

The Silent Survivors of Divorce: A Quest for Comprehensive and Inclusive Strategies in Botswana

**Tapologo Maundeni (PhD)
Senior Lecturer and Head
Department of Social Work
University of Botswana
Private bag 00 22
Gaborone
Botswana
Email: Maunde@mopipi.ub.bw**

Abstract

Parental divorce is a common experience for many children in contemporary societies. However, this group of children has not been adequately targeted in terms of research, policy and practice. Children whose parents have divorced face numerous challenges, hence they need interventions that address such challenges. The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. First, it highlights challenges faced by children whose parents have divorced in Botswana. Second, it shows the gaps that exist in available interventions. And lastly, it argues for the establishment of comprehensive and inclusive strategies that could facilitate children's adjustment to the divorce process.

Introduction

Many children today experience parental divorce, however, a majority of studies on children and divorce have been conducted in developed countries. This is so because it has been assumed that lower divorce rates prevail in developing countries. Recent evidence from countries such as Botswana, South Africa and Lesotho show that divorce rates are increasing (cf. Murray, 1981; Ahmed and Letamo, 1989; Bhebhe and Mosha, 1996; Maundeni, 2000; Loeto, 2005). This phenomenon has been associated with among other things the numerous changes that have been brought about by the process of social change. These include migration of people from rural to urban areas, increasing number of women who are knowledgeable about their rights and as such realise that some of the circumstances that they have been living under are abusive as well as the increasing number of women who are self sufficient.

Although several commentators contend that divorce rates in Botswana are increasing, there are no reliable statistics that show the figures. This is so because of several

reasons: First, many people separate permanently without going through any legal channels. One of the reasons that account for this trend is that the process of legalising divorce is expensive and cumbersome, particularly for women. Generally, women have fewer resources than men, so most of them are unable to engage expensive and more competent lawyers. Secondly, some people separate permanently because they want to avoid the shame of going through the legal divorce process.

Why these children are called silent survivors? The author calls them silent survivors because they are hardly consulted by parents about the divorce process, as we shall see later in the paper. Not only are they hardly consulted by parents, sometimes they are not even consulted by human service professionals. And even if they are consulted by human service professionals about issues of custody, magistrates are not obliged to abide by children's views as contained in the social enquiry reports. In addition, the word survivor is used because despite the various challenges that children face as a result of their parents' divorce, many are resilient and manage to thrive.

The remaining sections of the paper are divided into four parts. The section following this one provides background information that is necessary to put issues discussed in this paper into context. It is followed by the presentation of the methodology of the study that this paper is based on. Then a discussion of the challenges faced by the silent survivors of divorce is presented. Lastly, the paper focuses on existing gaps in service delivery and argues for the need for comprehensive and inclusive strategies that address the diverse challenges faced by children whose parents have divorced.

Background Information

Since attaining independence in 1966, Botswana has made considerable progress economically, politically as well as in the provision of social services. For instance, life expectancy, health, mortality rates, literacy, nutrition and infrastructure improved significantly (United Nations, 2004). However, for the past two decades HIV/AIDS has and continues to be a threat to all developments that Botswana has achieved since independence.

It is also important to highlight that Botswana is one of the numerous countries that has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as well as the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). However, it is still in the process of domesticating its laws to be in line with the requirements of the above two instruments.

Methodology

The study was informed by the social constructionist paradigm in particular and the 'sociology of childhood' approach. My interest in the meanings which children attached to their experiences led me to favour the development of a qualitative methodology. A

qualitative approach was also adopted because no study had been conducted on children's experiences of divorce in Botswana. The sociology of childhood approach view children as active agents who are capable of articulating their experiences. As such, in depth interviews were conducted with a total of 25 children. Their mothers were also interviewed to compare perspectives. However, this paper will largely rely on children's accounts. Interviews with children and their mothers were held separately. This minimised the possibility of influence or intimidation, and ensured that participants could feel free to give their own perspectives on the situation in privacy and without fear of repercussions (Laybourn, et al, 1996).

Purposive rather than random sampling was used because there was no readily accessible list of relevant families from which to take a random sample. In order to cut down the number of factors that had to be taken into account in making comparisons, the following restrictions were placed on the types of families that were studied:

- Gender (mothers only)
- Location (people living in or near Gaborone-the capital city)
- Age (children who were between the ages of eight and 17 during the period of parental separation)
- Duration (families that had experienced separation / divorce four or less years from the period of the interviews, i.e. between 1995 and 1998).

Within the above criteria, people from a wide range of backgrounds (religious, educational, ethnic and socio-economic) were included.

Only mothers participated in the study because maternal custody is common in Botswana. Children aged between 8 and 17 during the time of divorce were chosen because several scholars, for example, (Amato and Ochiltree, 1987) have found that children from about the age of 7 have adequate verbal ability and understanding to cope with an interview about family life. The period four years was chosen because it was discovered that interviewing children who had experienced parental separation and divorce many years ago might not yield very useful results as some children might not recall in detail the events that took place. To interview children who are close to the point of separation purely for the purpose of research might have been too distressing for them (Mitchell, 1985). Participants were accessed through customary courts and the high court. Lastly, the study was conducted in and around the capital city for economic reasons.

Challenges

The study found that children experienced numerous challenges as a result of their parents' divorce. These are inadequate communication; economic hardships, emotional effects and changes in relationships with family and social network members. These challenges would be unpacked in the below section.

Inadequate communication

Most children (nineteen out of twenty five) mentioned inadequate communication about the divorce as one of the challenges that they experienced. From the analysis of children's accounts, their lack of satisfaction was categorised into four types of dissatisfaction: inadequate or brief explanations; dissatisfaction with the way in which questions were handled; unsought opinions and contradictory information.

Inadequate or brief explanations

Children pointed out that the explanations did not detail how the separation was going to affect them, plans for continued contact with fathers, where their families were going to live, and other issues that would have helped them to understand the separation and its implications. The following words of Kitso¹ (aged 18) shows how inadequate communication with some children was:

'.....One day, a big truck came and my mother told us to load our things in it because we were moving. I did not know where we were moving to and why.....I did not even have the chance to say bye to my friends in the neighbourhood,

Dissatisfaction with the way in which questions were handled

Children lamented that their questions were not fully answered, others said they were not answered at all while still others expressed unhappiness about their mothers' angry responses to their questions. Maria (aged 15) said the following to express these sentiments:

'Every time when I asked my mother about the issue, she angrily told me to go and ask my father. This made me very sad. I don't think I did anything wrong that made my mother to talk to me angrily about my father.*I never talk to her angrily , I always talk to her with respect, and I wish she could do the same.* I feel my mother is neglecting me because she knows that I never see my father, she is the only parent that I am staying with, and she is the one who is supposed to tell me about things that I need information on.....'

The above words of Maria show that she perceived her relationship with her mother as asymmetrical. Her mother as well as parents in general have the power to punish and talk the way they want to children, but children do not have a corresponding power at their disposal. Also implicit in the words of Maria are feelings of neglect and sadness that arouse as a result of her mother's angry response to her questions. Maria wanted information about her father, whom she felt closer to than her mother, however her mother perceived the communication as upsetting. This reaction added to the child's feelings of sadness that already existed because of the father's departure from the

¹ All names used are pseudonyms

home. This shows how a custodial parent's response can complicate the child's adjustment to the divorce process.

Unsought opinions and feelings

Almost all children who expressed dissatisfaction about the way their parents communicated with them said their views about divorce and related issues such as custody and contact with fathers were not sought. Most children also mentioned that human service professionals had not spoken to them about any divorce related issue.

Contradictory information

Several children lamented that their parents gave them contradictory information about what was happening and who was to blame. For instance, some said their fathers told them that they found their mothers in bed with other men, while others said their mothers told them that their fathers caused the divorce because they had girlfriends. A closer analysis of children's accounts showed that such 'ambiguous' information to some extent contributed to confusion among children. Children of various ages understand issues differently. For instance, a 10 year old is less likely to comprehend what it means to 'find someone in bed with another person' while a 16 year old may understand what the expression means. Similarly, other children said their fathers told them that they will continue to maintain contact with them, while mothers told them that they would never see their fathers again because they were going to stay with children who belonged to other women. This kind of information can destroy the trust and love that children had for their fathers. Consequently, children's beliefs and understanding about stressful life events could complicate or facilitate their adjustment.

The above section has shown that by and large, consultation with children about divorce was inadequate and that this created difficulties for children. It also showed that even formal network members of children such as social workers had not asked many children about issues of custody. It must be mentioned that social workers do not automatically play a role in divorce situations, they intervene when magistrates have requested them to compile social enquiry reports. Such reports are usually sought when there are custody conflicts. In addition, even if social workers consult children and produce social enquiry reports, magistrates are not obliged to stick to the recommendations. The finding that children are hardly consulted in divorce issues in Botswana shows that the country violates article 12 of the CRC which states that the child has the right to express his or her opinions freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any manner or procedure affecting the child.

Emotional problems

The second challenge that children experienced was emotional effects. Emotional problems are well documented in existing literature from various countries (cf. Diamond, 1986; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1976; and Harvey and Fine, 2004).

One third of children who participated in the study felt sad about the absence of their fathers from the homes, another third felt okay, while the remaining third expressed mixed feelings. Children in the last group were those who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as mixed or just neutral. The mixed feelings stemmed from the fact that they did not want their mothers to continue living in unhappy marriages (because of being beaten²), while at the same time they wanted their fathers to continue staying with them.

The departure of fathers from the homes was not the only change that triggered sad feelings among children, children also reacted negatively to secondary changes such as changes in schools and neighbourhoods. Children assigned various meanings to changes in neighbourhoods and these influenced their emotional reactions. All children who moved except two expressed feelings of regret towards the moves. By and large, these feelings emanated from children's perceptions of the places they moved to as of low class neighbourhoods as well as the loss of friends and related social support.

The link between residential mobility and children's adjustment is well documented in existing literature. Coleman (1990) and Hagan et al (1996) for instance, contend that residential mobility adversely affects the 'social capital' available to children and adolescents. Social capital consists of connections between actors that inhere in family relations and in community organizations and that are useful for the cognitive and social development of a child (Coleman, 1990). Family, friends, peers, neighbourhoods and community groups can provide children with support that can ease their adjustment. Changes of neighbourhoods quite often cuts children's ties with friends and children tend to perceive this in negative terms. Coleman and Hagan et al's findings on how changes of neighbourhoods affects children's social capital has been conformed by this study.

Economic hardships

The third challenge was economic hardships. Divorce had different economic consequences for children who participated in the study. Most children (17 out of 25) associated it with declines in family standard of living, 5 associated it with improvements in family standard of living, while 3 said there were no changes. This section summarises views of children who experienced economic hardships.

Children's accounts of economic hardships ranged from their lack of basic needs such as food and clothes to the absence of television sets, cars, electricity, running water in the houses as well as lack of recreational facilities in the neighbourhoods where they moved to. Economic hardships impinge on children's rights as they limit their access to the basic needs of life such as food and clothing. They also impact on children's social, psychological, health and educational wellbeing. Consequently, children felt distressed, uncertain about families' future economic situations feelings, and experienced feelings of

² Most mothers who participated in the study pointed out that violence in the home prevailed in their families before divorce.

resentment and betrayal especially that their standard of living was less than that in their fathers' new households. While it is recognised that economic hardships may have the same impact on children irrespective of whether they live in intact or divorced families, children of divorced parents are likely to be more adversely affected because the hardships are often accompanied by stressors such as moving to new and less secure neighbourhoods, changing schools, being excluded from activities that have become too expensive for the family's budget, conflicts between parents and lack of information about what is happening in their families. Whether specific changes are positive or negative, the child will need to use considerable energy making adaptations (Sandler, et al, 1991; Neil, 1995).

Children's accounts of economic hardships should be understood in relation to the following: all children interviewed lived in maternal custody and more men in the country than women earn higher wages; the child support payments are too low; the child support system is ineffective; it is rare for courts to award alimony to divorced mothers and most mothers had no savings. Another issue that explains the economic hardships faced by the silent survivors of divorce is that more often than not, divorced fathers remarry immediately following divorce and the new wives hardly allow their husbands to continue providing support to the former children. This is a thorny issue that needs serious attention. Lastly, unfair property division contributed to economic hardships (see Maundeni, 2003, for a detailed discussion of this issue).

Economic hardships experienced by children whose parents are divorced are not peculiar to developing countries like Botswana only, they are well documented in existing literature from developed countries (cf. Wadsworth and Maclean, 1986; Eekelaar and Maclean, 1986; Holden and Smock, 1991; Guttman, 1993; Duncan, 1994). However, the hardships experienced by such children may not be as severe as those experienced by children in developing countries because some custodial parents in those countries can rely on state assistance after divorce whereas those in developing countries such as Botswana cannot. Gregory and Foster (1990), for example, in a UK study found that prior to divorce, one in twenty women were claiming state benefits (other than child benefit). But after divorce, the figure rose to one in three. None of the women in this study relied on state benefits.

Negative effects of separation on relationships

The fourth challenge was negative effects of separation on children's relationships with significant others. Divorce had diverse effects on children's relationships with family and social network members. Children reported declines in both the quality and frequency of their relationships with fathers, paternal relatives, friends as well as peers. They perceived such changes as a loss and reported that it complicated their adjustment to the divorce process.

Gaps and the way forward

This paper has discussed several challenges that children whose parents have divorced experience. These are: inadequate communication, emotional problems, economic hardships and challenges related to changes in relationships with family and social network members. These challenges have serious implications for the wellbeing of such children, therefore, it is crucial that *comprehensive* efforts are taken to address them. Before discussing the efforts that need to be taken, it is important to highlight some of the existing strategies that address psychosocial challenges faced by children in the country. Almost all strategies are broad and not tailor made to address the specific needs of children from divorced families. Such strategies include:

- a) The 'Talk Back' television program that allows school-going children to learn about various issues that affect their wellbeing.
- b) The Peer Approach to Counselling Teenagers (PACT) which enables youth to discuss problems that affect them. However, PACT is characterised by the following shortcomings: the groups are not operational in all schools; girls are overrepresented in groups; certain groups of youth (for example, those who do not attend school) do not benefit from the program.
- c) The employment of guidance and counselling teachers in schools is another strategy that addresses issues facing children in the country. This is a good move towards attending to adolescents' needs, however, students in contemporary societies quite often face psychosocial challenges that need more than the assistance of guidance and counselling teachers. In addition, the counselling that students receive from guidance and counselling teachers is not adequate because of the following reasons: the guidance and counselling curriculum puts emphasis on career guidance and little on counselling (Motswagole, 1999; Busang, 1999). The Masters Degree in Counselling and Human Services program is recent and at the time of writing this paper, there was no undergraduate program on counselling at the University of Botswana³; the teaching load of teachers does not allow them to devote enough time to counselling and lastly, some students are not free to confide their problems in guidance and counselling teachers largely because they fear that teachers would not keep their problems as confidential (Monowe, 2002). Numerous researchers (cf. Ncube, 1997; Callistus, 1999; Ratsatsi, 2000,) have found that many students prefer to talk to social workers about their problems rather than to teacher counsellors.
- d) The employment of social workers around the country is another step that focuses on the wellbeing of children. It should be noted, however, that most social workers spend a considerable amount of time providing material assistance to orphans, rather than on providing counselling.
- e) Public education, awareness raising campaigns on children's rights as well as the provision of psychosocial support by the civil society is another strategy that is worth mentioning. Non governmental organizations are doing a good job, however, the effectiveness of their interventions is limited by financial constraints that most of them face⁴.

³ The University of Botswana is the only University in the country.

⁴ Most international donor agencies stopped funding several NGOs in the country in the late 1990s under the contention that the economy of Botswana was doing relatively better than that of many African countries, therefore it was better to channel their resources to more needy countries.

f) Legislations such as the Deserted Wives and Children's Act also exist to ensure that mothers and children who have undergone situations such as divorce are taken care of financially. However, the payments are too low, many non-custodial parents do not pay and enforcement is weak.

The above section has highlighted some of the existing strategies that empower children to deal with various psychosocial challenges that affect them. Now attention focuses on gaps and the way forward. Findings of the study show that by and large, parents denied children access to information that could have facilitated their adjustment to the divorce process. It seems parents were not aware that children have a right to be consulted, provided with information about the divorce process, as well as to air their views about issues such as custody. In addition, some mothers denied children the right to maintain contact with their non-custodial parents. This violates article 9 of the UN Convention on Children's Rights (CRC) which states that '.....The child has also the right to maintain contact with both parents if separated from one or both'.

One of the crucial measures that could have a tremendous impact in reducing the effects of the challenges faced by the silent survivors of divorce is empowerment of parents about child welfare issues, children's rights and parenting in general including the importance of communicating with children about issues that affect their lives. Such programs would go a long way in empowering caregivers with knowledge and skills so that they can be able to help children to cope with stress and loss. The empowerment programs must be based on the rights based approach to programming.

It should be acknowledged however that empowering communities is a process not a one off activity. In addition, empowerment programs must target all communities in the country irrespective of their area of residence, education, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Secondly, it is important that continuous in-service training (focussing on children's rights, and child welfare issues) of professionals such as social workers, psychologists and lawyers are held. This is important because it will empower practitioners with knowledge and skills so that they could make decisions that serve the best interest of children. For instance, efforts must be taken to avoid exposing children to changes of neighbourhoods.

Thirdly, this paper has among other things shown that the guidance and counselling system that currently exists in schools does not adequately meet the needs of children who experience psychosocial challenges such as divorce. It is therefore crucial that social workers are placed in schools. The overall goal of social workers in schools is to attend to students' social problems. The importance of addressing social problems identified in schools has been clearly summarized by Ncube (1997: 4), who rightly pointed out that:

'If social problems identified in schools, whether indigenous to the school or families of pupils, are left unattended, their effects will not only be felt in the school environment, but will spill over into socio-economic,

political, and cultural aspects of the lives of the individuals concerned, their families, and society as a whole'.

Fourthly, social workers must devote more attention to providing psychosocial support to children in the country. Fifthly, radical and intense efforts need to be taken to address economic hardships faced by children of divorce. This could be done through child rights advocates' engagement in advocacy and lobbying for issues such as child support.

Furthermore, there is need for large scale longitudinal studies on children and divorce in Botswana. So far, existing research on the issue in the country is of a small scale nature and it is also cross-sectional. Lastly, children in the 21st century face numerous challenges that need multisectoral / multidisciplinary approaches. Therefore, collaboration among various professions who handle issues of child welfare (nurses, social workers, teachers, customary court officers, Community Based Organizations and Village Development Committees) must be intensified.

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