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Extended Abstract

According to UNICEF estimates, 2.3 million children in Uganda, 14% of all children, had lost either one or both of their parents by 2005. 45% of these deaths were caused by AIDS [1]. At present the care of these children depends almost exclusively on informal extended family fosterage [2, 3]. According to DHS survey data ,17% of all families have at least one orphan living with them [4] and the majority of these caregivers are likely to be members of the child's extended family [5].   The importance of the extended family in orphan care clearly cannot be overlooked. Yet, by the late 1990s the extended family was beginning to strain under the growing burden of orphan care [5].

Scholars working across Sub-Saharan Africa have long described the wide-spread practice of voluntary fosterage [3, 6-17]. In many cases parents, foster parents, and children have had something to gain from these voluntary arrangements. [11] Sangeetha Madhavan has recently reviewed the available scholarship on fosterage in Sub-Saharan Africa in an attempt to elucidate the relationship between the crisis-fosterage of orphans and these robust systems of voluntary fosterage [3]. In light of her review, Madhavan cautions researchers against assumptions which fail to distinguish between voluntary and crisis fostering. Madhavan's review also points to the need for empirical research on the contemporary practices of voluntary and crisis fostering and the effects of the high rates of orphanhood and other forms of social change on these practices.

The appearance of street children, and indeed of children who are socially classed as "orphans" seems to be a relatively new phenomena in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite the fact that children have long lost their parents early in life. What is new are situations which lead to such children living on the streets and being classified as "orphans."   The most obvious hypothesis is that that the appearance of "orphans" and street children has

been caused by the burdens placed on the extended family by the rising rates of orphans.

Indeed, the demands placed on elderly relatives who are caring for multiple children do

seem to be new and may reflect the geographical concentrations of orphans which are

hidden by nationalized statistics.

However, analyses of strains placed on the extended family are further complicated

by a number of issues. The first of these are explicit attempts to end voluntary fosterage

during the colonial period [19]. Whether or not a decrease in voluntary fosterage may

have effected people's willingness or ability to foster children in a crisis is an open

question. Perhaps more important is increasing urbanization and the changes in the needs

and resources relevant to the household economy. In addition, we must attend to shifts in

the conceptualization the needs and rights of children and the effects of these conceptual

shifts on practices of orphan support. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and

statutory instruments such as Uganda's Children's Act have attempted to alter the ways

in which people think about children and their needs. For example, the UN Convention

on the Rights of the Child promotes the idea that one should treat all children equally and

that children should not be made to work. These ideas, while potentially beneficial for

children, may also conflict with current fosterage practices. It has not been uncommon to

treat foster children differently than one might treat one's biological children in regards

to education or to require that foster children work to contribute to the family income.

Whether or not these legislative instruments will lead to the better treatment of all

children or to an increase in the numbers of children who fall outside of existing systems

of family care has yet to be seen. This paper will use qualitative data gathered in

Kampala during the summer of 2007 to explore the interactions between rising rates of

orphanhood, increasing urbanization, shifts in the conceptualization of the needs and

rights of children, and the increasing prioritization of the needs of the nuclear family over

the needs of the extended family. This preliminary analysis may help to illuminate new

variables relevant to the study of the effects of AIDS on children, sparking novel

collaborations between qualitative and quantitative researchers.

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