

THE SILENT SURVIVORS OF DIVORCE: A QUEST FOR COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES IN BOTSWANA

By Dr. T. Maundeni
UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

Purpose of the paper

- The purpose of the paper 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
- 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 Moshia, 1996; Maundeni, 2000; Loeto, 2005).

Why are these children called silent survivors?

- 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.

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.

Methodology Cont'd

- 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).

Methodology Cont'd

- Purposive rather than random sampling was used
- 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).

Methodology Cont'd

- 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.

Methodology Cont'd

- 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

- Inadequate communication
 - * Inadequate or brief explanations
 - * Dissatisfaction with the way in which questions were handled
 - * Unsought opinions and feelings
 - * Contradictory information

Challenges Cont'd

- Emotional problems
 - * one third of the children who participated in the study felt sad about the absence of their fathers from the homes (Children's emotions were also affected by secondary changes such as changes in schools and neighbourhoods)
 - * another third said that they felt okay about fathers absence
 - * the remaining third expressed mixed feelings about the absence of their fathers from the homes

Challenges cont'd

- Economic hardships
- Divorce had different economic consequences for children who participated in the study (Most (17 out of 25) associated it with declines in family standard of living; 5 associated it with improvements; 3 said there were no changes).
- 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, etc

Challenges Cont'd

- 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 resentment and betrayal

Challenges Cont'd

- 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.

Challenges Cont'd

- 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; unfair property division contributed to economic hardships (see Maundeni, 2003, for a detailed discussion of this issue)

- 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

Challenges Cont'd

- new wives hardly allow their husbands to continue providing support to the former children.
- 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

Challenges Cont'd

- 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.

Challenges cont'd

- Negative effects of separation children's relationships with family and social network members (e.g. fathers, paternal relatives, friends and peers)
- Consequently, these changes resulted in loss of social support

Gaps and the way forward

- The paper has shown that children who participated in the study that this paper is based on experienced challenges of: inadequate communication; emotional problems; economic hardships and loss of social support from family and social network members.
- These challenges have serious implications for the wellbeing of such children, therefore, it is crucial that

Gaps and the way forward Cont'd

- *comprehensive* efforts are taken to address them.
- a) The 'Talk Back' television program
- b) The Peer Approach to Counselling Teenagers (PACT)
- c) The employment of guidance and counselling teachers in schools
- d) The employment of social workers

- e) Public education, awareness raising campaigns on children's rights as well as the provision of psychosocial support by the civil society
- f) Legislations such as the Deserted Wives and Children's Act

A call for comprehensive and inclusive strategies

- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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 by strengthening the child support system. Consequently, child rights advocates' should advocate for that.
- 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.