

# **Substitute Family Placements of Unaccompanied Mozambican Refugee Children: A Field Perspective**

STANLEY PHIRI<sup>+</sup> & JOAN W DUNCAN<sup>\*</sup>

## **ABSTRACT**

This article will focus on several issues and difficulties faced by field staff attempting to provide substitute family placement for unaccompanied Mozambican children in refugee camps. Field observations make it increasingly apparent that specific policy issues and field practice regarding the fostering of unaccompanied refugee children is a complex area requiring substantial attention and follow-up. Problems and dilemmas include the sheer numbers of children in need of placement, difficulties in locating families able and willing to care for children other than their own, cultural differences among refugees, unsuccessful placements and difficulties in providing follow-up. A brief description of the context of social services provision will point out some of the severe conditions and lack of resources within which workers attempt to provide good foster placement. Our discussion will draw on our work as an international child-focused, non-governmental organisation (NGO) in southern Africa. SCF (USA) works in collaboration with governmental bodies, indigenous NGOs and the refugee community to create the potential for family reunification. Case examples are presented to highlight relevant issues; names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the identity of children and families. A call for the development of culturally appropriate guidelines is made.

## **Introduction**

The family unit is the most fundamental unit to the survival of the child. Through it children are nurtured, protected and educated. Under its guidance and support children are given the necessary social and emotional tools to become productive members in society. War, natural disasters, refugee situations and other forms of major emergencies threaten the survival of children because they threaten the foundation of the family, its unity and stability. Research consistently indicates that

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<sup>+</sup> National Programme Coordinator, Children & War Program, SCF (USA), Malawi.

<sup>\*</sup> Professor of Psychology, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York, USA.

attacks on family members, the death of family members, threats to the well-being of family members, as well as the uncertainty of the whereabouts or safety of family members, all frighten children most and seem to inflict the greatest trauma on children (Freud & Burlingham, 1943; Dodge & Raundalen, 1987, 1991; Punamaki, 1982). The extent and degree of trauma experienced by children following a parental separation are moderated by a variety of factors relating to the circumstances of separation. These include: the age of the child when separated, with children between the ages of six months and four years appearing to be at the greatest risk for attachment disturbances; the length of time of separation, with more lengthy separations having the potential for more adverse effects; and the conditions under which the separation occurred, which relate to the potential for reunification (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Schaffer & Callender, 1959; Wolkind & Rutter, 1977).

Research has pointed to the adverse *sequelae* that often accompany the death of parents as important contributory factors to psychological vulnerability and dysfunction in the child (Brown et al, 1985). For example, in the context of war, loss of parent or caregiver is often accompanied by other life-threatening events or conditions: lack of food, shelter and clothing, exposure to violence, exploitation, and persecution (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988).

For the children of Mozambique, the effects of war are devastating, continuous and far-ranging - affecting health, education and psychosocial realms (Richman, Ratilal & Aly, 1989; BIP, 1991). Over one-third of Mozambique's children die before the age of five. Of those who survive many have become the victims as well as the tools of war (Boothby, Upton and Sultan, 1991). Over one-third of Mozambique's children have lost one or both parents, leaving the care and protection of these children to the hard-hit extended family and community, host countries and the international aid community (BIP, 1991).

Over three million Mozambicans are internally displaced and over two million are refugees. As of October 1992, over 123,000 refugees (up from 98,000, at the beginning of the year) were in Zimbabwe (World Food Programme Report, 1992) and 1,021,085 in Malawi (Office of the President and Cabinet, Malawi, 1992). Reports indicate that per month, an average of 5,000 refugees arrive in Zimbabwe and 15,000 in Malawi. These numbers have continued to swell as a severe drought in the southern Africa region has further weakened the ability of the family to survive and care for its children. Other reports predict that upwards of three million people are directly affected by the drought in Mozambique (BBC, 1992).

Unaccompanied Mozambican children continue to be a grave concern of the Mozambican government. By *unaccompanied* we refer to children who are:

*"under the age of majority and not accompanied by a parent, guardian, or other person who by law or custom is responsible for him or her"* (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988).

Conservative estimates of the numbers of unaccompanied children are in the tens of thousands. Intensive efforts to reunite children with their families of origin have been ongoing. Through various collaborative community-based programme initiatives, indigenous organisations, Mozambican communities, governmental social service departments and NGOs have joined hands in working to reunify children with their families. As the numbers of refugees increase, family reunification efforts have been extended to countries of first asylum.

When children are separated from family, the most desirable action is to reunite them with the family. However, in the context of war, mass migration and lack of military security, it is often not possible to quickly reunite the child with his or her family of origin. Therefore, children are placed in substitute families until parents or close relatives can be located.

On the whole, substitute family placement solutions are better than institutional ones. In a good substitute family placement, the child has an opportunity for regular meaningful contact with an adult care-giver. This is typically less available in an institution like an orphanage or unaccompanied minors' house, which has a tendency to concentrate on material needs at the expense of addressing psycho-social needs.

## **Problems in Substitute Placements**

A myriad of factors create problems for successful family placements. The first is the sheer magnitude of the task. The task requires identifying appropriate substitute families, following-up frequently on children placed, and problem-solving with foster families. Each of these components often involves the coordinated efforts of administrative and social service personnel of the host country, refugee community leaders, as well as NGO field staff who may be involved in child-focused programmes within the camp.

Second, appropriate and timely case management of the unaccompanied child is made even more difficult by several realities at the field level. As the number of refugees increase, field staff are insufficient to cover the need. As a result, staff

responsibilities may be broadened or expanded to include areas for which staff have not received proper training. For example, training for registration and administration, nutritional monitoring or health-related services are not interchangeable with training in case management and assessment of a family's ability to provide foster care for a child. When social service staff are used to cover the additional workload generated by large numbers of new arrivals, like registration and plot allocation, social service responsibilities may be neglected. Workers are simply spread too thin. At the field level, where telecommunications and transportation often do not exist or are unreliable, discussion, information sharing, supervision, and feedback occur sporadically. Workers often feel isolated and unsupported as they struggle to make difficult foster care placement decisions in the best interest of the child.

Lastly, clear and specific guidelines need to be developed for staff to follow when assessing substitute family options for children. The development of these guidelines should proceed with the full participation of the refugee community. Ultimately, the community itself is the source for workable and sustainable solutions. Full input from the community will help avoid culturally inappropriate placements that are likely to be unsustainable - particularly at repatriation. Generally, in cases where placement was made with the assistance of the Mozambican community, and where there has been some constant follow-up, there has been a degree of success.

Children ought not to be placed in families where tribal, regional, religious and language differences will make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to fully join the family. Some families do not wish to care for unaccompanied children from different tribes, because they believe that a child from a different ancestry may bring bad fortune onto the family. Other families may take in an unaccompanied child, but not fully accept the child into the family. It must be pointed out that people do not automatically affiliate just because they are Mozambican or Vietnamese. Within Mozambique, there are differences in, for example, matrilineal or patrilineal systems. To place a child from a patrilineal system in a matrilineal family would create difficulties. The same reasoning applies to a child and foster family with different religions (eg Islam and Christianity), or originating from different areas or regions of the country, as mentioned above.

Lack of attention to any of these factors places the child at risk of isolation or neglect, as well as abandonment or exploitation. In fact, with repatriation underway, it now appears that a significant percentage of unaccompanied Mozambican refugee children, who have been placed in families with such differences, are in jeopardy of possibly being abandoned again, as substitute families depart for different provinces of origin.

## Isolation and Emotional Deprivation

One of the prime purposes in placing a child in a substitute family is to give the child access to the support and guidance a family can offer. In some cases children are placed into families where the parents themselves are depleted of emotional reserves. These children face a family unit where they are competing for scarce or sometimes non-existent resources. They are not given emotional support, are not stimulated at home, or are not encouraged to seek the support or stimulation they might obtain through attending school or making friends.

The emotional deprivation the child faces at the family level may be echoed and reinforced by the breakdown of community support for the African family. For example, cases have been observed in the camp where there is a funeral at one house and the next door neighbours are not appropriately respectful. This lack of connectedness to others would never be observed in the village. Similarly, in another incident, a child apparently had been badly beaten by a cousin with whom he had been placed. When asked about this the neighbours said that it was an internal family problem and that they did not see any reason why they should interfere. They cited other important things competing for their attention. Again, this level of isolation of the family unit is rare in African life and has obvious repercussions for children in families in such a setting.

## Exploitation/Neglect

Some families accept an unaccompanied child for humanitarian reasons; the child is nurtured, provided for and becomes an equal member of the family. However, not all families accept a child for purely altruistic reasons. Physical and sexual exploitation is not unique to this setting. Indeed, the severity of the situation, particularly as resources become more scarce, increases the potential for exploitation. The camp policies wherein a family receives an adult food ration, extra blankets, Vaseline and soap for taking in a child, might militate against the well-being of the fostered child. In the extreme, situations have arisen where the child becomes a material asset in a setting of great material scarcity. This state of affairs actually undermines ongoing reunification efforts as the foster parents might not want to lose the child for material reasons. Parents who are fostering girls, in particular, might be reluctant to lose a girl who has reached puberty, because apart from domestic value, more importantly, she also has *lobola* (bride price) value. Sometimes placements break down because of material scarcity in any given family. This in itself is a dilemma because the community does not have enough resources to generate substitute families.

Dilemmas also arise when material support from agencies or government is only provided to the fostered child and not to other children in the family, potentially creating a conflict. The provision must ideally be in the context of the whole family situation.

The development of guidelines on identifying appropriate families, how to prepare and support substitute families and follow-up procedures can facilitate problem-solving and the early identification of inappropriate placements. For example, by increasing the frequency of follow-ups on newly-placed children, instances of exploitation might be identified promptly rather than late when the situation has become extreme enough for the child to take potentially dangerous actions. Policies placing the weight of making a complaint on the child are likely to hide problems, prolong suffering and force a child to take desperate action.

*Rosa*, for example, is an eleven year-old girl who was placed in a family consisting of a mother, father and four children. Most often the resources of the family were not shared with Rosa, although Rosa seldom complained to her foster parents. Culturally, it is appropriate for Rosa's younger siblings to show respect to her. Most often, however, they tease her, call her names and order her around. This is tacitly reinforced and sometimes sanctioned by her foster parents. Rosa was enrolled in school. Her teacher reports that, although she was slow, she had started showing interest in her studies and other school activities. Rosa was also enrolled in a child enrichment programme. She suddenly stopped attending both. A follow-up visit by social service workers discovered that, against official policy, her foster parents had contracted her to work in one of the local estates. She was working long hours, from first light to late afternoon, with very little to eat. When asked about school, her foster parents assured the fieldworkers that they would send her back to school. In private conversations they stated there was no need for her to attend school; instead, they felt it was best for her to work in order to supplement the family's needs. However, their own biological daughter, who is older than Rosa, was not contracted out to work and attended school. Persistent follow-up with the parents revealed that they were unwilling and even resented the idea of talking to the social service worker. The case was referred to a higher authority who agreed with the fieldworker that an alternative foster home should be located for Rosa.

*Carlos* fled to the bush when his village was attacked, and he was separated from his parents. He is four years old. He was found by Maria, an older woman who accompanied him to a neighbouring country where she became his foster parent upon registration. She had three children of her own. Carlos was placed under her care at the time of registration; social service workers, however, were not informed about this placement. Consistent with policy, an additional ration was given to Maria. Luckily, after some time, neighbours reported that Carlos was being

neglected and was not being fed enough, despite the extra ration. The foster parent reported that Carlos did not have an appetite for anything else other than mealie-meal porridge. However, it was evident on follow-up that Carlos was seriously malnourished, while the other children in the family did not appear malnourished. Carlos was taken to the feeding centre and placed on a supplementary diet.

## Abandonment

In some cases, children are simply left to their own devices and are either literally or figuratively abandoned. Two adolescent brothers experienced several unsuccessful placements. Foster parents described them as delinquent and disrespectful. The boys, on the other hand, reported that they had been maltreated. In the absence of another substitute family placement, the boys began to stay on their own, unsupervised by any adult. Both stopped going to school. They began to leave the security of the camp, going on cross-border trips for periods of up to two weeks. Unfortunately, during the course of one trip, one of the boys stepped on a land mine and was killed. The other boy is still missing, and it is feared that he may have been captured by armed men.

## Implications/Suggestions

Each of these cases points to the need to develop policies and procedures to address the difficulty of making successful placements and the realities that limit solutions. At a basic policy level, procedures should be devised that do not encourage families to use children to gain additional food and material needs. On a supervisory level, the importance of communication between workers and the need for frequent and careful follow-up cannot be over-emphasised. Greater assessment of what a particular child requires and more careful screening of the proposed foster family are needed. Greater community participation could help avoid such potential missteps as placing a child in a family with a different language or a child from a patrilineal tribe into a matrilineal family, or vice versa, or with other cultural prohibitions. Additionally, in the process of community participation, more intimate relationships would be built with the community members that could aid in identifying new foster placements.

For example, *Jose* is a fifteen year-old unaccompanied child. He was placed in a foster family identified with the assistance of Mozambican personnel. The foster parents and the child speak the same language, come from the same region, have the same beliefs, religion and are from the same tribe. This particular family has

seen constant follow-ups. Apart from the child reporting occasionally that he has been missing his parents, his health has been good, he has made friends even though he does not go to school. He appears happy and reasonably settled and adjusted to his new situation. On being asked what their plans regarding repatriation were, the family replied that they would go back with the child, adding that it would be easier to trace his parents because they came from the same region and shared many other similarities (beliefs, spirits, religion etc). They indicated they would stay with the child if they did not manage to trace his parents.

Another example of what has also seemed to work is placement of children with older women living on their own who might also have suffered losses (husbands and/or children). The agency provides some modest material assistance and follow-ups while continuing to trace the family. This arrangement has received the sanction and acceptance of the community - an often overlooked but important factor in the psychosocial well-being of both parties in this arrangement.

Respected women in a village or camp (OMM women in Mozambique, community and church leaders) are a potential source of sustainable assistance in monitoring placements. The potential for churches and religious groups in the camps in providing substitute families could also be explored. However, there is a need to look out for extreme proselytising. For example, a Muslim child might be wrongly placed in a family of intense, evangelical Christian faith.

Identification of, collaboration and coordination with other support structures in the community, like primary schools and preschool teachers, are critical. Teachers have close contact with parents and care-givers in the community. They could encourage foster families to support school attendance and help monitor potential problem situations. As respected figures within the community, teachers could also be involved in counselling, discussion and sensitisation of issues for the community. Similarly, traditional leaders, religious leaders and their acolytes could also be called upon to sensitise the community.

## Summary

Problems in placements not only put some children at risk physically, they also deprive the child of nurturance, love, and a sense of belonging. Repercussions on the society of placement difficulties include: weakening of socialisation processes and traditional values; norms not being passed on as they would be through the family unit; unavailability of important role models and less opportunity for guidance and correction to occur. Though there are successes, the pressing problems must also be addressed. Greater training, review of policies, communication, community involvement and sensitivity to cultural issues are all elements that must be incorporated into placement initiatives.



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