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Social work and families in child welfare in Malawi: Social workers considerations when placing a child outside the home

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Abstract

This article discusses professional discretion in relation to placing a child outside the family, as understood by Malawian social workers. The article is a product of an exploratory study covering different aspects of social work practice with children and families in Malawi. It is based on focus group discussions with practicing social workers that were conducted using a vignette. This article describes how social workers handle child protection cases, in which a child has to be placed outside the home or family. The article points out different solutions and the reasoning behind certain decisions on placing children outside their home. The study explores issues of patriarchy, intervention methods into families and the cooperation between social workers, community members and other professionals when helping families. The study found that a number of different factors affect the decision of placing a child outside the home. Social workers in this study put an emphasis on the importance of helping children within the immediate- and extended family to help cope with the lack of financial resources that would provide alternative options.

Background to social work and family in Malawi

In most societies, the family is the primary unit of socialization, economic and social support for its members. When it is unable to fully carry out its functions, support and service to families in need becomes a priority area for the social work profession (Costello, 2003). According to Chitereka (2009), Malawi, like many other sub-Saharan African countries, is facing a shortage of skilled frontline social work professionals, particularly at the district level. This is primarily due to the fact that social work as a profession in Malawi is relatively young and not well established. In addition to this, the family, including the extended family, has been the most important avenue over the years for where family members could get help of any kind. As stipulated by Wilson et al. (2008), since the family has the responsibility over its members, there seems to be no need for professionals to carry out this role. The family is responsible for taking care of children which involves providing for them and protecting them. The Malawi Law Commission (2006) cites the 1994 Constitution of Malawi, chapter 4, section 23, subsection 3, which states that children have the right to know- and be raised by their parents. This clause has been interpreted in several ways, one of which is that the state gives parents total control with regard to custody of their children. This clause is further clarified in the Child Care Protection and Justice Act (2010), which states that parents,

family members and the state can decide on the custody of the child under different conditions. Division 3, section 38 of the Child Care Protection and Justice act states that: *"Where a child has to be placed outside the home, the parents, the extended family or the court can choose a guardian for the child. In the absence of a guardian, the child can be placed in either a public foster home or a private foster home."* As stipulated in both the 1994 Constitution and the Child Care Justice Act (2010), This legal provision appears to imply that wherever possible, a child should be cared for by his/her family or their delegate, and only when this cannot be done for any reason should a child be cared for via public or private foster care. Maluwa-Banda and Bandawe (2001) argue that in most cases vulnerable children are helpless because only a few social support systems exist, and basic social services are largely inadequate. In addition to this, they point that it is rare in rural communities for children to be fostered or adopted by non-relatives. A small number of vulnerable children are admitted to orphanages, and the government runs a foster care scheme for childless couples who wish to foster orphans (Bandawe & Louw, 1997). Maluwa-Banda and Bandawe (2001) also state that as part of the official support system, the state strives to strengthen families and communities to meet the needs of vulnerable children. However, it has been stipulated in the National Orphan Policy Plan that the state, together with UNICEF, should further strengthen community-based approaches for caring for children and expand formal foster care as a second source, and that institutional care should be the last resort for where vulnerable children can be placed while waiting for placements. It must also be noted that Maluwa-Banda and Bandawe (2001) focused on orphaned children, but this applies to other vulnerable children as well. According to Maluwa-Banda and Bandawe (2001), the statistics of the current formal foster care placements are not found in the literature.

According to the Malawi government structure, the Child Protection Service falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. The task of the Child Protection Service is to help children who have different problems at home, whether lacking material necessities or being physically abused or neglected. According to the 1994 Constitution, children are entitled to protection from economic exploitation or any treatment or work that is hazardous which interferes with their education or is harmful to their health or to their physical, mental, spiritual or social development. The Child Care Protection and Justice Act (2010), part 2, section 24 states that: *"A police officer, social welfare officer, a chief or any member of the community, if*

satisfied on reasonable grounds that a child is in need of care and protection, may take the child and place him/her into his/her temporary custody or a place of safety and brought before a child justice court within 48 hours." However, this legislation is impractical, as it provides widely ranging powers to almost anyone in Malawian society to make judgements regarding abuse and to take action by taking a child to safety. The impracticality of this legislation makes it hard to implement because this could be translated to kidnapping, which is punishable by the Penal Code of Malawi [Ch0701s258]. This penal code states that*, "Any person who takes or entices any minor under fourteen years of age if a male, or under sixteen years of age if a female, or any person of unsound mind, out of the keeping of the lawful guardian of such minor or person of unsound mind, without the consent of such guardian, is said to kidnap such minor or person from lawful guardianship."* The consequence is that the Child Care Protection and Justice Act, part 2, section 24 is not followed or practiced actively as it is meant to because people are afraid that their actions might be misinterpreted for kidnapping which is punishable through the penal code of Malawi [Ch0701s258].

Family structure in Malawi

According to Phiri (2009), a number of aspects determine the marriage contract in Malawi. These aspects include family residential patterns, the exercising of domestic authority, control or custody of children and the inheritance of land and property. These aspects have been the result of historical developments, and they determine the marriage type. Patrilineal and matrilineal marriage systems are the two main types of family systems in Malawi. Davison (1993) highlighted that matrilineal marriage patterns dictate that a husband moves to his wife's village upon marriage (uxorilocality), while in patrilineal, a wife moves to her husband's village (virilocality). In matrilineal marriages, systems of descent, land inheritance and clan affiliation are inherited through the mother's lineage. A patrilineal system is one in which systems of descent and land inheritance are done through the fathers' lineage. Even so, interchange with groups practicing virilocality and the impacts of Westernization have affected these patterns over time. These two traditional systems are legally recognized by the courts, such that when courts are resolving disputes they take into account whether the person comes from the matrilineal or patrilineal lineage to determine the custody of children or the inheritance of property or land. This is because under matrilineal, it is the male from the mother's side who has control over the children. The uncle or the brother of the woman,

and not necessarily the mother, has responsibility over a woman's children, and these are called "mbumba". In modern days, these two systems are not applied in strict terms. This is because people can settle in town at a place of their choice, and not necessarily at the wife's or the husband's village. This has brought different systems that are altogether made by the couples themselves. Nonetheless, research shows that in most cases, in either matrilineal or patrilineal marriage systems, the men have the overriding power with regard to the custody of children, land and property control and inheritance over women (Davison, 1993; Phiri, 2009).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Welfare regimes, family policy and child welfare systems

Every society has different rules and laws about what children are allowed and expected to do, what their families and the state's responsibilities are toward them and how much children themselves should be involved in decisions that are taken about them (Lawrence, 2004). Hantrais (2004) categorized European family policies into four categories, namely *defamilialized, partially defamilialized, familialized and refamilialized.* These different regimes reflect different ways of balancing state responsibility and provision and family responsibility, and they can also reflect different approaches on how social workers work with families. In defamilialized countries, governments have long been explicit in their efforts to minimize the reliance of individuals on their families. State intervention in family life is legitimized and commands public support, with the countries in this category including the Nordic countries (Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway). In the second category of partially defamilialized, the government rhetoric is supportive of families, but policy actors are reluctant to intervene in private life, thereby resulting in a more implicit and indirect approach to policies for families. Examples of partially defamilialized countries include Ireland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. The third category of a familialized regime is characterized by a fragmented and largely uncoordinated approach to family policy that is not administered by a dedicated institution. The state delegates the responsibility for family well-being to families themselves, who are under a legal obligation to look after their members. In this case, family welfare can be described as familialistic. Examples of countries in the familialistic welfare regimes include Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and Malta. Lastly, the fourth category of refamilialized entails that formal institutional structures for managing family policy are existent and legitimized, but they are underfunded, so

support for families is often rhetorical rather than practical, and the state is not trusted to deliver good quality and reliable services. According to Hantrais (2004), examples of countries in this category include former socialist countries such as Poland. Following this categorization, Malawi can be said to fall under the familialized regime. This means matters concerning the child are left to the family, and that in many cases parents are not answerable to anyone in matters involving their children unless it is extremely life threatening. As stated above, there quite a bit of legislation regarding family policy but the implementation of these policies lacks funding and resources such that they remain rhetorical rather than practical, as is going to be highlighted in this article. Still, it is worth noting that the examples used by Hantrais are European countries only, and not African countries for which this article applies.

Skivenes et al. (2015) categorized societies, depending on their ways of protecting children. Three classifications are made, which include: *child-centric, family service system* and *child protection systems.* The child-centric notion regards children as individuals with particular rights and needs, and combines family service and child protection in its approach. The family service is concerned with the provision to families, which is based on a therapeutic idea of rehabilitation and people's ability to revise and improve their lifestyle and behaviour. The aim of the family service system is that child welfare systems should provide services to prevent more serious harm, and thus prevent out-of-home placements. The level of intervention in the family service system is therefore low. Lastly, the child protection system focuses on intervention when there is a serious risk of harm for a child. The level of intervention in this system is very high and the ambition is to provide services for a possible reunification, and these three notions could describe different types of child welfare systems. However, we cannot argue that each society portrays only one of these notions as there could be some that might show traces of two of them or even all three. Nevertheless, an understanding of these notions can help to understand how social workers work with families.

Chapter IV of the Malawi Constitution makes it clear that it is within the family where children are to be raised, and that it is the parents' responsibility to ensure that their children are provided with basic needs and protected from all forms of abuse. This is in accordance with Malawi's portrayal of the family service systems. Saxonberg and Sirovátka (2006) argued that the higher involvement of the welfare state in welfare

provision to individuals may challenge the institution of the family as a caregiver, and as a backlash, the ties between the family members and the generations they represent will become weaker. The opposite of this can only be implied where the state is not highly involved in welfare provision and where this is the responsibility of the family, as in the case of Malawi.

Social work in Malawi in regard to family policy

Saxonberg and Sirovátka (2006) argued that different types of welfare state and kinship regimes shape and maintain the cultural, normative and practical context in which social work takes place. Aspects such as social factors, politics related to power, cultural orientations and other related aspects, affect how social workers work with families. According to Saxonberg and Sirovátka (ibid), much attention has been given in Western European countries to the interplay between state interventions and the family obligations in caregiving in recent decades. Three actors emerge in family policy, and these are the family itself, the state and the market. The respective roles of the state, the market and the family in welfare provision to individuals affect the state's interventions into the family, and thus influence how social workers work with families. When a family is no longer able to deal with problems, abuses its members, whether physically or emotionally, and cannot provide the basic physical, security and emotional needs of the children, this warrants the intervention of the department of social welfare. Nonetheless, the response of the department of child welfare is influenced by the welfare provision to individuals. In de-familialized regimes like in the Nordic countries, the state has a responsibility towards its citizens, giving the state a say as to what goes on in children's lives. In Malawi, where the state does not provide tangible support for the child, it makes it difficult for the state to intervene in the family on behalf of the child, even though there are institutions and legislation which state that the state would intervene in such situations. Intervention is mostly hindered by lack of financial resources, although there are legitimate structures for family policy.

Symbolically, if we are to give hierarchies of power in the family according to the systems of marriage in Malawi, the father would be on top of the hierarchy, followed by the mother and then the children at the bottom (Phiri, 2009; Mbweza et al., 2008; Barzargan-Hejazi, 2013). This patriarchal hierarchy determines how social workers do their job with the family and the powers that the fathers have over their families and their children, which could also have a huge impact if a social worker decides to place a child outside the

home. This is because if the father does not consent to a decision made by the social workers, it then becomes difficult for the decision to be carried out. This can be compared to other systems, in which the child welfare workers have authority from the state that makes the parents' compliance to their decisions involuntary in some cases. Hence, in these systems, child welfare workers can decide to take a child out of a home even if the parents do not give their consent. This is not the case in Malawi, where respect for the parents' consent in decisions is emphasized, and it can be problematic if the social workers to decide on something that the parents do not want. Wilson et al. (2008) highlighted that it is always difficult when the social workers have the best interests of the child in mind, as far as not having their attention diverted to the child's parents in both family-based- and state-based child care systems.

Lawrence (2004) describes the powers vested in social workers with cases related to the statutory responsibility of child protection, which allows social workers under certain circumstances to remove children from their families. She states that there are specific and rigorous legal grounds that need to be met for such an action to be taken everywhere in the world. As discussed by Mbweza et al. (2008), it seems as if this is even more difficult in Malawi because the family seems to have more authority on matters involving their children. Despite home assessments that may expose the family as not being conducive for the child to live in, social workers do not often interfere much on where the child can be placed temporarily due to unreliable structures in children's institutions (Sabin et al., 2011). This is one of the key factors that differentiate social work practice in Malawi from that of Western countries. While social workers in Western countries might also believe in the sovereign value of the family, when the family is not providing love, care, food and security to the children, Western social workers have suitable options compared with their Malawian counterparts. This often leave children at risk and helpless, which is worrisome in cases where children are abused and need protection, because the options for helping them are tied to the family due to structural issues (Every Child, 2012, UNICEF Report, 2011).

Methods and data

This study was part of an international research project on social work with families. The general aim of the project was to obtain knowledge about how social workers work with families in child welfare and protection services in different national contexts. This project aimed at describing and analysing different forms of contact such as working with the

family to support the child/youth, providing support to other members of the family or with their relationship to various welfare providers such as the community and other networks. These child welfare and family policies and practices were also studied within gendered, generational and ethnic perspectives (Nygren & Oltedal, 2014).

Data were collected through focus group discussions with social workers in child protection. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) defined a focus group as an exercise in collecting data through group interaction. The interaction part in focus groups makes it possible to explore a specific set of issues in practice or the experience of contraception. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) highlight that the group is focused in the sense that it involves a collective activity, which in the case of this study was debating on- and discussing the assigned vignette. Kitzinger and Barbour (ibid) also stated that the importance of using vignettes in focus groups entails giving the discussion not only a direction, but also a common external reference point. The use of a vignette in this study achieved this purpose and made the discussions more to the point, while capturing the shared practical experiences of the participants. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Lilongwe and Chikhwawa in December 2013 and January 2014, respectively. The study purposefully chose these sites since Lilongwe is the capital city located in an urban area, while Chikhwawa is in a rural area. In Lilongwe, two of the five participants were female, whereas in Chikhwawa the sample was comprised of one female and four male participants, thus yielding a total of three female and seven male participants.

Purposive sampling, which consisted of identifying social workers working as child protection workers, was used in recruiting the participants for the study with the help of key personnel at the social welfare offices in both districts. These social workers came from child protection departments in both government and non-governmental organizations.

The data is based on a vignette that was prepared by the international research team in the social work with family project (Nygren & Oltedal, 2014). According to Hughes and Huby (2001), vignettes consist of text, images or other forms of stimuli to which research participants are asked to respond. Vignettes can be presented to participants in a number of different forms, e.g. like a story, a form that was adopted in this study. Hughes and Huby (2001) added that vignettes provide a useful focus for discussion, and act as a stimulus for the group's discussion. The use of vignettes is recommended in focus group discussions as they help to maximize the interaction between the facilitator and

the group participants, as suggested by Kitzinger (1994). The FGDs involved reading this vignette, which describes the life of Maria, a girl who got pregnant at the age of 14 from a short-relationship she had with a 16-year-old boy. Maria came from a house where her father physically and verbally abused her mother, hence causing challenges in raising her child. Maria had to give her child up for a short period in a foster home in order to finish school. The vignette consisted of three situations and five group discussion tasks that were discussed among the participants. The discussion tasks included the following:

- Task 1: How they understand the concept of "family" in their country, and how they usually work with families in social work, and in particular in child welfare work.

- Maria 14 years - Task 2: What advice they would give the counsellor before the next talk with Maria, and what further initiatives would they suggest that the councillor should take? What other actions would the group recommend? (Who will do what with whom?).

- Maria 16 years - Task 3: Discuss what advice they would give the social worker before he/she meets Maria in terms of informing her about a decision they have made. And what further initiatives would they suggest in this case? What is the role of Maria's family in this?

- Maria 18 years - Task 4: What advice would they give to the social worker at the local public welfare service centre concerning his/her talk with Maria on these topics, and what further initiatives should be taken in this case? What is the best outcome for Maria and her family in the long run?

- Task 5: Reflect on the case and its different stages, and discuss what this can tell about how social workers in the local context reflect on- and cooperate with the family (as in this case with Maria) Discuss how this case more generally can tell something about the "welfare mix" in your country, which means the relationship among NGOs, civil society, the family and the state as partners in a cooperation to extend help in situations like the one with Maria.

The different age groups in the vignette helped to get a response regarding how social workers relate to clients of different age groups. In Malawi, this was very important because at the age of 14 most decisions regarding Maria were to be made by her

parents. Since this was a vignette that was used in many countries, it was difficult to make it fit completely into all the various contexts. The most important point then was to focus on how different countries resolve the social problem that was portrayed in this vignette. The vignette therefore addressed problems and service contexts that are recognizable in all the countries. For example, the term foster home is not often used when a child needs to be placed outside the home in Malawi, as most people live with their extended family and not necessarily in a foster home.

The main focus of the study was on circumstances surrounding the decision to place children outside the home or remain in the home. As a result, we did not analyse all parts of the data that were collected, but only those related to the primary focus of the study. Some sub-questions were also analysed from the stated tasks in the study to help further explore the theme. These included: how social workers understand the term family, what are the intervention methods employed by social workers when helping children, how patriarchy affect social workers' intervention into the families and lastly how social workers coordinate with other professionals and the community when working with the families. These questions were answered during discussion of the tasks in the vignette.

The responses from the participants and discussion points came from their practical experiences related to the vignette. Thus, the participants used examples from their work in the discussions, which gave a thick description on how they work with families in child protection, while also enriching the data with practical information about social work in Malawi.

The FGDs were conducted in Chichewa, which is Malawi's mother tongue, and the data was translated into English verbatim. The verbatim-transcribed FGD data was manually analysed using a thematic content analysis, which is chiefly a coding operation- and data interpretation process characterized by a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings (Berg, 2009: 338-339). Therefore, the themes, patterns and meanings were the primary focus during the analysis. Theory and concepts provided the framework of discussing and looking at such emerging themes in the text. The data was analysed through the use of a qualitative content analysis, which involved reading systematically through the data from the focus group's discussions and making themes for the study.

Euro centricity

The first observation in this study was how the vignette was placed in a Malawian context with regard to social work with families. Nygren and Oltedal (2014) discuss how this vignette might have a different understanding and focus in different contexts. As referred to by Nygren & Oltedal, "Euro centricity" discusses how the family structures in the vignette reflected typical features of cases within a European context. In Malawi, this vignette did not reflect how the issues can be handled, though it did reflect a similarity in issues/problems encountered by social workers. This means the issue that was being discussed in the vignette is something that is very common in Malawi, a country with a high percentage of teenage pregnancies according to Brabin et al. (1998), as well as households with abusive fathers or husbands, which is also on the rise in Malawi as stated by Bazargan-Hejazi et al. (2013). The scenario posed by the vignettes of teenage pregnancy is therefore not new to Malawian social workers. However, the problem with the vignette is that it only involved the immediate nuclear family, which is not as common in Malawi as the extended family. In this respect, the vignette was Euro-centric, and perhaps skewed the nature of subsequent focus group discussions. This was addressed by the fact that this was a focus group discussion, which meant the participants could interact as to how the situation could be reframed to suit a Malawian context.

Firstly, the absence of the extended family in this vignette was problematic for the respondents because they believed in the discussed scenario that the presence of the extended family was very important. The vignette focused on helping Maria outside her extended family circle, which according to the participants was a Western practice. They believed Maria could get a lot of help from her family members or obtain counselling from community elders and not just trained social workers. Another contextual difference was the availability of school counsellors, which was made as a presupposition in the vignette. According to Maluwa-Banda (1998), counselling in most schools in Malawi is non-existent, and where there is counselling the focus is on academic counselling, and not on social or personal issues. Teachers double as counsellors and social workers, albeit without undergoing any relevant training in counselling and social work. Of great use in terms of counselling in Malawi are the community elders or religious leaders, who in most cases take the role of counsellors. Religious leaders offer counselling from a spiritual point of view, whereas community elders offer counselling from the cultural/traditional point of view. Such a spatial contextual difference is very significant

in this case, since the social workers had to answer with regard to their contextual practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Family and child placement

In the study, family was defined as the union of a man and woman and their children, together with relatives related to this union by marriage, kinship and blood. This is essentially the extended family which includes the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and all those related to them. The responsibility of the family to the child is to protect the child, provide for all its necessary needs and to care for the child. This is supported by chapter 4 of the Malawi constitution as stated in the background. Since Malawi adopts family-based care for the children, the state does not take a greater role in these aspects. It was also mentioned that the extended family construction helps social workers in their practice, as it widens the net for solutions whenever there is a problem in the immediate family.

The discussions highlighted that social workers rely on the family to help the child in different ways; in this case the family is seen as the problem solver. Since the family has the sole responsibility for the welfare of children due to the Malawian family values, in addition to the fact that the state leaves this responsibility to the family, social workers depend on the family to provide, care for and protect the children. The participants stated that in case of any problem that a child is facing, they try to help the parents so that the parents can be able to help their children. As discussed by Pecora et al. (2012), this is also evident in many Western countries, where the focus goes to helping the family or parents first as a way of helping the child. The participants focused on the extended family, as highlighted by one participant in this quote:

> *The extended family is very important in Malawi, in particular to child welfare work. This is mainly because when a problem arises that concerns the child, as social workers, we do not go outside the extended family to look for help. We try to look within the extended family, for example if we think a child is being abused and there is a need to take that child from the parents, the first option is not in the foster homes but the extended family. We do this to let the child feel the vibe of his or her family even when moved out from the biological parents.*

Kinship care is used as an alternative care in many societies. Aldgate and McIntosh (2006) have discussed the development of the use of extended families in looking after children in Scotland. In Malawi, kinship care is still one of the available alternatives for caring for children. The goal of social work in Malawi is to help clients live a productive life in their own community, so in order to achieve this goal, social workers often enlist the assistance of family members, relatives, and other community leaders, as highlighted in a study by Bandawe and Louw (1997). Working with the family takes several routes, among these are counselling and financially empowering the family so that they are able to provide for their children. It was also noted that the emphasis on sourcing help within the family is due to the fact that social welfare as a department is underfunded; therefore, it lacks options that would involve the department spending money. There lays one of the critical points that inform social work practice concerning the structural aspects of the Malawian context: a lack of resources in children's institutions enforces the social workers to opt for family help, as explained by one participant:

> *...taking the child to be with another member of the family has to deal with the fact that the department of social welfare in Malawi does not have several options supported by the state. This is because we do not have places provided by the government where children can go to when they are separated from their families temporarily......we receive cases where there is a need to take the child away from parents but the child doesn't have a proper place to go to than within the family. If we decide to take the child to an orphanage, I think that would not be in the best interest of the child due to the bad conditions of the orphanages.*

Social workers try as much as possible not to put children in foster homes, orphanages and children's homes, probably due to the bad state that most of these are in (Sabin et al., 2011). They bemoaned the sexual abuse, culture and religious impositions and emotional battles that children in institutionalized homes in Malawi face, both at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them and from fellow children. To add to this, most institutions are underfunded with many children to look after, thereby causing a lack in basic necessities for institutionalized children. Furthermore, social workers emphasized the importance of the child-parent attachment that is not possible in the orphanages or in children's homes. The Malawian social workers have the support of Gordon, Guez and Allen (2000), who argue that, "Although institutionalization may be necessary at times, it is a temporary solution."

It is a universal value in social work that the removal of a child is an option of last resort. But in the case of Malawi, this value is accentuated because of poor state support and the deplorable conditions of the alternative care facilities. The lack of sustainable financial help to the vulnerable children explains the reasons for looking for help within the family. The extended family is a coping strategy in the context of very limited financial constraints that Malawi, like any other poor country, is grappling with. This should make obvious sense, given that children's homes, orphanages and any other supported housing all require intensive financial capital to run.

In addition to financial constraints, culture also explains the preference of the extended family regarding where children can be temporarily placed. The study found that social workers want the children to stay with people of their tribe to help preserve the cultural identity of the children, which might be disrupted if the child stays with people of a different tribe. This clearly came from a study which revealed that foster homes or children homes are not easy alternatives to come by, and as argued in child welfare practice, it is considered a last resort when everything else has completely failed.

Social worker's intervention methods with families

The study also analysed how social workers intervene in the families when helping families in need. The study found that counselling is the most used intervention method to help families deal with various problems and come to reach some goals together. According to Sedan (2005), counselling is defined In this regard as a way of enabling choice or change or reducing confusion. Sedan adds that this is done by listening attentively and patiently, whereby the counsellor begins to perceive the difficulties from the client's point of view, which can help the client to possibly see things more clearly from a different perspective. Sedan emphasizes that this means it does not involve giving advice or directing a client to take a particular course of action, but instead reaching desired goals together with the client. Both individual counselling and group counselling sessions for the family members concerned were emphasized in this study. However, it was noted in the study that counselling was also done mostly by community leaders and religious leaders, and not necessarily limited to social workers. This is mostly due to the fact that there are few trained counsellors. Counselling in school was also problematic since most schools do not employ professional counsellors.

Reuniting the extended family came out of a study as another intervention method, in which the social workers act as mediators between family members. The vignette stated that Maria's parents rarely return to the rural area where they come from, and apart from a positive relationship with Maria's grandparents they are isolated from other family members. This entailed a sour relationship between Maria's immediate family and the extended family. The participants stated that uniting the family resulted in the building capacity of the family, with the eventual benefit of achieving self-reliance at the family level. The social workers stated that they negotiate with the family members to unite if there are some tensions in the extended family, hence acting as mediators. The goal is to include the extended family as part of the solution once they are united, since this would be impossible if there are some disagreements within the family. The participants stated that they act as mediators, and also involve the chiefs in this process. Yet, Fonchingong and Fonjong (2003) highlight that the self-reliance discourse is faulted for shifting responsibilities to individuals and families, whereby the state shuns its responsibilities to the population masses characterized in familialized state regimes. This of course is based on a political view regarding how the state should relate to its citizens as a provider of service and an enabler of active citizenship. The respondents mentioned that narrowing the gap between Maria and the extended relatives could help broaden the options for care for Maria and her child. Unity within the extended family was regarded as a precondition to successfully helping families to solve their own problems.

Home assessment in this study was also considered as an intervention method, which was thought to be one of the important preconditions for interventions. Social workers do home assessments in order to ascertain how they are going to help the family, or whether they can insist on taking a child from home or not. Home assessment focuses on two fronts: social relationships and resource endowment. On the one hand, social relationships entail assessing interpersonal relationships, as well as the physical-, emotional- or sexual abuse of a spouse or children. On the other hand, resource endowment aims at ascertaining the ability of the family to provide basic needs like food for the family. Such data helps the social workers to know how best to help families that are lacking in the short-run, as more sustainable strategies based on empowerment and

self-reliance principles are being pursued. This is also more rhetorical than it is practical due to a lack of resources at the social welfare department.

Patriarchy and social work with families

Patriarchy, which according to Connell's (2009) anthropological definition refers to systems of male power and the oppression of women, can also be discussed as one of the factors that influence social work practice according to this study. This study showed that gender plays a role in the social work practice with families, in which cultural traditions regard men as the head of the family, so their decision and consent is therefore sought in many instances that involve the child. This can also be reflected in the introduction part concerning matrilineal and patrilineal marriage systems, which shows that regardless of the system, men have control over children, property and land. Thus, in most cases, the male members of the family are entrusted with the decision regarding the custody of children or any matters that involve children. One participant stated that:

> *The main reason for telling the father is that this is a sensitive matter, as it involves the life of his child. Now in Malawi, no matter the behaviour of the man, he is still respected and regarded as the head of the family, so he has to be informed on every decision.*

In this case, even though the vignette stated that Maria's father was abusive, this did not have an effect on his role as the head of the household. He was still respected as the head of the family, and therefore the one to give consent on any decision to do with taking the child or the grandchild out of the home.

The study also found that the presence of a male figure in the life of a child is more symbolic with respect to culture and societal norms, than it is functional in terms of child support. In this case, the presence of the father in a child's life is more for the community's reputation, as illustrated in this statement by one of the participants:

> *The father of Penny has to show up in the child's life so that Penny is not regarded as a "bastard" child by the community. If he does not, Penny and her mother might suffer ridicule in the society.*

According to the participants, the absence of a male figure in Penny's life would meet resistance from the community. For this reason, there was no mention of the need for a

father in terms of child support or to help raise the child, but instead to have a good reputation within the society. Hence, the presence of the father in this case was more symbolic for the society, and not really about how this would benefit the child.

Patriarchy plays a role in many issues in Malawian society, and the family is one of the avenues where it has a big impact on decision making. In this study, the participants highlighted two things with regard to patriarchy: first was the fact that the father has to give consent before any decision is implemented, and second was the need for the symbolic presence of the father in a child's life.

Cooperation between social workers and other stakeholders when helping the family

According to the focus group participants, cooperation between social workers and other stakeholders from other related fields in helping families is more in the urban areas than in the rural areas. Social workers from Chikhwawa expressed challenges when collaborating with other stakeholders from other professions. This was due to a lack of social workers in institutions such as hospitals, prisons and schools that are present in the cities, but not in districts such as Chikhwawa. Social workers in rural areas have to link with community members or traditional authorities in helping the families. As a consequence, there is a lack of cooperation between the social workers and other professions that might be involved in child protection issues. As illustrated by a participant from Chikhwawa:

> *…as social workers working with children in the communities, we are supposed to work with other professionals. Unfortunately, there is little support that we get from other professionals here apart from the help we get from traditional authorities and other community members*

By contrast, the social workers in Lilongwe stated that they work in collaboration with other stakeholders in many ways. The reason why there is a difference between rural and urban cooperation between social workers and other stakeholders is that there are many organizations in the cities that support social workers. For example, in Lilongwe, UNICEF has projects working with social workers in helping vulnerable children, but this type of project is absent from- or not very active in rural areas. Secondly, unlike in districts like Chikhwawa, there are social workers situated in most institutions in the

cities, such as in prisons, hospitals and other public institutions. In the FGDs, participants perceived and suggested that support from other professionals in child welfare work was more forthcoming in urban- as opposed to rural areas.

Religious organizations, traditional leaders and the community are all involved in helping the family in collaboration with the social workers in rural areas. For decades, church-related voluntary organizations have endeavoured to meet various social needs, including offering counselling to couples and establishing shelter homes for children in need. The active involvement of both religious leaders and elders in the extended family, especially in relation to providing counselling to children and families, must be seen as an adaptive strategy. It is a way of coping with Malawi's shortage of social workers and counsellors. However, it must be noted that children's institutions under religious organizations entail that the children adopt the beliefs of the religion that is supporting the institution, which excludes other children if they do not belong to the religion that sponsors the institution (Chitereka, 2009).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the years, most African countries, including Malawi, have gradually assumed a greater role as the principal source of social protection for children. In Harding's (1997) terms, this is balancing state intervention to protect children from poor parental care, and to also help to maintain that children and parents stay together due to a lack of state support. Although the family, the community and the church are still important actors in the provision of welfare, they are no longer considered adequate in themselves to deal with social problems that have emerged as a result of rapid social and technological change (Rwomire & Raditlhokwa, 1996). This has brought about a need for state intervention in social welfare, whereby social workers intervene in helping families. Even if the family is universally acknowledged to be the best place for a child's development and well-being, situations sometime demand that children to be placed outside the home, which is challenged by many factors in Malawi. Social workers' professional discretion is affected by patriarchal systems, culture, state regulations and professional value. Therefore, even when it is necessary for a child to be placed outside the home as per a professional assessment, economic aspects can be a hindrance to this decision. The department of social welfare's lack of the resources needed to take care of the child once he/she has been taken out of the family discourages social workers from placing

children in an institution, even if only temporally. It can therefore be stipulated that financial development in the social welfare services could empower social workers by equipping them with resources for better options/institutions for children who are placed outside the home. Due to the rise in orphan children, many people have the responsibility of taking care of children of their relatives, thus causing an unavailability of foster homes (Bandawe & Louw 1997; Sabin et al., 2011). This also limits foster homes as an alternative regarding where children can be placed when they are temporarily placed outside their home.

Patriarchy also seems to play a role by giving men or the fathers of the child decisive authority as to what decisions can be made regarding their children. Social workers therefore have to appeal to their professional discretion but also respect the system of the context of their practice, which also affects their decisions regarding placing a child outside the home. The factors discussed in this article show that social workers work towards improving situations in homes to enhance that children should as much as possible remain with their families. In summary, the findings show that family dynamics, especially patriarchal structures, culture and the economic status of Malawi as a country, direct how social workers work with families in child protection work with regard to placing children outside the home.

Social workers in this study emphasized the importance of helping children within the immediate- and extended family to help cope with the lack of financial resources needed to provide alternative options. Inasmuch as the choice of this approach is brought about by a lack of resources, it is worth noting that the social workers always try to work in the best interest of the child. In this way, helping the families to take care of their children ensures that the child grows up in a familiar environment while receiving help from social welfare. This can therefore be looked at in terms of the strengths of having the child be raised in the family, where as one participant said, *"It helps the child to feel the vibe of the family."*

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