



Foster Parents' Withdrawal of Childcare for Unaccompanied and Separated Children from Meheba Refugee Settlement in Kalumbila District, Zambia

Chisote Mugara

Masters in Development Studies, Faculty of Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Cavendish University Zambia

Dr. Crispin Kukano  

Chalimbana University, Directorate of Quality Assurance, Chongwe, Zambia

Edwin Peter Chungu

Head of Social and Business Studies Department, David Kaunda National School, Zambia

Suggested Citation

Mugara, C., Kukano, C. & Chungu, E.P. (2023). Foster Parents' Withdrawal of Childcare for Unaccompanied and Separated Children from Meheba Refugee Settlement in Kalumbila District, Zambia. *European Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences*, 1(6), 700-708.
DOI: [10.59324/ejtas.2023.1\(6\).70](https://doi.org/10.59324/ejtas.2023.1(6).70)

Abstract:

Zambia has been hosting refugees of different nationalities in the various refugee settlements across the country namely Meheba refugee settlement, Mantapala refugee settlement and Mayukwayukwa settlement. With the influx of asylum seekers entering the country, there arises an occurrence of children arriving in the country without biological parents nor legally recognized guardians. This category of children is referred to as unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). The Zambian governments laws, regional guidelines and international laws maintain that each abandoned, unaccompanied and separated children, their safety and wellbeing should be guaranteed. Protection of these children in

Meheba settlement has been through an approach known as foster care. However, there reported incidences of foster parents handing back unaccompanied and separated children to MCDSS living children without parental support or protection contrary to the Child Code Bill of 2022 for Zambia, UN general assembly, Refugee Act of 2017, National Framework for the Care of Children in Need of Care, 2019. Therefore, the intent of the study was to understand the causes of foster parents withdrawing the required parental care for UASC and explore approaches to improve childcare provided by foster parents to them in Meheba settlement. The study established that there were various gaps in the childcare procedures which include, noncompliance, inadequate monitoring, inadequate data management, flaws in case management, support for caregivers, training for caregivers. Recommendations include strengthening the referral and monitoring mechanisms in case management, childcare agencies to upsurge support for community structures and foster parents, improvement of training and sensitization to foster parents, prospective parents and community workers, orientation on UASC on her rights and responsibilities and the department of social welfare to develop a framework to make foster parents accountable.

Keywords: *Childcare, Foster, Settlement, Separated, Refugee.*



Introduction

Zambia has been hosting refugees of different nationalities in the various refugee settlements across the country namely Meheba refugee settlement, Mantapala refugee settlement and Mayukwayukwa settlement (Government/UNHCR Verification Report 2022). With the influx of asylum seekers entering the country, there arises an occurrence of children arriving in the country of asylum without their biological parents nor legally recognized guardians. This category of children is referred to as unaccompanied and separated children. The situation poses protection needs as such a category of children are at heightened risks. The Ministry of Community Development and Social Services (MCDSS) is mandated by law to take the leading role in ensuring the protection of children by assigning unaccompanied and separated children to foster parents for safety. In such cases, temporal care can be provided by placing the child with a foster family. The United National General Assembly resolutions (2010) affirms that family is the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being, and protection of children.

From records, there is a reported increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children being placed in foster care families in Meheba. Figures were standing at 366 in 2021 compared to an upward increase of 477 in 2022 (UNHCR report 2021, UNHCR report 2022). However, staff in Child Protection and Child and Youth Care Workers under MCDSS have underscored incidences of foster parents handing back unaccompanied and separated children in their care to the ministry or leaving the children without parental support or protection. The Child Code Bill of 2022 for Zambia, provides details indicating that a child has a right to live with parents, be protected and cared for by the child's parents, or through appropriate alternative care if the child is separated from birth parents.

Background

There are currently three active refugee settlements across the country namely

Mantapala in Luapula province, Mayukwayukwa in Western province, and Meheba in North-western. As of February 2022, Zambia was hosting 105, 868 persons of concern segregated as 76,093 refugees, 4874 asylum seekers and 24, 901 others of concern. Out of 105, 868, 46% were women, 47% children aged between 0-17 years (UNHCR Operation update 2022:2). Refugees flee from their countries of origin for various reason which include internal conflicts and fear for persecutions. With the growing number of refugees globally, the UNHCR report (2021:1) accounts that separation of children from their families is one of the most prevalent protection risks for children of concern to UNHCR. According to global figures, in 2020, unaccompanied and separated children lodged in 21, 000 new asylum applications with 153,300 unaccompanied and separated children reported among the refugee population by end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2021:1). Meheba settlement has been recording an upward trend of unaccompanied and separated children. The achievements report by the UNHCR for 2021 and Joint government and UNHCR Verification report for 2022 record that there were 480 unaccompanied and separated children in Meheba in settlement in 2021 compared to 625 in 2022 (UNHCR Achievements report,2021, GRZ/UNHCR Verification report,2022). There were 366 unaccompanied and separated children in foster families in 2021 compared to an upward figure of 477 in 2022 (UNHCR Achievement report 2021, UNHCR Achievement report, 2022). From records, there is a reported increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children being placed in foster care families in Meheba. herefore, this research sought to determine the leading causes of foster placement breakdown for unaccompanied and separated children.

Statement of the Problem

There was an increasing number of unaccompanied and separated children being placed in foster care families demonstrated by statistics of 366 children in 2021 compared to an upward figure of 477 in 2022 (UNHCR Achievement report 2021, UNHCR Achievement report, 2022). The statistics depict

the need for foster care. However, staff under Child Protection and Child and youth Care workers in the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services have underscored incidences of foster parents having handed back unaccompanied and separated children to the Ministry or left the children without parental support nor protection. The Child Code Bill of 2022 for Zambia, indicates that a child has a right to live with parents, be protected and cared for by the child's parents, or by appropriate alternative care if the child is separated from birth parents. Therefore, the aspect of foster parents handing back unaccompanied and separated children to the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services or leaving the children without parental support nor protection requires an inquiry.

Aim

The intent of the study was to understand the causes of foster parents' withdrawal of the required parental care for unaccompanied and separated children and explore approaches to improve childcare provided by foster parents to unaccompanied and separated children in Meheba settlement.

Specific Objective

To determine the causes behind foster parents' withdrawal of childcare for Unaccompanied and separated children.

Research Question

Why do foster parents withdraw parental childcare from Unaccompanied and separated children?

Significance

The intent of this ethnography was to contribute to the body of knowledge the causes of withdrawal of parental care by the foster parents in Meheba refugee settlement. The inquiry sought to uncover the causes behind withdrawal of parental care by foster parents and explore approaches that will contribute to the body of knowledge in strengthening alternative care for Unaccompanied and separated children whose statistics keep on increasing in Meheba refugee settlement. The body of knowledge shall assist

MCDSS as the primary institution in childcare on how to appropriately implement the foster care system and identify the policies for emphasis that support childcare

Literature review

According to the UNHCR Achievement report (2022) there is upward increment of unaccompanied and separated children in Meheba settlement. The Child Code Bill of 2022 for Zambia mandates the department of Social Welfare to superintend fostering care arrangement and staff in the department have the responsibility of placing unaccompanied and separated children in foster care as stipulated by law.

In a study by Jacobs et al (2022) on the disruptions of adoption and permanent foster care in Scotland, established that changes in family events such as movement to a new geographical location, getting a new job, arrival of new family members such as children, new partner, and birth of new children. contributed to foster parents withdrawing from the foster care system. This is consistent with what Galic et al (2020) found in a study which aimed at providing insight into the experiences of children and the youth with behavioural difficulties. With new family events, foster children cannot be accommodated anymore in the families hence the withdrawal of care and necessitating the surrendering of foster children back to the social welfare system. In Meheba refugee settlement, there is a program under durable solutions that resettles families to a third country for better socio-economic services. It is anticipated that resettlement program in Meheba could be a push factor for families abandoning foster children.

The child welfare system is a support mechanism for child protection that coordinates their welfare and is in charge of alternative care arrangements and placements. The childcare system in Zambia is managed by the department of Social Welfare. Nonetheless, childcare systems have been cited for their inadequacy and contribution to foster parents' motivation to

cease fostering unaccompanied and separated children. Bombach et al (2018) in a study on how children and parents in German- Speaking Switzerland explain the breakdown of foster placements, ascertained that foster parents were not well supported and the support provided was inadequate. The findings are consistent with Frimpong- Manso et al (2020) in a study on the experiences of foster parents in Ghana who also determined that absence of adequate support for foster parents was causing them not to continue in the childcare system. The support was discussed in terms of foster grants being inadequate and delayed, limited communication with institutional staff and parents, limited visitations, and absence of counselling services to help them cope with children's behaviour. From the foregoing, it is necessary to provide adequate support to foster parents because they take on them added responsibility of parenting. This would make the responsibility lighter. Limited communication and involvement of foster parents in decisions pertaining to placement could be attributed to as a leading cause of mismatching of traits between children and carers (Bombach et al 2018). This implies that due diligence was not respected in the placement process and guidelines of placement are not respected.

In a study by Vanderfaellie et al., (2018) on Investigating prevalence and precursors of breakdown in long-term foster care, determined that Challenging behavior of Unaccompanied and separated children was a contributing factor for parents withdrawing childcare services. some behaviors highlighted include fights, drug abuse and frequent night runs (Galic et al 2020, Aslamazova et al 2019). In a related study, Aslamazova et al (2019) established that the age of a child was also a determinate of foster placement breakdown coupled with socially unacceptable behavior. Late adolescence stage could be cited for defying instructions or resisting restrictions proclaimed by foster parents thereby straining relationships between carers and fostered children depending on the behavior manifested.

Diogo and Branco (2020) in a study focusing on the voices of foster carers in order to understand

their experiences, found that family members such as the spouse and biological children did not want the foster arrangements to continue. Without the support of close family members, carers have limited options of continuing to provide foster care to a child. The above findings are consistent with findings in a study by Galic et al (2020) who determined that tense relationships between the foster child and foster family members existed. when family members don't welcome a foster child, no cordial relationships can exist in that family, and neither can they provide any assistance to that child. In a related study, Frimpong- Manso et al (2020) identified a challenge which was the negative perception of society on foster carers. They were cited as being lazy and were after the support that was provided by the childcare system to foster parents. Thus, if society does not appreciate the foster care service, it would continue to discourage families with good intentions to foster.

It should be noted that the role of parents on the withdrawal of childcare for unaccompanied and separated children from the community should be noted with emphasis and suggestions have been proposed. Other scholars indicated that parents could use music just like politicians do so when campaigning. Namuyamba et al., (2018) noted that musicians and politicians shared the same stage to show Zambians that despite them belonging to different tribes, they are able to work together and push the one Zambia one nation agenda through music. This is one-way parents should think of their foster children. They have to show that despite being born from different parents, they have to show love and care. It can also be understood that language also plays a role in preventing the withdrawal of foster children. Namuyamba et al., (2018) further asserts that the choices regarding the language used in communicating to a given audience is the matter of who the target is. Therefore, children can be linked to the language they can understand well, including music to make them be motivated to realise the need to be loved and cared for. For this, the withdrawal of childcare for unaccompanied and separated

children from the community should be prevented at all cost.

Capacity building and provision of information on foster care arrangement to carers is a success factor in the childcare system. Negrao et al (2022) in a study to understand the perceptions of Portuguese child protection professionals regarding foster care, found that poorly defined training programs and monitoring processes were a stressing factor affecting the foster parenting experience and negatively impacting on the retention of foster families in the childcare system. Consequently, suitable training would provide adequate knowledge and skills that carers require in foster parenting services. Aslamazova et al (2019) identified on one hand that parents rarely attended intervention programs and the absent category of foster parents was prominent in ceasing to provide foster care. It can also be linked to literacy skills. Tembo, Nyimbili, Namuyamba and Tambulukani (2018) that through the identified literacy skills, learners learnt from each other the various social skills of respect, emotional control, accepting defeat and self-control in school and community through the activities the teacher exposed them to. In this context, the role of parents in the withdrawal of childcare for unaccompanied and separated children from the community can be curbed through parental education on their mandate and roles in the lives of their children.

Theoretical framework

The study employed the Family Systems theory for Bowen which came in effect in the 1950s (Hall 2013) for its concepts that are relevant to this study. The relevancy of this theory to this study is the central assumption that families and individuals for example foster parents and foster children, as units and systems that that are mutually influencing relationships and interaction with other systems such as schools, social workers or organizations, social support networks, policies, and laws (Emovon et al 2021). Applied in this study, the family systems theory could be useful in helping the study understand the way in which interrelations between foster parents and foster child and their

surrounding environment such as the foster family, biological family social support network could influence the developmental outcome for children for example quality of care and placement outcome laws (Emovon et al 2021). Further, the Family systems theory emphasizes paying attention to sequences of interactions taking place between members of the family: who is doing what to whom, where, when and in what ways is it a problem? (Johnson and Ray, 2016).

Methodology

The study used qualitative approaches in which collection of primary data was achieved through extensive period of time in conducting face-to-face individual interviews, key informant interviews and focused group discussions (Mwita, 2022). Non-probability sampling technique was used in the inquiry in which respondents that satisfy the objectives and needs of this research were selected purposefully (Shaheen et al., 2019, Isaac 2023, Palinkas et al., 2013).

The sample size comprised 14 respondents who were selected from the current pool of foster parents, adolescents of age between 13-17 years who are currently in foster care, and key informants from Ministry of Community development and Social Services in Meheba refugee settlement which include staff and community workers.

The first stage in data collection involved the establishment of rapport with respondents and creating an environment conducive for open discussions. (Waweru 2020). Data was collected accordingly through in-depth interviews for key informants and adolescent children aged 13-17 years. The interviews were conducted in the natural settings of the respondents in Meheba settlement (Waweru 2020) and the duration of each interview varied from in the range of 30 minutes to one hour depending on the respondent. Additionally, a semi structured questionnaire was developed and used in the collection of data targeting current foster parents through focused group discussions.

Findings and Discussion

This study established under the theme that Child behaviour is among the reasons of negative experiences that unaccompanied and separated children encounter in foster families. A subtheme of challenging behaviour emerged during analysis. In a focused group discussion, foster parents expounded further that challenging behaviour was described that children:

“13-18 year’s category is difficult to keep, control and follow instructions. they have negative influence from friends and under peer pressure,

These findings are consistent with what Deedat (n.d.) determined in his study on factors that contribute to foster care placement breakdown found that placement disruptions or cessation of foster care arrangement were triggered by the age of the child and problem with child behaviour. Further, Challenging behaviour by Unaccompanied and separated children was found to be associated with foster care disruption confirming the findings of Deedat (n.d.) who isolated child triggered cessation of child foster care arrangements. In this study during focused group discussions challenging behaviour was cited as

“Stealing, vandalism, fighting and under peer pressure. When they try to respond they say you are not my parents”

Negative child’s behaviour triggered another subtheme tabbed prejudice in foster parents that contributed to negative experiences of Unaccompanied and separated children which included disruption of foster care arrangement. One foster parent drove this point home during a face-to-face interview that:

“Foster parents withdraw parental care because of the bad behaviour of the foster children fearing that they may spoil the good behaviour of their biological children”.

However, this study furthermore established that compliance to family behavioural standards was the reason for positive experiences that Unaccompanied and separated children enjoyed

in a foster family. One foster parent narrated that,

“My personal experience, why I accepted the foster children am keeping is because they have good discipline and are obedient to instructions”.

The implication is that good discipline of Unaccompanied and separated children and obedience to laid down family rules provide a conducive living environment for Unaccompanied and separated children.

Caregivers’ financial challenges in this study emerged as a subtheme and was identified as a contributing factor to negative experiences of Unaccompanied and separated children in foster care. one foster parent clearly explained that:

“The causes of disruption of foster care arrangements are...financial challenges that experienced by foster parents. Financial challenges are compounded by a big family the foster parent has to look after”.

The findings above substantiate what Frimpong-Manso et al (2020) concluded in a study on the experiences of foster parents in Ghana that financial challenges for foster parents was causing them not to continue in the childcare system. In the focused group discussions, a subtheme of occurrences of care disruptions emerged. It was underscored that:

“The frequency of abandonment of foster children by their caregiver is more in caregivers that responded to the call to foster by the ministry on community development and social services”.

The proposition of this assertion is that foster care arrangements that come into being when community members initiate the arrangement on their own are more long lasting

In the analysis of the correlation between family relationships and experiences of unaccompanied and separated children, attachment between the Unaccompanied and separated children and the foster family, another subtheme that emerged was determined to be associated with positive experiences unaccompanied and separated

children encounter in foster care. one adolescent and foster parent described their situation that:

“The relationship with my foster parent is good and strong. We originate from the same ethnic group and have the same history of violence” Adolescent.

Foster parent indicated that I “met with the children from church when they were staying in the transit Centre and started fellowshipping with them”.

Therefore, when the foster family and Unaccompanied and separated children are warmly attached the children have positive experiences and disruptions are reduced. Further the bonds and attachments are stronger in kinship care. The above accounts is consistent with what one staff indicated during the interview that:

“Families with kinship arrangements don’t go to the office to of MCDSS complain. Those caregivers that keep blood relatives don’t complain. Those that complain and bring back children are those keeping non-blood related children”.

Strong family bonds emerged as a subtheme that stimulate positive experiences for Unaccompanied and separated children in foster care. strong family bonds coupled with kind-hearted attachment has positive results on children’s experiences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Donor development agencies and the Ministry of Community Development and social services should heighten the reporting and referral mechanisms in child protection systems coupled with monitoring of children in foster care. Upsurge support towards community’s structures and systems in order to complement the functions childcare agencies in the childcare system. Increase support towards foster parents to enhance their socio-economic status, improve livelihoods security. The intervention is aimed at decreasing incidences of childcare disruptions. Finally, undertake sensitization sessions with communities centring on legal procedures for

participation in the childcare system. The initiative is aimed at strengthen recruitment processes of foster parents and, enhance care for Unaccompanied and separated children.

References

- Aslamazova, L. A., Muhamedrahimov, R. J., & Vershinina, E. A. (2019). Family and Child Characteristics Associated with Foster Care Breakdown. *Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland)*, 9(12), 160. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs9120160>
- Bombach, C., Thomas, G., Stohler, R., & Werner, K. (2018) Foster care breakdown perspectives of foster children and foster parents in German- Speaking Switzerland. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare*, 18(1), 63-79.
- Diogo, E. & Branco, F. (2020). The Foster Family Process to Maintain the Will to Remain in Foster Care - Implications for a Sustainable Programme. *Sustainability*, 12, 7942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12197942>
- Emovon, S., Gutura, P. & Ntombela, N. (2021). Support for Non-Relative Female Foster Parents in South Africa: Quality of Care and Placement Outcomes. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 33(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/7210>
- Emovon, S.O. (2019). Experiences of Foster Parents Caring for Non-Family Related Foster Children in De Deur, Gauteng Province, South Africa. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36334.23363>
- Frimpong-Manso, K., Tagoe, I. & Mawutor, S. (2020). Article Experiences of Formal Foster Parents in Ghana: Motivations and Challenges. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development*, 32. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2415-5829/6529>
- Galić, I. (2020). Experiences of Placement Breakdown among Children and Youth with Behavioural Difficulties in the Foster Care System in Croatia. <https://doi.org/10.33422/5th.hsconf.2020.11.115>

- Hall, C.M (2013). *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*. Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Hamidani, K., Research, E., & Hamidani, K. (2020). Ethnographic Research. *Encyclopedia of Public Administration and Public Policy, Third Edition*. <https://doi.org/10.1081/e-epap3-120051222>
- Jacobs, P., Mearns, K., Grant, M. & Armstrong, T. (2022) *The Disruption of Adoption and permanent foster, A Scottish Perspective*. Adoption, and monitoring Alliance Scotland
- Ministry of Community Development and Social Services. (2019). *National Framework on Childcare*.
- Ministry of Community Development, Mother, and Child Health. (2014). *Minimum Standards of Care for Child Care Facilities, Procedures and Regulations*.
- Namuyamba, M., Chakanika, W.M., Nyimbili, F., Chisenga, K., Conrad, M. & Phiri, D. (2018). Music and its Role in the Electoral Process of Zambia. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education*, 5(6), 39-47. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0506006>
- Negrao, M., Mendonca, A.M., Veiga, E., Verssimo, L. & Moreira, M. (2022). Family Foster Care: Perceptions of Portuguese Child Protection Professionals. *Anallse Psicologue*, 1(40), 33-47.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and policy in mental health*, 42(5), 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Tembo, B., Nyimbili, F., Namuyamba, M. & Tambulukani, G. (2018). Teacher Utilisation of Emergent Literacy Skills in the Teaching of Physical Education in the Primary Schools of Lundazi District. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, 5(7), 56-63. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0507007>
- The Child Code Bill of 2022 United Nations Children’s Fund. (2022). *Supporting Foster Care in Eastern and Southern Africa*.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report. (2022). Achievements report. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/en/ohchr_homepage?gclid=CjwKCAiAs6-sBhBmEiwA1Nl8s4r9JKgvs0GoGeDAwQ2gyF7LQEGUZwSvlWbrt32XFiNapGoyHt4pBxoCdAUQAvD BwE
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). UNHCR Best Interests Procedure Guidelines: Assessing and Determining the Best Interest of the Child. Retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c18d7254.html>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022). Zambia Operational Update. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/zambia/zambia-unhcr-operational-update-october-2022>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report. (2021). Achievements report. Retrieved from https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unhcr-global-report-2021?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAs6-sBhBmEiwA1Nl8s-V5o-vYPeK7CB8DLLPTyrJs5jJ-wxC-3mjRdp_XMYdWN_6sgHBI_RoC30kQAvD BwE
- United National General Assembly resolutions. (2010). Resolution adopted by the General Assembly. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/yemen/publications/resolution-adopted-general-assembly?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAs6-sBhBmEiwA1Nl8s8ow01WDrL44bMSYUvMWdodbAVutio6dGO_NuCOo2H6m5GC4LWFSOBoCihEQAvD BwE
- Vanderfaeillie, J., Goemans, A., Damen, H., Holen, V. & Pijnenburg, H. (2017). Foster care placement breakdown in the Netherlands and Flanders: Prevalence, precursors, and associated

factors. *Child & Family Social Work*, 23.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12420>

Waweru. J. N, Tucholski. H, Kisasa.C, Mwarari. C, Nyagah. A, Churu. B (2020) *Experiences of children Living in Foster Families in Kajiado Country, Kenya, Nairobi, Institute of Youth Studies.*