Poverty and child abuse in Zimbabwe: a social work perspective

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This article focuses on how poverty has contributed to the unfortunate situation of abuse of children in Zimbabwe. The abuse of children has taken the form of trampling upon their fundamental rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights of the Child. Forms of abuse which are prevalent include sexual, emotional, neglect and child labour. It also examines the social workers roles in addressing child abuse. The article recommends mainstreaming child abuse in poverty alleviation programmes as a way of tackling child abuse.

“Many poor families are being forced to send their children out to find work or wild foods and simply can no longer afford to send them to school” (UNICEF 2009)

INTRODUCTION:
The increasing levels of poverty in Zimbabwe have resulted in the children being left vulnerable to abuse. The Ministry of Labour and Social Services (undated?) noted that, child abuse is fast increasingly recognised as an issue requiring urgent attention. They went on to cite a study conducted with UNICEF in 2010 which showed that 22 percent of all children in Zimbabwe reported abuse in one form or another. This is due to the fact that as families means of survival diminish, children’s needs are usually not met resulting in varying level of neglect. Also poor living conditions resulting from poverty expose children to various forms of physical and emotional abuse. Because of their specialised training social workers play an extremely important role in assisting abused children and even in some cases, preventing the abuse, preventing the abuse of the most vulnerable members of society.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
In Zimbabwe, the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 defines an adult as any person over 18 years of age. Therefore any person below the age of 18 years is a child. Due to negative macro-economic fundamentals in Zimbabwe many children have been left vulnerable to abuse. The Ministry of Labour and Social Services (MoLSS undated) include the following categories of children as vulnerable, abused children (sexually, physically, and emotionally), working children, children living with very poor parents and children living in very crowded shelters. This vulnerability is a consequence of rising levels of poverty resulting in many forms of child abuse.

Child abuse or maltreatment is often classified into four major categories, physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment (Wolfe 2001). He further observed that, the social science definition of child abuse places primary importance on the relational context in which such abuse occurs. In addition maltreatment is often enmeshed in other serious familial problems, most notably parental substance abuse, financial problems, and stressful life circumstances. Therefore child abuse has to be understood within an ecological context. In this article child abuse has to be understood within the context of extreme poverty affecting families in Zimbabwe. Many families are facing financial problems exacerbated by a failure to access social services and degrading living conditions. Access to health services and education are also problematic. These dire social conditions have worsened and contributed to the many forms of abuse taking place in these poverty stricken families and communities in places such as Harare, Epworth and Bindura in Zimbabwe from which cases of child abuse cited in this article were drawn.

Child abuse occurs when an adult threatens or causes physical or mental harm to a child (National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Zimbabwe 1999). The Association went on to define forms of child abuse such as emotional abuse and neglect. Emotional abuse is defined as a pattern of behaviour that attacks a child’s emotional development and sense of self-worth, for example constant criticism, insult and withholding support and guidance. According to Ministry of Labour and Social Services (undated) child abuse can be categorised in terms of physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, all forms of child
abuse which are exacerbated by poverty in Zimbabwe. The Ministry of Labour and Social Services also identified additional variables that contribute to child abuse such as economic pressures, marital conflict, cultural or religious beliefs and practices and ignorance of children’s rights. On the issue of economic pressures the Ministry made an important observation that, sometimes adults express their frustration with economic problems such as poverty or unemployment by abusing children under their care.

In Africa, poverty has been characterised by a declining per capita income, poor economic growth, low employment, and inadequate access to social services (Hall 2000). Graaf (2001:8) noted that “...being poor is not just being without money. Being poor frequently also means being subjected to physical abuse and violence, being subjected to humiliation and indignity”. Therefore poverty can be a driving force behind a spate of child abuse witnessed in Zimbabwe.

It can therefore be noted that poverty is multifaceted with economic, political, cultural, emotional, and psychological dimensions. This also means that poverty contributes to a state of vulnerability, meaning children living in a poor family are particularly vulnerable to child abuse. An attempt to define poverty using one dimension has proved to be inadequate as poverty is a complex phenomenon. This calls for defining poverty from different viewpoints as shown by Figure 1 below.

**Fig 1: Definitions of poverty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Absolute poverty, GDP per capita</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative, inequality</td>
<td>Human Development Index</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociological</td>
<td>Structural deprivation</td>
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In pure economic terms, poverty is defined and measured in terms of income, for instance a family is considered poor if its income fails to meet an established threshold. Smelser and Baltes (2001) noted that, economists often seek to identify the families whose economic position falls below some minimally acceptable levels. In Zimbabwe according to the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe (CCZ) the low income earner monthly basket for a family of six was US$ 573.00 (Newsday 2013). This means families living below this monthly income are considered poor. Children living in such families are vulnerable to some form of child abuse because the family might not be able to meet some of their needs. In Zimbabwe therefore with low levels of income being earned by the majority of the labour force cases of child abuse are on the increase.

The introduction of people-centred poverty measures in the late 1990s, resulted in the construction of the Human Development Index to measure as well as define poverty (McKinley 2006). A case in point is the indicator on real (Gross Domestic Product) GDP per person which denotes command over resources needed for a decent living as a measure of poverty.

The sociological definition of poverty focuses on reasons or causes of poverty such as the power relations and social structures (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 2012). In these factors lie the drivers of poverty. For instance the gendered nature of poverty in many African countries is blamed on culture which perpetuates the subjugation of women. McKinley (2006:1) observed that due to the multidimensional nature of poverty, particular social aspects such as poor housing and health needs to be understood in order to create more effective intervention strategies when dealing with the menace of poverty and protecting those most vulnerable members of society, namely children.

**POVERTY IN ZIMBABWE**

In Zimbabwe, forms and levels of poverty have been reported to be on the rise. Mpofu (2011) noted the following trend of poverty in Zimbabwe, the World Bank estimated that urban poverty in Zimbabwe in 1990/91 was 12 percent. He further observed that, the 1995 Poverty Assessment Study found urban poverty to be 39 percent. Mpofu (2011) cited UNICEF noting that in 2010, 78 percent of Zimbabweans were “absolutely poor” and 55 percent of the population, (about 6.6 million) lived under the food poverty line. While New Zimbabwe (2009) estimated that more than 65 percent of Zimbabweans lived below the poverty datum line. These statistics paint a bleak picture of the level and incidence of poverty in Zimbabwe. This has regrettably had an influence on some forms of child abuse that are being experienced in the country.

Poverty in Zimbabwe has forced some people to reside in sub-human standards as shown in Fig 2 below, which is a shack in Epworth. It is in such appalling housing conditions due to poverty that some forms of child abuse have taken place. This is indicative of some of the living conditions in poor urban communities in Zimbabwe.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The study examined the relationship between poverty and child abuse in Zimbabwe. A documents analysis method was applied in compiling data relevant to the topic. An overview of the legislation and policy environment was done in the study in order to come up with informed conclusions and recommendations. A review of available literature on child abuse as well as on poverty was conducted. A total of three cases studies drawn from the print media were used as a sample for this study. These were selected based on availability and purpose of containing appropriate information which was in line with the thematic focus of the study.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS
Legal and Policy Framework
Zimbabwe is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC sets out what governments and individuals should do to promote and protect the indivisible human rights of all children and was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly. It has since been ratified by all the world’s governments except Somalia and United States of America (Sachiti 2011). The Convention’s Article 19 clearly states that, children should be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. In the area of child welfare, Zimbabwe has a legal framework that supports children buttressed by two key national policies namely the National Orphan Care Policy and the National HIV and AIDS Policy.

Legislation most pertinent to the protection of children from abuse in Zimbabwe is the Children’s Act (Chap 5:06 2001). The Act provides for categories of children who need care including those who are destitute or have been abandoned, who are denied proper health care, whose parents are dead or cannot be traced and whose parents do not or are unfit to exercise proper care over them. The Act has provisions for the protection of children from ill-treatment or neglect. Section 7 sub-section 1 provides that, if any parent of guardian of a child or young person assaults, ill-treats, neglects, abandons or exposes the child or allows, causes or procures the child to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned or exposed in a manner likely to cause the child unnecessary suffering or to injure or detrimentally to affect the child’s health or morals or any part or function of the child’s mind or body shall be guilty of an offence. Therefore one can conclude that the Act attempts to comprehensively protect children against abuse.

However the same Act protects parents or guardians who fail to meet the needs of their children and in cases which border on child neglect, a form of child abuse due to factors beyond their control such as poverty. An interpretation of section 7 sub-section 4 suggests that a parent or guardian is not guilty of an offence against a child abuse as read in section 7 sub-section 1, if failure to provide for the child is not due to unwillingness to work, misconduct, incurring unreasonable debts or omission to take reasonable steps to obtain relief from any other person legally liable to maintain the child or young person concerned or from any association, authority or institution whose purpose is the relief of indigence. This means that child abuse occasioned by poverty might be left unattended and legislation leaves the child without the necessary intervention.

National policies in support of orphaned and vulnerable children include the National Orphan Care Policy and the National AIDS Policy, both adopted in 1999. These policies were developed using a broad-based consultative approach, reflecting Zimbabwe’s strengths in traditional ways of doing things, and promote collaboration between government and civil society (Ministry of Labour and Social Services, undated). These policies also establish the government infrastructure to implement and coordinate services and benefits provided in the policies. The Zimbabwe National Orphan Care Policy identifies opportunities to provide care and support for vulnerable children that are inherent in the country’s legislative framework, the cultural
tradition of caring and the collaborative approach, which exists between government and the civic society, especially the six-tier safety net mechanism. Also strategic plans and action plans have since been developed over the years to ensure implementation of the policies provisions. These include the National HIV and AIDS Strategic plan 2011-2015 and the National Action Plan for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (NAP for OVC).

In terms of the legislative and policy framework, it can, therefore be concluded that Zimbabwe has put in place a basic legislative foundation which could be used to protect children from abuse. It should be recognised and appreciated that law makers have made an effort to introduce laws that protect children and other vulnerable groups. Commendable as this could be, it seems rising poverty has proved to be a stumbling block in the operationalization of some of the laws and policies resulting in increasing reported cases of child abuse yet few measures to deal with them. Therefore even with these comprehensive laws that have been passed to protect vulnerable children from abuse the additional resources and improved capacity development necessary for their implementation are not available, making it difficult to lift the provisions of the laws and policies off the paper to translate into something tangible within the community.

CAStES OF CHILD ABUSE

The following are cases that have been captured by the media in Zimbabwe highlighting the link between poverty and abuse of children.

In an article by Sachiti (2010) titled “Door-to-door in search for alms” cites a case in which a little boy aged nine years who is into door-to-door begging for food, money and clothes. The boy had dropped out of school, as there was no one to pay for his school fees. He said “Our mother is very sick…”. This suggest that due to the sickness the mother is no longer in a position to fend for the children, this has given rise to poverty which has in turn forced this boy into begging. This results in physical and emotional abuse of the child. An enumeration of children living and working on the streets in Harare, Chitungwiza, Ruwa and Norton by Streets Ahead revealed that out of 705 interviewed children, 36 had been pushed to the streets by poverty.

Sachiti (2011) in another article titled “Living hell for vulnerable children” he noted the following case. Maria Ndlovu (not real name) aged 16 year-old is orphaned, both her parents succumbed to HIV-related illnesses three years ago and she now fends for her three brothers aged 12, 9 and 5. She reported that “She used to go to bars and nightclubs in search of men who become intimate with her for US$5. She used the money to buy food for her brothers and pay rent…”. This case reveals the link between poverty and sexual abuse and exploitation of children. In this case poverty due to orphan-hood forced a child aged 16 years into prostitution in order to financially fend for her brothers.

Another case showing the association between poverty and child abuse is by Lupande (2012) reporting on a court case before the magistrates court. In the article titled “Polygamist beds wives, in kids’ view” Lupande (2012), tells of an Epworth polygamist sharing one room with his two wives and four children, who told the civil court that he becomes intimate with the women in the presence of the minors, the eldest being 13 years old. The magistrate noted that the polygamist was “…abusing his children”. In terms of child welfare this is psychological abuse of children. It is also a violation of Article 19 which states that, children should be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment. The children in the cited case are suffering mental violence by being exposed to private adult acts. Poverty can also be noted as an underlying cause which is resulting in this man sharing a one room as a bedroom with his children unintentionally resulting in their psychological abuse when he becomes intimate in their presence. This in the long term may result in delinquent behaviour by the children due to their exposure to indecent acts at a tender age. Weatherburn and Lind (1997) found out that there is a correlation between child abuse and later delinquency by the abused children.

In yet another article showing how poverty can result in child abuse, by Guyvombe (2011) titled “MaOne: Where up to 7 people sleep in one room!”, he observed that in Bindura’s MaOne section during the night a family of up to seven people, huddles in one room. He even quoted a 14 year-old school girl saying she was always milling around the shops at night as she finds it difficult to sleep in their one-roomed house together with the parents. The girl went on to say that, “I have fallen prey to the trap (sexual abuse) and I sometimes charge US$2-3 depending on negotiations for a short time”. It can be noted
from this case how poverty manifesting in the form of squalid living conditions has led to the sexual abuse of a child.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN CHILD ABUSE

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defined social work as a profession that promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (Beckett 2006). O’Connor, Hughes, Turney, Wilson and Setterlund (2006:1) noted that, “social work practice seeks to redress human suffering and injustice. Practitioner aim to mobilise the forces of the individual, community and state to address the processes by which individuals and groups are marginalised or diminished in their capacity to participate as citizens”. They further observed that, such practices maintain a particular concern for those who are most excluded from social, economic, political or cultural processes or structures.

Social workers do serve multiple functions and purposes in the various agencies where they are employed. O’Connor et al. (2006) observed that social work is practised in government settings, voluntary organisations, religious organisations, and the profit–making sector when corporates or companies employ social workers in their human resources departments to offer social work services such as counselling and referrals to the company employees. Social work interventions range from primary person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development (Beckett 2006). Further to this the intervention methods include counselling, clinical social work, group work, as efforts to help people obtain services and resources in the community. Social workers also engage in social action and political action to impact social policy and economic development (Bernstein 1995).

NASW (1999) recommend a number of roles for social workers when dealing with child abuse. They suggested that when informed about a child being abused, social workers should respond quickly but carefully so as to protect the child’s life and reputation. There is need to offer constant support to families in distress. Social workers should link abused children with available resources such as support groups or experienced counsellors. It has to be noted that some social workers are already practising the roles being suggested by NASW, however, many do not.

In Zimbabwe social workers are employed in government settings such as the Department of Social Services and are responsible for the administration of the Children’s Act making sure that children are protected from abuse as per the Act’s provisions. They also offer counselling services and place abused children in places of safety. Social workers within the Department of Social Services are also involved in the administration of social protection schemes such as Public Assistance and Free Medical Treatments for the poor and destitute. Whilst some voluntary organisations such as Family Support Trust are complementing government efforts through offering services such as counselling to children suffering from trauma due to abuse and conduct campaigns in communities to raise awareness about child abuse. Social workers in Zimbabwe are very much involved in addressing child abuse through the roles they play.

The government of Zimbabwe need to be commended for coming up with the national action plan to address challenges faced by OVC, social workers working in the Department of Social Services as well as those in non-governmental organisations are working towards the implementation of the provisions of the action plan. They are working with increased vigour to reduce the abuse of children especially as a result of poverty and deprivation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The article has attempted to highlight how poverty is fuelling abuse of children in Zimbabwe. An attempt was also made to articulate how social workers are currently dealing with child abuse. Potential roles for social workers have also been identified. Poverty has been noted to be a contributing factor to some forms of child abuse in Zimbabwe. The laws and programmes that have been put in place to assist orphaned and vulnerable children have been undermined by poverty which is being experienced in many poverty stricken rural and urban communities in Zimbabwe.

It is recommended that, social workers in the Department of Social Services (DSS) need to be capacitated in terms of material resources and
improvement in their working conditions in order for them to deal with cases of child abuse comprehensively. The capacity can be improved through increased funding from the national budget, to enable the Department to carry out its mandate effectively. This is because social workers are specially trained to deal with child abuse as they are equipped with skills and knowledge in child welfare.

There is need to separate statutory child welfare and general welfare duties in the DSS to ensure that social workers concentrate on child welfare because of their specialised training, they are able to professionally deal with child abuse cases. The other disciplines (sociologists and psychologists) in the DSS are better positioned to carry out the other social services duties and responsibilities such as administration of the Grain Loan Scheme in the drought prone regions of the country.

Communities need to be conscientised about child abuse and its negative effects. This may address cases where parents might be abusing their children due to ignorance. Therefore awareness campaigns will assist them to stop children abuse as they become aware that it is unacceptable. Professional bodies such as the National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe (NASW-Z) are better placed to conduct such awareness because of the respect they have in communities.

There is need for urban renewal in Zimbabwe’s older suburban areas. This should be in the form of renovating the accommodation as well as restoring dilapidated amenities. The old suburbs’ carrying capacity has been overstretched because of unchecked rural to urban migration, increasing poverty and natural population growth. The efforts may address the problem highlighted in the study which revealed high levels of child abuse taking place in suburbs such as Chipadze in Bindura.

The government should intensify poverty alleviation strategies specifically targeting poor households. Social workers employed within the Department of Social Services are being involved in poverty alleviation strategies such as the cash transfer programme in few selected districts in Zimbabwe in order to deal with poverty as literature has shown that poverty can fuel the abuse of children. Samson (2009) observed that social cash transfers are emerging in many developing countries as a key social protection instrument for tackling poverty and vulnerability. They are involved in selection of beneficiaries, linking people with resources, monitoring and evaluation of the programme. The cash transfers have potential of addressing poverty in the targeted households. Therefore if poverty is addressed, indirectly some forms of child would have been dealt with in these households.

Although the study was mainly focusing on Zimbabwe, it has implications in the area of child welfare viz-a-vis child abuse in South Africa as some of the recommendations might be useful. The study provides valuable insights into how poverty contributes to child abuse. This highlights, to policymakers, the urgent need to address poverty in order to reduce child abuse. For South African practitioners in the area of child welfare such as social workers, it will support the dilemma and frustrations they face in practice especially when dealing with the effects of a problem without addressing the actual problem. In this instance tackling some forms of child abuse rather than the root problem of poverty which unfortunately results in the problem and its effects continue unabated. This will hopefully stimulate debate regarding the need for developmental rather than remedial services in the field of child welfare. The study also suggests a framework of mainstreaming child abuse in poverty alleviation programmes which might be useful in both Zimbabwe and South Africa.

REFERENCES


