



Critical Social Thinking: Policy and Practice, Vol. 4, 2012

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Child Protection in families in Uganda: Critical Policy Issues

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Abstract

This article is based on a qualitative research project titled *“Child Protection in Uganda: A critical Analysis of the Implementation of the Children Act of 1997”* which was conducted for a Master’s thesis in Social Policy. The article examines how effectively the responsible child protection structures provided for in the Children Act of 1997 affords protection to Children in their families in Uganda. It argues that the introduction of this law is a positive step for the plight of Children in Uganda, but not necessarily enough to offer adequate protection. The Child protection system is basically non-existent. The weak implementation structures, the low priority given to children’s issues and the low capacity of child-workers among others greatly undermine the working of the Children Act. The State needs to empower existing protection structures if children’s dream of a safe family is to come true.

Keywords: Child Protection, family, Children Act of 1997, Effectiveness and Uganda.

1. Introduction

I have been struck by the fact that violence against children in all settings and contexts is very prevalent and knows no boundaries of geography, class, politics, race or culture (Independent Expert – Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, UN General Assembly, 2005, quoted by Bennett et al. 2009: 784).

Child abuse and neglect is a truism in every society (UN, 2006). It is estimated that at least 40 million children are victims of child abuse and neglect by age 14 annually (WHO, 2006, cited by Svevo-Cianci et al., 2010). Most of these occur in the family environment; and are perpetrated by those who have primary responsibility for the care and protection of children (Guterman et al., 2009). The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF, 2011) projects that $\frac{3}{4}$ of children in the world experience abuse in their families. In the USA there are approximately one million annual victims of child maltreatment in the families (Wilcox et al., 2008). In the UK, the rate of physical abuse in the home ranges from 48 – 71%; and at least 50% of parents support its use (Bunting et al., 2010). In Northern Ireland, Pat Cawson et al. (2000) claimed that most violent treatments (in 78% of the cases studied) had happened at home. Cawson et al. thus conclude that;

Violence towards children is primarily a family affair. Violence by unrelated adults is rare and it is primarily birth parents who mete out the violent treatment (2000: 9).

Uganda is not an exception. Annual reports by ANPPCAN Uganda Chapter (2006; 2007; 2010) and the Uganda Police (2009; 2010) over a four-year period, point to a high prevalence of child abuse and neglect in the families. The frequency of this abuse is so high that up to 31.8% and 15% of children experience violence at least once a week and daily respectively (Naker, 2005). The available anecdotal evidence perhaps even underestimates the true prevalence of abuse. It is generally difficult to measure intrafamilial child abuse and neglect in any society for various reasons. Firstly, the definitional and many other forms overlap (Cawson et al, 2000). Secondly, no reliable statistical data on exist (Lewis et al., 2000; Lalor, 2004a). According to Mary Selby (2011) the inadequacy of data is “partly because, like an iceberg, it [abuse in the family] is mostly hidden”. It is therefore difficult for an outsider to recognize and quantify the abuse and neglect of children therein. Thirdly, there has been little research carried out on this kind of abuse (Lalor, 2004b).

2. Definition of Child Protection

Stating the explicit definition of child protection is no easy task. However, child-workers underscore the importance of having a shared-understanding of the

terminology. This would help to standardize child care and protection work. According to a proposal by Save the Children Alliance (SCA),

Child protection [constitutes]...measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children (UNICEF, 2006: 11).

Protection of children should always revolve around securing their rights and well-being, the analysis of the risks and vulnerabilities affecting such children and the capacities of those charged responsible for their protection. This emphasis is on prevention of abuse and neglect; but also on the need for the restoration of hope, dignified life and a protective environment for such an abused child. This is important because implementing corrective measures against abusers while leaving a child in the same environment (in this case, an abusive family) of earlier abuse, exposes him/her to further – and sometimes more extreme – cases of abuse and neglect.

3. The Primacy of the family in Child Protection

Rory McDowall Clark (2010) describes a family as a ‘basic social group, generally connected by kinship or marriage, which aims to provide its members with mutual social, emotional and economic security’. The notion that the family is the best place for a child’s development is a long-held one (Wulczyn et al., 2010). The Child Rights and the Protective Environment Frameworks both emphasize the importance of the family in child care and protection. In the first instance, families are child-centred. It is argued that adults are happy to have their own children and enjoy the challenges of bringing them up because that gives a meaning to their lives (Ong, 2001; Nabukeera, 2001; Akwara et al., 2010). Families are the most basic social unit for a child’s experiences (Bugwadia, 2010). It is in the family where children develop physically, mentally and socially. A child learns physical actions like sitting, crawling, standing, walking and talking through the help of the family (Isobel, 2010). It is also the family that introduces a child to social skills like conflict resolution, human relationships and coping mechanisms; and develops his or her confidence to explore the world (Smith, 2009 and Culotta, 2009). Even more importantly to children, families represent a safe haven – a place of safety and comfort; their fallback position when the world becomes abusive to them (Isobel, 2010). The family is the first place for a child to experience his or her right to love, tolerance, mutual respect and solidarity. Most cultures still regard the family as the primary institution that best suits a child’s development.

This sweeping simplification that every family is the best and safest environment for children (Wilcox et al, 2008) however meets robust empirical resistance. The very families entrusted with the primacy of care and protection can be very dangerous places for children (Kassem et al., 2010; Lewis et al., 2000). Straus et al. (1980) therefore note that;

Publicly at least, we think of the family as a loving, tranquil, peaceful social institution to which one flees from stress and danger. Privately, the family is perhaps society's most violent institution (cited by Gelles, 1983: 157).

According to Derek Kassem et al. (2010), child abuse is mostly perpetrated by caregivers or close relatives who live in close proximity to the child. In Uganda, for instance, it is reported that mothers and fathers are the highest perpetrators of abuse against their children (ANPPCAN, 2006; UCRNN, 2004). Therefore, the family may not simply be trusted to respect and value a child without any external regulation. This is attributed to several reasons.

Firstly, most economies have shifted from being primarily agrarian to industrialization (Corsaro, 1997). With it has come the breakdown of the traditional family structure with its layers of protection for children (Ong, 2001). In Uganda, the extended family acted as a cushion against abuse and neglect of children, and even more in the absence of the child's biological parents (Nabukeera, 2001). The grandparents became fond and protective of children because of their central role in passing on the cultural values (Otiso, 2006). The children would also normally develop their own protection mechanism. Since socialization was done in age-sets, children learnt to care for and protect each other. It is not uncommon now to find nuclear families (Corsaro, 1997; Featherstone, 2004); and this nucleaty has sneaked into the public domain the false assumption that the domestic family is an institution of constant happiness and bliss. Thus the abuse and neglect of children in the family may simply be ignored by other relatives as it happens.

Secondly, the nuclear family has assumed the form of a private institution. The family is considered to be 'inviolable' (Ong, 2001); it is the least studied area of our society (Cawson, 2000), and therefore most of the abuse in it remains hidden (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). This has given rise to the secrecy of abuse, be it of the

children or women since the two mutually reinforce each other (Firestone, 1970, cited by Archard, 1993, Lee, 2001; Krug et al. 2002; Wyness, 2006). Michael Wyness (2006), therefore, challenges the cultural paradigm that subsumes children into the family with a fallacy of assured protection from within. This makes violations of children possible; but also nullifies any attempt to intervene. The families prioritize their own ‘sanctity’ over and above the child’s right to safety and well-being.

Thirdly, the constantly changing value of childhood influences their care and protection in the family (Naker, 2002). In many traditional societies children constituted an investment; their existence represented continuity and the reproduction of a family (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). In Africa, it was commonly said that “the child is the father of the man” (Akwara et al. 2010: 27) because such a child would grow up to have his own children. They were also economically beneficial as they would earn for their families by laboring away in the farms and factories. Now children are considered costs to their families and a long-term advantage to the society (Oldman, 1994). Emotionally they are still relevant because their presence facilitates emotional stability for their parents, especially when these parents are having relationship problems (Jensen, 1994; Makrinoiti, 1994). In case of no such need for stability, however, children become irrelevant. Dipak Naker (2002) therefore argues that this attitude objectifies children and makes them vulnerable to abuse by adults in the families.

Fourthly, children are seen as property of parents – especially their fathers, which derives from the doctrine of *patria potestas* (Akwara et al., 2010). This attitude bestows on parents unchecked authority with exclusive paternal rights, while the children have no individual status in the eyes of the law (Barnitz, 1998; Bunting et al., 2010). The notion of ‘parents know best’ influences the society around the child to think that parents and families should be trusted in all decisions regarding the child (Ong, 2001; Wyness, 2006). Parents are therefore assumed to have absolute powers over their children and are at liberty to abuse these children without ‘interference’.

Fifthly, child abuse in the family may arise out of the need for social control. There is generally a social acceptance of punishment at home as ‘reasonable chastisement’ and ‘moderate correction’ (GIEACPC, 2011). This comes about as a result of the high

social demand placed on parents to up-bring children who are obedient and responsible (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994; Kassem et al., 2010). In the *Ganda* culture in Uganda, characteristics most valued in a child are submissiveness and pliability; any rebellion by the child and failure to play by the rules is met with severe response (Opolot, 1983). However, “the dividing line between the two [punishment and abuse] is artificial. It is very easy to pass from one stage to the other” (CRC/C/SR 176, 1994, para 46, Quoted by GIEACPC, 2011: 2). Actually, the two are “inextricably linked” (Straus, 1994, cited by Ritchie, 2002). Jane Ritchie (2002) encourages the use of positive child training methods like reasoning, explanations, praise and reward because they are more effective than negative ones like scolding, shouting or smacking. Punishment may escalate to the point of child abuse as parents get consumed in it and lose control of themselves in the ‘hit of the moment’ (Straus, 1994, cited by Ritchie, 2002). It may also influence future adult behaviour of the child, making him/her abusive to those over whom he/she has power (Smith, 2009; Isobel, 2010). The policy arena has to delve more into how to instill in parents and adults that positive methods of child training accrue benefits to the family and society as a whole.

4. Legal and Institutional measures on Child Protection

Uganda is a signatory to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (Ekayu, 2005). The UNCRC (1989) provides a comprehensive expression of what the world wants for its children (Barnitz, 1998). The ACRWC (1990) is not any different. Both recognize the primacy of families and parents in child care and protection (UNCRC, Articles 5, 8, 18 and 20; ACRWC, Articles 18, 19 and 20). They also acknowledge a child’s vulnerability to abuse and implore adults to routinely protect them (Pais, 1999; Bellamy, 2005). However, ratification of these laws in itself provides no protection. The UNCRC and ACRWC have no mechanism for individual redress; neither can they hold parents responsible for the treatment of their children in the families. This role is entrusted to states. Nevertheless, these legislations can only have relevance to children if their provisions are fully implemented (Mulinge, 2010). In Uganda, the Constitution of 1995 provides for the rights of children under Art. 34. Following this, the UNCRC and the ACRWC were also domesticated in the Children Act of 1997 in line with the dualist legal system in practice (The African Child Policy

Forum, 2007). The Act provides for the care, protection and maintenance of children; local authority support for children; establishment of a family and children court; and procedures for children charged with offences. More importantly, however, it emphasizes the primacy of the family as the best institution to provide care and protection of a child, unless when it becomes abusive (Sections 4, 5 and 6). The parents and guardians are held responsible for the maintenance and protection of the children therein. The protection system within the family works in tandem with the Local Councils in the area. There are other laws in Uganda which support child protection. These include;

- The Local Government Act, 1997
- The National Council of Children Act, 1996
- The Penal Code Act,
- The Probation Act, 1963
- The Local Council Court Act, 2006
- The National Food and Nutrition Policy, 2005
- National Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Policy, 2004

Uganda therefore boasts an impressive legal credential even capturing the rhetoric of the rights of the child; but they have not been grounded in any progressive practical guidelines for enforcement. Uganda has inadequate and weak institutional frameworks (Katende, 2010; UN, 2007; Kwesiga et al., 1999, cited by Nabukeera, 2001). This often leads to delayed response to reports of child abuse and neglect. Such delayed response by the responsible structures has often led to a reporting fatigue. Haruna Mawa of the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) – Uganda Chapter, notes that; *Sensitizing the communities and reporting cases is not enough, it requires that even when the cases are reported, immediate legal action is taken to penalize the offenders (Quoted by Katende, 2010).*

Mawa argues that only enhanced accessibility to mechanism for identification, reporting and responding to cases of child abuse in the country will deter people from continued child abuse. Such response will also create public confidence in the institutions of the police and the courts of law. Otherwise, the normative protection of children in Ugandan families will continue to be elusive.

Philista Onyango et al. (2006) note that most States provide criminally inadequate and unpredictable human and financial resources that impede efforts to make legislations relevant to the abused or potential child victim. The result is that child protection is never implemented.

5. Research Findings

This study was based on the fact that despite the enactment of the Children Act of 1997 which provided for child protection structures, there was little evidence of progress in the situation of children. This study was therefore relevant to the policy arena in Yumbe District and Uganda generally in way of making these structures more effective in their roles. There is also a scant body of literature on familial child abuse and neglect in Uganda. This research sought to fill this gap in knowledge.

This study mainly aimed at examining the effectiveness of the Children Act of 1997 in protecting children from abuse and neglect in families in Yumbe District and Uganda generally. It sought to explore its prevalence, the protection offered against it by the Children Act, effectiveness of the child protection structures therein as well as providing recommendations (where necessary) for legal, policy and institutional improvements. It is hoped that this study can open up opportunities for an improvement in the overall welfare and protection of Children in the district and the country.

This study employed a method triangulation to collect data. These included interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Documentary reviews. Semi-structured and Delphi interview types were used mainly targeting key respondents. Four (4) Focus Group Discussions were held with community members mainly parents, Local Council 1 Chairpersons, elders and religious leaders given the important role they play in child protection. Secondary data was obtained by reviewing relevant documents and analyzing the texts to make meaning of its contents. These documents included the national, district and sub-counties' development plans and budgets, minutes of technical planning committee, sectoral and council meetings, activity progress reports, minutes of proceedings of court cases (if the case involved Children), minutes of planning meetings, any policies or resources on children and Police daily records.

5.1 Knowledge on Child Protection

It is generally agreed that basic understanding of child protection greatly influences the response of those charged responsible. Christine Katende (2010) notes that without knowledge of what constitutes child abuse and neglect, the reliance on the good-will of parents and community members to protect children in the families is in vain. The general assumption has been that most child actors in Uganda are well informed of the child protection laws and procedures. However, this assumption is ‘misleading’ and this probably explains the small efforts put into protecting children or reporting their abuse and neglect. During this research, a parent said;

What are you talking about? That I don't beat or hit my child? My friend...this is my child; I will properly beat till it gets some sense into them [children]. I don't see any problem with giving a child a few strokes and slaps. I cannot afford to see my children get spoilt in the name of protection.

From the trajectory of the discussions during the research, it is also noted that gender influences responses to child abuse and neglect in Uganda. The above attitude of high-handedness is exhibited more by the male population. Women meanwhile sympathize with the pain of an abused child. This sympathy, however, arises from the simple reality of seeing a child cry or looking at wounds inflicted. It only comes about after a child has been abused or is being abused. It does not therefore prevent abuse or neglect. Neither is it based on the rights of the child to remain free from abuse and/or neglect.

War Child UK (2010) finds fault with the reporting paradigm that privileges the participation of adults other than children themselves. It argues that children can be more important agents in reporting abuse and advising their peers than the adults because they are the victims. It cites the example of Pader in Uganda where Youth and Children Clubs successfully engage in their own protection. Children can therefore provide own protection if empowered.

This lack of knowledge on the rights of the child to stay free from abuse and neglect in the family is not restricted to the parents alone. It has permeated the Local Councils that are charged with the responsibility of safeguarding children's rights (Children Act, 1997: S.10) and serving as courts of first instance for cases concerning children

(Section 12). Juvenile Justice Panel (2005) notes that Local Councils were trained on the procedures of handling child cases at the onset of the Children Act. However, these local councilors occupy elective offices and it is possible that many of them have left their positions. The Probation and Social Welfare Officer (PSWO) and Community Development Officers (CDOs) who guide and coordinate child protection efforts at the districts and Sub-counties also have knowledge gaps. During interviews for the research, one officer admitted that;

What I learned in school was totally different because I did Economics and Political Science, so it had no connection with child protection. On the job training has not been done either for me or the other CDOs in the Sub-Counties.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that these responsible structures have inadequate access to the legal/policy instruments like copies of the Children Act and the Local Council Court Act which would guide them. There is need, therefore, to deliberately train child workers and avail them with necessary legal/policy documents to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the various structures responsible for child protection.

5.2 Prioritization of Child Protection activities

Inclusion of child protection in the plans and budgets of a government is indicative of its will to act for children under its jurisdiction. Plans and budgets guide allocation of resources to competing priorities. “So if a sectoral issue is not prioritized in the development plan, it cannot attract funding however much you try”, said a respondent in this research. Philista Onyango (2006) claims that most States are unwilling to fund child protection because they tend to prioritize directly-productive sectors. This is the case here. In Uganda the national planning framework guides both national and local government planning processes. The 10-year national planning framework – the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP, 1997-2007) laid emphasis on areas of sustainable growth, good governance and security and improved household incomes (Witter, 2004). Its successor, the National Development Plan (NDP, 2010/11 – 2014/15) similarly emphasizes the thematic areas of growth, employment and economic transformation far and above the social sectors of the economy. Except for child-specific services like Universal Primary Education (UPE) and immunization, Children barely get a mention in both documents. Where there is a mention of

protection of abused and neglected children (NDP, pg. 284), it is to urge the civil society to take it up. This is indicative of the fact that the State seems to have abdicated its central role in child protection to other stakeholders. The Children Act of 1997 is too abstract as well; it does not provide as to what specific support should be provided by the local governments in upholding the welfare of children in the families (Futures Group et al., 2005). The loophole in the Children Act and the planning framework means that the government is under no obligation to prioritize child protection, except out of courtesy, contrary to the provisions of the Children Act of 1997. Caroline Harper et al. (2000) observe that even planned funding does not find its way into the practical implementation. Much as child protection in most cases occupies the very top of political rhetoric, it drops to the very bottom of implementation plans. Child protection activities therefore take a low priority compared with other areas of public expenditure.

The low budgetary support allocated to structures responsible for Child protection frustrates their work. For instance, the Police Child Protection Officer complained during the interview that;

We seem to be a forgotten unit; yet our office is central to the successful prosecution of child abusers. We lack transport to visit lower police stations and to talk to victims and potential witnesses. This limits our success in trying to punish perpetrators because many times witnesses decline summons for court appearances.

It is also noted that non-participation by children in planning is responsible for their being left out. In Uganda, the law provides that the secretaries for children affairs represent children's interests (Children Act, 1997; MGLSD, 2006). This correlates with Corsaro's (1997) claim that many people still see children as incapable of making their own choices. However, political spokespersons for children cannot be solely trusted to deliver because they have other political interests other than the child (Frones, 1994; Juvenile Justice Panel, 2005). Therefore, there is no mandate that ties them down to this job more than for what they sought election in the first place. Children have to be involved by having their views and experiences sought.

5.3 Incentives to protect Children at the family level

It is noted that there seems to be no much incentive for relevant child protection actors. Many wonder what benefit it brings to them when they decide to ‘own’ the protection of a child in their family or in the neighbourhood. Nick Lee (2001) and Michael Wyness (2006) argue that there is now a widespread social acceptance of the privacy of child up-bringing. It is more important to maintain relationships, in this case with the abuser, by respecting the ‘privacy’ in each family. To many, this is more valuable than trying to protect a child who is ‘merely being given a few strokes to help him or her grow well’. Children therefore have no choice but to face abuse and neglect.

As the protection within the family fails, the next best ring occupied by the Local Councils (LC) is supposed to intervene. However, the LCs are not motivated enough to act in cases of child abuse and neglect. The LCs’ quarrel with the state over lack of facilitation negates their child protection responsibilities. Why then would they invest in child protection when they gain nothing from it? Instead LCs willingly and expeditiously arbitrate other adult cases because their ‘small’ allowances are paid immediately. When adults trying to help abused children withdraw, the victims are left on their own; powerless and voiceless but more vulnerable to further abuse and neglect. We have here a case where the basic child protection structures around the child find no incentive in doing their work. This means that the very trust that the Children Act of 1997 places on them to protect children is abused. The basic child protection structures need to be revitalized and empowered.

5.4 Poverty

The nested nature of child abuse and neglect is reflected in the theme of ‘Poverty’ that emerged in the research. According to Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2006), the average poverty in Uganda is 38%, but that in the north and east is 61%. Yet children bear the brunt of this poverty; they make up 60% of the poor in Uganda and at least 41% of all children in the country live in very poor households. Poverty is a major determinant of child abuse and neglect (Doek, 2002; Mulinge, 2002; 2010; Lubandi, 2008; Plummer et al., 2009). Poverty limits the capacity of the parents and relatives within the family to provide for the basic needs of the children. More to this, however, poverty breeds frustration among the parents. The inability to

provide for their children makes the parents socially impotent. In addition, the perceived lack of understanding of such a situation by these children may lead to their abuse and the tag 'unappreciative'. In Uganda, poverty also encourages caregivers to profiteer from child abuse. This is common with child sexual abuse cases, where communities connive to get money or cows for dowry from the perpetrator instead of reporting to the LC or police for prosecution (Ekhayeme, 2010). This calls for deliberate social protection support to these families.

6. Protection Issues

The lack of (or inadequate) knowledge on child protection was all too apparent. The family and close community members who are the basic protection source for a child claimed ignorance of a child's right to freedom from abuse and neglect. To them, these are external constructs being forced onto them in apparent disregard of their experiences of having brought up successful children in the past. However, other wider institutional and State structures responsible for child protection are not any better. They lack knowledge and policy documents relevant to their work.

Child protection does not count among the priorities of the State; nor does it get a mention on priorities of local governments and communities. This means that it basically attracts no funding and no facilitation for its officers to carry out their work. The very local structure – Local Council I – specifically mentioned as the first instance of protection after the family/parents is the least facilitated and therefore lack any incentive to follow-up child-related issues. The other structures like the police and probation services are not any better. Most adults therefore abandon children to face the wrath of abusers because the concerned structures seem uninterested in children issues, since they earn no benefit from its pursuance.

Child abuse and neglect is not an island of a problem; but it is also influenced by other wider socio-economic and political occurrences. This includes poverty which restricts the capacity of the care givers to provide for the needs of the child; but also frustrates the parents to the point of taking out such frustration on a child. Such households deserve to be enrolled on social protection programmes.

Uganda's impressive and comprehensive list of laws for the protection of children has been hailed as a role model for Africa. Nevertheless, most of its implementation structures remain completely underdeveloped, under-resourced and non-functional. The child protection system in Uganda cannot therefore post any valid claim of existence. There is need for an overhaul of the child protection system in the country.

7. Conclusion

The primacy of the family in child care and protection is a popular view. However, the family may not always be the best place for a child; since he or she is more often than not abused by the very person who has primary responsibilities for his or her care and protection. There is need for other rings of protection to play their roles if the family environment becomes abusive. Uganda has a rich vein of laws and policies meant for the protection of children in such abusive families in the country. Arguably, though, the protection enshrined within these laws has not been fully realized by children. It is not enough to boast a line of laws if the State cannot commit adequate resources and support the institutional structures to implement them. It is safe to say that most of the structures charged with the responsibility to protect children are either non-functional or too weak to make an impact. At the end of it all, it is the defenseless, voiceless child who bears the brunt of the inadequacy and failures of the State and other social structures charged with the responsibility for their care and protection.

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