

The Plight of Children as Secondary Victims of Divorce in Gweru Zimbabwe: 2013 – 2016

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Abstract

This study focused on the plight of children who are secondary victims of family break up in Gweru, Zimbabwe. The focus was on children who suffer loss as a result of the consequences of divorce and /or separation of parents. The researchers used purposive sampling, also referred to as convenience sampling to ensure that a significant number of participants were involved. Interviews and observations were handy in the collection of data.. The study established that children of divorced and/or separated parents suffer a lot of problems some of which result in the adoption of anti-social behaviour, decline in school performance, deterioration of health, low self-image. 75% of the participants interviewed showed that consequences of divorce and/or separation are catastrophic on children. The study further established that children as secondary victims, run away from home, dropout of school, develop a negative attitude of family life. The study recommends that counselling services be made available to these children, their parents and the society in general for behaviour change, attitude change and adjustment to the challenges caused by family break-up. Other stakeholders such as the Government and civil society should also support these children in as far as the five basic children's rights are concerned.

Key words: family break-up, secondary victims, children, divorce, separation

1. Background of Study

A knowledge of divorce and understanding of the causes and incidence of divorce is considered essential for those who are concerned with the rate of divorce and the serious and undesirable economic and social consequences of divorce. Goldin (1968) stated that in Rhodesia, a decree of divorce was granted by the General Division of the High Court of Rhodesia on the following grounds, adultery. Malicious desertion, incurable insanity, imprisonment for a certain and defined period and cruelty. The main grounds upon which divorce has been granted were adultery, desertion and cruelty. The Matrimonial Causes Act (Chapter 5:13) in Zimbabwe provides guidelines on what a court must be satisfied with before a divorce can be granted. There are two expendable grounds for divorce, which are irretrievable breakdown of marriage, incurable mental illness of one of the spouses. The other grounds are imprisonment for an extended period of time, living separately for a period of more than a year and adultery.

Carter and McGoldrick (2008) stated that divorce was a major disruption in the family life process, adding complexity to whatever developmental tasks the family was experiencing in its present phase. In family life, divorce **and/or separation** permanently weakens the relationship between children and parents. Fagan (2014) in support said that family break-up led to destructive ways of handling conflict and diminished social

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competence. A study carried out in the USA by Bryant (2008) showed that 90% of divorced mothers have custody of their children (even if they do not receive it in court) and that 65% of these divorced mothers do not receive child support. Lack of child support brings with it untold suffering for the secondary victims, in this case the children.

Nyoni (2014) wrote that latest statistics from the High Court of Zimbabwe indicated an increase in the number of divorce cases in the country. In 2014 the High Court received a total of 551 cases, a 20% increase from 1216 cases received in 2010. The Southern Eye reported that in Bulawayo alone 473 divorce summons were issued by the High Court during the year 2014 as compared to 427 in 2012 which consequences of divorce showed a steady rise in divorce. Radio dialogue in 2015 also reported that divorce and maintenance cases were on the rise. Latest statistics indicated that 519 summons were issued by the Bulawayo High Court in 2014, an increase of 113 cases from 2011. The Judge President, Chief Justice Chiweshe speaking at the High Court Circuit in Bulawayo in 2013 said, "The rate at which couples are divorcing has reached alarming levels" He emphasized that the prevalence of factors such as urban migration, domestic violence, adultery and other social ills had exacerbated the prevailing harsh economic conditions. Studio 7 on 7/2/15 reported that the economic meltdown in recent years had seen millions of Zimbabweans trek to the diaspora in search of greener pastures leaving their spouses to raise children, care for aging parents and attend to all other domestic challenges. Jessie Majome, the then Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs in the dissolved Government of National Unity while being interviewed by Radio Dialogue also said that divorce statistics were alarming and labelled children as the biggest casualties of divorce.

Family break-up is a life-changing experience for all concerned and can have a serious negative impact on the secondary victims especially on children. The Convention on the Rights of Children (article 1) defines a child as a person below the age of 18, unless the law of a particular country sets the legal age of majority for adulthood is younger. The Children's Protection and Adoption Act,(Chapter 33) defines a child in (section 2) as any person (including an infant) under the age 16years. The legal age of majority of 1982 defines any person below the age of 18 as a minor.

The Zimbabwe society has not been spared of the negative effects of divorce. The most vulnerable group are the children who are left wondering what has happened to their parents. Family break-up can be caused by several factors among which are divorce, separation, death in the family, sickness in the family small houses, lack of adequate financial resources, relocation of a family member. For the purposes of this study the researchers focused on divorce **and/or separation** as it affected children in a negative way. What impact do all these have on children? Divorce **and/or separation** brought with it life changing experiences which in turn ushered in untold misery and suffering especially on the children. Children as secondary victims responded differently to family break-up.

Family break-up was on the increase and had introduced a massive change in the lives of all concerned no matter who they are, what they do. For example the daily absence of one parent while living with the other, created a challenging new family set up. Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale and McRea (1998) stated that this childhood event can set in motion a chain of circumstances that affect individuals' lives even after they have left home, married and entered the labour force. This was supported by Wallerstein (2002) who said that children not only learnt to find their new life, divorce silently shattered the individual's conception of safety and reliability. Family break-up is a life changing experience, relationships within the family change their course, new and uncertain relationships are created which may be detrimental to the life span development of children, (Kanyowa, 2004). Children were exposed to a new family set-up which served as support for the custodial parent, who may also be dealing with his/her own uncertainty as regards the divorce and/or separation. Wallerstein (2002) went on to state that most people would agree that divorce was devastating in any person's life but children were

expected to contend with these emotional shifts before they were even fully developed cognitively. Jiri (2010) also supported the notion that psychological effects of family break-up were more prevalent in children. There was a loss of relationship with the parent who had left. A study carried by Bryant (2008) found that adult children of divorce were seven times more likely to agree with the statement, "I was alone a lot as a child" Jiri (2010) pointed out that although the number of people who get married was escalating at a steady rate of 34%, the divorce rate was also rising sharply. That could probably be due to the worsening economic conditions and the migration of a lot of people to the diaspora. Jiri (2010) went on to say that the issue of small children affected the divorced woman more than the man. Machinga (2005) indicated that when married people live apart for more than one year it became difficult to sustain that marital union.

They were specific feelings, attitudes and dynamics associated with family break-up whether one was in the role of the initiator or receiver of the decision to break-up. Secondary victims experienced shock and betrayal, loss, victimisation, decrease in self-esteem, insecurity, anger towards the couple that has broken up, (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004).

Family break-up has become endemic to the Zimbabwean society. The Women Law Society in Zimbabwe said that 50% of married couples chose separation and/or divorce as the solution to marital dissatisfaction. The year 2013 saw the nation of Zimbabwe going for elections and families facing economic hardships. Money was channelled towards other things such as funding the election process. Industries closed in large numbers and people found themselves with no formal employment. The competitive role for the dollar was so high in the informal sector such that children were forced to join in vending to supplement the income of parents. The period 2013 – 2015 saw a rise in illegal vending on the streets of Gweru. Pedestrians hardly have space to move about conducting their business. Verandas of shops have become the market place for street vendors. Nursing mothers bring their infants and toddlers to such places, affecting their physical, psychological, social and emotional growth. Even the city council is finding it difficult to enforce its by-laws on vending. Designated places for vending were being neglected because customers no longer frequented them. They would rather get goods at places convenient to them.

The upsurge of economic hardships has led to family break-up with some couples divorcing, living separately, children withdrawn from school and some children choosing to become domestic workers in order to eke for a living.

2. Research Problem

The plight of children as secondary victims of family break-up in Gweru Urban between 2013 and 2015.

3. Significance of the Study

Family break-up has gone on the increase due to among other things married couples choosing to divorce as a way out of their marital problems. Children, as secondary victims of family break-up are the worst affected by this negative development in their lives. They are forced into street, vending, begging and prostitution to supplement the income of the custodial parent. It is therefore imperative for stakeholders such as the Government and civic organizations take an interest in the vulnerability of these children. Policy makers should be informed to come up with strategies to help children affected by family break-up lest a generation of delinquents is created.

4. Justification of the Study

A lot of research has been done on family break-up with focus on the primary victims of the break-up. Gender activists have focussed more on the plight of female victims of divorce to the extent that they have advocated for the building half way homes in the event of domestic violence. There is need to focus on how the secondary victims, especially the children were affected by family break-up and how they fared after the break-up, what emotional, psychological and social problems they had to face, the challenges of this life-changing experience and its effect on affected children's behaviour. Did society care about these secondary victims of family break-up and if society did care, what measures had been put in place to help them.

5. Research Objectives

- To establishing the obtaining socio-economic and socio-political environment of the children from divorce and/or separation
- to establish the educational status of the victim children
- To establish the copying mechanisms of child victims of divorce
- To come up with interventions to help the children affected by divorce and/or separation.

6. Methodology

This paper assumed a qualitative research paradigm. The issue of family break-up is quite sensitive hence the choice of this research paradigm. The paper looked at the plight of children in the quagmire of divorce. Primary sources of information were the affected children, guardians and institutions dealing with divorce related cases. The researchers used purposive sampling also referred to as convenience sampling to ensure that a significant number of participants were involved, especially those that are rich in data. Purposive sampling was also used because the researchers targeted the rightful persons and have had experience of family break-up. Interviews, observations and focus group discussions were used to collect and/or gather data. The participants were subjected to in-depth one on one interviewing. The bulk of this paper's scope of children go to school hence one school head of a high density school was interviewed. The researchers also carried out focus group discussion with five Civil Society Organisations.

7. Findings

From the interviews, focus group discussions and observations, the study found that children were the worst affected in the wake of divorce and the current economic downtrend. Following are findings by the researchers.

- Divorce and/or separation brought in a lot of mistrust of the parents by children. The children interviewed felt that life was very unfair to them. One child stated, "our lives were changed by the separation of our parents. We are so vulnerable now because our mother really cannot afford to take care of us as they used to do when our parents were together".
- Zimbabwe's Child Protection and Adoption Act prohibited the exposure of children to hazardous and harmful conditions and using them for begging purposes. The reason is that unemployment has caused families to break-up hence child vending and begging on the streets. Children were not only exposed to danger by their parents but also by those who employed them as street vendors and as house help.
- Informal employment was an important source of livelihood for many people in Gweru. Faced with a lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector.

- Jobs such as street vending cross boarder trading and prostitution left children unattended by responsible adults exposing children to the risk of suffering all forms of abuse. One parent interviewed commented thus, “I have no choice but to send my children onto the streets to make money. They need to feed, clothe and go to school. As a divorced parent things are difficult for me”, yet another responded thus, “Informal trading has helped me a lot to care of my children, putting food on the table, clothing them and sending them to school”

- **Multiplicity of new roles**

Children could be called on to do adult tasks like caring for younger siblings before they were ready for that kind of responsibility.

The girl-children fell victim to unscrupulous men who sexually abuse them ending up contracting sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS. According to sociologist Lenore Weitzman, divorced women get by on about 64% of the income they had during marriage. For their children, that translated into less money for school activities, clothes, opportunities for travelling and learning, day care and sometimes food. As stated earlier on in this study, the children ended up on the streets as street vendors and beggars to supplement their custodial parent’s income.

- **Increased youth crime rate and juvenile delinquency**

Children not living in intact, married households had far higher rates of delinquency, youth crime, alcohol and drug use, said (Kanyowa, 2004). Those from father-absent families were twice as likely to be in jail as those from two-parent families because they found it hard to resist temptation to be dishonest or criminal. The absence of a father whose voice is more often than not given due respect and attention caused children to glide into delinquent behaviour. A child is less apt to commit a crime with fathers visibly present. For boys, leaving school generally meant a succession of low paying jobs or life on the streets. Certainly our “fatherless society” cannot be blamed for all juvenile delinquency but it is a major contributor. Morals are taught best within the confines of a stable home with both parents present.

- **Education needs**

Statistical data revealed that children of divorced parents were much more likely to drop out of school due to frustration. It was also noted that no one was home to supervise the younger children’s homework Older children were required to work long hours vending to help supplement the family income. As a result, they fell behind in their school work and felt that it was hopeless to try to keep up and decided to quit school.

- **Poverty**

Children living with a single mother are six times more likely to live in poverty as those who live with two biological parents. Children not living with both parents are about twice as likely to drop out of high school, and to have behavioral or psychological problems, while children of married parents tended to be more academically successful and emotionally stable. The issue of stigmatization also affected children from divorced households as a result they adopted compensatory behaviour such as bullying, being dishonesty, disobedience

- The financial implication of family break-up is often hard to comprehend especially as children ended up being the most affected. One respondent lamented, I have had to send my two children to the rural area to live with my aged parents while I eke for a living here in the city’. Yet another said,; I have

been driven into prostitution as a quick way to raise money for my children's upkeep because their father does not support us in any way'

- **Civil Society on Experiences with Children from Divorce Cases**

Midlands based Community Based Organisations (CBOs) dealing with children from divorced cases noted that divorce increased the vulnerability of children from divorce. The children were left with no form of security and no source of protection. The children therefore became receptive to any negative influence and very much exposed. About 75% of the civil society members noted the absence of parental love and parental care as a worrisome plight. Without the parents, the children were likely to suffer much more than they would if marriage was preserved. Lack of confidence among the children was a notable aspect especially in those assisted by the CBOs. In an interview with a school head at one of the secondary schools in Mkoba High Density Suburb, it was noted that the confidence issue was prevalent among many mostly those stigmatised by other pupils. At school, the tendency was that these children were stereotyped as children of returning female soldiers as they mostly reside with their divorced mothers. Adoption of compensatory behaviour was an aspect reported by a Non- Government Organisation dealing with commercial sex workers in Gweru urban. The organisation noted that most of its beneficiaries were engaged in commercial sex work as compensatory service of their plight.

The following are the findings from the civil society organisations interviewed:-

- Abuse among the victims, girl children were the most affected. The divorce experience displaced and disenfranchised the children from the parents. The civil society umbrella body NANGO Midlands reported that most children were often sent to the rural areas such as Gokwe and Shurugwi where they become young cotton labourers, illegal gold planners and household help respectively. School was abandoned and income raising activities primarily occupied these children.
- Stigma and stereotyping refers to societal labelling and negative perceptions of the children as a result of the divorce. They were often labelled "*vana vemahure*" in society while they are labelled "*magora*" by the maternal relatives taking care of them. That often demoralised and demotivated the children hence they experienced serious social isolation as reported by many institutions interviewed.
- Divorce cycles became rife once the victims failed to get proper social rehabilitation. CBOs that track their beneficiaries reported a 75% chance of divorce recurrence among their married beneficiaries. This was confirmed by NANGO Midlands. Focus group discussions which noted that children who experienced divorce were likely to divorce again in their marriage and their children also divorce hence the divorce cycle became difficult to break
- Poverty, financial difficulties and insecurity of children were reported by 90% of CBOs and confirmed by the school head. Once divorced, most mothers took custody of the children but due to patriarchal systems in the industry and public spheres, the mothers hardly got money to look after their children. In essence the children experienced financial difficulties hence they dropped out of school while some absented themselves for longer periods leading to unfavourable educational performances and results. Poverty or lack of basic needs like food, shelter, clothes and shelter was reported to be prevalent among the victims of divorce.
- Children custodial conflicts were reported by one of the organisations handling divorces in Gweru. Most often divorced parents fought over children who in turn suffered the effects of these unwarranted battles

amongst parents. Fathers were sometimes denied access to their children while these children were often socialised to hate their fathers. The step fathers also physically, emotionally and sexually abused the female children. In other cases, children under the father's custody were also subjected to physical and emotional abuse by step mothers. Strained relations became the climate for these children. There is too much friction and feelings of hurt, hate and rejection creep in as the children grow.

- Orphanages and institutions handling OVCs have reported that 50% of their beneficiaries are divorce victims. These come to their institutions in search of shelter, food, clothes and education. Another organisation involved with children on the streets noted that 60% of their beneficiaries better known as "Street kids" were victims of divorce. In the streets it was observed that the children were exposed to the unfavourable weathers (especially winter) of Gweru. They often lacked food and decent clothing hence they engaged in immoral activities in order to survive on the streets.

8. Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the plight of children as secondary victims of divorce and/or separation in Gweru. Participants were purposively selected to take part in the research. Interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather information. Basing on data collected the following is a summary of collected data:-

- Children of divorced and /or separated parents suffer a lot of stigma and discrimination as a result of the divorce and/or separation. Children develop antisocial behaviour and end up as delinquents
- The custodial parent finds it difficult to make ends meet hence is forced to send children to hi/her rural home.
- The custodial parent ends up involved in prostitution to supplement the little income she has
- Children drop-out of school because there is not enough money to pay fees and other necessities for school.
- Lack of a steady flow of income was an inhibiting factor in the education and health of affected children
- The girl-child became a target for unscrupulous males who exploited her sexually. This had a negative consequences in terms of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and falling pregnant.

9. Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusions drawn from this study, the following recommendations are made;-

- Counselling services be provided the affected children for behaviour and attitude change.
- Counselling services be provided to the parent who remains responsible for the children
- Counselling services be provided for the community members to be supportive of the children from divorced and/or separated parents. This would help to lower the number of abused children and juvenile delinquents in the community
- The Government to put in place measure to support these children not just on paper but to effectively implement the measures
- Workshops be held to conscientise people on the evils caused by divorce and/or separation

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