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## EXPLORING CHILD PARTICIPATION IN ZIMBABWE'S REUNIFICATION AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS

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**Abstract:** *There has been limited research and critique on the mainstreaming of the principle of child participation in reunification and reintegration of institutionalised children in Zimbabwe. The paper relies on qualitative data collected from 19 children and 16 social workers who were interviewed in 11 selected districts. The data was collected in May-July 2015 through in-depth interviews. A robust literature review was done as part of the study. The paper documents the views of children on their participation during reunification and reintegration. The views of the social worker on child participation and the impediments they face as they try to uphold the principle of participation. It would be argued that mainstreaming child participation in reunification and reintegration is an integral part of the child protection system of Zimbabwe.*

**Key Words:** *Child participation, child protection, reunification, reintegration, social work, Zimbabwe*

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## **INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) of 1989 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) of 1990 are the main guiding international law on mainstreaming child participation in Zimbabwe. Viviers and Lombard (2012) argue that in the context of the UNCRC, children are entitled to the right to be heard. At local level, legislative and policy framework has been modeled in sync with the UNCRC and the ACRWS. These policies and laws fostering child participation include the Children's Act (Chapter 5:06) of 2004 and the new Constitution of Zimbabwe (Amendment, No 20 of 2013) (Mashongera, 2015). Whilst the UNCRC continue to be celebrated globally for protecting the right of the child to be heard, scholars begin to question the practicality and feasibility of mainstreaming child participation in statutory child protection (Mashongera, 2015; Healy and Darlington, 2009).

The debates on the practicality of child participation were largely raised in Europe and America (the North) with very few critical analysis in the global South (Mashongera, 2015). High case loads and resource limitations are chief impediments to mainstreaming of child participation in child protection processes (Healy, 1998). Handley and Doyle (2012) are of the view that social workers in the United Kingdom (UK) lack the competences needed to build relations and open communication lines with the children in a way that fosters child participation. Woolfson et al (2010) add that children in the UK normally go through the child protection process without being given an opportunity to purposefully express their feelings as well as have their views heard. Vis et al (2012) accuse social workers in Norway of neglecting involving the children during the child care planning process hence failing to uphold the principle of child participation as domesticated in the Norwegian Child Welfare Act. A social worker in child protection is largely an agent of social control, therefore his/her use of statutory power impact negatively on the participatory practice (Healy, 1998). Therefore the UNCRC's implementation practicality on the ground in relation to the principle of child participation is questionable.

Reunification and reintegration are terms which are closely linked, with a few using them interchangeably. What is common on both terms is that they refer to processes undertaken to return institutionalised children to their families of origin. Balsells, et al (2014), conceptualise reunification as follows, "In the child protection system, family reunification



refers to the process through which children who have experienced abandonment, neglect or abuse return to the home of their birth families after a mandated separation period. ...the reunification process begins the moment the child is separated from his/her parents of origin.”

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011) posits that family engagement in the planning and execution of reunification fosters a successful reunification outcome. Reunification exercise is fundamental given that in most countries placement of children in residential care is increasingly being viewed as an easy way out by social workers dealing with child protection cases. Balsells et al (2014) has it that in Spain, residential care constitutes 75% of the placements whilst in Zimbabwe, 98% of the orphans find care within their extended family, Powell et al (2004) note that social workers within the Government are increasingly opting for residential care placements besides the country’s National Orphan Care Policy (NOCP) of 1999 putting institutionalisation as an option of last resort. This is largely due to the fact that placements in residential care institutions are not taxing. On the other hand, Bonnerjea (1994), conceptualises reintegration as, “The process of a separated child making what is anticipated as to be a permanent transition back to his or her immediate or extended family and the community...in order to find protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life.” Save the Children further argues that there is no global definition on reintegration and that reintegration is a lengthy process which unfolds over months and years. A good reintegration process is characterised by ensuring that it takes a rights based approach, a gendered perspective, taking a holistic view of the child, fosters child participation and emphasises coordination and collaboration of various stakeholders such as Government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) (Bonnerjea, 1994).

Horejsi (1979) in his trace of the historical background on the phenomenon of children living outside their family environment noted that the indenture system was widely used in America and the United Kingdom as an early form of child placement in the eighteenth century. Cohen (1992) defined indenturing as a form of servitude where persons under the age of twenty-one, provided labour for the rich landlords in return for shelter, food, education and other services. In the UK, the policy of boarding out children was formalised between the 17th century and 18th century. The Elizabethan Poor Laws recognised



boarding out of children as more healthy and beneficial. However, Thurstone (1930) criticised the indenture system for permitting all sorts of abuses and exploitation. He noted that foster parents were motivated by selfish ends as they fostered the children as a way of getting cheap labour hence viewing the fostered child as a servant not as a child in need of care and protection.

In the United States of America (USA) fostering became popular in the 19th century. Thurstone (1930) has it that in the 1850s New York faced a problem of vagrant children which then led to a rise in foster care. Therefore, Charles Loring, the then Secretary of the New York Children's Aid Society, recommended that these vagrant children should be fostered in rural areas where the environment was believed to be sound. This resulted in children being placed in families of none origin hence calling for reunification and reintegration once the recommended time lapsed.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The debates on child participation in statutory child protection has largely dominated the global North with very few debates in the South with Zimbabwe being no exception (Mashongera, 2015). There is increasing evidence in Europe that the principle of child participation is not being fully implemented by social workers, hence the need to find out if Zimbabwe is suffering the same challenge. There is limited data on the views of children and adults on the child protection system (Mashongera, 2015). This study will join the few studies seeking to amplify the children's voices in the Zimbabwean child protection system.

### **AIM OF THE STUDY**

The study aimed at exploring child participation in reunification and reintegration in Zimbabwe through listening to the views of children and young adults. The study, hopes to build the much needed knowledge base in the area of child protection and kindle the debates on the practicality of mainstreaming child participation in the child protection process in particular; reunification and reintegration.

### **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

The study involved interviewing 19 children and 16 social workers purposively sampled from 11 districts in Zimbabwe. An interview guide with guiding questions was used during in-depth interviews which was the main data collection method relied upon. In addition, relevant literature and documents were reviewed to gain insight into the current debates on



the area. Authority was sought from the relevant government department and the consent of the participants was sought and all respondents freely volunteered to participate. Data was analysed through thematic content analysis relying on the scissors approach as espoused by Stewart (2009).

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

### **Views of the child on reunification and reintegration**

Children and young adults interviewed expressed feeling happy when being reunified. Those aged 10 years and below were observed putting on wide smiles on their faces as they nodded expressing their joy on being reunified. In some isolated cases, some young adults felt that reunification was done to get rid of them by “hostile” residential care staff. This perception was echoed by a considerable number of provincial and district child welfare officers (social workers) who felt that some institutions were very much forthcoming when it comes to a reunification case of troublesome children whilst resisting the efforts to reunify children perceived as well mannered. Some children complained that their reunification process was rushed and that their residential care institutions terminated their support such as school fees payment which meant that children slump back into untold suffering. Those children who gave an optimistic view of reunification, shared that they were happy with the way reunification was done. This category said that they were first, taken to meet their family or relative before they were reunified. The probation officers visited to find out if both the children and the receiving family were happy to be reunified. This scenario seemed to offer a more fulfilling reunification outcome for both the child and the family, since those who experienced the same expressed satisfaction of the reunification exercise.

The study, revealed that 83.3% revealed that though that though they missed their former residential institution they favoured remaining in their new family set up. They cited being with relatives as a more fulfilling experience as compared with being in an institution. They elaborated that life outside the institution has greater freedom as compared to the rigid timetables associated with life within an institution. Some, explained that whilst institutions offered them a rose life characterised by nice clothes, good food, surrounded with friends and timely payment of school fees, they argued that living with their biological family members was more fulfilling. Those who opted to return to the institution cited that



institutions offered them basic necessities without a hassle as compared to their poverty stricken families.

### **Child Participation in the Process**

In the views of the interviewed social workers, child participation in the reunification process is key. The findings established that involvement of children in the reunification and reintegration of the child was limited but to a larger extent children and young adults were involved and consulted in the process. The children and young adults were involved in giving leading information which could assist the social worker to trace the child's family or relatives. During reunification, the child was made to visit his/her family or relative over the holidays and he/she was consulted to express their views on whether they could want to stay with the family or relative. However, some participants explained that whilst child participation was key, they did not have adequate time and resources to follow all the procedures required to satisfy the principle of child participation.

Some of the children interviewed, expressed that they were never asked to express their views rather the social worker just told them that they were supposed to be reunified because either they were no longer eligible to be in an institution or that their relatives had been found. In some instances, children were not given adequate time to prepare for the process of weaning themselves from the bonds created with the institution. However, this could be taken care of by the institutions which could continuously prepare the child for reunification.

### **Impediments of Social Workers in mainstreaming Child Participation**

- **Use of Statutory Authority**

Children interviewed did reveal that social workers were normally using their authority to subvert the views of the child. Whilst the UNCRC, ACWRC and the constitution of Zimbabwe is explicit that the right of the child to be heard is an alienable entitlement, social workers in Zimbabwe seem to be subverting this right as they busk in their authority. The main reason given being that if children are given the latitude to determine the course of action, it's likely that they may choose to remain in the institution contrary to the aspirations of the National Orphan Care Policy of 1999 which ranks institutionalisation lowly. However, some children were given an opportunity to make a decision as to which relative they would want to be reunified with. This was done in the event that there were several relatives willing to



stay with the child therefore where there was only a single option the child could not be given that option and opting to remain in the institution was not a welcome decision to the social worker. Thus the right of the child to be heard and the principle of child participation cannot be universally applied to all situations but it should be contextualised though the best interest of the child should be upheld at all the time.

- **Lack of resources**

Asked on what are some of the impediments social workers encounter in their effort to mainstream child participation in the reunification and reintegration process, they cited lack of resources as a significant setback. It was noted that involving the child in decision making needs resources so as to facilitate adequate visits to the relatives so as for the child to make an informed decision on whom to be reunified with and what conditions she/he wants improved before reunification. Without adequate fuel and functional vehicles, social workers revealed that they were limited in fostering child participation. It was explained that at most the child is reunified without having visited the relative prior to reunification due to lack of resources to facilitate the visits. It is not clear whether if resources are availed child participation will be fostered given the other setbacks such as high case load. The scenario was summed up by one social worker as follows, "...my friend we are experiencing multiple challenges which need a holistic approach to deal with. Yes, the challenge of resources is a chief factor why we cannot effectively mainstream child participation as we would aspire but we have other challenges such as high case load and of course issues of competence. I did not receive special training on how to effectively communicate with children. Children are slow to speak which can be time consuming for a social worker who will be having clients waiting in a queue to see him..." (A 42 year old respondent).

- **High Caseload**

High case load was ranked high as one of the impediments to mainstreaming child participation during reunification and reintegration process. Social workers in Zimbabwe have a high case load ratio of about 1: 48 000 (Wyatt, 2010). This high case load ratio does not give room to the social worker to have adequate time to listen to the child. One social worker summed up the context by saying, "...as professionals we are very much aware of child participation and we are committed to ensure child participation is realised. However, our hands are tied. You see, per day I handle several cases which makes it difficult for me to



spend an hour listening to the child. That would mean I will have to turn away several clients unattended at the end of the day. So it is wise for me to be guided by the best interest of the child to make the decision with very limited participation of the child so that I become economic with the little time I have to deal with several clients...” (35 year old social worker). This means in order for child participation to be realised the issue of high case load has to be addressed otherwise children will continue to receive token participation with real participation being an illusion.

- **Attitude of the social worker**

It was observed that whilst there are external challenges which are beyond the social worker’s control, the attitude of the social worker is an addition setback to mainstreaming of child participation in the reunification and reintegration process. Some social workers were just used to use their authority to execute their duties. Thus reunification of children was mandatory hence some social workers were consulting the residential care staff and the relatives of the child and processed reunification basing on these consultations and assessment. The child was then just a recipient of the decision made by adults. One young adult summed up the scenario during the interviews as follows, “The social worker just called me to her office and she told me that I was supposed to be reunified back to my family since I was going to turn 18 before year end. She explained that when I turn 18 I will be no longer eligible to be in the institution. I was not given an opportunity to input in her decision she just said the law does not allow me to continue being in the institution and I complied...” (A 19 year old young person).

## **THE WAY FOWARD**

The following recommendations are being made based on the findings of the study:

- In face of a lean human resource base against a huge work load, it is recommended that the government consider operationalizing a statutory instrument that allows engagement of qualified social workers working outside government to undertake some of the reunification and reintegration cases with government playing its supervisory level. This would bridge the gap created by a lean human resource against a huge work load hence giving social workers enough room to foster child participation.





- There is need to channel more resources towards pre-reunification processes which include comprehensive assessments of the receiving families. On the other hand, the child's participation in identifying the family for reunification is critical. Minimal conditions that show a family's preparedness to receive the child should be established prior to reunification. From the pre-reunification assessments of target family and the child, the social worker can draw a programme for targeted support towards the establishment of an enabling environment for successful reintegration.
- Training of social workers in child participation mainstreaming as well as on how to effectively build relations and communicate with the child is essential. Social workers need to be capacitated to develop special listening skills to children which they seem to lack given that their training does not expose them to such domains.

## **CONCLUSION**

Family reunification and reintegration requires coordination and collaboration of multi-stakeholders. Residential care institutions are key in continuous preparation of children for reunification whilst NGOs were key in mobilising resources to bridge the perennial challenge of resources bedeviling government departments. Limited child participation and family engagement in the planning and decision making during reunification has a negative bearing on the reunification outcome. Children and families who were recipients of adequate engagement in form of home visits, timely communication about when reunification was going to be finally done were leading a happier life as compared to families starved of engagement and participation.

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