Children's Homes: A Refuge for Vulnerable Children in Society: A Case Study of a Children's Home in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
The purpose of the study was to establish the extent to which children's homes serve as substitute homes for vulnerable children in society. The study was conducted at a children's home in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. The population comprised administrators, caregivers and the children. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and observations. The study established that children become vulnerable due to abandonment, neglect and juvenile delinquency. It was established that at the home, children are categorized into two groups. Those classified as being 'at a place of safety' are children who were kept there temporarily while the whereabouts of their relatives are being established, while the 'committed' are those who have no traceable backgrounds and would be kept until they attain the age of majority. The study also established that the home was run as a family, where there are mother figures in each family unit. The major challenge faced by the home is that of shortage of funding. Children need money for school fees and workers need monthly salaries. Generally, the study established that the children's home plays a crucial role in providing a nurturing environment for vulnerable children. The home provides the children with basic needs and equips them with essential survival skills needed in society. The study recommends total community participation and Government involvement at the home by providing emotional, financial, social, spiritual and material support.
Keywords: Vulnerable Children, Children's Home, Refuge.

Introduction
The culture of children's homes is not foreign to the Zimbabwean setting, however, of late, this culture has slowly become a necessity in Zimbabwe due to various factors such as HIV/AIDS, moral degeneration, poverty, divorce and westernization and urbanization. Bruce and Meggitti (2007) refer to children who are in the care of local authorities as 'looked after children', for example, orphans, abandoned and destitute children. They are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The majority of children who remain in care are there because they have

suffered some sort of abuse or neglect. Children's homes offer a safe place for vulnerable children to develop physically, socially and emotionally in a caring environment.

Recently, statistics show that AIDS is a major contributory factor to the need of children's homes in Zimbabwe. AIDS has left over one and a half million children parentless, creating a generation of children growing up without parents (Nhambura, 2006). Sharma (2002:108) says "The United Nations conservatively estimated that by December 2000 about 13 million children under the age of 15 in Sub-Saharan Africa lost their mother or both parents to AIDS". He goes on to say that in July 2000, the United States Bureau of Census, which keeps data on AIDS, independent of the United Nations, estimated that there were about 15 million children under age 15 who had lost at least one parent to AIDS in Africa, and that by 2010 this number would be at 28 million. Many times there are no surviving relatives to take care of the orphans. So this has prompted a greater need for children's homes.

Moral degeneration is yet another factor that has led to the need for children's homes. Some teenage dump their babies in public places these babies are sent to o children's homes. The youths are becoming sexually active at a tender age due to loose morals. They are not comfortable with becoming mothers at such tender ages and their only alternative is to dump the babies. Also, some adults abuse the young girls and threaten to kill them if they disclose. The girl keeps silent and dumps the baby afterwards (Sunday Mail 12.12.2010, p11).

Poverty is also a contributory factor since girls who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds dump babies born out of wedlock. They have no means of taking care of their babies. Poverty leads the girls to engage in prostitution, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and baby dumping.

Divorce has also contributed to the need for children's homes since one parent care can at times prove to be very difficult. The children become destitute in a bid to try to care for themselves, and some end up in children's homes.

The influence of western culture and urbanization also contribute to the need for children's homes. Concentration on the nuclear family has become the order of the day for many Zimbabweans. Social ties with the extended family have become weak. The extended family used to take care of the orphaned children through systems like "nhaka" (inheritance), where a male close relative, either a younger brother or a nephew of the deceased would marry the widow, while "Chimutsamapfiwa", a niece or sister would marry the widower. The system of "sarapavana" where a relative of the deceased would be given the responsibility of looking after the orphaned children, used to work well in the black Zimbabwean culture. These systems were put in place to make sure the children of the deceased were not moved away from close relatives. They would grow up in their families and never lose touch with close relatives. In African countries hardest hit by HIV/AIDS, the extended family was traditionally the source of support and care for orphans or other children needing special protection. Sharma (2002) contends that in the face of enormous numbers of children without parental care, the extended family became increasingly overstretched, if not completely overawed, and unable to provide its traditional level of protection and support. Things have changed due to westernization and also due to the AIDS pandemic where the supposed 'sarapavana' or 'chimutsamapfiwa' would refuse to marry the widow or widower in case the spouse might have died due to AIDS. Therefore, this has promoted the culture of children's homes in Zimbabwe.

Given the above scenario, one would find these children in children's homes. In the majority of cases, these children become neglected. Kanth and Varma (1993) classify neglected children as destitute, abandoned, exploited or abused. These children are the ones usually housed in children's homes. For the purpose of this study, vulnerable children will refer to all those as classified by Kanth and Varma (1993).

Neglected children might have one, both or no parents living. Where one or both parents are alive and negligent, they do not provide their children with basic needs either intentionally or unintentionally. According to Lindon (2003: 18), neglectful treatment could arise in the following ways;

- giving children inadequate food so that they are malnourished or starving,
- giving them inadequate clothes so that they are cold and ill,
- some are very young children and some older children with disabilities who need considerable support with feeding,
- children's basic needs are ignored to the extent that they are left dirty and have infections that would have improved with basic medical attention ,
- andyoung children are left alone or with inappropriate carers.

In the past, children's homes had a boarding school setting where there were common facilities such as dining hall, common room and dormitories, and the person in charge was the boarding master/mistress. The trend nowadays is to house them in family units which resemble family life in the society. They have 'mothers', 'sisters' and 'brothers'. Kanth and Varma (2003) view the family as the most ideal medium to raise children. This is also supported by Bruce and Meggitti (2006) who say that the best place to raise a child is within the family. Thus children are best looked after within the family with support if necessary. Bruce and Meggitti (2006) define a family as a social unit made up of people related to each other by blood, birth or marriage. In another definition they say that a family is a social unit made up of people who support each other in one or several ways, (e.g. socially, economically, psychologically), whose members identify with each other in a supportive unit.

Families provide children's basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. Bruce and Meggitti (2006) say that children need to feel loved and to learn to love. This means they need some reliable people in their lives to show them affection and warmth, and who enjoy receiving their love and warmth in return. The family also serves a socialization function. Children learn the basic interaction processes in the family, from the first intimate relationship with mother and including all parental and sibling relations. The child learns sharing, reciprocity, fairness, cooperation authority, obedience and many basic components of interaction found in relationships throughout life (Nock, 1992).

These functions of life which the child should adapt to are the reason why children's homes were moved from boarding settings to home settings. All children whose family life has been disrupted or who are looked after in public institutions require good quality care which is crucial in the development of a secure personality and a strong sense of self-worth. The children need help to develop self-knowledge about their background, geneology, race and ethnic background (where necessary) including also knowledge about the circumstances of coming to live with substitute carers, all these are necessary for the development of secure social identity (Triseloitis et al 1997).

Nock (1992) concurs with Triseloitis et al (1997) that the family provides the child with an initial social position, an ascribed status.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to establish the extent to which children's homes serve as substitute homes for vulnerable children in society.

Methodology
A case study of a children's home was carried out in Masvingo province because it was within easy reach for the researchers, considering costs and time. Tuckman (1994; 364) postulate that "a case study has a natural setting which is the data source and the researcher is the key data collection instrument". Best and Khan (1990) view a case study as a way of organizing social data with the purpose of viewing social reality.

The population at the children's home comprised 6 house mothers (caregivers), 3 administrators, 2 general hands, 34 children and one Social Welfare officers. The method used for sampling was purposive, where subjects who are able to provide information were sampled. According to Leedy and Ormrad (2005) purposive sampling is used when choosing people for a particular purpose. The sample consisted of 3 administrators, 2 general hands, 4 caregivers and 32 children. Interviews and observation were used to collect data. The interview method was used to collect data from administrators, caregivers and general hands. The interview method was used because it is the best method for collecting firsthand information. *****

The observation method was also used. The researchers observed children doing their daily chores, and also interacting with each other as well as with the elders at the home. The observation method was used because the researchers wanted to see how the home set-up compares with families in the society. ******

Analysis of Findings
Demographic data
The home has a capacity to house 96 children but at the time of the research there were 33 children, 20 boys and 13 girls, of whom 3 were in pre-school, 21 in primary school, 6 in secondary school, 2 in a special school for the mentally challenged and one who was considered too young to attend pre-school. These children ranged in age between 3 and 18 years. The highest number recorded at the institution is 70 children and the lowest 30.

Children who are housed in the home come from all over the country irrespective of gender, color, creed or background. These children are referred to the home through the department of Social welfare in conjunction with the Ministry of Justice and the Police. The cases that are referred to this home range from baby dumping (being the most common), abandonment, child abuse, neglect, rejection and total orphan hood being the least common.

The home is owned by the community and run by a committee. It is administered by a superintendent, a secretary, a finance administrator, 6 caregivers (house mothers0 and 2 general hands.

Categories of children at the home
Children at the home are classified into 2 categories. The first category is that of children who are 'at a place of safety'. These are children who were lost, abandoned or sexually abused and are being kept while the whereabouts of their parents and relatives is being established. At the time of the research, there were 3 boys and 2 girls in that category. Of the 5 children, one girl and one boy were victims of sexual abuse, and the perpetrator, their stepfather, was serving a jail sentence. One boy was lost and picked up by police while roaming the streets. The other two, a boy and a girl were dumped at the bus terminus. It was also reported that 4 other girls and one boy had been at the home due to juvenile delinquency, but at the time of the visit they had already left, having been reunited with their parents.

The second category is that of 'committed' children. These are children whose backgrounds are untraceable. At the time of the research, there were 28 committed children, 18 boys and 10 girls. Most of them were said to be victims of baby dumping. They do not have an identity so the institution gives them a totem and a birthday.

Reasons for staying and length of stay
The length of stay at the home depends on the category of the child. Those at a place of safety stay until the whereabouts of their parent or relatives have been established. One such boy was reunited with his parents after 4 years. Three others, two sisters and their niece who had been brought to the home upon the death of their parents were reunited with their close relative after their aunt disclosed their whereabouts at her deathbed. So these children were taken to their aunt's funeral, and it was only at her memorial service that they were reunited with their blood brother after three years. One girl who was a victim of sexual abuse by her father was sent back to her family to stay with an aunt after counseling and rehabilitation by the institution.

At times the home keeps children who run away from home (juvenile delinquency). At the time of the study, three such children had just been taken back to their home. They had come to the children's home on their own, after they had stolen money and ran away from their home. They were bought to the home by Social Welfare officers after they had lied that their parents were dead and the grandmother who was looking after them was also dead. The Department of Social Welfare had then carried out investigations and established that these children had run away from home.

From the above scenario, this shows that some children are at the institution not because they have no close relatives or parents, but relatives and parents might not want to take the responsibility of looking after their children. An example was given of a woman who had her 3 children at the institution but pretended to be a well-wisher. It was established after some time that she was their biological mother of these children.

The children in the 'committed' category can stay at the centre until they reach the age of majority, after which they have to leave. After leaving the home, some of them go to half-way homes while they attend tertiary education and the majority is presumed to join the world of employment. The 'committed' children come to the institution because of different reasons, the most common being baby dumping, (10 cases). This is due to moral degeneration, most of these dumped babies are from young girls who fall pregnant out of wedlock and find themselves faced with the burden of looking after the child, so they resort to dumping the baby. These dumped

babies are picked up by the public and taken to hospitals where they are kept until they can be sent to some children's home, usually at the age of 2 years. Meanwhile the Police will be trying to establish who the mother is and most of the time it is in vain. The Social Welfare department is responsible for the welfare of these dumped babies. Since the children will not have an identity, the hospital gives them names and surnames that are usually related to the places where they were picked up.

It shows how crucial it is for a person to have an identity and to belong to a family unit. The children's home takes the place of the lost family and gives the child a new identity, hence the idea of 'mothers', 'brothers' and 'sisters' at the home. Under normal circumstances it is the role of the family to orient children into social roles in society. Researchers in the role-theory tradition argue that people first acquire gender roles through socialization during childhood. Elkin and Handel (1984) support the idea when they say socialization is the process by which we learn the ways of a given society so that we can function within it. From the above argument, it means then that the children in this institution are mainly socialized by 'house mothers'. These mothers take the role of the absent mother and father in these children's lives. So in these children's homes, the vulnerable children find refuge in the sense that, at least they have somewhere to belong. In this way the home tries to sustain the normal family structure by giving the child a sort of identity. The male figures working at the institution are also taken by these children as the fathers and uncles. This shows that to some extent these children have 'both' parents at the institution. It is most unfortunate that these 'fathers' do not stay in the home units with the children, only the 'mothers' do.

Abandoned children are those who are left by parents or guardians mainly due to poverty. These children may be left in the home to fend for themselves, or are left at public places like bus stops or in the streets. They have names and surnames but are not able to say out their places of origin. One example is that of a child who was left by his mother at a bus terminus. The mother pretended to be buying something for the child, left the child in the custody of a fellow passenger and disappeared. The passenger then took the child to the nearest Police station and the Police took the child to the department of Social Welfare. The child ended up at the children's home. Another mother left a 4-year old boy and a 2-year old girl at a street corner with vegetable vendors, pretending to visit the toilet and she never came back. The children were taken to the police and ended up at the children's home. Two other boys aged 5 and 7 respectively were left at their family home by their father, the mother had died. The villagers realized after 7 days that the father had left the children and alerted the village head who in turn alerted the Police. No one in the village was prepared to take care of these children so they were taken to the children's home.

There are also children who come to the home because of total orphan hood. In the majority of such cases, the cause of parental death would be HIV/AIDS. In some cases one parent might be alive but too sick to take care of the children. One girl at the institution was sent to the home because the mother was too ill to look after the child. The mother later died. According to statistics given at the home, HIV/AIDS seems to be the major cause of total orphan hood. Sharma (2002) supports the idea that HIV/AIDS is the major contributory factor and estimates that 13 million children in sub-Saharan Africa lost their mother or both parents to HIV/AIDS. Nhambura

(2006) quotes the National Aids Council (NAC) as saying that one and a half million children in Zimbabwe have lost one or both parents due to HIV/AIDS.

Life at the home
Children at the home stay in 3 home units, each being manned by two 'house mothers'. Each household comprises a kitchen, pantry, lounge bedrooms and separate bathrooms and toilets for boys and for girls. Each bedroom houses 3 children usually of different ages. A secondary school child would share a bedroom with primary school children in the spirit of elder and younger brothers/sisters. Each family has a family setting with 'mother', 'brothers' and 'sisters', except that there is no father. All children call the administrator 'father'. This set-up enhances the social development of the child in the sense that they learn to relate to one another, each one taking a particular role. This gives the children emotional stability; it gives them a sense of belonging and they can identify themselves with members of the 'family'. They develop trust and attachment to other members of the family unit, so they learn to love and to share. Bruce and Meggitti (2002) support this when they say that children need to feel loved and to learn to love. This means that they need some reliable people in their lives to show them affection and warmth, and who will enjoy receiving their love and warmth in return. In the home the 'housemothers' become part of these children's social and emotional growth. They rely on these mothers for warmth and affection. Triseloitis et al (1997) are of the view that the need for love and security are probably the most important of forming the basis of developing a positive identity and the capacity to make rewarding relationships with an increasing number of people. Love and security involve an experience of good physical care, protection from danger, affection, continuity of care and an environment within which the child feels secure and a sense of belonging.

 There is also a common room which is a centre for recreation where children from the different house units meet and play. Entertainment is provided in the form of music and drama, in addition to the TV that is provided in each lounge where children can watch different programs. Children's homes provide the children with shelter which closely resembles family homes in society. They have a dining room where they eat together as a family. They are given balanced meals as evidenced by the meal program which they follow every day. The children were very relaxed when they were having their meal on the day of the visit. The bedrooms provide the children with comfort. There were enough blankets and bed linen to keep them warm during the night. The rooms give these children a sense of belonging as they call them their own and could arrange their things as they saw fit. They had a duty roster in the kitchen where each child had some responsibility to carry out. Their health needs are met by the Government which pays the children's hospital bills.

Children at the home attend church services at the home in their common room. Different churches take turns to come and conduct services at the institution to cater for the children's spiritual needs. No child attends church outside the home.

Children are allowed to interact with visitors from outside. The general public who have an interest in the welfare of the children can make occasional visits to the home. Relatives, if there are any, do not come to visit, and the authorities thought that they are afraid that they might be forced to take the child with them. The children are allowed to visit only those homes that will have been vetted by the Social Welfare officers, in case they are abused. These outside visits help

the children to be exposed to the outside world. Some are lucky to be taken out of the home during school holidays and stay with some families.

The institution appeared to be under-funded. The funds from the government are not enough to cater for the children's needs. All children at the home, except one infant, go to school and hence they need school fees. The institution relies on well-wishers for funds as government assistance was inadequate and erratic in coming. Sometimes, workers could go for 5 months without salaries, but they were very committed to their work and had patiently continued to work even without a salary. The greatest need for the institution is funds and clothes for the children. Food was not a problem since they had received enough from a reliable donor to last for the whole year. The home supplements their food through produce form the garden which is very productive. At times they sell their garden produce as well as chickens that they keep to the public to raise funds. They also have a grinding mill which they use to generate funds.

The home was under-staffed at the time of the visit and the reason given was that of inadequate funding for salaries. At times, the home employed unqualified staff and the home has tried to send them for short courses, which needs funding as well.

There was need to expand the poultry project and procure a truck which would be used to make follow up visits on those children who leave the centre after attaining the age of 18. At present there was no way of telling how these children fare in society save for the few who come back to visit. The home also needs more infrastructures in terms of staff quarters, an office block and a library.

Conclusion

The study established that the children's home acts as a refuge for vulnerable children. These vulnerable children are the abandoned, the neglected, the abused, the orphaned and juvenile delinquents. All these children could not find a place in society and ended up in children's homes where they find a new home, new relatives and friends. Some find themselves in these homes after being abused by parents or relatives, and are sent back home to live with some relatives or guardians after counseling and rehabilitation. These homes appear to take the place of the biological family in as far as their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs are concerned.

The study established that some children temporarily stay in the home for a certain period while an effort is made to locate their relatives, those at the so-called 'place of safety', while others, those whose backgrounds are untraceable, the 'committed', stay until they reach the legal age of majority.

The researchers established that the mother figures at the home provide motherly care for these children. The home setup that the institution adopted enables the children to develop an attachment with the mothers, to the extent that it resembles a biological relationship where motherly, brotherly and sisterly care is evident.

Generally, the study established that the home is a viable children's refuge providing total care and community participation. It provides a nurturing environment for the vulnerable children. While the centre strives to nurture these children, the major challenge they face is that of funding.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the Government provides meaningful grants on a regular basis to cater for the needs of every child in the home. This would go a long way in assisting the authorities to run the home smoothly by engaging qualified personnel to work with the children and to cover other essential expenses such as school fees. The surrounding community needs to be conscientised of the need to assist these vulnerable children by donating both in cash and in kind. Awareness campaigns could be done in schools and churches so as to make other children aware of the plight of the vulnerable children. If the whole community gets involved, it could help the children's home to sustain itself and be effective in developing the physical, emotional, psychological spiritual and social needs of these children.

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