able to learn survival skills, integrate with other community members and live fulfilling lives. In other studies, it was discovered that children in institutions performed dismally at school and also had difficulties in integrating with the larger community (Clarke et al., 2014; Muzingili and Mhande, 2017). Similarly, Powel et al (2004) discovered that children in institutions, especially those in dormitory styled set up scored very high in a psychological disturbance test. They also discovered that care staff in the institutions physically and emotionally abused some of the children and mainly focused on catering for their physical needs while ignoring their emotional needs. One opportunity that foster care has to offer the government of Zimbabwe as well as other developing countries is de-institutionalisation. This will protect orphans and vulnerable children from the harm inflicted by institutionalisation. The handbook further states that foster care will lessen the burden on governments considering that many developed countries are faced with a problem of lack of resources (Government of Zimbabwe, 2015). In support of this, Vinga (2016) argues that foster care can reduce even the number of children living in the streets. Hence foster care can be said to be economically sustainable on the part of government of developed countries.

Socialisation

From the study it was also found that foster care offered a 'normal' socialisation opportunity for orphans and vulnerable children, especially when compared to institutionalisation. Key informants highlighted that due to the lack of an adult figure to bond with and model and learn social values from, children in institutions or in streets tend to lack general social values like respect, humility and *Ubuntu*. One key informant highlighted that:

Children in streets or institutions are alienated from the rest of the society and foster care ensures that a child has a chance to grow up in a normal sized family and within a community. The child is also likely to bond with their mother and father as well as the extended family.

One foster parent noted that:

These will teach the child how to respect elders, humility, politeness and Ubuntu. Most of all children in foster care are highly likely to grow into responsible citizens as compared to those in institutions

In relation to the above, Haralambos & Horlborn (2009) define socialisation as the process through which people learn to be 'proficient members of a society.' They also note that socialisation involves the inculcation of social values such as humility, respect, kindness and politeness. Through foster care, children also come to enjoy parental care. In the African society the socialisation agents are usually the mother and father, extended family and the larger society. A study carried out by Better Care Network (2015) also came to the same conclusion that children raised in institutions miss out on some of the critical aspects of the socialisation process as they lack a parental figure who can walk them through the process. Previous studies (e.g. Sibindi and Dube, 2016; Tsitsi and Dziro, 2014) have demonstrated that the family based model provides children with a healthy environment which improves their social and cognitive development. According to Cigada et al (2010) foster care as a substitute to biological and extended family care enables a child to grow in a small sized family where attachment can take place with the foster parents. This also enables them to be in contact with their extended family and the community which paves way for easy community integration.

Culturally acceptable compared to other forms of alternative care

The study also discovered that foster care, as compared to other alternative care methods like institutionalisation and adoption was more culturally acceptable in Zimbabwe. This is mainly because it did not involve the fostered child changing their surname and adopting their foster parent's. One key informant, Mik, argued that:

Every year we receive more applications for foster care than adoption. The majority of applicants' state that their families highly support their decision to foster a child but always talk of angering ancestors when the adoption issue is mentioned.

One fostered child noted that:

I still have hope that one day I will go back to my parents and stay with them. I am happy here but am also keen to know my biological parents so that I get my true surname.

Findings revealed that there is a strong cultural resistance to the concept of adoption in Zimbabwe. Institutions are also viewed with contempt and as culturally inappropriate because they pave way for the removal of children from their communities of origin and natural way of life. Muchanga (2012) argues that the issue of different totems makes it hard for the Shona and the Ndebele to take in a child as their traditional beliefs prohibit it. They argue that fostering presents the child as a 'guest' and this builds on the African tradition of always treating guests well. Vinga (2016) argues that foster care is the best alternative model which can change the mindset of children who have been suffering trauma in the streets or outside a home environment. These findings thus make foster care a sure way of ensuring that orphans and other vulnerable children grow up in a family set up.

Affordability

From the study it was further discovered that foster care is a more economical alternative method of care and lessens the burden on the government coffers which are already overwhelmed due to economic challenges facing the country. A key informant, Mr R, highlighted that:

Foster care is a way cheaper method of care especially when compared to institutionalisation. This is because with foster care, though the government disburses foster care grants, the money is way less as compared to the one channelled to institutions. With institutions there is the aspect of staff members who have to be paid as well as electricity, water and maintenance bills.

In their study, Williamson and Greenberg (2010) also discovered that institutional care is about 10 times more expensive in comparison with foster care in Zimbabwe. This is because of bills such as water electricity, salaries and maintenance fees. With foster care, prospective foster parents are usually financially stable and can afford to cater for all other financial needs of the children like school fees, hospital bills, food and clothing. Several scholars (e.g Grant and Yeatman, 2012; Cigada et al., 2010; Mpambela, 2017) argue that foster care is both an economically and socially effective alternative method of child care. For examples, Tsitsi and Dziro (2014) observe that many resources are channelled towards ineffective institutions in Zimbabwe. This consequently makes foster care an economically sustainable method on the part of the government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In consideration of the challenges faced in child foster care and protection in Zimbabwe, the following recommendations are made to improve the situation:

- More financial support should be channelled towards foster care so as to increase the foster care grants. This will lessen the burden on the foster parents and act as a motivator for other willing but financially unstable prospective foster parents.
- Extensive advertisement, information dissemination and education about foster care is needed to make more people aware of this service especially those in the rural areas.
- This will end ignorance about foster care and make more people appreciate it thereby increasing the number of prospective foster parents.
- There is need to include churches in foster care issues because they have a large pool of prospective foster parents.

CONCLUSION

This paper argued that foster care is a very progressive alternative child care system that can go a long way in bettering the plight of orphans and other vulnerable children and ensuring their protection in Zimbabwe. This is amenable especially when it is compared with institutionalisation and other alternative methods of child care in general. Foster care offers orphans and other vulnerable children an opportunity to grow up in loving, caring and stable homes. It gives them a sense of identity and belonging as well as socialisation that most children who do not grow up in a family set up miss on. Despite shortcomings of the child protection system, foster care can be promoted to lessen some of the challenges bedeviling the child protection efforts in Zimbabwe.

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