SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF UNACCOMPANIED MINORS SEEKING TO CROSS ZIMBABWE-SOUTH AFRICA BORDER

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore the socio-economic challenges of unaccompanied child migrants in Zimbabwe's Beitbridge district. The study examined factors that force children to illegally cross/ seek to cross the Zimbabwe- South Africa border without guidance and it also examined challenges faced by the child migrants during their transit. Micheal Ungar's resilience across cultures theory informed the study. The study adopted a qualitative research approach where in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and key informant interviews were triangulated to collect data. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that children leave their homes due to poverty, abuse and neglect among other reasons. These determinants were identified as the major factors that push children away from home in search of better opportunities in other countries. The study also revealed that on their way to South Africa children face abuse from transporters and there is spread of diseases due to sexual abuse. The study recommends that the government of Zimbabwe as the leading agent for the welfare of children should devise measures that strengthen families so that they contain children even in cases of life shocks. The study also recommends for closer collaboration between the government and private partners in improving the economic base of families. Social workers and other helping professions were also recommended to train parents on some good parenting strategies that help to improve the welfare of their children.

Keywords: child migration, child trafficking, unaccompanied minors, challenges, resilience across cultures theory

INTRODUCTION

Child migration has been growing for some time due to various socio-economic factors such as poverty, abuse and neglect. According to the Masud, Pfeil, Agarwal, and Gonzalez-Briseno (2017) more than 1500 children in Zimbabwe have been induced to forced migrations annually due to poverty and neglect. Beitbridge district being a border town has been found to be the hot spot of unaccompanied child migrants who target to work in South African rural areas and farms. Masud et al. (2017) assert that unaccompanied minors end up being employed in working environments detrimental to their well-being such as mines. This violates the basic International Labour Organisation's (ILO) standards that interdict all forms of child labour. According to a 2018 report by the Ministry of Public Services, Labour and Department of Social Welfare, cases of unaccompanied child migrants with no identification documents have been on the rise in Zimbabwe's border posts with both South Africa and Botswana. The department noted that the number of illegal child migrants increases during holidays and some of them very young which

exposes them to all forms of abuse by strangers. The department recorded that 150 children were rescued by the government and various NGOs between January and June 2018 (Department of Social Welfare, 2018). It is against this introduction that the current study sought to examine socio-economic challenges of unaccompanied minors seeking to cross Zimbabwe-South Africa border.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of unaccompanied minors is one of the most complicated issues before the international community today (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). According to Swart (2009) there are millions of illegal child migrants in Africa who are vulnerable to abuse and who, therefore, need to be protected in order to ensure that their human rights are not violated. Unaccompanied child migrants require special protection as a consequence of their exceptional vulnerability. Unaccompanied minors require special protection because of their personal situations and their immediate need for nurturing and care. According to article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), unaccompanied minors are children who have been separated from both parents, as well as from other adults who have a legal or customary duty to care for the child. These children lack parental care and are highly exposed to external abuse. In Zimbabwe, due to high levels of poverty ranging to 95% (ZIMVAC, 2017), children are being forced to migrate from their homes in search for better lives in neighbouring countries such as South Africa. In the process of migrating, these children usually carry no legal documents for identification and expose themselves to abuse.

According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2019), unaccompanied minors have become a critical vulnerable group of children under the refugee programming across the globe where conflicts are escalating. Unaccompanied and separated minors have gained a crucial recognition and are on the spotlight in humanitarian settings and development programming. Considering the global or international overview of the fate of unaccompanied child migrants, different scholars shared varied opinions on the push and pull factors for illegal child migration. Bayti (2009) avers that in the European Union perspective, an unaccompanied minor is a third-country national or stateless person below the age of 18 years, who arrives on the territory of the (Member) States unaccompanied by the adult responsible for them by law or by the practice of the country of origin. The definition was corroborated by Rosenben (2011) who defines illegal child migrants as minors who are left unaccompanied without care of an adult person after they have entered the territory of another member state. There are various push and pull factors that influence the illegal migration of children from their mother land to foreign nations. Highest level of desperation by some children from member states experiencing internal struggles have been recorded to be the major push factor among sending countries.

In a regional overview of cases of unaccompanied child migrants, United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] (2016) reports that Africa has lowest number of unaccompanied numbers worldwide. However, even though the figures are less as compared to other continents, the trend of unaccompanied minors is found to be steadily increasing within African countries (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR] 2012). UNICEF (2016) states that about 3 million children are forced to leave their home countries and are facing the cruellest atrocities along the way as they travel to desired destinations in search for a supposedly better life. Wahis (2017) shares the same sentiments that most unaccompanied minors face various forms of

human rights violations as they try to illegally travel from one country to another. She gives a case scenario of unaccompanied and separated children who are received in Uganda, Africa. Wahis (2017:7) writes, "no matter their country of destination, these children face a variety of rights violations, from exploitation and violence to being separated from their families or caregivers and deprived of essential protection and services. These abuses constitute a grave human rights crisis. This is the case for the children of South Sudan who fled their country to Uganda in search of safety and peace." Wahis (2017) reported that a million South Sudanese refugees purportedly left the country due to conflict, drought and hunger. These emigrants largely found their way to Uganda and children have not been spared of the long distances they travel to safety.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research used the Resilience Across Cultures (RAC) model as its theoretic framework. The model was developed by Michael Ungar (2005) in the area of Positive Youth Development. This approach is relatively consistent with Frazier's (1999) and Rutter's (2007) work on risk and coping. The vital impression is that of resilience; the capacity of individuals to access resources that enhance their well-being and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make those resources available in a meaningful way. Ungar (2005) is clear in defining resilience as an interaction between individuals and their environments, not simply individual attributes. This accommodates cultural diversity without pathologising differences in coping strategies and other areas related to adaption. Ungar (2005) focuses on positive adjustment in the face of adversity and trauma among young persons. He accounts for physical and social context, including the youth development perspective. RAC's framework contributes four conceptual areas of inquiry for this study which are challenges, success, support, and capability. The model will be used to analyse the resources that unaccompanied children have in their disposal or tool box. The model helped to assess how these resources can be used to deal with to be identified challenges facing unaccompanied child migrants. The Resilience across Cultures model is often applicable when dealing with people experiencing significant trauma, depression and adversities. The model provides a strengths-based approach in addressing the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors in the face of various calamities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach which involves the systematic collection, organization and interpretation of textual information. Young (2017:4) defines qualitative research as "an inductive approach to the generation of novel insights into phenomena that are difficult to quantify". Considering the lived experiences of unaccompanied child migrants, the approach helped the researchers to gather narratives of participants. Creswell (2009) perceives research design into three interrelated aspects that include knowledge claim, strategies of inquiry and methods of data collection and analysis. These features help the researcher to gather valid, credible and reliable data. This study used a phenomenological philosophical view which enabled

unaccompanied child migrants to give meaning to their lived experiences. The approach was crucial in analysing factors that push children from their families in search of greener pastures in other countries. It enables children living the situation to create and recreate social reality through their life experiences as illegal migrants and minors.

Population and Sampling

Target population refers to the entire group or elements which the researcher is interested to draw conclusions on (Rubin & Barbie, 2008). The research targeted unaccompanied child migrants found in the South African – Zimbabwe border post of Beitbridge with an aim to establish their shared experiences, opinions and views on the challenges they face when trying to cross the border illegally. A sample of 15 purposefully selected unaccompanied minors participated in the study. Five key informants who included three child welfare officers employed by the Department of Social Welfare and two NGO employees were purposefully selected to participate in the study. These were selected considering their seniority at work and their experience with child migrants in need of care.

Data Collection and Analysis

Three data collection methods were used and these are interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interview. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the 15 unaccompanied minors who also participated in one focus group discussion. Data were collected from the five key informants using key informant interviews. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

(i)   Biographical Characteristics of The Participants

Out of the fifteen unaccompanied minors, there were nine boys and six girls. The researchers realised that there are more male children involved in illegal child migration as compared to the girl child. The participants were between the age ranges from 12 to 17 years. Out of nine boys who participated in the research study, five were 15 year olds, two were 17 year olds and the other two were aged 12 and 13 years. The girls who were chosen for the study also fell in the same age range. Three of the girls were aged 17 while the other three were aged 13, 14 and 15 years of age. All the fifteen children were school dropouts with the highest level of attainment being Form 2[1]. Only three boys had reached secondary school and dropped at Form 2 level due to lack of funding at home. The other 12 participants ended their schooling at primary level.

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[1] Second level of secondary education in Zimbabwe

(ii)   Social Challenges Forcing Children to Illegally Cross The Border

Participants gave diverse opinions on the factors that force them to escape home in the quest of finding greener pastures in nearby countries probably South Africa. Views and expositions of unaccompanied child migrants were put into social and economic factors that push children away from home. Among the social determinants shared by participants include abuse at home, child neglect in their families and gender based violence which affected the emotional ability of children. These factors are systematically discussed below into sub themes with data being transcribed into extending quotations of children's experiences.

Abuse at home

Unaccompanied child migrants reported that they experienced emotional, psychological and physical abuse at home which forced them to escape home as a safety strategy. One participant indicated that she stayed with her auntie who abused her regularly which forced the child to escape from home. Children are minors who require love, caring and happiness all the time, therefore surviving in a stressful environment will trigger misbehaviour that might force children to resort to harmful coping mechanisms. Aggravated abuse at home was recorded by a girl child who indicated that:

> *"I am the first born in a family of three children, our parents died last of last year and I then went to stay with my abusive auntie while my other siblings are staying in Bulilima with my grandmother. My auntie is so abusive she beats me every day and it affected me that is why I decided to run away with an aim to crossover to Messina but now it is difficult".*

The child explicated that her abusive stay with auntie forced her to think of escaping home. This shows that circumstances at home pushed unaccompanied child migrants to venture into risky coping strategies which are even worse than staying at an abusive home. The other participant who was a seventeen-year-old boy indicated that:

> *"Ooooosh sister life is so tight, my parents died when I was 15 and I have my little siblings in Masvingo, I am the one who provides for the family through peace jobs and try to pay school fees but now it's hard on my side so I decided to go to South Africa to look for money to feed my siblings haaa it's so tight".*

The boy came as far as Masvingo with an aim to cross the border to South Africa in search of greener pastures. The findings reflected that both push and pull factors influenced children to escape home. The first participant indicated that her auntie was so abusive while the boy showed that the need to look for better opportunities in South Africa influenced him to leave home. His aim was to find money and support his younger siblings since they were left at a tender age with both of their parents. This shows that orphans especially those in child headed families experience a lot of unbearable burden which influence them to leave their homes in search of better opportunities. Choruma (2006) conducted a study on the push factors on illegal child migration to

neighbouring countries. He established that poverty and abuse are at the core of child migration using illegal means. In line with Choruma (2006), the study revealed that poverty at home forces elder siblings to run away from home while other children experience abuse which drive them away from their homes.

Child neglect

The study gathered that child neglect is a pushing factor that led children to escape home to nearby countries. Child neglect involves inattentive attitude of guardians towards their children, Morris (1994). This involves the failure of parents or guardians to offer help, attention and minimum care that children require. This is because according to Erick Erickson, children require independent as well as support and care from their immediate others. Therefore, a gap in these needs may force children to feel disempowered, abandoned and unwanted which result in risk behaviours that include malingering. Three participants in a focus group discussion indicated that they were being left unattended by their parents who even went for three days with no food at home. The children shared the same sentiments arguing that:

> *"It was better if my parents threw me in a bin at a tender age that neglecting me like that.... they chose to go for weeks without coming back and they left no food in the house with dirty clothing, on top of that you will be given with huge tasks to do while hungry, is that possible".*

After thoroughly facilitating group discussions, the researcher asked the children where the parents had been going and she found out that their mothers were commercial sex workers at Ngundu growth point while fathers were into gold panning in areas near Shurugwi. The children showed that they arranged as a group to escape home with an aim to crossover to South Africa as a result of neglect at home. A 13 year-old girl reiterated that:

> *"My mother was a vendor at Ngundu growth point and also did prostitution with those truck drivers ....at the same time my father is into gold panning in areas near Shurugwi where he can go for long without coming back, even to send money back home he neither do".*

Unproductive families have been recorded to be the causing agents of illegal child migration and the majority of children reported to be from Masvingo province in areas surrounding Ngundu. This was revealed during data collection that many children were from Masvingo and they were victims of poverty and neglect. The researcher established that children require regular care in order to keep them under control. Ungar (2005) in his Resilience across cultures theory, which is the theoretical guide of this study, believed that the construction of problems in human life is dialogical meaning that it involves the reasoning between two or more people or intra-reasoning within the affected person. The shared experience of neglect among these children forced them to decide to escape homes and illegally cross the border with adult supervision. Houston and Griffiths (2000) have shown that at some point in life, risks are socially constructed depending on the identification of what people experience as risks to their well-being. This reveals that minors can experience a

problem at home and through their reasoning as young individuals or through social learning and peer influence, they may choose to illegally cross the border without identification documents, financial backup or proper destination points. This automatically exposes them to risks and adversities that affect their well-being and overall development as children.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

One participant recounted that there was unrest with in her family as it was characterised by regular and consistent fights between her parents. She indicated that her elder brothers usually intervened in the fight which worsened the situation. The child elaborated that her father and the elder brother were alcoholics who abused drugs and thereby ill-treating others at home. The child when asked by the researcher if she was interested in going back home, she had this to say:

> *"(aaaah hahah (laughing) home again surprisingly ....i do not go back home again I need to cross the border or else I will stay here in Beitbridge. At home there are always fights and they shout each other with unbearable words? My father beats up my mother to an extent of killing and my brother intervene beating my father, sometimes my mother beats me up as well so let them stay there on their own".*

The child indicated that violence at home was an eyesore which affected her as she was always a victim. Her sentiments showed that it was even harder for her to witness her father assaulting the mother to an extent of killing her and the mother projected her anger on the child. The child failed to survive in this threatening environment and then decided to illegally cross the border with no parental consent and adult guidance.

The findings from the study indicated that endemic poverty and violence within the extended family were among the push factors that contribute to child migration. This violates the overriding principle of the "best interests of the child" towards the care and protection of children. In Syria, child migration was reported to be a result of structural violence usually marred by political differences and civil unrest. However, this study revealed that violence within the family was a major cause as there was no influence of national politics as in Syria. Stinchcomb and Hershberg (2014) on their study in Central America posit that sending communities often experience internal struggles which act as push factors for the children migration. This was found to be a borrowed phenomenon in this context since the study gathered that family violence was the major cause of illegal child migration unlike in other violent prone areas such as Syria and Nigeria where structural fights purported to be the major causes of child migration.

(iii)   Economic Factors that Push Children to Illegally Cross/Seek to Cross The Border

As indicated from the outcomes of the study through key informants and in-depth interviews, prevailing economic condition within the country had a heavy force on the trafficking of children towards the South African border in search of job opportunities. Economic factors are discussed below with special reference given to child labour, child prostitution and family poverty.

Child labour

Key informants reported that children escape poverty from their homes since most of them have parents who work and live in the diaspora and they rarely come back home or repatriate goods and services to their left behind families. A Department of Social Welfare officer reported that their everyday cases were dominated by children who ran away from work even at a tender age which is against the international standards of child labour indicated by International Labour Organisation (ILO) which states that it is harmful to employ people below the age of 18 in any income benefiting employment. The officer had this to say:

> *"You know these children are largely victims of child abuse, they work and sell in the streets of Ngundu and Beitbridge and you know they are being used by their elders who give them nothing in return. They sell wares and belongings of their elder people such as boiled eggs, water, drinks and fruits. They are being told that we will give you money, buy food and bring cloth for you when I go to Mussina but at the end of the day they get very nothing…you know it's a very disgusting situation."*

The key informant narrated the case of a child who was tasked to stay at someone's home in return he was promised school fees and all necessary welfare needs but got nothing after the child served the whole December holiday while the couple had a vacation in Johannesburg. The key informant reported that:

> *"Aaaah last year we attended to another case of a child who was promised to send to school of taking care of another yard in Limpopo view. You it is an affluent family but they failed to give a thank you to that child. So you know these children are victims of circumstances, sometimes it's not their wish to cross the border but just that they are being used for nothing by heartless people".*

These expositions from key informants indicated that child labour is a driving force that pushes children to illegally cross the border without legal identification documents or all necessary travelling items such as passports and enough bus fare. Another girl child in a focus group discussion narrated her case with her former caregiver. She stated that she was taken from her rural home in Chivi to work in Chiredzi as a maid. The caregiver or employer was a cross border dealer who bought things in bulk in Mussina and sell in Chiredzi. The girl with eyes flowing indicated that:

> *"My aunt looked for a job for me in Chiredzi and we were in Chivi. My work was as a maid and the women I worked for was a cross border dealer with market places in Chiredzi. My role was as a maid but one day she tasked me to attend to one of her market places where she said I stole her money which I never did and she said if you do not want to go to jail then leave this home…that is when I came here".*

The child narrated a sorrowful event with tears on her eyes. The researcher at some point wanted to cry as well but the principle of controlled emotional involvement was thoroughly observed. The

findings showed that children were being used to labour for nothing and this influenced them to leave their homes in search of greener pastures. The resilience across cultures by Ungar (2005) focuses on positive adjustment in the face of adversity and trauma among young persons. Resilience across Culture's framework contributes four conceptual areas of inquiry for this study which are challenges, success, support, and capability. One of the concepts is challenge and successes that came out of the adversity. The child decided to escape the harsh situation in a bid to find job opportunities in South Africa.

Abject poverty

Another representative from the non-governmental organisation that assist unaccompanied children in Beitbridge border post indicated that highest levels of poverty within communities and the country at large had a pressing force on illegal child migration. The officer had this to say:

> *"You know the problem is not within our families or our children, the problem is structural…it is deeply rooted in our communities and the nation at large because you know poverty is caused by high inequality and unequal distribution of resources in our country…these children have no opportunities in their communities and in the country as a whole so when they go out they are looking for better opportunities"*

The key informant's exclamations were highly unique from other participants because he noticed that poverty was not a result of individual flaws but rather it was a serious issue that needed the government to take action. The participant pointed out that unequal opportunities within communities and the nation at large had a greater force on illegal migration of children from their homes to South Africa. This can be referenced to Royce's (2005) structural theory of poverty which argues that unequal distribution of resources and reduced employment opportunities expose families to poverty. This causes children to employ risk coping mechanisms in trying to acquire better living opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore factors that force children to escape home in search of greener pastures in neighbouring countries. The study also aimed to establish the lived experiences of unaccompanied child migrants on their way to South Africa with special reference to the social and psychological challenges that are associated with illegal travelling. The study gathered that children face all sorts of abuse, child labour and exploitation which force them to leave their homes without parental consent. Gender based violence within the family was identified as the push factor on illegal child migration. The study established that family violence and emotional abuse of children was a major reason that pushed children to leave their families. On their way from home to Beitbridge, children were reported to be using illegal transporters called "*amalaystshas*" who ferry them to the border. On the way, children were exposed to abuse, rape, physical abuse and fraud by transporters. In the border they were reported to be hooked by old people and result in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases which havoc their healthy. Children also faced

harassment from cross border bullies known as "*amaguma guma*" who threaten to kill them with machetes. It was recorded that the place was not a safe place for minors since they were exposed to all forces that recon their physical, mental and emotional development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Role of The Government

In line with the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (number 20) Act of 2013 chapter 19(1) "the state must adopt policies and measures to ensure that in matters relating to children, the best interests of the children concerned are paramount". The state should be the leading agent in safeguarding the interests of children. Therefore, government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare should accelerate the formulation of policies that promote the welfare of families and children. These policies should be driven by future needs of children as leaders of tomorrow.

The Role of Social Workers and other Helping Professionals

Social workers and psychologists should assist in moulding the behaviours and capabilities of children so that they can become responsible and independent in the face of shocks. It is the duty of social workers and other helping professional to assist children in identifying and developing their talents instead of adopting risky coping mechanisms that expose them to danger. This helps to boost one's self-esteem and being confident in oneself rather than depending on others. Teachers in schools should also identify children in need of care especially emotional support and conduct some follow ups on what should be done within families. This can be done in collaboration with the Victim Friendly Unit by punishing parents who abuse and neglect their children.

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