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Professional understandings of child neglect in Namibia

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About the research

The Child Care and Protection Act (2015, p. 15) of Namibia defines child neglect as ‘a failure in the exercise of parental responsibilities to provide for the child’s basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs’. The Act also specifies that caregivers are responsible for providing for the child according to their abilities and capabilities. The harsh realities of extreme poverty and economic inequalities that many Namibian families face, raise many challenges within local communities, and result in the inability of many to adequately provide for their children’s basic needs.

The study undertaken in 2018 investigated how child neglect is understood both by staff in schools and social workers in statutory organisations in Namibia. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with practitioners across three (of the fourteen) ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in the country. Interview questions were framed around understandings of children’s basic needs and explored practitioners’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences of responding to child neglect.

This briefing makes recommendations for policy and practice to support practitioners in understanding child neglect and improve the overall health and welfare of children in Namibia.



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Policy implications

Whilst this study was small in scale, findings offer new and important insights into understandings about what is considered neglectful parenting in Namibia.

As a result of the study we suggest that

Practitioners should:

- Support parents to register children’s births so all children have citizenship and entitlements in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Schools should:

- Deliver information and guidance on issues of teenage pregnancy through Life Skills Teachers in schools to educate learners on sexual and reproductive health.

Organisations should:

- Introduce culturally sensitive parenting programmes.
- Encourage parental participation in alcohol education programmes.

Government and policy makers should:

- Develop a definition of child neglect based on the socio-economic context.
- Although Namibia is already committed to reducing poverty and the effects of poverty through national initiatives, further work with stakeholders should be undertaken to increase knowledge and insight into how poverty impacts child neglect and the prevalence of the issue.

Key findings

- Due to cultural beliefs some single women experience difficulties registering children's births in the absence of cooperation of the biological father. Without this certificate children are unable to access crucial welfare support from the state, or to attend school. Some parents themselves were not registered, compounding difficulties.
- Due to high levels of unemployment, many fathers migrate to seek work. If the remaining parent does not receive financial support, they too migrate for work, leaving children with elderly relatives or unsupervised.
- The frequent use of alcohol by parents is a problem contributing to inadequate supervision of children. Children were recognised as being more vulnerable when accompanying parents to Shebeens (drinking dens) where they are exposed to unknown adults under the influence of alcohol, increasing the risk of abuse.
- Teenage pregnancy is a common concern for girls of school age. Girls living with limited support from their families may be vulnerable to men who are able to provide emotional warmth and material resources. Families were thought to remain silent about this type of abuse as sexual activity and pregnancy is largely a private matter, often involving the receipt of additional resources which alleviate poverty.
- The grants paid out by the State to vulnerable and orphaned children do indeed contribute to their well-being, however there is evidence of parental mismanagement which could be more closely monitored.

Further information

This study was a collaboration between the University of Bristol, the University of Namibia and Cardiff University. Approval for the research was obtained from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture (Government of Namibia) and from research ethics committees at the University of Namibia and Cardiff University. This work was funded through the University of Bristol's Global Challenges Research Fund allocation from Research England.

Further reading available at:

Sharley, V., Ananias, J. Rees, A. & Leonard, E. (2019) '[Child Neglect in Namibia: Emerging Themes and Future Directions](#)'. British Journal of Social Work: Vol 49(4), pp 983-1002.

Sharley, V. (2018) '[Understanding Child Neglect in Namibia: Challenges and Strategies](#)'. International Social Work. Vol 62(3), pp 1159-1164.

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