

The Role of the Church in Reintegration of Street Children into Their Families in Lusaka District

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Abstract: *The purpose of the study was to analyze the role of the church in the reintegration process and to come up with new strategies for increasing the effectiveness of these rehabilitation activities. The study objectives were to establish the type of support churches provide to the families with children on the street in Lusaka district and to assess the church-led initiatives that foster positive parent-child relationships after integration of street children in Lusaka district. A total sample of five families, 15 family members and four counsellors totaling to 19 participants made the total sample of the study. Interviews were conducted with parents and their children while a focus group discussion was conducted in this study at the sampled church grounds. Data was analyzed thematically by sorting similar responses and created themes under which the findings were presented. The study found that that under family talk on child care, it was the responsibility of the family to initiate family integration was initiated by the willingness of the family and the child at the same time. With regards to child safety and future consequences, the church had a responsibility to ensure that the family provided safety guarantees for the child before the child could be talked to by the church counsellors. On food provision to broken families, the church provided start up packs for families which were struggling to keep their children at home. the financial provision for family sustainability was available to the parents whose children were integrated into the family and the parents were helped financially with capital for business and employment as maids or guards to help them earn a living. It can be concluded that the church and parents played a crucial role in ensuring that there was effective and peaceful integration of children into the main family. The study recommended that Churches should come to the aid of the parents and homes where children have left for the streets so that family integration is supported. This will enable members of the church to feel safe to belong to the church since there will be enough help*

Keywords: Street children, church, reintegration, family reunification,

INTRODUCTION

Street children are a socially at-risk population and, as a rule, experience negative effects from several adverse childhood experiences that raise their risk for mental health issues and psychiatric disorders. Almost all the street children in Lusaka, Zambia are without shelter due to poor treatment, poor parenting and dysfunctional homes. The most recent articles emphasized the family characteristics, including the parenting strategies and their relation to the traumatic histories of the mentioned above children as the main factors to consider while exploring the experiences of these children (Maguire et al., 2020; Bowers & Cummings, 2022). Positive parenting techniques and interventions including those by religion in the case of positive parenting are gradually being accepted as a tool for reintegration. There is evidence that supportive environments like those promoted by community / church-based organizations are instrumental to meeting the emotional and psychological needs of street children. Family therapy, parenting workshops, ongoing support in religious settings in Lusaka, where children are in church programs, show effectiveness in enhancing the parent-child relationship and hence, reintegration to family (Jansen et al., 2021; Williams & Thompson, 2022). This study, therefore, aims at analyzing the role of the church in the reintegration process and to come up with new strategies for increasing the effectiveness of these rehabilitation activities.

Existing evidence indicates that permanent or temporary psychological health and physiological-related issues for adult individuals may arise from childhood traumatic experiences (Huang et al., 2021). Stressful circumstances are unique for every person as their effects reflect the change happening in the subject throughout development stages (Miller et al., 2020). Adverse childhood experiences in children cause depressive signs, anxiety, mood swings, confusion, hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, and sudden irritability, increased sensitivity, mistrust, and fear of potential dangers even in familiar environments (McLaughlin et al., 2019). Children who suffer child neglect or/and child abuse and lack of proper attachment are most likely to end up being homeless considering that many of the children are fostered out by the state (Smith et al., 2022). Child abuse according to World Health Organization (2016) is any act or lack of act that results in violent or severe consequences for a child's health, well-being or safety, in other words any harm that can impede a child's progress of growth or even possibility to grow up. Child abuse effects can even continue in later years, in ways that an individual may have an insecure attachment, criminality, or spousal abuse (Zajac et al., 2023). Besides these indirect results, clinical cost can still be induced by child abuse producing not only psychological and behavioral disorder but also involved in the economic effect. For instance, the approximate yearly social cost of child abuse in the United States is more than \$124 billion, as stated by Fang et al. and Smith & Waldfogel in their respective studies of 2012 and 2021.

A study by Forslund, Granqvist, van IJzendoorn, Sagi-Schwartz, Glaser, Steele and Duschinsky, (2021) argued that it is imperative to provide families with support to facilitate good-enough care, and not threaten continuity of care without the most serious of justifications. Furthermore, we argued that although child removal is sometimes warranted, there are risks associated with breaking established attachment bonds, and it often leads to unstable out-of-home care arrangements with adverse consequences for the child's development. Ferguson, Kelly, & Pink, (2021) show how social workers creatively 're-made' key aspects of their practice, by recognising inequalities and providing material help, through digital casework, movement and walking encounters, and by going into homes and taking risks by getting close to children and parents. The counsellors should be able to use the familiar languages and probably translanguaging when talking to children for them to help them understand each other (Nyimbili, 2021) as this would help smooth communication.

In addition, Andrej and Smiljana (2020) noted that the process of integration children must be understood as a gradual and individual process in the development of a child's street career and that, through analysis of its stages, a significant contribution to the individualization of RR programmes can be made. They added that a campaign to deliberately raise public awareness that giving money to begging street children is not charity but active participation in keeping them on the street, significantly influence the number of street children in the district of Lusaka. To this, Sheila and Shekhar (2020) supported that many vices occur which include child labour, child sex work and trafficking, child marriage and child sexual abuse, and that result in immediate and long-term mental health problems in children. Other scholars argue that legal protection for children as victims of economic exploitation has not been effective. This means that there are obstacles/obstacles in its implementation, including the obstacles faced in dealing with the problem of violence and economic exploitation of children, namely law enforcement in controlling children, not solving the root problem, only taking curative action, not preventing it.

A Zambian study by Fellows (2016) established that the United Church of Zambia contributed to the economic and social development by offering employment, engaging in community development, advocating for women's economic rights and providing education facilities from preschool to secondary schools among others. Matafwali (2023) found that child neglect and sexual abuse were prevalent, emphasising girls' vulnerability. Child protection services played a crucial role but 48% of providers reported unpreparedness for emergencies. Child risk factors included age (46.1%), community substance abuse (45%), and parental absence (40%). Also, Desiderio, García-Herrero, Hall, Segrè and Vittuari (2022) stated that food supply chain stakeholders can benefit from the implementation of social sustainability aspects, although these benefits become inconsistent if not respected in each stage. With regards to poverty, Kotze (2016) realised that poverty is collective sin! Getting paid is economic empowerment. In addition, Malaya (2021) agrees that poverty creates barriers of interrelation; socially, politically, economically and

spiritually, because “monopoly over production” and “understanding power as ‘power over’ and ‘domination’”.

This study defines parenting style as the manner that parents use when comforting, punishing, encouraging, and safeguarding their children (Chandler et al., 2019). Positive parenting practices require development of attachment between the child and the parent or a primary adult caregiver (Huang et al., 2021). This bond is made through a normal set of interactions that occur between the mother and child, changing them both in the parent-child interaction circle (Darling and Steinberg, 2019). A theoretical model of parenting styles is provided by Baumrind (1991) and consists of three basic dimensions: authoritarian, authoritative (Democratic), and permissive (uninvolved). Authoritative parenting style is characterized by parents as being warm and supportive, vigilant, responsive and demanding but not overbearing while at the same time promoting independence (Darling and Steinberg, 2019). In contrast, authoritarian parenting is headed by controlling, punitive, rejecting, and power assertive behaviors. Lastly, permissive parenting entails warm acceptance and involvement while having little control or supervision (Baumrind, 1991). From several empirical findings done on the subject, it was deduced that permissive parenting styles promoted delinquent behavior of adolescents, evident among street youths (Okorodudu, 2020). This is because while permissive parents do not correct their children or set a proper limit to the child and the child’s behavior, the children will learn behaviors from their environment that will be reinforced by the surroundings (Smith et al., 2022). However, authoritarian and permissive child-rearing practices contribute to the development of antisocial behavior higher rates (Hart et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018). To this, it can be clear that what was not established in the Zambian society was the role of the church in the reintegration process and to come up with new strategies for increasing the effectiveness of these rehabilitation activities

Statement of the Problem

Street children lack basic psychological and emotional needs and have multiple experiences that lead to psychological and emotional disorder; it becomes very challenging for such children to be reintegrated into society and with families (Kavuma et al., 2022). Lusaka street children are often from dysfunctional homes, and they experience different forms of neglect and abuse (Chanda et al., 2021). However, despite these interventions, the impact of such experiences, in the long run, is still not well-managed (Mwanza & Mwewa, 2023). The church has always had an important responsibility of creating positive contexts as well as attending to the psychological aspects of such children (Banda, 2020). However, literature on how church-led interventions enhance family reunification, emotional recovery and psychological wellbeing of street children remains scarce (Nkhata et al., 2021). This study, therefore, aims at analyzing the role of the church in the reintegration process and to come up with new strategies for increasing the effectiveness of these rehabilitation activities.

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Establish the type of support churches provide to families with children on the street in Lusaka district.
2. Assess the church-led initiatives that foster positive parent-child relationships after integration of street children in Lusaka district

METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative and used a phenomenological research design on the population which includes families which have undergone child integration for the past five months. A total sample of five families, 15 family members and four counsellors totaling to 19 participants made the total sample of the study. Interviews were conducted with parents and their children while a focus group discussion was conducted in this study at the sampled church grounds. The participants were sampled using expert purposive sampling due to its advantages (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024). Data was analyzed thematically by sorting similar responses and creating themes under which the findings were presented. Participants were assured that they would not be mentioned in the study and their identity was to be kept secret. An informed consent was signed before data could be collected, risks and benefits for participating in the study were shared. Every participant was assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without the researcher feeling offended.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data for the study was collected from parents, the children who went away from home and the church counsellors who are tasked to handle such matters. The study findings are presented under the following themes: family talk on child care, child safety and future consequences, food provision to broken families and financial provision for family sustainability.

Family talk on child care

Participants revealed that initiating family integration was initiated by the willingness of the family and the child at the same time. It was learnt that parents were always willing to make their children come back to their homes at any time, but the children did not find the home conditions favourable especially if the children were making some money through pieces of work. One parent stated that:

I have always been willing to take back my child into my family when he left. The problem has been that the child was found to be having better meals on the street than what we provided at home. This made the child come and go back to the street after finding the conditions had not improved.

One counsellor said:

To initiate the comeback for the child is something which is not easy as some children become emotional when we approach them to discuss the integration. After the child cools and thinks of talking, that is when we continue to discuss the integration process.

A family participant added that:

It is always healthy to be reunited with my family, but we had to agree on some terms with my parents which made me leave their home. I am happy that we were able to talk to each other in a very frank manner and agree on the future we all wanted.

From this, it was clear that when church initiates child integration, a family talk was significant to this process. The results of the study agree with Andrej and Smiljana (2020) whose study found that the process of integration children must be understood as a gradual and individual process in the development of a child's street career and that, through analysis of its stages, a significant contribution to the individualization of RR programs can be made. They added that a campaign to deliberately raise public awareness that giving money to begging street children is not charity but active participation in keeping them on the street, significantly influence the number of street children in the district of Lusaka. The process of not giving them money can be the best process of making them go home since their source of income would no longer be sustainable. Through this process, it can be argued that there is need to also strengthen the local institutions to ensure that children are aware of the dangers associated with being on the street so that when integration is initiated, there should be no problems for both children and parents.

Child safety and future consequences

The study established that the church ensured that the family provided safety guarantees for the child before the child could be talked to by the church counsellors. The family was engaged first to provide consent to bring the child back and, in most cases, it was the parents who approached the church for its interventions. The family discussed the future security of the child before the child was engaged. On counsellor stated that:

What we do is that, when a family approaches the church for help to bring back the child, we first find out how the child left the home, what has changed and how they hope to keep the child when he or she comes back.

Another counsellor added that:

We only proceed to talk to the child after the parents give us a safety plan for the child and assure us that they can keep the child better than they did before the child left. So, we even visit the home for the parents, assess their preparedness and things they have put in place to ensure the child does not go back to the street.

One parent noted that:

The church made us prepare for the child better than we did before so that the child does not go back to the street. We were asked to assure the church that the child will be safe and will have a better life than before.

It can be argued that children could only be reintegrated into the main family after parents provided safety guarantees for the child. If there is no integration, Sheila and Shekhar (2020) found that many vices occur which include child labour, child sex work and trafficking, child marriage and child sexual abuse, and that result in immediate and long-term mental health problems in children. Other scholars argue that legal protection for children as victims of economic exploitation has not been effective. This means that there are obstacles/obstacles in its implementation, including the obstacles faced in dealing with the problem of violence and economic exploitation of children, namely law enforcement in controlling children, not solving the root problem, only taking curative action, not preventing it. The future consequences are that children will have no empathy for the people in the community because of the rough and bad surroundings they are subjected too while their parents are around but cannot just afford to raise them decently. Therefore, children need integration into the main family and ensure that they improve their social and psychological standing in society for them to become responsible people.

Food provision to broken families

The participants established that the church provided start up packs for families which were struggling to keep their children at home. It was learnt that the main reason some of the children were on the street was hunger at home which led to parents sending children into the streets to look for food. One participant stated that:

The main reason why children leave their homes is the acute hunger situation where parents send their children to look for handouts on the streets. When children are used to getting handouts, they go for good as they think this is a source of income. So, hunger becomes a reason for leaving home.

One counsellor said:

As a church, we have collaborated with partners who have provided some food humpers to some families which cannot manage to feed themselves. This includes a monthly bag of maize meal, some cooking oil, sugar, kapenta, K300 cash, salt and detergent. This enables the families to stay stable for some days or a month depending on the number of family members.

A parent noted that:

The food which we have been receiving from the church through the counsellors has made our children stay home. Our children were leaving

home because of lack of food but now they are home. I just hope that the church will not stop soon because the children may go back to the street.

Food provision has been a serious factor which makes children stay home apart from parental care. The findings of the study are in tandem with Fellows (2016) who established that the United Church of Zambia contributed to the economic and social development by offering employment, engaging in community development, advocating for women's economic rights and providing education facilities from preschool to secondary schools among others. It was concluded that the church was a valuable partner in the social and economic development of the citizenry. It promoted the holistic development of the citizens, and this had a ripple effect on the Social and economic development of a country through helping mend the broken homes. Also, Desiderio, García-Herrero, Hall, Segrè and Vittuari (2022) stated that food supply chain stakeholders can benefit from the implementation of social sustainability aspects, although these benefits become inconsistent if not respected in each stage. The church becomes a major stakeholder for the broken families as it has a social role of making sure that all the people find peace and comfort in it. Through these efforts, communities and churches create a long and sustainable link which enables them to depend on each other.

Financial provision for family sustainability.

The study findings revealed that families who were assisted financially by the few well-wishers selected by the counsellors managed to keep their children as a family and no child left the home for the street. Meanwhile, the parents whose children were integrated into the family and the parents were helped financially with capital for business and employment as maids or guards to help them earn a living. One counsellor stated that:

Some well-to-do church members have volunteered to help some vulnerable church members through offering them jobs so that they do not depend on handouts. Some have been employed as guards while some women have been employed as maids. They are assured of a steady monthly income to support their children.

A parent noted that:

I was employed as a driver through the church. After I got sick, I was given another job as a stores man in the warehouse. Through this job, my children have been supported to go to school and I have a stable family now. No child has ever gone back to the street.

Another parent added that:

I am a maid for our church members. I was offered the job when they found me sick, and my children were found looking for food on the street through handouts. I was assisted with medication and after I recovered, I was asked

if I could work as a maid, and I was happy. For five years now, my children have never gone to the street to beg for food and money.

Financial stability initiated by the church and its members brings about sustainable family ties and cohesion in the communities. The study findings are supported by Kotze (2016) who argued that poverty is collective sin! Getting paid is economic empowerment. In addition, Malaya (2021) agrees that poverty creates barriers of interrelation; socially, politically, economically and spiritually, because “monopoly over production” and “understanding power as ‘power over’ and ‘domination’”. Through the support of the church, poverty should be fought and ensure the members are self-sustaining. The results of the study are further supported by Matafwali (2023) who found that child neglect and sexual abuse were prevalent, emphasising girls’ vulnerability. Child protection services played a crucial role but 48% of providers reported unpreparedness for emergencies. Child risk factors included age (46.1%), community substance abuse (45%), and parental absence (40%). Therefore, the provision of financial independence to church members was indirectly curbing the rampant child abuse which results in children leaving their homes for the street which is more dangerous. Therefore, it should be the role of the church to ensure that they plough back into the membership by supporting the vulnerable financially so that they can provide for their families.

CONCLUSION

From the study, the study concluded that under family talk on childcare, it was the responsibility of the family to initiate family integration. It was learnt that parents were always willing to make their children come back to their homes at any time, but the children did not find the home conditions favourable especially if the children were making some money through pieces of work. With regards to child safety and future consequences, the church had a responsibility to ensure that the family provided safety guarantees for the child before the child could be talked to by the church counsellors. The family should be engaged first to provide consent to bring the child back and, in most cases, it is the parents who should approach the church for its interventions and security of the child. On food provision to broken families, the church provided start up packs for families which were struggling to keep their children at home. It was learnt that the main reason some of the children were on the street was hunger at home which led to parents sending children into the streets to look for food. Lastly, the financial provision for family sustainability was available to the parents whose children were integrated into the family and the parents were helped financially with capital for business and employment as maids or guards to help them earn a living. From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the church and parents played a crucial role in ensuring that there was effective and peaceful integration of children into the main family.

Recommendations

The study recommends that:

- a. Churches should come to the aid of the parents and homes where children have left for the streets so that family integration is supported. This will enable members of the church to feel safe to belong to the church since there will be enough help.
- b. The families with children on the street should engage church counsellors so that they can help them bring back the children. This should be in line with the safety measures provided for child reintegration.

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