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ENSURING SOCIAL INCLUSIVITY AND HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN WHO ASSIST THEIR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PARENTS TO BEG ON THE STREETS IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This article has been developed from a broader ongoing study of children who act as guides for parents with visual disabilities, who attempt to eke out meagre existences by begging on the streets. An impartial assessment of the plight of these children from an African cultural standpoint is dependent on an awareness of the moral impulse of humaneness which is known by the Nguni word "Ubuntu". Granting the children social inclusivity and endeavouring to ensure their healthy development requires a strong sense of the need to recognise that their needs are the same as those of any other child who needs care and protection. Ubuntu provides a coherent indigenous conceptual framework from which it should be possible to develop appropriate policies and strategies to enable these children, eventually, to develop to their full potential.

KEY TERMS: Children guides, child labour, Ubuntu/Unhu, inclusion, street begging, streetism

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

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

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INTRODUCTION

Children guides are children from the ages of 8 to 15 years who provide regular and ongoing assistance to their visually impaired parents, who resort to begging to provide an income. Consequently, children guides spend significant amounts of time on the streets. They often develop unique and persistent styles of begging on behalf of the visually impaired older people whom they accompany (Katsande, 2014). The time which they spend engaged in begging inevitably precludes them from having adequate access to education and also has severely negative implications for their health and the standards of living which they are able to achieve. Consequently, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (2016) recognises that excessive or inappropriate engaging in begging by children as guides precludes them from exercising their right to education, fatally undermines their prospects in life, and renders them vulnerable to living in extremely adverse circumstances. It is widely acknowledged that children who act as guides in begging activities should be considered to be victims of child labour practices (The Children's Society, 2018).

Children who become victims of child labour, willingly or unwillingly, are effectively precluded from fulfilling their true potential in respects such as obtaining an adequate education and becoming economically self-sufficient through gainful employment. In addition, as the persistent begging of children guides is offensive to large segments of societies, they are likely to become ostracised. The social exclusion which the children suffer effectively precludes them from availing themselves of the opportunities and freedoms which are rights for other children. Consequently, the notion of social exclusion has been added to the capability approach of Sen to develop an appropriate theoretical framework for this research paper. The researchers have endeavoured to determine the underlying reasons for the failure of children guides to enlarge their choices and increase their opportunities with respect to the three components of the Human Development Index (HDI) and also the failure of societies to recognise their plight.

Research has been conducted concerning both the negative and positive consequences of children engaging in begging on the streets. From a study which was conducted to identify the creative ploys which child beggars use to court public sympathy, Owusu-Sekyere et al. (2018) concluded that begging had greater potential for providing opportunities for escaping from extreme poverty than many other activities. By contrast, the findings of a research study which was conducted by Mhaka in Zimbabwe (2014) revealed that children of visually impaired parents, who accompanied them in their begging activities, were very often excluded from formal education and the types of social lives which other children enjoyed. Consequently, it becomes crucial to obtain a sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the effects which accompanying their parents and begging on their behalf have on the lives of children guides with respect to the three components of the human development index, namely, life expectancy, school life expectancy, and standard of living.

As children are expected to spend most of their time in school (Hart & Brando, 2018), school settings provide the environments in which they form many significant relationships, both with young people and adults. In addition, school environments should also provide settings in which children gradually attain increasing independence, as their understanding of themselves in relation to being and becoming deepens (Hart & Brando, 2018). It is evident that children guides have little or no time when they are on the streets to associate with the peers with whom they mix when they are at school. Consequently, they are effectively deprived of their rights to education and with respect to freedom of association, which are crucial to both their cognitive development and their social functioning, by spending most of their time out of school (Morais, 2019). Accordingly, a question which needs to be answered could be formulated as follows: *Are the visually impaired parents whose children accompany them to beg on the streets aware of the capability deprivation which they inflict upon them by requiring them to do so?*

Street begging in Zimbabwe is a consequence of urbanisation, weakened traditional support systems, poverty, droughts, hunger, and the depressed state of the economy (Rugoho & Siziba, 2014; Rugoho, 2017). Visually impaired parents are inevitably among the most vulnerable to these parlous circumstances and beg with the assistance of their young children in an endeavor to survive in the face of extreme poverty (Owusu-Sekyere, 2018). The severity of the economic crisis which grips Zimbabwe makes mere day-to-day survival extremely difficult for vast swathes of its able-bodied citizens (Dickson, 2018; Moretti, 2017). As a direct consequence, large numbers of people, irrespective of whether or not they are disabled, have taken to flooding the streets to engage in begging (Rugoho & Siziba, 2014; Rugoho, 2017). Although Zimbabwe has promulgated appropriate legislation to assist disabled people in the form of the Disability Persons Act of 1992, begging by disabled people is rife in the streets of the cities of the country.

According to Rugoho and Siziba (2014: 51), although street begging is not a new phenomenon in Zimbabwe, owing to the dramatically increased numbers of beggars who attempt to eke out existences in the cities, the strategies which beggars employ are now characterised by cut-throat competition. Relatively little research has been conducted to date concerning visually impaired adult beggars and the guides or assistants who accompany them in their activities (Katsande, 2014; Mhaka, 2014), but it has been almost impossible not to notice the rampant use of minors by visually impaired adult beggars.

Although child labour practices are widely viewed as being morally reprehensible, the phenomenon of children assisting their visually impaired parents to beg needs to be evaluated in relation to the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu can be described as the ability of people who are raised in African cultures to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality, in the interests of fostering and maintaining communities which are characterised by social justice and mutual caring. It holds that society confers humanity on human beings (West, 2014). Mugumbate and Chereni (2019: 28) describe the concept of Ubuntu in broad terms with respect to the essential experiences of attaining humanity and being a human being. The authors of this paper believe that when children beg on the streets, not only do they forfeit their rights, but their dignity is also lost. If societies uphold the principles of Ubuntu and have genuine compassion and respect for humanity, it should be possible to nurture cultures in which phenomena such as children assisting their parents to beg on the streets are replaced by other practices which are valid expressions of the principles.

Societies and communities which are afflicted by poverty and rampant selfishness and corruption provide environments in which socially undesirable phenomena such as children begging on the streets on behalf of their parents are likely to proliferate. In many African countries such as Zimbabwe, owing to the symbiotic relationships which were prevalent among relatives and in communities, it was very rare to see children begging on the streets in former times. When the principle of mutual assistance began to lose its adherents, begging became a common phenomenon (Seni, 2017). It has been found that even in some instances in which parents could avail themselves of alternative assistance, they continue to insist that their children should accompany them to beg on the streets. Metz (2011) emphasises that poverty in itself is degrading and suggests that in cases when the state fails to prevent poverty, communities should be able to act to prevent the lives of their members from being destroyed by it. Traditional African communities were not characterised by the pursuit of individualistic agendas. Instead they were guided by the tenets of the African philosophy of Ubuntu or Unhu.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF UBUNTU OR UNHU

Ubuntu or Unhu, to give the Nguni word its Shona equivalent, is an African guiding principle of human values which acknowledges that individual people are entirely dependent for their being upon the other members of their communities. It has been translated as “I am because we are”. Communities which revere the African philosophy of Ubuntu are characterised by close knit-relations which entail responsibility being placed upon all members to ensure that the dignity of individual members, including that of children, is respected. Makuvaza (2014) contends that Ubuntu is essentially selflessness, in that it is predicated on the promotion of humaneness and respect for the lives of individual members of communities, families, and communities. Accordingly, it becomes incumbent upon social workers to advocate for respect for human dignity and awareness of the needs of the “Other”, rather than an emphasis upon more abstract notions of morality. Seni (2017) found that a need to attract sympathy, a lack of education, a lack of proper orientation in life, and laziness constituted some of the principal factors which encouraged the proliferation of the phenomenon of children begging on behalf of their parents. It is the considered opinion of the authors of this paper that if social workers acknowledge the potential of Ubuntu to inform practice, incidences of highly undesirable patterns of social behaviour which erode the healthy relations which Ubuntu fosters can be significantly reduced. Accordingly, the authors advocate that social workers promote the principles of Ubuntu when they work with families in which children engage in begging on behalf of their parents and enlist the collaboration and participation of religious leaders, community leaders, and community elders to promote adherence to the principles of Ubuntu.

A LACK OF UBUNTU AND THE LOSS OF RIGHTS BY CHILDREN WHO BEG ON BEHALF OF THEIR PARENTS

When the principles of Ubuntu no longer guide the lives of people in traditional African communities, the lack of a unifying philosophy which inculcates a spirit of oneness and brotherhood and sisterhood is felt acutely. Its negative manifestations can include a lack of shared social responsibility, mutual assistance, trust, willingness to share, unselfishness, caring, self-reliance, respect for others, and awareness of other crucial ethical considerations (Mandova & Chingombe, 2013). The authors contend that as Ubuntu is a uniquely African guiding principle, Zimbabwean society should return to its philosophy of shared collective humanness and responsibility (Opini, 2016). The table which follows summarises the conditions under which children are raised in families or communities in which Ubuntu is practised and also in families or communities in which it is not practised.

Table 1. Roles performed by Ubuntu in families and communities

Communities or families in which Ubuntu is practiced	Level	Communities or families in which Ubuntu is not practiced
Adequate child support Children at home	Home (nuclear family)	Inadequate child support Child neglect and abuse High divorce rates
Take care of children in need	Larger family (relatives)	Relatives ignore children in need
Take care of children in need Adults are positive role models	Community	Communities ignore children in need Adults exhibit anti-social behaviour (negative md models)
Children are in school	School	No programmes to keep children in school
Rejection of streetism	Streets	Adults exhibit anti-social behaviour Streetism is rewarded

If Ubuntu is to permit individual members of families and communities to draw strength from one another in accordance with the principle that a person is a person through other people (Eze, 2008), it is essential that people should provide support to one another at all levels, including those of the family, community, and society as a whole. Although children who beg on behalf of their visually impaired parents display Ubuntu by assisting their parents in their battle against extreme poverty, as it can be seen from the table, the conditions under which they do so do not promote their healthy development.

It needs to be emphasised that the principles of Ubuntu do not imply that the blame for failing to ensure that their children are raised in environments which are conducive to their healthy development lies with the impoverished visually impaired parents. The children are rather the victims of institutions or societies whose capacity to treat them with compassion does not extend to enabling them to attend school, have access to healthcare services, associate with other children of their own ages, or lead lives which they value. Although a plethora of reasons could be advanced for children to engage in begging in the manner which has been described in this paper, a strong case could be made for ensuring the inclusion of children in society and their healthy development by revitalising the African philosophy of Ubuntu or Unhu in Zimbabwe (Kusemwa and Kusemwa, 2018). Conversely, it would be possible to contend that the plight of children who are reduced to begging on behalf of their parents represents a manifestation of the denial and abandonment of the philosophy of Unhu in Zimbabwean society. One of the most articulate expressions of the philosophy is provided by the African Proverb “It takes a village to raise a child”. Not only are children nurtured by practices which entail entire communities participating in the care and protection of children, but the practices also facilitate social cohesion in communities. Accordingly, the plight of children who become marginalised through begging becomes the responsibility of entire communities, as it is for enabling them to become sufficiently capacited to exercise their basic capabilities and become fully fledged members of their communities (Rapatsa, 2016). Consequently, it is imperative that Zimbabwean society should enable child beggars to restore their humanity in accordance with the tenets of the philosophy of life for the people of Zimbabwe (Bondai, 2016; Rapatsa, 2016).

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