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## Child disciplinary practices – Experiences of low-income women in Botswana

Tumani MALINGA and Poloko N NTSHWARANG

### ABSTRACT

*The Botswana Children's Act of 2009, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child call for child protection. However, children continue to be exposed to disciplinary practices that do not conform to these legal frameworks. They are exposed to practices that negatively impact on child welfare and development. Using data from a qualitative study, the paper explores disciplinary practices that 15 low-income women were exposed to in their childhood in their homes. Face to face narrative interviews were used. The findings indicate that in the primary socialization setting, common disciplinary practices included violent physical and psychological discipline. Based on the African Ubuntu perspective, the findings illustrate that there was no sympathetic social relations between the women and their guardians. The paper concludes by providing recommendations such as provision of education, school social work and change in the law to promote child protection, children's rights and positive child development.*

**KEY TERMS:** child-protection; disciplinary practices; low-income women; Ubuntu; violent child discipline

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## INTRODUCTION

Child discipline is an action by guardians to teach children self-discipline and acceptable behavior. Child discipline teaches children acceptable standards, norms, behavior and instills self-control. It is within the family that children are disciplined and can be protected against or be exposed to violence and abuse. Exposure to violence and abuse can be through how guardians execute disciplinary practices. Child discipline has been discussed broadly with the focus on disciplinary practices that guardians adopt. Child disciplinary practices include violent and non-violent disciplinary practices. Non-violent disciplinary practices referred to as positive discipline include explaining consequences of undesired behaviors, taking privileges and role modeling. Violent disciplinary practices include psychological aggression and physical punishment. This paper examines the experiences of how rural Botswana low-income women were raised and how discipline was conducted in their childhood. These are discussed in relation to the African Ubuntu perspective, which is grounded on the ethic of doing right or being human.

## BACKGROUND

In contemporary times, challenges experienced by children have become more intense and complicated (Ntshwarang & Malinga-Musamba, 2016) and the most complicated duty of guardians is to meet the needs of children while also grappling with many other challenges. The family is identified as critical in child protection and safeguarding children's physical and emotional needs (United Nations, 1989). However research studies (Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021; Ntini & Sewpaul, 2017) show that although families are an integral part of child socialization, they can also be a place where children are exposed to negative discipline and other forms of abuse. Child discipline often takes place under unpalatable political, cultural, social and economic conditions that contribute to negative parenting practices (Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021; Ntini & Sewpaul, 2017). In Botswana women are the most socio-economically and politically disadvantaged when compared to men (United Nations, 2015) and they mostly perform parenting roles, hence they are likely to use harsh disciplinary practices. Parents often do not see anything wrong in physical discipline because child practices are embedded in cultural norms (Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021). Sewpaul (2014) has also indicated that there is a complex link between conflict, poverty, social justice and human rights abuse. Notably, the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 is committed to stopping all types of violence against children but the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children [GIEACPC], (2021) indicates that physical punishment is a common disciplinary method experienced by children globally. Therefore there is a need for research on child disciplinary practices.

Child discipline aims to develop behavioral boundaries, self-control, self-sufficiency and positive social conduct (Mikton & Butchart, 2009). Child discipline is an essential part of child rearing. However, child disciplinary practices that cause pain, either physical or psychological as a way of controlling behavior is violent discipline (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2010). Child disciplinary practices adopted by guardians are influenced by the type of parenting style that the caregiver subscribes to. Authoritarian parents tend to adopt violent child discipline practices. These include psychological (shouting and name calling) and physical discipline practices. Violent physical discipline involves spanking, and physically forcing children to do something. Violent psychological discipline includes use of guilt, emotional manipulation to control children, humiliation, and withdrawal of love. It also includes shouting and using offensive names (UNICEF, 2010). Nonviolent forms of discipline are associated with authoritative parenting. This includes taking away privileges and explaining why something is wrong or unacceptable. As opposed to authoritarian, authoritative parenting have clear standards, set boundaries, and their disciplinary measures are supportive to the child (UNICEF, 2010).

Violent disciplinary practices have negative impacts on children's mental and social development (UNICEF, 2010) and can have long term implications that a child can carry into adult life. It also violates children's right to protection from all forms of violence while in the care of their guardians, as set forth in the CRC. This paper uses data where low-income women retrospectively shared their childhood experiences on how they were parented and disciplined. It uses the African Ubuntu perspective to explore how low-income women perceived to have been disciplined as they were growing up. "Ubuntu" is a moral theory that promotes humanity and respect for all the people. It is also a moral and social principle that emphasizes communal attitude towards life, and anchored on principles of care, community, harmony, hospitality, respect and responsiveness that expresses the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

## METHODS

The paper is based on a qualitative study that explored the lived experiences of low-income unmarried women in rural Botswana with the aim of understanding the psychosocial life course pathways that might be exposing them to chains of risks (Malinga, 2018). The constructivism paradigm which relies on the participants' views of the situation and on capturing the participants' voices as they describe their experiences and reconstruct their realities was used (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Data was collected using the narrative approach where participants freely expressed and shared their life experiences in a chronological manner, a method referred to as a relational interview by Chilisa (2012).

Prior to sampling, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA where the first author did her PhD training. In addition, a permit was obtained from the Botswana Ministry of Local Government. Three rural villages were purposively selected. Thereafter, five participants were purposively selected from each village, through the help of local gate keepers who included community leaders. To partake in the study, one had to be low-income (below poverty datum line), never married, have dependent children, and be willing to share their lived experiences. Purposive sampling was ideal for the study as it allowed the researcher to select participants with characteristics outlined.

An oral consent script (detailing the objectives, benefits and risks of participation, and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time) was read and explained to those who were interested to partake in the study. Oral consent was preferred to signing forms, which might intimidate potential participants. The sample consisted of fifteen low-income unmarried mothers with dependent children who agreed to the study conditions as outlined in the consent form. Interviews conducted in the women's local language lasted an average 70 minutes. Interviews were not audio recorded as the participants were against it. Data analysis was done manually and it was an interactive process. It included categorizing and connecting the stories (Maxwell, 2012). Codes were derived from the women's words and phrases. The codes covered the women's experiences and transitions. Restorying of the narratives allowed reorganizing into a chronological sequence the experiences of the women. In the first cycle of coding, coding was done line by line, using words and phrases from the narratives. In the second cycle of coding, the identified codes were grouped into categories, allowing cross case analysis. Themes were translated into English after the analysis and identification of themes.

## FINDINGS

Participants were fifteen low-income never married mothers with dependent children. They were aged between 23-47 years. The educational level of the participants varied; two did not complete the seven years of primary education and four completed the seven years. Seven participants completed 9 or 10 years depending on the cohort; and two completed 12 years of education. Majority of the participants were raised either by their grandparents or relatives as their biological parents stayed in town or were deceased. As the women shared their childhood experiences, they indicated that they were maltreated as a way of punishment. The main themes were that women experienced violent physical and psychological disciplinary practices at home. The violent physical discipline were describes as spanking, hitting and slapping whereas the violent psychological discipline included being shouted at, being scolded and starved as a way of punishment. These themes are discussed below.

### Violent physical discipline

Violent physical discipline as indicated in the women's narratives was prevalent for the low-income mothers during their childhood. It involved spanking, hitting, slapping and physically forcing children to do something. As indicated in the women's narratives more than half of the women endured some physical abuse in their childhood at the hands of their parents and guardians. They reported physical abuse and that was viewed as a form of punishment for failure to follow instructions or not fulfilling chores as instructed or to the satisfaction of the guardian or parent. This is illustrated by Shelly's story.

Shelly is a 36 years old woman. She was the fifth born in a family of seven. She was raised by parents who abused alcohol and were never available at home. As a result, Shelly and her siblings had to keep moving houses, between her uncles and aunties. As they moved from house to house, they were tasked with the responsibilities of household chores. Every morning before they left for school, Shelly reports that she had to ensure that all household chores were done to the satisfaction of her aunt, or else she would be spanked or even denied to go to school. She lamented:

*In most cases my parents were not available and my siblings and I moved to stay with my aunt. I was around 10 to 13 years. Even though the elders were always available, there was a lot put on us, my siblings and I do to. Failure to fulfill my aunt's request, there was punishment, you are beaten or you miss school so that you attend to the task. One time she beat me up and even stepped on my neck. I was beaten almost daily.*

The same sentiments were spoken by Basetsana (33 years) who had to herd goats. She reported that:

*I was responsible for heading goats. If they went missing or somehow went into the neighbor's field and destroyed crops, then I would be beaten for negligence. I was young and it was difficult to herd many goats all by myself.*

Kedibonye, aged 39, had this to say:

*I am grateful for my uncle who took me in when my mother was unable to take care of me and my siblings. However, I worked like a slave. I had to herd goats, milk them before I went to school, and then made sure that they were in the kraal in the evening. If any of these were not done, I would not receive food. At times, I slept on an empty stomach. During the ploughing season, I had to skip school to take care of the goats, so that they do not destroy other people's fields.*

Shelly, Basetsana and Kedibonye's stories highlight the tendency of most parents in the African context such as Botswana to engage children in child labour, and overburdening them with household work without taking into account children rights to education, play and rest. Kedibonye's narrative also highlights a traditional practice that was common among most communities in Botswana where the girls were often denied education with a belief that they will one day be married and taken care of by their husbands, hence many parents believed it was useless to educate a girl child.

Another woman lamented:

*I was staying with my grandmother. At times she would send me to get something in the house, and if I failed to find the object, she would drag me by the ear to the house to look for the object. Thereafter, she would beat me with any nearby object (Segopotso, 47 years).*

Segopotso's narrative which was shared by other women is an indication that many parents and caregivers do not understand what constitute abuse as well as the short and long term consequences of excessive use of physical discipline on children. It also shows that caregivers uphold physical discipline when compared to other disciplinary practices that are not abusive such as offering guidance.

### ***Violent psychological discipline***

The women reported that violent psychological discipline included emotional abuse through food deprivation, being shouted at, offensive name calling, humiliation and withdrawal of love. For example, Peggy aged 42, was raised by her aunt who exposed her to emotional abuse through food deprivation. Peggy was the sixth born in a family of ten. Some of her chores included taking care of her younger cousins and helped with other household chores. However, what puzzled her was that her other cousins of the same age, were not tasked with all these chores. She narrated that the favoritism at her aunt's place hurt her as she could not even do her school work or had time to sit and enjoy a meal with the family. She stated that;

*I was always reprimanded for not following instructions or not finishing up the chores. As a result, my punishment was either to be beaten or not given food. The little food from school would be the only meal I would have in a day (Peggy, 42 years).*

Another woman noted issues related to favoritism as well. She said:

*My grandmother did not like me like the other grandchildren. There were about seven of us there. I remember in some occasions I would come home after school and there would be no food left for me. Grandma would tell me that the saved food was for my other cousins and that I should attend to my chores first and not only think of food. I would work on an empty stomach – going to fetch water from the community stand pipe. Even after this, I would be given more tasks to attend to. This favoritism pained me as I did not understand why she treated us differently, yet we are all her grandchildren (Masa, 35 years)*

The above women's narratives indicate that there was preferential treatment between biological and non-biological children within the families. The women were denied food and discriminated. Their experiences were likely to leave negative psychological impacts that create difficult adulthood health situations such as depression. It is also important to note that it is a traditional practice for older children to look after younger children but Masa's story indicates that the practice is often abusive because as shown in her narrative, children are

overburdened with parenting roles. Masa's reporting of her emotional abuse also indicated that it is something that has left a negative impact in her life.

Another woman, Segametsi (23 years) reported how her grandfather called her a bastard child and told her that she should go to her father. She lamented;

*Sometimes my grandfather was so mean to me. If I did not complete a task to his satisfaction, he would call me a bastard child, stupid and say that all I know is finish his food and that I should move out of his house. This was hurtful since I did not even know who my father was.*

Segametsi's situation indicates both the disadvantages of growing up without father support and the insensitive nature of adults towards children's emotional needs. It also shows that caregivers hardly validate and appreciate children's efforts. In such instances Segametsi grew up feeling worthless and struggled with low self-esteem. In most instances, it has been generally observed that psychological discipline such as offensive name calling, humiliation, insults and withdrawal of love are often down played by caregivers as insignificant and less harsher than physical punishment. It is important to note that the women's exposure to violent physical and psychological disciplinary practices set the stage for later difficulties that rendered them into the of low income status. Their childhood adversities are likely to have exposed them to adulthood adversities such as unemployment, living in poverty, dependency on their male partners, exposure to gender based violence and poor health among others.

## DISCUSSION

The findings concur with the ideology that intersubjectivity, interpersonal and immediate group memberships are critical in shaping communal behaviors (Sewpaul & Kreitzer, 2021). The findings of the research study on physical discipline augment previous research results by Ntshwarang and Sewpaul (2021) as well as Sebonego (1994) that corporal punishment is a common disciplinary practice in Botswana. It is significant to note that children's age, behaviour and gender can predict the type of punishment that they can be exposed to. It was noted by Patel, Shanmugam, Obong'o, et al. (2021) that the child's gender and the severity of the child's misbehavior/actions influences discipline. As seen in the findings orphaned children and children raised by non-biological parents were more likely to be harshly disciplined. Staying with non-biological parents, might expose a child to psychosocial stress that add to their behavioral problems (Cluver, Gardner and Operario, 2007) which in turn could have contributed to their caregivers' excessive use of aggressive discipline. Further, as indicated in the findings, majority of the women were raised by extended family members where they were prone to aggressive discipline as they were beaten, shouted at and name called. The women might have been struggling with maternal deprivation and separation, leading to what Lee and Boyle (2021) refer to as psychosocial stress which can expose children to harsh discipline. Women might also have harbored feelings of resentment for being raised by non-biological parents and felt they were not loved and valued by their parents. As illustrated by Ubuntu theory, the act of the women not raised by their parents can be deemed inhumane and their ill treatment as unsupportive of societal expectations (Metz, 2007).

In addition, household factors such as parental presence, family income, and number of children in the household have been reported to influence violent discipline. UNICEF (2010) reports that parental absence is linked to harsh discipline, as was reported in the findings that the women were exposed to emotional abuse and neglect especially when residing with extended family members. There was psychological aggression where they were yelled and shouted at, harsh words and vulgar language used, name-calling and denied food, as well as physical aggression. Patel, et al. (2021) reported that guardians tend to withhold food and overwork children as a way of discipline. Also, in Botswana and the region, it is common for elders to physically discipline children. However, Lachman (1996) argues that in the African context, definitions of physical abuse and discipline are blurry.

Alyahri and Goodman (2008) and Stith, Liu, Davies, et. al. (2009) have reported that age, sex, educational level and mental health status might influence the type of disciplinary practices that a guardian adopts. Also, single parent families are said to expose children to harsh discipline (Stith, et. al., 2009). Findings indicate that majority of the women in the study were raised by single parents. Also, majority of the women's guardians did not go to school and tended to lean towards harsh discipline. Researchers argue that high level of caregiver education is linked with non-violent discipline practice (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Trang & Duc, 2014) which was not the case in this study. In cases where guardians are overwhelmed with caretaking responsibilities in harsh conditions such as poverty and limited social support, there tend to be impatience and use of harsh discipline as was shown by Morantz et al. (2013) where guardians turned to corporal punishment. This was also illustrated by Stith and colleagues (2009) that poverty in a household can expose children to harsh psychological or physical discipline. These arguments were also shown in this study as the women grew up in low-income households where their guardians struggled to provide for the family. As there was evidence of limited parent's social and financial resources, most of household chores had to be attended to by the women such as child care, cooking and cleaning



whenever the parents were not available. Despite lack of parental supervision, the women were expected to perform all the chores to the parents' satisfaction. Failure to meet the parental requirements, corporal punishment was applied, thus Ntshwarang and Sewpaul (2021)'s argument that physical discipline is a normalized practice.

The actions of the caregivers were working against the "Botho" or "Ubuntu" perspective that entails a collective or communal care of children. As illustrated in the findings, violent psychological and physical discipline the women experienced exposed them to life challenges because their negative experiences with their caregivers interfered with the development of a personhood (Metz, 2016) that's critical in an African communal context. Metz's (2016) idea of a person needing positive relational experiences is a developmental processes rooted in "Botho" or "Ubuntu" theory. The theory supports the positive upbringing of children where they have positive relationships with both immediate family members, extended relatives and the community in general. The family is very critical in the upbringing of the child and it is in the interest of the Ubuntu values for parents to raise children within the home (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019) but the findings of the study indicate that the low income women did not get the appropriate socialization and mentoring advocated by Ubuntu values.

Despite the adverse caregiver characteristics and their negative attitudes towards those they cared for, the Ubuntu perspective condemns such actions as its focus is on harmony (caring and supportive relationships) and ensuring well-being of others. Ubuntu as argued by Metz (2007), should be "the anchor of all human relations devoted to 'promote harmonious relationships and to prevent discordant ones'" (119). However, low-income women's experiences indicate that in some instances, cultural child care practices often violated the foundations of the "Ubuntu/Botho" moral theory. While the women felt they were wronged, they could not openly express that to those that brought them up as it could have been culturally viewed as disrespect for the elderly. Thus there is a clear demonstration that although the moral theory might be valuable in some instances, some of the negative salient behaviors and norms if left unexamined might be harmful in the society.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The paper has indicated that low income women were exposed to childhood violent physical and psychological discipline which has negative adulthood outcomes, as it lead to the women's vulnerability in the society. The use of harsh discipline in an effort to decrease the likelihood of unwanted behavior to occur again or to ensure obedience in children is against social justice and human rights that are promoted in social work. The discussion shows that harsh discipline can be harmful to the child and produce negative emotions and future behavioral problems. As social work is one of the leading helping professions in Botswana, the findings of the study have implications for the profession to explore within families if there are any signs of exposing children to adversities so that these can be attended to early as the effects have long lasting damage to an individual. There is also need for social workers to develop interventions that address negative childhood experiences, because that might also assist in building healthy families and communities.

As indicated in the CRC (United Nations, 1989), child protection (absence of discrimination, exploitation and abuse) is critical for positive child development. Given the consequences of violent physical and psychological discipline and their unforeseen circumstances there is a need to de-campaign policies and laws that promote corporal punishment (Ntshwarang & Sewpaul, 2021). If laws such as Botswana Children's Act of 2019 still accommodates physical punishment as a way of child discipline, social work practitioners might have difficulties to abort some of the social ills such child abuse and domestic violence.

On one hand, there is need for social workers in schools who can work with children to identify the challenges and the adversities that children might be exposed to within the family setup, so that they can provide supportive environment. On the other hand, factors that influence the use of harsh discipline should be explored and be identified in the family setup, so that parenting intervention can be developed to help curb such. As illustrated by Patel, et al. (2021), guardians should distinguish between discipline, abuse and neglect. Such interventions can focus on how to provide supportive discipline and nonviolent forms of discipline that would enforce and strengthen positive behaviors and emotions of children.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reported on disciplinary practices that low-income women were exposed to while growing up in their households and school setups. It adopted an Ubuntu perspective and highlighted that violent child disciplinary practices which were common during the research participants' childhood do not promote children's rights as indicated in the Botswana Children's Act of 2009, CRC and the ACRWC documents. The paper also underlined that while the school system is expected to promote positive child discipline, it can also fail to do so by administering disciplinary practices that are inconsistent with human dignity. The paper advanced the need for parental education on how to engage disciplinary practices that nurture positive child development.

## DECLARATIONS

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