

Extended Families Wane as Group Parenting Vanishes in Zambia

By Benedict Tembo

The proliferation of orphanages and the unprecedented increase of street kids demonstrate how Zambian society has broken up due to the harsh economic climate and “westernisation” which has seen most citizens lose social responsibility and abandon group parenting.

Iwake Masialeti, a lecturer in Geography at the University of Zambia, remembers how he was brought up as a child in the country’s Western Province.

He recalls that in his childhood, group or communal parenting was very strong. Typically, all village

elders were responsible for looking after all the children. For instance, an elder was free to assign chores to any child without having to consult the latter’s biological parents.

“If you had a child, you were not the only one responsible for instilling moral values in that child,” Masialeti says. All adults were aware of their obligation to teach the children of their relatives to become good members of the community.

Only the father and mother lived in the house with their youngest child. Boys and girls older than six

lived with their peers until they got married.

Men hunted, brought firewood, herded cattle and performed jobs that were considered to be tough while women drew water from the wells for drinking and bathing for their children and husbands. Women also did the cooking for all the men, girls, boys and everybody else in the village. People were encouraged to eat together, sharing whatever food they had.

Boys were encouraged to be with their fathers to learn life skills such as hunting and carpentry. Every evening, after the day’s

work, the male folk met at the *insaka*—a traditional rendezvous—where they shared knowledge in herding animals, hunting, fishing, agriculture and carpentry. Young men preparing to get married were also taught family values during the *insaka* sessions.

Meanwhile, the women had their own *ichibwanse* (a traditional gathering of women where they meet to discuss various issues)—where they shared wisdom and skills and prepared young girls for womanhood through initiation ceremonies.

When a child was born, naming it was not a monopoly of the mother and father only. Uncles and grandparents were also expected to participate in giving the child an appropriate name.

Is community parenting a thing of the past? Nuclear families such as this one are now more common in Zambia



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Traditionally, all children born in an extended family were treated equally. A father's brother would be called Father, too; a mother's sister was also considered Mother. Orphans were looked after by the extended family.

In the village of Vava, the entire community contributed in cash or in kind to help send Mark Banda to secondary school. Mark was the first boy from the village to be admitted to secondary school, and his success was considered a victory for all. Everybody was sure that if he did well and got a good job as a result, he would inspire others and be able to help the community.

Thus, in the past, streetchildren were unheard of in Zambia. So were orphanages, which dot the country today.

"Group parenting is not widely practised anymore nowadays," observed Joseph Mwenya, a lecturer in Agriculture at the University Of Zambia. The society has become much more cash-

oriented, he said, pointing to the harsh economic climate which has forced people to run away from close family relationships and become independent.

Formal education also had a role to play in decimating the traditional family. Educated individuals abandoned the extended family arrangement, reducing their families to father, mother and children. Furthermore, it is no longer common, as it was in the past, for people to renew family ties by visiting their home villages. "Now this tendency has almost stopped. Basically, what has happened is that people want to have a nuclear family, limiting their concern to that," according to Mwenya.

Ignatius Bwalya, a teacher, noted that the nuclear-family concept has spread even to villages whose populations have shrunk significantly.

Masialeti agreed with Bwalya that most villages today are not as strong as they were. "They are not as

cohesive as they used to be simply because people who had that knowledge are dead," he declared. The skills which young people were taught in the past have now become irrelevant because of westernisation.

Many children now live on the streets, Masialeti said, because people are poor and no longer willing to feed extra mouths. "They have lost social responsibility," he remarked.

Asher Phiri, an artist, thinks that street kids are a result of the lack of group parenting, recalling that in the past, when a father died, an uncle would take over the obligation of raising his children. "Today, the tendency is to be responsible only for one's nuclear family," he said.

With society seemingly going western, some concerned Zambians have formed institutions to revive the idea of group parenting. For example, Phiri is a committee member of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, which seeks to contribute to group parenting by creating a vibrant national theatre movement for children and young people. The group acknowledges social responsibility towards vulnerable children and youth.

Another such group is Alangizi, whose task is to

educate would-be brides about marriage. Members of Alangizi have been going around the country to sensitise people on the need to restore their rich cultural traditions. When they started, there was resistance but people have begun appreciating the existence of the organisation.

The success of Alangizi stimulated the emergence of Boy Power, with basically the same objectives. For a start, Boy Power has just launched some radio programmes to attract listeners before embarking on tours in secondary schools and colleges where they hope to establish a constituency.

But all this is not enough when one considers the lost family values which could in fact have been the best solution to the problem of orphanages and street children resulting from the high death rate that has been accelerated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

With the HIV/AIDS epidemic almost unstoppable and the economy getting harsher by the day, Zambians will do well to re-embrace group and community parenting to reduce the number of orphanages and street children. Prevention being better than cure, group parenting should be considered as one effective shield against the HIV/AIDS menace. ☺

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