INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF POVERTY: THE ROLE OF AGENCY IN MITIGATING THE IMPACT FOR CHILD HEADED HOUSEHOLDS - A CASE OF ZOLA, SOWETO (SOUTH AFRICA)

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of child headed households (CHH) is a ubiquitous pathological challenge in South Africa that requires strengthened responses. The study was grounded in the qualitative approach and a case study was employed as the research design. The target population for this study were children in child headed households identified in Zola 1, 2, 3 and Zola North, Soweto. The study also included social service professionals and other community structures that were supporting child headed households in the Zola area. In addition, the study included as its population, non-formal support structures involved with OVCY, like social auxiliary workers (8), project managers (2), social workers (10), volunteers/community caregivers (10), community leaders (2), educators (3), the clergy (2), neighbours (3). The child headed households were selected through purposive sampling for all the areas they access services from social workers. The findings revealed that community-based organisations play an eminent role of safeguarding children in child headed households. However, there is a disconnect between policy and practice that often leads to poor responses in effective child protection work around child headed households. The study findings reveal that there are internal and external policy weaknesses that impeded the quality of child protection responses. Internal issues were related to lack of proper guidelines and policies that underpinned what constituted a CHH and the appropriate services   External policy challenges were related to poor coordination between agencies and the apparent lack of advocacy on the "duty to care" for professionals working with CHH. On the basis of the findings, it is recommended that the South African government should, among other things, provide a properly resourced, co-ordinated and well managed child protection system to facilitate constituency work that responds to the real needs of child headed households and SMART planning by social workers, with systemic teaming around CHH with the Department of Social Development as lead agency.

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INTRODUCTION

The South African government has made great strides towards achieving its development goals and protecting children and youth over the years and the current Children's Amendment Bill attest to this commitment. However, violence, poverty, social inequality, the effects of the HIV epidemic, and an erosion of traditional families are some of the issues that continue to create a challenging environment for development for South Africa, with child headed households often being the hardest hit by these. While poverty is at the core of many of these issues, HIV/AIDS deeply complicates the environment both for the consequences of and the response to the epidemic. As a result of the social effects of HIV/AIDS, millions of HIV-affected children are highly vulnerable, as they are more likely to become child headed households and are at increased risk of being victims of abuse, live on the street, and engage in hazardous and/or exploitive labour, (Cluver et al 2012). More specifically, children who live with an ill adult or who have been orphaned by AIDS have a dramatically greater risk of abuse and exploitation, school drop-out (as children leave school to care for ailing family members), and psychosocial distress, (Guo and Sher 2012). Community structures include schools, CBO's, churches, local councillors and health professionals among other and these have played invaluable roles in improving the welfare of OVCY, (Agere and Tanga, 2017). International policies point to community structures as key actors in ensuring the inclusion, protection and well-being of child headed households (UNICEF, 2013). For instance, community-based organisations have come up with numerous programmes that have assisted children and promoted resilience in children and broader society by reducing adversity and by building services and systems that reach this type of family directly in their households and communities.

BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of child headed households is complex and multifaceted. The increasing morbidity and mortality rates among adults as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, poverty, violence, social exclusion and crime have resulted in growing numbers of orphans and vulnerable children and youth (OVCY), UNICEF (2000). The extremely rapid rate of orphanhood and destitution among children makes it difficult for families and communities to respond in the traditional manner of taking these children into extended families and, considering their age, it is virtually impossible to consider them for statutory intervention in view of alternative care arrangements. The child and youth care centres (CYCCs), for instance, are already riddled with severe challenges that inhibit their capacities to take more children and also provide holistic services due to erratic funding and other infrastructural challenges (Agere, 2014). On the contrary, Magwa and Magwa (2016) aptly states that informal care system such as older siblings will continue shouldering the biggest share of orphan care in the absence of other care systems and strategies. Child headed households face diverse socio-economic hardships, academic and psychosocial quagmires that include the disruption of their normal childhood, (Agere and Tanga, 2017). In recent years the phenomenon of child headed households has generated interest and research (Kurebwa and Kurebwa, 2014, Mothapo, 2016, Kapesa 2016, Magwa and Magwa, 2016) but very little has delved into examining the nature and scale of support that community structures assume in escaping poverty for this type of household. This study thus seeks to address this gap in knowledge. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the nature and extent of support offered by community structures to child headed households, and account for the paradox that exists between policy and the wider variety of community resources and the pervasive poverty that is among the child headed households.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: UBUNTU

The term Ubuntu originated from the belief systems, and practices of those who speak the Nguni languages and those that lived near and with them, such as the Sotho-Motswana and Shona speakers (Metz, 2011). According to Maphalala (2017), ubuntu has three pillars namely, interpersonal values (regard for others), intrapersonal values (regard for self) and environmental values (regard for environment). The White Paper for Social Development (1996) consists of democracy, partnership, ubuntu, equity and inter-sectoral collaboration, among others as central tenets behind its philosophy. This key paper aptly describes Ubuntu as a principle of caring for each other's well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support. The ubiquitous maxim "a person is a person through other persons" and this tersely captures a normative account of what is ought to be valued in life. Ubuntu can be described as personhood, selfhood and humanness in characteristic Southern African language. This view is reinforced by Mugumbate and Chereni (2019), who posits that Ubuntu exists in different spheres and contexts and suggested that the liberation framework and professional practice development in Zimbabwe were also heavily influenced by the concept of Ubuntu. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) further give reference to the Code of Ethics of Social workers in Zimbabwe which describe Ubuntu as humaneness that places the emphasis of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity and the humaneness in every person.

Metz (2011) suggest that Ubuntu as a moral theory is grounded upon human dignity and takes into account the Bill of Rights that are espoused in the Constitution of South Africa. So construed, a human right is a moral right against others, that is, a natural duty that ought to be taken into account by social workers, policy makers and communities that accommodates child headed households. Child headed households face a myriad of vulnerabilities as a result of their set up and circumstances, and for the purpose of this paper, the Integrated framework of Ubuntu in social work with children suggested by Chereni and Mugumbate (2019), is applicable. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) postulates that the integrated framework has five levels (individual, family, communal, environmental and spiritual) and all these are responsible for providing safety, identity, morality, communality and humanity. These levels provide the context in which the role of agency can be discussed in mitigating the impact of intergenerational poverty for child headed households.

METHODOLOGY

The ecological systems theory which posits the importance of symbiotic relationships as people encounter different environments throughout their lifespans and how it influences behaviour, inform this study. The purpose of the study was to explore the the role of community structures and the in-depth interview guide that was used in this study was more focused and structured and administered to 94 children in child headed households. The structure of the interview guide included an introduction, opening questions, key questions and closing questions. There was an interpreter who assisted participants who could have struggled with the interview. The study used focus group discussions and a focus group discussion guide was used to guide discussions. The discussion group used in this study consisted of a list of topics and a series of questions used by two moderators to guide the discussion and this ultimately helped the discussion keep focused on the research topic. The guide essentially served as a memory aid for the moderators to ensure that the key topics were uncovered during the discussion period. The qualitative data was analysed using content thematic analysis. Content thematic analysis involves counting explicit words or phrases and identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas (Guest and Macqueen, 2008). The collection and the analysis of the data in qualitative research occur simultaneously because findings emerge during the process of collecting the data. Throughout the research process, from inception and resourcing through design and investigation to dissemination, the researchers maintained an active, personal and disciplined ethical awareness and adherence to the following ethical issues: voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality. Thus, the researchers issued out consent letters for children in child headed households to confirm that they were willing to participate. The research aims and objective were fully explained to the participants before the commencement of data collection. The respondents were encouraged to participate voluntarily, and they did and it gave the researchers the view that accurate data was obtained.

FINDINGS

The utility function of the community-based organisations

The study revealed that community institutions have played an instrumental role in improving the quality of life and looking at the welfare needs of vulnerable children for instance, the social service professionals from community-based organisations in Zola North reported that they provided holistic services to 300 orphans and vulnerable children and youth, including child headed households.

> *We provide holistic service to orphaned and vulnerable children and youth that includes child headed households and work towards their optimal development. We currently have 300 children that we are working with.*

They added that they provide supportive services, with children remaining in their households as they did not promote institutionalisation. This has been one of their successes to avoid family breakdown but instil resilience for child headed households and provide opportunities for self-discovery and empowerment for better opportunities. This finding was also supported by child headed households who reiterated how the community-based organisations have been instrumental in providing the much-needed support to face their day to day struggles. One participant had this to say:

> *The program we attend at the NGO has changed our lives for the best. They are easily accessible and visible in our community. They give us food; they listen to us and provide us with advice.*

From the findings it is clear that the community organisations had the responsibility of providing access to resources and opportunities that should enable the good interaction at the meso system level so they can function properly and aid their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Mugumbate and Chereni (2019), the community level consists of many players and in Ubuntu, children belong to the community. The community-

based organisations offered financial support through community-based programmes modelled to help ease the burden on the children and the ease of access to them influenced the children's attitudes and behaviour in building resilience. The community assumes the eminent role of protecting children, socialisation and creating an identity as suggested by Mtetwa and Muchacha (2017). Conversely, these institutions are overburdened and the capacity to deliver sound project deliverables is always questioned. The social service professionals of the project in Zola 1 mentioned that they had one social worker who was assisted, with three social auxiliary workers and it was virtually impossible to effectively address challenges affecting child headed households and orphans and vulnerable children and youth. In view of this the majority of the respondents alluded to meeting with their social worker at least once a month and they felt it was not quite enough as they always had issues, they wanted their social worker to address for them and issues of funding were mentioned as the biggest concern.

Schools as safe spaces and offering academic support for child headed households

The findings revealed that educators go beyond the traditional academic role and assist in mitigating the psycho social challenges that child headed households face through pastoral care and support (including child protection and social protection roles). The study findings further revealed that most child headed households were supported by community-based organisations in their academic endeavours. It was reported that a plethora of initiatives were utilised by community social service professionals to ensure that children in child headed households kept engaging with their education. The majority of the social service professionals acknowledged that they knew that the child headed households were susceptible to much vulnerability that had a formidable chance of having them drop out of school and they had to find ways to reduce and mitigate the impact. The following extract is revealing:

> *Over the years we have observed that child headed households are mostly affected when it comes to attitudes and approach in engaging with their education due to their vulnerabilities. It's not easy for them to be children and to be parents at the same time; it takes a lot to balance the two.*

This shows the magnitude of the challenges the children encountered. Substance abuse, disillusionment, peer pressure and teen pregnancies are among the rampant vulnerabilities that child headed households are exposed to and their ripple effect often lead to dropping out of school. Further to this Maphalala (2017) states that schools are also viewed as purveyors of western ideologies and values and there are circumstances, they negate the values of Ubuntu, creating conflict for child headed households. Thus, the community-based organisations act as safeguards that lessened the risks of children getting entrapped in such vices. This is also supported by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (2004), which states that the exo system encapsulates the meso system. The exo system comprises settings in which a child headed household is not immediately involved but do affect the child's life (Berk, 2007). The school fees, among other support rendered, form part of the exo system. However, Bee and Boyd (2004) note that the adjacent macro system may affect the moral development of the children as it embodies cultural values, beliefs, practices and traditions. Further, the challenges with this is that the community based organisations rely on the presence of donor funding and, in view of the economic quagmires that have fallen the social development sector in recent years, donor fatigue has kicked in and the continued running of such progressive and helpful initiatives will be found wanting, which has devastating effects for children who had been benefiting.

Psychosocial support for child headed households

The majority of the social service professionals highlighted that children in child headed households often developed problematic behaviours that included excessive crying, aggression, withdrawing, being fearful, anxiety, sexual promiscuity and substance and alcohol abuse. One social worker illustrated the extent in the following statement:

> *In my experience I have observed that when child headed households have behavioural problems it is a result of their circumstances, not their genetics. They lack the requisite stamina and social skills to deal with problems and these skills are usually imparted by adults socialising with them.*

Life is often described as a journey of life and death and in each journey, people encounter certain opportunities or face certain challenges. In view of this, typically adults help children learn skills to overcome challenges but, in their absence, it becomes a huge challenge to ensure children are equipped with skills or develop the resilience to cope with life's challenges. The majority of the social workers added that extreme toxic stress often leads to depression, anxiety and can have long term effects on the children's emotional development. To respond to the behavioural challenges experienced by child headed households three social workers in the study stated that they used various psycho social tools to help build resilience and cope with challenges. Strategies included support groups, which they described as a useful tool to enhance the psychosocial functioning of child headed households,

working with formal and non-formal school systems, social services and other community structures. Support groups allow the children to vent out their struggles, challenges with other children in similar circumstances. Further, they offer encouragement from peers and assist them to process their feelings about a tough situation. Some social workers noted that counselling was another way of effectively dealing with the challenges facing the child headed households and it would either be one to one or include the family in 4-6 short sessions. It is convincingly evident in the findings that the community based social workers have built on effective psychosocial support interventions made possible through community resources, and links children with existing support systems and ultimately help child headed households strengthen coping mechanisms and make deposits of resilience.

Spiritual support as a tool to deposit resilience

The study also revealed that some community-based organisations in Zola 2 facilitated programmes at drop-in centres that embodied spiritual paradigms that helped foster the sense of belonging and generosity and resultantly helps children build resilience as the child headed households navigated through their difficult circumstances. According to Seehawer (2018) Ubuntu values spirituality because it plays a huge role in the life of Africans including children. In the same vein, at a broader spiritual level, the majority of the participants confirmed affiliation to a religious group in their respective communities where they received a sense of humanity. The spiritual level is responsible for companionship, comfort and advice for child headed households. Some confirmed that they were affiliated to Christian groups and a few did not belong to any kind of religious group. Some of the participants stated that they had received some counselling by their church leaders following the demise of their parents. They found this support as helpful as it came from a familiar person who also had a degree of understanding of their personal circumstances and family life.

Tenants as a support system for child headed households

Support from tenants featured prominently in child headed household narrations of their life experiences as a strong support system of building resilience. A significant majority noted that they had tenants at the back of their properties who paid rentals that they then used as income. These tenants lived lives independent of each other, but they had established formidable relationships with them in such a way that they were involved in each other's lives and the tenants had become like big brothers/ sisters or uncles/aunts. A few of the child headed households stated that every time she got paid, their tenant would pay her rent with extra money and groceries on top to assist them cope and last to the next month because she felt for them and they appreciated the help. The following extract portray how the one participant felt:

> *Our tenants are the best; they have shown us love and care we never imagined. We feel like we have second mothers, and this has helped us settle and focus on school because she also checks if we have done homework's and follow everything we do.*

This illustrates that a healthy start to life greatly enhances a child's later functioning in school, relations with peers, in intimate relationships, and interactions with the broader connections in society. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) suggest that the community where tenans are part of are responsible for socialisation and the provision of basic needs. In support of this, Agere and Tanga (2017) submits that a holistic package for self-sustenance should contain the major dimensions of a healthy start to life, and these are social, physical and psychological well-being. However, the role of tenants cannot be discussed in full extent as a solid support system as it is only possible if the other household are of relatively better off economic standing and level of understanding to reach out and help child headed households.

The eminent role of local councillors and NGO support

The study also revealed that the local councillors played an instrumental role in ensuring that child headed households remained protected and that their rights were promoted. Some children involved in the study mentioned that through the support they received from the community-based organisations and the local councillor they had managed to keep their inheritance, especially houses from the deceptive intentions their extended families harboured after the demise of their parents. A few of the participants from different households reported that after burying their parents, relatives had moved in with them and they wanted to take over the houses by falsifying the house permits and deceiving them into changing ownership as indicated in the excerpt below:

> *We could have lost our house if it was not for the councillor. We are grateful! As of now the housing permit is at the Social worker's office for safe-keeping and we know that no one will deceive us of our inheritance.*

From the narratives it is clear that the children received numerous services that supported their day to day living from the councillors and community organisations. It was clear that the proximal relationships that existed between the participants in child headed households and the councillors and aligned organisations helped ease the pressure on the child headed households and, in the process, bolstered their resilience to adversity and safeguarding their inheritance.

DISCUSSION

Families play a huge role at every stage of child development and the concept of Ubuntu places extends the view that every child is belongs to the whole family- including the extended family. However, many factors have interfered with the existence, core and functioning of the extended family and this include poverty, HIV/AIDS and migration among others. Despite the diminished role and prevalence of Ubuntu, community responses have been quite existent and have helped certain child headed households in diverse ways to cope with their life situations. Life without parents was perceived by the majority of participants as difficult and their main concern was that no one was there to guide them, supervise them and encourage them and as a result they feel so lonely and stressed. This view is supported by Berk (2007) that children without parents are lonely and distress because they are deprived of mental and emotional security. They are poor and vulnerable, and as a result, they can have low self-expectations and low self-esteem. The study revealed that neighbours, tenants and extended family members provided emotional support through frequent contact with some mentoring of some sort that mitigated the loneliness and providing the much-needed guidance and counselling for the child headed households. Tenants and neighbours regularly checked on the child headed household and would reprimand them when they erred, and they would also reinforce positive behaviours. They provided opportunities for socialisation and the provision of basic needs that afforded the child headed households a chance of "normalised" childhood. The roles performed by tenants can be viewed as an extension of the Ubuntu concept as their efforts advance the belief that children become human beings through others. However, these support systems and the nature of support differed with people and household circumstances. Others had neighbours who acted contrary to support and would behave in ways that child headed households viewed as stigma and discrimination. In other instances, tenants did not care about the plight and circumstances of the child headed households and some participants reported that others took advantage of the situation and would delay paying their rentals or deliberately flout boundaries and rules that they had put in place. Community based organisations through social service professionals- social workers, social auxiliary workers and child care givers; made regular home visits and through youth mentor work, child headed households had exemplary figures who encouraged and strengthened them to cope with life stressors.

The study revealed that food security was chief among the ruminating thoughts that affected child headed households. The lack of food in some instances led to malnourishment and other children were on ART and this created a problem for their health. Food security and its ripple effect often entrenched child headed households to the clutches of poverty as some participants dropped out of school to pursue avenues that would enable them to support their siblings. In response to this, community-based organisations like the Steinhoff program in Zola provided nutritional support to households through daily door to door food deliveries and other child headed households accessed daily meals in drop-in centres. This program was very important as it responded directly to the basic day to day needs of every household but with more meaning and effect on child headed households who have limited or no means of economic prowess.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Constituency work in communities

The Department of Social Development needs to gain qualitative information from the recipients of their funding and observe CHH in their own environments so as to gather the lived experiences of their day to day living as part of informing research on how to improve their welfare and responding appropriately to their challenges. In turn, this information should empower them to draw responses that address the myriad of challenges for the affected communities and widen resources and capacitate community structures that are first respondents to the challenges that child headed households face especially poverty.

Conducting community oversight visits

The DSD, as the lead agency in multi-sector collaboration, should make visits to schools, CBO's, clinics and other community structures to gain insight and information into the effectiveness of programmes that are in place. They would do well if they would make efforts to engage the beneficiaries or meet with the children and zero-in on their circumstances. They should encourage partner agencies to share their stories and compare programme successes and failures that thus becomes a domain for capacity building and promoting inter-sectoral collaboration.

Legislating the aspect of duty to care for all professionals working with children

Leadership and meaningful coordination in multi-sectoral collaboration should be a requisite responsibility for all matters concerned with child protection. The DSD is the lead department in child protection systems and there are several departments who also have a duty to protect children and these include Health, Education, Social Security, Housing, Justice and Correctional services. It is recommended that the DSD leads, cooperates and collaborates with the different arms of government. Of utmost importance is that the lead department, DSD must work cooperatively with the NPO's since most of the services are being delivered by NPOs through a Public Private Partnerships model. The quality of coordination and cooperation between the child protection system and other systems will be central for effectiveness of strengthening responses to the need of child headed households.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that there are several community structures in place that recognise the plight of child headed households and have developed responses that are aimed at mitigating the challenges the households face. Even though these structures and systems assumed eminent roles, they were bedevilled by several hurdles in service provision like funding, they however remained involved with child headed households and they would seek alternatives to ensure that child headed households were cushioned from the adverse social, psychological and economic challenges they were vulnerable to. Their efforts are important in enhancing the quality of life for the child headed households and this was important in giving them a fighting chance and access opportunities.

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