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Unaccompanied Mozambican Children in Zimbabwe: The Interface with Street Children

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ABSTRACT

The author provides a descriptive study of street children in Zimbabwe who are unaccompanied Mozambicans. Both the reasons for and types of parent-child separations are examined. Individual case histories are presented to highlight the children's social, emotional, psychological and physical experiences. The author's findings indicate that unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe are found in refugee camps, urban centres, commercial farms, communal areas and children's institutions. They range in age from early infancy to 18 years and they are predominantly males. The article highlights the vulnerabilities of unaccompanied children, but also provides examples of their coping strategies. It concludes with concrete recommendations on policy and programmatic intervention strategies for this marginalised group.

Introduction

Children separated from their families in emergency situations of war, natural disaster or famine have been referred to by a variety of terms: abandoned children, homeless children, separated children, orphans, waifs, foundlings, urchins and unaccompanied children. The most widely-used term is orphans. This term is a misnomer because it implies parentless children and, in certain cases, it is used to refer to children with single parents. The most appropriate term, *unaccompanied children*, does not assume that one or both of a child's parents are dead. It simply means that the children are not in the company and care of their parents or adult guardians. This is the fundamental criterion for identifying unaccompanied children. Some street children are unaccompanied children whilst others are not. Those who sleep on the streets and those who rent rooms on their own or in groups are unaccompanied; those who go back to families in the evenings are not unaccompanied.

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In this paper the author presents a field perspective of unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe, focusing on the phenomenon of street children as it relates to unaccompanied children. The paper is based on the author's field experiences working with unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe's five refugee camps, five major cities, rural areas and commercial farms. The research techniques employed include structured and semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

All the Mozambican street children in Zimbabwe's urban areas are pre-adolescent and adolescent males. Their ages range from 9 to 18 years. The majority (95%) of the children interviewed* in urban areas are employed by Zimbabweans as street vendors, whilst 5% are self-employed street vendors. In refugee camps the majority of unaccompanied children are males who constitute about 85% whilst females constitute about 15%. Their ages range from early infancy to 18 years.

Causes of Unaccompaniment

The cause of children being separated from parents is an important factor in determining how to provide care facilities for the children. Unaccompanied children exist in almost every war, famine, natural disaster and refugee situation (Ressler et al, 1988). In Zimbabwe, anecdotal evidence shows that tens of thousands of children became unaccompanied during the war of liberation when they left schools and communities for camps in neighbouring countries.

Drought, a floundering economy, social, psychological and cultural factors continue to separate children from their parents in Zimbabwe. The increasing number of street children in Zimbabwe's urban streets stands as testimony to this fact (Muchini & Nyandiyi-Bundy, 1991). The number of unaccompanied children in Zimbabwe has further been increased by the influx of displaced people from Mozambique.

The war in Mozambique has had the unfortunate, and probably unavoidable, effect of displacing hundreds of thousands of people, especially women and children. Some have settled inside Mozambique, whilst others have fled to Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. UNICEF (1988) estimated the number of unaccompanied children in Mozambique at 200,000, while the Provincial Department of Social Action gives between 30,000 and 40,000 for the province of Zambesia alone. Vincent (1992) says there are about 450 street children in the Mozambican town of Quelimane and they are exclusively boys. Their ages range from 9 to 18 years and they are of similar ages to Zimbabwe street children and street children in other Mozambican towns (UNICEF, 1988). Among those who have fled the war and the ravages of persistent drought in

* Research undertaken for unpublished Master's thesis, University of Zimbabwe

Mozambique are children who are not in the company of their parents or guardians. These unaccompanied Mozambican children are predominantly pre-adolescent and adolescent boys, found in Zimbabwean communities, refugee camps and urban streets.

Types of Parent/Child Separation

Unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe have been separated from their parents for voluntary and involuntary reasons. Their reasons are not different from those Zimbabwean children who are forced to work on the street except for the war in Mozambique. Other reasons include poverty, hunger, family disintegration, abandonment, abuse and neglect and remarriage, which involves unaccepting step-parents. In voluntary separations, the children and parents consent to separation; they can be divided into two sub-categories: *entrusted* and *independent*. Involuntary separations occur against the will of children and parents.

Entrusted children are those sent to refugee camps by parents who remain in Mozambique. Parents will send their children in an anticipatory way, trying to ensure their children's safety. They send them to refugee camps to stay with relatives or neighbours who are moving to, or are already in, the camps.

Independent children are those who left their homes to work in Zimbabwe's communal areas, farms/estates and urban areas to stay in refugee camps. These children left their homes in Mozambique of their own free will and, most often, with parental consent. Such children are often encountered in urban streets selling vegetables, fruits, sweets, cigarettes, nuts and the like.

Street Children

A study of street children in Harare by the author *, found that about 29% of the street children were Mozambican. A situation analysis of street children in Zimbabwe also found that 21,5% of the children were Mozambican (Muchini & Nyandiya-Bundy, 1991). In some cases, children who fled Mozambique with their parents and/or relatives separated when in refugee camps, leaving parents behind. These have moved to seek employment on farms, in communal areas, urban areas and mines, and some have moved to South Africa.

The following story about *Jose* * typifies the experiences of independent unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe. Jose is male, aged about 14,

* Master's thesis research (unpublished)

*To ensure confidentiality all proper names in case examples are pseudonyms

who reported that both his parents are believed dead Jose came to Zimbabwe from Mozambique in 1987 in the company of a maternal uncle. Both were fleeing from war and wanted to seek employment in Zimbabwe, having left their village after a major incident.

Jose came through Tamandayi area of Chipinge and immediately found work as a herd boy looking after cattle. He worked there for a year earning Z\$30 a month and was provided with food and shelter. His employer at times bought him clothes instead of giving him money. His uncle found work in an irrigation scheme at Mount Selinda and lost contact with Jose.

At the end of the year Jose moved to Chibuwe and worked on an irrigation scheme, watering and cultivating vegetables and maize plants. He earned Z\$15 a month and was given clothes. After three years on the scheme he decided to leave for Harare when he could not get a pay rise. He also heard from other boys who worked in Harare that there was work and an exciting life in the big city.

Jose worked in Harare as a vendor; during the day he sold eggs and fruits and in the evenings (from 6 pm) he sold roasted meat at beerhall entrances in Mbare. Jose earned approximately \$40 per month for this work. At the end of three months he was arrested in a police blitz on illegal vendors. He reported that his goods were confiscated and he was taken to the Department of Social Welfare Office in town, which in turn sent him to the Highfield Probation Hostel. He stayed at the Hostel for seven months, until he was transferred to the Kadoma Training Institute.

Jose did not like what he experienced at the Kadoma Institute. He complained that the blankets he was given were tattered and that he did not have enough clothing. He complained about the amount of manual work he was asked to do - spending long hours weeding. He complained that too many people had divergent thoughts and behaviours: Ndebeles, Zezurus and *Moskens* (people from, Mozambique). Also he complained of being mixed with people who had stolen things and others who had been brought in by their parents Jose reported that there were fights among the different ethnic groups because of the poor conditions and ill-treatment by other inmates.

Jose stayed at the Kadoma Institute for 14 months. When his welfare officer came and saw him there, he expressed surprise that Jose was still there and then Jose, along with two other Mozambican children, was moved to Tongogara refugee camp.*

He stayed in Tongogara at the old people's home for three months and then moved back to Chibuwe where he used to work. He stayed at his former employer's place for two weeks but did not like the new set-up. The food was not sufficient and his former employer could not pay him the \$40 he wanted. Jose went back to Tongogara and stayed at the transit centre for two days and was then trucked to Chambuta camp.

* Note: Tongogara and Chambuta are two of the five refugee camps in Zimbabwe (ed).

In Chambuta, Jose stayed at the transit centre for two days with a friend, Alberto. Jose and his friend then went into the camp's villages and stayed together for two weeks. When he heard about Redd Barna and its work with orphans he went to register with them. Redd Barna officers asked him to stay with a foster parent, Mai Tapuwa. Jose has been with Mai Tapuwa for three months and says he is staying well with her. Mai Tapuwa is single with three children of her own.

Some street children left their families and relatives in refugee camps. The lack of paid jobs in the camps forces many adolescent and pre-adolescent boys to seek employment in farms, communal areas and cities. Their situation contrasts sharply with that of refugees in Malawi who are paid as programme or health assistants or are employed in the camps. Their situation also differs from settings where families have access to land to farm as in Zambia. In Zimbabwe, families are unable to farm outside the perimeters of these camps (except Mazowe) and agricultural activities within the camps are restricted by the unavailability of water.

Involuntary Separation

Children who are involuntarily separated from parents can be categorised as *abducted, lost, orphaned* and *abandoned*.

In Mozambique, children have been *abducted* by the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR) guerrillas to serve as porters and finally as child soldiers (Boothby, et al, 1992). Some children have managed to escape from captivity, whilst others have been "freed" after attack by government forces. Children who ran away from the MNR can be found in camps and Zimbabwean communities. These children have encountered gruesome war activities either as observers or as participants.

Mosses' story highlights some of the common experiences of abducted children. Mosses is a male, aged 19. He comes from Homoine District in Inhambane Province. His father is deceased and he does not know the whereabouts of his mother.

Mosses and a brother left home one day in 1986 to visit an uncle living in a neighbouring village. Whilst they were at their uncle's place, the MNR attacked their home and village. Their grandfather and grandmother were killed. The MNR then moved into the uncle's village, killing their uncle and aunt. Mosses relates that the MNR took him and his brother to the next village where they killed all the elderly, burnt huts, looted food stores and abducted young boys and adults. The MNR did this repeatedly in all the villages they passed through. Finally they reached an MNR base near Xai-Xai. On the way, Mosses and the other boys were

beaten and made to carry foodstuffs. At the base the boys were first asked to do domestic chores, and after some weeks they were trained to use guns.

After receiving military training, Mosses and other boy soldiers were sent to Nhanale, where they stayed for some time. From Nhanale, Mosses and some others were sent to Combomuni. Whilst the boys were at Combomuni, Zimbabwean soldiers attacked. On this particular day in 1989, Mosses was wounded and captured in the shoot-out with Zimbabwean soldiers. The soldiers took him to Chiredzi Hospital where he received medical help. He was later moved from Chiredzi to Chambuta camp.

Mosses is physically fit and is currently attending a building skills training course offered by SCF (USA). He stays alone.

Mario is another boy who was abducted. He is aged about 18 and he comes from Maparanyanga in Ngomai in Chimoio District of Manica Province. Mario, along with seven of his schoolmates, was abducted by the MNR in September of 1983. He and his friends were coming from Maparanyanga School in the late evening when they came across a group of MNR soldiers.

The MNR took them blindfolded to their base at Mushamba and put them in jail immediately after arriving. They were beaten on the way and accused of being members of the government militia. Mario reported that they spent three months in jail; when they were released they received some military training. They were given guns in 1984. They operated from Mushamba for some time until the base camp was bombed in 1985 by Zimbabwean helicopters. Some remained at Mushamba and others moved to Mucate Base.

Mario was transferred from Mucate to Gorongoza, passing through Muswata base. In 1986 he attempted to run away from Gorongoza because they were always short of food. Furthermore, the place was experiencing continuous air raids by Zimbabwean planes. At times, ground forces were involved and life "had become hell" at Gorongoza. Mario thus decided to leave with his gun. He went to Catandica but was arrested by other MNR soldiers, who took his gun and were about to kill him when he escaped.

He fled to Zimbabwe and entered the country through Honde Valley towards the end of 1986, where he immediately found work as a coffee planter. In June of 1987 he moved to Makoni where he worked as a general hand in the communal area. He also worked in Harare where his employer had a house. His employer retrenched him in 1992 because of drought. Mario went to Goromonzi police station, and was then transferred to Nyangombe camp. From Nyangombe he was sent to Chambuta.

In Chambuta, Mario stays alone in Village 11. He is in Grade 3 at the local school. He says life is difficult in the camp. He would like to look for some employment in order to earn money to pay for his *lobola* (bride price). He often misses school to go to Chiredzi or rural areas to buy things for resale in the camp.

Lost children are those who are inadvertently separated from parents. Children have been lost in Mozambique during bombing raids, attacks on villages or when families are caught in crossfire. Children have also been lost in Zimbabwe when police round-up Mozambicans and leave behind children who have been sent to fetch things like water, firewood or to buy foodstuffs.

Orphaned children are those with both parents dead. The vernacular translations, *nherera/nkungwa/zvisiwana/terera*, refer also to children of single parents. Refugee camps in Zimbabwe have received orphaned children from hospitals along the border with Mozambique and from some children's homes in the eastern and northern districts. Other children were orphaned when both parents were killed in war activities in Mozambique.

Eduardo is one of the children considered to be orphaned. He is aged 16 and is in Chambuta camp. He comes from Mapai in Gaza Province and is an only child. According to Eduardo, his parents divorced when he was still very young. He grew up in the custody of his father who was a soldier in the Mozambican army. His father was stationed at Mapai and Eduardo stayed with his father in the barracks. Eduardo's father died in action in 1987. Eduardo believes that his mother is in Beira.

After the death of his father, Eduardo stayed with Zimbabwean soldiers at Malipati. Eduardo reported that he mainly interacted with soldiers and played football with them. He stayed at Malipati camp for two years (1988 -1989) before he moved into rural areas in Malipati to work for a local man. He herded cattle in Malipati, earning Z\$30 a month. In March 1992, Eduardo was caught in a police round-up and brought to Chambuta camp where he stays with a foster mother.

Eduardo reported that he enjoys staying with the foster mother in Village One in Chambuta but that he did not have enough clothes. Eduardo is in grade one at the refugee school but does not attend regularly.

Eduardo has had problems concerning theft and gambling and was reported to have attempted to rape one of the foster mother's daughters. He is alleged to have stolen a blanket belonging to a neighbour. Eduardo named an unaccompanied child who stays in Village Three as his best friend. He said he still had some money he was paid at Malipati by his former employer and that outstanding wages were sent to Chambuta. Eduardo plans to return to Mozambique as soon as things seem stable. He would like to work in Maputo.

Abandoned children, also known as “dumped” children, are those deserted by parents who have no intention of reunion. Children are mainly dumped at infancy. Older ones, those aged 2 to 15, are usually abandoned when they are too ill and/or are emaciated, and the parents feel overwhelmed and overburdened. Camps like Tongogara have received infants abandoned by parents along the border or inside Mozambique or in the camp. Two abandoned children have been documented in Tongogara camp, whilst one has been documented in Chambuta camp.* At the height of influx into Chambuta, in September 1992, the camp received about 10 unaccompanied children who were severely malnourished and looked emaciated. These children reported that their parents disappeared when they crossed the border into Zimbabwe.

Vulnerability

The term *refugee children* also implies elements of physical vulnerability, as the children are subjected to unfavourable events arising from the situation in their home country and in the country of asylum (Malenga, 1992).

Independent unaccompanied children usually lack the financial resources and the courage to seek medical help from clinics and hospitals. Furthermore, the lack of responsible adults to urge them to seek health facilities means that such children usually take little preventive care, seeking assistance only when problems have become extreme. Mozambican street children in Zimbabwe have been seen with ugly sores. Other unaccompanied Mozambican children who pick cotton in rural areas and commercial farms can be seen with lacerated arms and hands.

Some unaccompanied children work in estates picking cotton, tea and coffee. Field interviews* suggest that the majority of these children who pass through Chipinge District were once employed in the district's tea and coffee estates. In the northern Zimbabwe camps of Mazowe River Bridge and Nyamatikiti, many unaccompanied children reported they have picked cotton on farms. Health precautions are minimal in such work and some children have been exposed to poisonous substances whilst spraying chemicals without protective clothing.

A casual survey of farms in Mashonaland Central and estates in the Eastern Highlands will show that children generally are used extensively as cheap labour. This and the health risks the children face have been well documented by Loewenson (1985). The Commercial Farmers' Union has refuted this, arguing that the children are asked to help their parents who have been given piecework (*mugwazo*). The thinness of this argument cannot be overstated; in some farms children can only go to school after working on the farms, eg Ratelshoek Tea Estates in Chipinge. Many other farms have no schools at all.

* Author's field interviews conducted for SCF(USA)

Intervention Programmes for Unaccompanied Children

Unaccompanied Mozambican children in Zimbabwe receive various forms of support in refugee camps. The most extensive and direct programme meant to benefit specifically such children is the Documentation, Tracing and Reunification Programme (DTRP). This programme is being undertaken by Save The Children Federation (USA), Redd Barna (Zimbabwe), the Zimbabwe Red Cross and the Department of Social Welfare. The main objective of the programme is to reunite unaccompanied or lost children with their parents and/or relatives. Posters bearing the children's pictures and relevant information like name, sex, parents' names and places of origin are used for tracing. This tracing system has been successful in Mozambique and Malawi. In Zimbabwe, the programme has documented approximately 1,200 unaccompanied children and has reunified about 50 children with their parents or relatives to date.

Once unaccompanied children are identified and documented, they are placed with foster parents and assisted with foodstuffs, clothing and other basic material needs (when such items are available), by NGOs working with children in the camps. In addition to DTRP, other intervention programmes benefit unaccompanied children in refugee camps, generally focusing on child-centred activities.

Programmes including recreation, traditional song, music, dance, skills training, etc, place emphasis on the important social and psychological needs of children, which are all too often overlooked or neglected. Whilst many improvements can be made, and are being made, on existing care and help facilities in camps, other issues must be addressed to prepare for repatriation of the unaccompanied children.

Issues to be Resolved before Repatriation

• Information needs

Some abandoned or orphaned children came into camps without any information about their parents' names and places of origin. Some children were sent from hospitals like Chipinge without even a name.

In Tongogara, more than four children came from probation hostels in Manicaland without names and without known places of origin. Seven infants have been received in Tongogara; these also do not have names and or information about their parents and places of origin. Chambuta camp has received at least two such children who are without information concerning their parents and areas of origin.

Jeremias' case is typical of children without any background information. He is an unaccompanied child aged four, staying in Chambuta refugee camp with a

foster mother. He was brought to the foster mother's home in August, 1992. Little was known about Jeremias' background because he was too young to provide meaningful information about his history. When Jeremias was brought to the home he was severely malnourished and had stomach problems that made it difficult for him to eat much food. He appeared very timid, sad and would not answer questions, making little or no eye contact with visitors. A child such as Jeremias is obviously at risk and the lack of information available on his background seriously jeopardises his future.

• *Need for accurate assessment*

The Government of Zimbabwe appears to lack clear policy guidelines for Mozambican children in the streets of Zimbabwe. Few have been assessed to determine if they have the right to refugee status.

Some unaccompanied Mozambican children have been rounded-up in urban areas and sent to refugee camps. Others have been sent to probation hostels or institutions like the Kadoma Training Institute. Other children have been placed in boarding schools like Saint Patrick's Secondary in Nyanyadzi, and still others placed in children's homes like Mount Selinda in Chipinge. There is still scant information about the numbers of children placed in such homes, hostels and boarding schools. Their presence needs to be noted and clear plans made for their eventual repatriation. Investigation by the author indicates that Mount Selinda Orphanage cares for at least eight Mozambican children, St. Patrick's School has six Mozambican pupils and there are at least 40 Mozambican children in children's homes in Harare. Providing adequate assessments and making recommendations that ensure these children's best interest are protected will be a major challenge for those responsible.

Some children sent to refugee camps after round-ups and from probation homes may be Zimbabweans. Whilst the criteria for ascertaining whether one is Mozambican or not has been to see if the child can identify and pronounce certain words (eg *zanda* and *Mabvuku*), this has not adequately differentiated Mozambicans from Zimbabweans who share a border and who may have the same chief and dialect. In Tongogara, three children are said to be Mozambicans, but they have no knowledge of relatives and places of origin in Mozambique. All the children have are faint ideas of places they used to stay with their parents in Zimbabwe.

In Chambuta, one small boy aged about four is said to be Tanzanian. In Nyangombe, seven children staying at the transit centre say they are Zimbabweans. Five such children are in Tongogara camp. The possible presence of non-Mozambican children in refugee camps needs to be noted, and plans made to provide thorough assessments, ensuring no child is mistakenly sent to Mozambique at repatriation. If such children are confirmed, efforts to trace the relatives in Zimbabwe or other countries of origin should be made.

• *Minimising risk factors*

Whilst the aforementioned are important issues that need to be resolved before repatriation, some issues concerning intervention programmes for unaccompanied children also need to be resolved. Intervention programmes meant to benefit unaccompanied Mozambican children must always put first the best interests of the children. Such programmes need to acknowledge that developmental harm arises when risk factors accumulate and overwhelm coping capacity (Sameroff, et al, 1987). Thus decisions need to be made quickly about child placement or foster care, about child assessment, outcome and child intervention programmes. Programmes will need to allow for intensive casework, having the capacity to screen, assess and make recommendations in the children's best interest on a case-by-case basis.

More often than not children placed in foster care are not adequately followed-up to see how they are coping. This has been so because of a lack of sufficient human resources to run programmes in the camps. Some children suffer more by being placed in foster homes that do not respond positively to their psycho-social and physical needs. The main goal of all intervention activities must be to minimise risk factors and build upon strengths, enabling a child's coping capacity (Garbarino, 1991).

Conclusion

Unaccompanied Mozambican street children in Zimbabwe have had diverse experiences but all have some things in common; their experiences have been marked by the trauma of loss and separation, yet they also show degrees of resilience. Some have witnessed the brutal murder, rape or physical mutilation of their parents, siblings or close relatives, whilst others have been victims themselves. Some have been forced to take part in gruesome human atrocities as child soldiers, and still others have been abused by unscrupulous employers or been neglected in bad foster placements. These experiences may have long-lasting effects on children; some exhibit clear symptoms while in others, the problems may be latent (Chimombo, 1992).

Despite the magnitude of the stresses street children have experienced in Mozambique and in Zimbabwe, and some continue to encounter, the children also demonstrate a range of coping capacities. They are quick to move away from situations where they have little control, opting for independence and attempting to exert personal control over their lives.

NGOS working with unaccompanied Mozambican children in the camps need to extend their roles and services to street children and support efforts by government to protect, rehabilitate and reintegrate the children with their families. Lessons learned in working with vulnerable refugee children in the camps are relevant to the problems of street children in general, suggesting genuine potential for NGOs now working in the camps to liaise with NGOs already working with street children, eg Streets Ahead in Harare. This partnership could provide useful approaches for the future.

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