
Abstract

The desire to understand young adults’ transition into adulthood from informal kinship-based foster care has been growing. This paper examines the challenges encountered by, and the opportunities available to, young adults as they transition from informal kinship-based foster care to independent living in the Bikita District of Zimbabwe. In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 young people who had left care and key informants. Data was analyzed using a thematic framework. Key findings included the young adults’ need for proper preparation in formal education, health, social welfare, and employment to ward off the challenges they face before they leave informal kinship-based foster care. The opportunities available to the young adults included cultural identity, social capital, and training in independent life skills within their kinship group. Recommendations are made for better preparation and support to young people transitioning out of informal kinship-based care in Zimbabwe.

Key words: Kinship, informal foster care, transition, care-leaving, adolescence, Zimbabwe
Zimbabweans have suffered as a result of the AIDS pandemic, persistent droughts, and other environmental challenges that have left many children as orphans (Mupedziswa & Ushamba, 2006). Most of these orphans are looked after by their next-of-kin in informal kinship-based foster care. However, some now belong to nuclear families, making it difficult for them to survive without the support of their extended families (Mushunje, 2006). Their transition to adulthood thus becomes a challenge.

The theoretical concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ was devised by Arnett (2000). It proposes that, over the past half-century, a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood has emerged in industrialized countries, involving a slower and more variable journey towards adulthood in one’s late twenties (Arnett, 2015). This theory is used to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by young adults who are transitioning into adulthood from adolescence under informal kinship-based foster care. This transition leads young adults to experience far-reaching changes in their social and economic roles in society as they undergo their psychosocial and physical development (Nyamukapa & Gregson, 2008). In relation to the challenges faced by care-leavers, developed countries have put legislation in place that provides funding and mandates the provision of services that aim to prepare and support young people in out-of-home care for their transition to adulthood (Frimpong-Manso, 2012). Such support is not available in many countries in Africa (Bond, 2018), and specifically in Zimbabwe.

An exhaustive search of the literature on young adults transitioning to adulthood from informal kinship-based foster care found a few studies that focus on kinship-based foster care. Most studies focus on youth transitioning from formal foster care and residential care, and assume that the nuclear family is the best environment (Cameroon, Hauari, & Arisi, 2018; Dziro & Rufurwokuda, 2013; Frimpong-Manso, 2012; Liu, Modrek, & Sieverding, 2017; Van Breda, 2018). This study is unique, as it focuses on informal kinship-based foster care where there is no involvement of the state and where grants are not offered. In Africa, informal kinship-based foster care is the main form of ‘alternative’ or ‘out-of-home’ care. Residential care is the main form of formal alternative care, as formal non-kin foster care is also rare in Africa (Cameroon et al., 2018).
The aim of the study is thus to examine the challenges and opportunities young adults face when transitioning from informal kinship-based foster care to adulthood in Bikita District, Zimbabwe. This article seeks to answer the following specific questions: What do these young adults need to prepare them for the transition? What challenges do they face when emerging into adulthood? What opportunities are available to them?

**Background, Context, and Literature**

Kinship-based foster care is understood by examining a wide-ranging and complex network of relationships: social, cultural, economic, and political (Idang, 2015). In Zimbabwe, the majority of people speak chiShona, where “the word father is *Baba*, father’s oldest brother is *babamukuru* (senior father), and father’s younger brother is *babamudiki* (junior father). On the mother’s side the parallel terms are *mai*, *maiguru*, and *mainini*” (George, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003, p. 346). Similar constructions for mother and father are found in other developing countries; they signify the connectedness of kinship-based foster care (Roby & Eddleman, 2007). In African countries, kinship relationship is so tight that all children have a ‘mother’ and a ‘father’ to take care of them in times of need. The assumption about looking after orphans in the community is that every member of the household or community has a role to play in the upkeep of every child in the community until they become independent (Case, Paxson, & Ableidinger, 2007).

Relationships between orphaned children and members of the extended family in kinship-based foster care have led to changes in African family structures: there has been a shift from extended families to nuclear families (Nyambella, Wandibba, & Aagaard, 2006). This shift highlights the enduring tensions between traditional and modern values and structures, as the care of orphaned children depends heavily on nuclear families that do not have enough resources. The shift is a result of the breakdown of collective, kinship-based systems of production and reproduction (Mbacke, 1994), and has led African nuclear households to move from high to low fertility rates. In many families, poverty has limited the number of children per family. Such beliefs have contributed to emerging perceptions that large families are an economic burden.

In most situations, the care of orphaned children has been left to the extended family network, which has been observed to be poor at providing the support children need (Mushunje, 2006). However, without proper exit planning and psychosocial support from other family members,
orphans – especially females – are vulnerable to dropping out of school and becoming sexually active at a much younger age (Nyamukapa, Foster, & Gregson, 2003). They are also at risk of early marriage and unwanted pregnancy, leading to problems as they enter adulthood without proper preparation (Nyambedha, Wandibba, & Aagaard, 2006).

The shift in economic outlook in Zimbabwe since the 1990s has seen young people moving out of kinship-based foster care, and facing the difficulties of a lack of formal education, unemployment, poor relationships (Kanyenze, Kondo, Chitamabara, & Martens, 2011), and instability (Torrico, 2010). Many such young people rely on support from their family members (Van Breda & Dickens, 2017). Yet many are cared for by grandparents who are poor, with limited resources, and who have limited sources of employment (Cudjoe, Abdullar, & Chiu, 2019).

In some cases, young people with foster care experience produce poor academic outcomes (Prettyman 2016). It is critical to note that formal education is vital to meeting life’s basic needs (Van Breda & Dickens, 2015). Unstable education has an impact on young people’s access to employment, education, and health services. The lack of health insurance, in some cases, leads families to rely on traditional healers and Pentecostal churches to solve their health issues, as the lack of formal education results in poorly paying jobs that cannot help them access good health services (Mushunje, 2006).

In the developed world, youth transitioning into adulthood have opportunities planned for them, as they receive financial support (Torrico, 2010). By contrast, in developing countries such youth encounter obstacles that make the transition to adulthood difficult, such as family instability and a disrupted education; and they present mental problems at a higher rate than teens in the general population (Torrico, 2010).

The journey of young people emerging out of care is a major crossroads for them (Van Breda, 2015, 2018). They navigate through several decisions and challenges to establish where they should go and who are the appropriate people on whom they could depend in times of need. In some cases, they seriously mess up by making unwise decisions that take them off their path to success (Van Breda, 2015). The situation becomes worse for the young adults who grew up as
orphans and who were deprived of a formal academic journey because their caregivers could not afford the necessary fees.

Changes in cultural values have shifted from the extended family to nuclear families (Mushunje, 2017). Culture entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people, such that it marks them out from other people or societies (Idang, 2015). Culture should help to prepare young adults to transition into adulthood. While it is expected that young people who transition gradually into adulthood would receive support from relatives and other community members – a characteristic of African families – some fail to get the necessary training into adulthood.

African communities are characterized by the prevalence of collectivism, as opposed to individuality. The most characteristic features of the African household are that they are mostly rural, patriarchal and hierarchical, polygamous, and open to kinship networks (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2001). Africans also attach substantial importance to continuing their lineage. The social organization of most African families is therefore embedded in patriarchal and hierarchical systems that deprive women of the freedom to choose the number of children they want to have (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 2001).

Contemporary African family patterns have changed as a result of better social and economic conditions and health opportunities. These factors exert a tremendous impact on contemporary family patterns in Zimbabwe. Socio-economic circumstances in Zimbabwe – particularly the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) of the 1990s (Kanyenze et al., 2011) – have triggered changes in fundamental cultural values, especially in the domain of the family.

Soon after becoming independent in April 1980, Zimbabwe pursued a socialist policy framework with respect to education, health, and social welfare. The people of Zimbabwe experienced economic challenges after these services were put in place. Through support from Breton Woods institutions, Zimbabwe was encouraged in the 1990s to introduce ESAP to revamp the economy. The government witnessed a paradigm shift as it introduced a market-driven approach to development. This reversed the gains of the 1980s in the social arena. Many people lost their jobs as company closures increased daily. Many families suffered as unemployment also rose during this period.
Methodology

Study Site

The study was conducted in the Matsai area in Bikita District. The district is known for cases of constant hunger. The overall poverty prevalence for Bikita District is 80% (ZIMSTAT, UNICEF & World Bank, 2015). Efforts have been made by the government to influence people to grow drought-resistant crops to reduce poverty and thus be able to support orphans. Education for orphaned children was supposed to be provided through the basic education assistance module (BEAM) program, a form of governmental educational assistance given to orphans and other vulnerable children. The program was dependent on donor funds, but is now dependent on revenue collected by the government. It was initially established in 2001 as a key component of Zimbabwe’s enhanced social protection program (ESPP), providing tuition fees, levies, and examination fees to orphans and other vulnerable children (Government of Zimbabwe, 2016).

Research Design

The study used a qualitative narrative research design to collect data from participants. This approach was chosen due to the study’s aim of examining the challenges and opportunities for Zimbabwean youth transitioning into adulthood. The narrative design was used to understand participants better as they expressed themselves through narrating their life stories. Narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which “the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:18). The approach also assumes that the life world of a person can best be understood from his or her own account and perspective, and “thus the focus is on individual subjective definition and experience” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 22).

Sampling and Recruitment

Two populations were sampled: kinship care-leavers aged 18-20 years, and key informants in the care-leaving field. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 care-leavers who grew up as orphans but were now staying with relatives, and who were engaged in some form of informal employment. Care-leavers were recruited through the registers of childcare workers who were
operating within their local community where the participants used to be registered before transitioning out of kinship foster care.

Eight of the care-leavers were females, all of whom had worked as domestic workers. Five of the eight females were married, three of them at the age of sixteen. Seven of the participants were males, and all were married. Only one of the participants, a male, managed to complete an Ordinary Level qualification.

Twenty-two key informants – experts working with care-leavers in the community – were selected. The key informants included three social workers, five childcare workers, five headmasters, five policemen, two chiefs, and two pastors. Two members from each group and one chief were interviewed.

Data Collection

The researcher collected the data with the help of a trained Master’s of Social Work student who worked as a research assistant, using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted up to 90 minutes, and were conducted in chiShona, the language spoken by most Zimbabweans. Interviews took place privately, but within the view of other people. This was to avoid any suspicion arising when a female was being interviewed, as Zimbabwean cultural values do not allow a man to talk to a woman in a private place, especially if they are strangers. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, then transcribed and translated into English.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Ritchie and Spencer’s (1994) analysis framework, which involves five distinct stages: (1) familiarizing, when the researcher repeatedly reads a sample of the textual data to identify key ideas and to become familiar with the transcripts of the data collected; (2) identifying a thematic framework, when the researcher uses the research objectives to identify themes, to recognize and note emerging themes; (3) indexing, conducted through an index framework, when the researcher identifies portions or sections that correspond to particular themes; (4) charting, where specific pieces of data that were indexed in the previous stage are
now arranged in charts of the themes; and (5) mapping and interpreting, which involves the analysis of key characteristics as laid out in the charts.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare through the Department of Social Welfare, and from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. After the researcher had explained the purpose of the study, participants were asked to complete an informed consent form. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time if they did not feel comfortable with the interview. The researcher respected the dignity of the participants through maintaining confidentiality.

**Findings**

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study. Two main themes emerge: the challenges, and the opportunities, relating to the transition out of care. Each of these themes has several subthemes. The findings of care-leavers and key informants related to each theme are presented together.

**Care-leaving Challenges**

Six challenges were reported by the participants in the study, both care-leavers and key informants: inadequate kinship care, early marriage, unemployment and poverty, dropping out of school, engaging in sex work, and accessing health care.

**Inadequate kinship care.** Care-leavers cited the inadequacy of the care they received from their kin as an important challenge while emerging into adulthood. Some young adults felt that they were not liked or loved by their caregivers:

> “I used to be blamed by my grandmother on whatever I did in the house, be it coming late at home or breaking a clay pot, even in the presence of visitors. I interpreted this as being disliked in the house.”

One young adult highlighted the lack of parenting skills among their kinship carers:
“Our caregivers need to be trained in new parental skills to match the current global trends in child rights. Most of the children who ran away from informal kinship-based foster care is due to poor parental skills on the part of the caregivers.”

The challenges mentioned by the young adults were also cited by the key informants. Childcare workers, for example, noted that young adults leaving informal kinship-based foster care do so out of frustration about poor care from their caregivers. One childcare worker noted:

“As these young adults are not staying with their biological parents, they end up having a feeling that they are not given what they expect as children because they are not the biological children to the caregivers. The majority of the caregivers are elderly women who might fail to understand the needs of young adults. The young adults become frustrated and try to look for better places to stay, resulting in big challenges for the young adults.”

Social workers also noted that the lack of caregivers’ parenting skills created challenges for care-leavers:

“Most caregivers do not have the necessary training in parental skills, and they often display challenges in communicating well with their orphaned children, such that, as the young adults leave care, they appear to be uninterested in staying with their caregivers any longer. Some of the children are left behind by the elderly woman’s daughters as they migrate to South Africa in search of employment. They get re-married there and literally forget to come back to care for their children.”

Similarly, a pastor noted:

“Caregivers need to be supported with community training methods in good parenting and nurturing skills and how to communicate with young adults, as they can be easily upset, as a way of preparing them into adulthood.”

Most caregivers in the study believed that the use of a stick was necessary to correct a child’s behavior. One caregiver noted:
“There is no way you can take care of a child without beating him/her, and you assume the child will grow up as a good person in society”.

One local pastor noted that caregivers did not provide young adults with the life skills necessary to emerge successfully into adulthood:

“The young adults leave their care without any supporting life skills because of poverty. Extended family members will be more concerned about their biological children. The majority of caregivers are elderly people who are not formally educated and who need care as well. This tended to promote the idea that once the child drops out of school, they think of going to look for employment to help their siblings and their elderly caregivers at times.”

**Early marriage.** Most of the young women who emerged into adulthood left their informal kinship-based foster care by getting married earlier than expected by society so that they could avoid the challenges they faced at the hands of their caregivers. One young woman noted:

“I thought by getting married earlier I would reduce my challenges of being abused by my caregiver, but unfortunately it got worse, as my husband constantly beat me up and I ran away twice because of the abuse I have been experiencing”.

The chiefs indicated that most young adults who married early did so not out of desire but because of the situation they faced with their caregivers:

“Most of the marriages end up as divorces, and the young adults had to remarry or become single parents with a number of children with different fathers. These young girls are forced by circumstances to get into marriage. Most of the young adults are orphans who are exposed to hazardous and strenuous work at the hands of their caregivers.”

A nurse working at a local health facility reported that young people got married or became pregnant before they could provide themselves with a meaningful life plan. She believed that they were not ready for marriage or family life:
“The majority of girls get married before they are fully prepared for the marriages. The opportunities available are that they should get life skills first before they get into marriage. This will help them to have a better focus for their future families.”

**Unemployment and poverty.** Lack of finances is a major challenge facing care-leavers, precipitating several other challenges. One young adult noted the lack of employment and the lack of a living wage:

“The death of my parents stresses me very much. I did not get enough education. I am unemployed, and the kind of job I normally get pays me very low wages.”

One key informant, a chief, noted:

“The majority of the care-leavers are unemployed because of lack of proper skills. The type of skills they acquired were just independent living skills, which helped them to do minor duties for survival, but not for looking for a job in the industry.”

The chief emphasized this point by suggesting that perennial droughts in the area created challenges for many people, and this had been worse for households headed by elderly people who take care of children:

“Some elderly people become the heads of most households, as their children flock to South Africa in search of greener pastures, leaving their children behind. In the process they do not send back any remittances. This leaves families relying largely on social welfare assistance from government. The welfare assistance considers the indigent poor and not the able-bodied. Resources are so scarce, and strict eligibility criteria are used, which means the majority are left behind.”

Welfare assistance in Zimbabwe is means tested, and children with surviving parents do not qualify. Some children in informal kinship-based foster care find it difficult to get support from social welfare, as the register of beneficiaries of government assistance is drawn up with the aid of members of the local community, who normally leave out those households with children working in South Africa under the pretext that such households depend on remittances. Therefore, obtaining food is difficult.
One chief spoke about a traditional practice of communal care, which would have helped such families. However, indigenous practices have eroded, leading to the increased vulnerability of kinship care families:

“In the traditional way, people survived through the ‘Zunde ramambo’, where members of the community came together and provided labor to the chief’s land and the harvest will be given to vulnerable people in society, who included children and care-leavers. This is no longer the case, and people get starved.”

Poverty has a knock-on effect in many areas of care-leavers’ lives. Poverty leads to hunger, for example, requiring young people to move prematurely into the workplace to generate money for food. One care-leaver noted:

“I had no option than just to find employment as a domestic worker and provide food and fees to my siblings and taking care of my grandmother as well. It is pathetic that at times we could only eat food once per day in the evening for us to get enough sleep.”

Similarly, poverty can prompt criminal behavior. One police officer noted:

“Most young adults who commit crimes are forced to do so as they try to move out of the care of relatives and try to be independent and they end up committing petty crimes like shoplifting.”

**Lack of financial support for education.** Lack of formal education was cited as a factor leading to challenges affecting young adults in their transition to adulthood. Previously, most children who grew up as orphans among their kin were sponsored by their extended family to go to school. However, with the current wave of modernization and the emergence of nuclear families, foster children often fail to go to school, even when others from the same family do. One young adult noted:

“My other relative is sending his children to school whilst I failed to go through grade seven due to lack of money. I ended up herding cattle in the same community as the relative was saying he had no money for my fees. He was also responsible for collecting
my money from where I was working, claiming that I was still too young to take care of my money despite the fact that I am 19 years.”

The social workers noted that the challenges faced by young adults arose from the fact that they dropped out of school because they were not formally registered with the government through the Department of Social Welfare, and so received no government support; the financing of their education became a challenge. One social worker noted:

“The only support they can get from government is through the BEAM, where fees are paid for from primary level up to secondary level form four. A committee is set up to choose a specific number of children, depending on the funds available per each school. Therefore, if the child is not chosen, there is no way a school can choose more than the number required per school, as the funds are not enough for every vulnerable child.”

The social worker noted that school fees for the current period had not been paid, but that examination fees are being paid up to the current period. Normally BEAM covers examination and tuition fees and levies to reduce the education burden on poor households. However, BEAM does not take on all the responsibilities and obligations of guardians to provide for their children’s education. The assumption is that guardians can afford the other necessary fees for their children. The social worker noted:

“The Department of Social Welfare has managed to pay fees up to 2014, but has also managed to pay examination fees to date. It will continue to pay the necessary fees as the money is made available by government. However, no child is allowed to be sent away from school for failing to pay fees, as the government will finally pay for each child. The school heads and the caregivers should be patient with the process.”

The community members commented on young adults who leave school. One headmaster from a local secondary school noted:

“Most young adults who leave school do so because of lack of school fees which BEAM fails to pay on time. The fees take a long time to be paid, and the child cannot afford to buy exercise books. As a result, the student absents himself until he thinks of looking for
employment to support his siblings. The child then leaves the school with no educational qualifications, which are a necessity in the job market.”

Sex work. Some young adults, especially women, take up sex work to get money for their survival, as they felt their caregivers could not afford to give them money to meet their basic needs. One such young adult noted:

“I ended up being involved in prostitution because I had dropped out of school. Therefore, getting money through prostitution helped me to buy the basics I wanted for myself and my siblings. But the older men I go out with could at times fail to pay me after having sex, and I failed to challenge them.”

One elderly woman felt the problem of prostitution lies with the young adults themselves. She viewed them as having mental health problems, because they defy the orders of their caregivers:

“I tried my level best to advise these young adults, but they did not listen at all, preferring to run away from school and engage in prostitution. I then decided to allow them to do what they preferred to do, considering the new western life and the rights of individuals.”

Access to health care. Many of the young adults faced health challenges, as they had no one to pay for their health needs. Local clinics do not charge for health services, but they do not have enough drugs to issue to patients. Those who are employed in poor-paying jobs, such as domestic work, do not have enough money to pay for their health needs at hospitals where drugs can be found. One young adult noted:

“I do not have money to cover for my health needs, as my job for herding cattle in the rural area does not provide any medical aid. So, if I become ill, I find traditional herbs to treat myself.”

One local nurse also noted:

“Our local clinic does not have enough drugs, so we end up referring our patients to the nearest hospital, which is a private hospital, and drugs are not given for free, despite the fact that it is a mission hospital.”
Care-leaving Opportunities

Although participants in this study noted many challenges that young people experienced when transitioning out of kinship care in Zimbabwe, they also identified several opportunities that they acquired through kinship care, including developing their cultural identity, acquiring social capital, developing skills for independent living, and obtaining a birth certificate.

Cultural identity. A key feature of young adults’ stay in informal kinship-based foster care was that they could easily identify with their clans. One young adult noted:

“Though I am facing some challenges, I am proud to be among my own tribesmen. I can go away and come back and still be identified with them in terms of my culture and have a totem to align myself with.”

One chief also noted:

“The young adults are trained in their culture, norms, and values as they interact with other members of their clan, which is a great opportunity for them as they grow up, despite them facing challenges. The challenges are part of growing up.”

Social capital. Another key feature that emerged among the participants who grew up with relatives was that of social capital. One young adult noted:

“I grew up staying with my father’s young brother who used to take care of my health, fees and welfare whilst I was staying with his family where I was socialized in my own culture. I benefited a lot. I managed to through my ordinary level education although finding a job after ordinary level is a challenge. I am able to make a living after the necessary and basic qualifications.”

Independent living skills. Young adults learnt a number of independent living skills in preparation for care leaving as they stayed with kin who could train them in a number of skills – although the young adults could see the training as a form of abuse. One caregiver noted:

“I trained some of my grandchildren in cooking food, fetching firewood, fetching water at the well, and washing her own clothes when she was still young in preparation of her
marriage when she will be expected to do most of the duties for her husband and husband’s family in my absence.”

The young adult raised by this caregiver felt that these activities were imposed on her when she was still very young. Another young adult noted:

“All the training which I received in preparation for leaving informal kinship-based foster care was seen as some form of abuse, as I was still young by then; though I learnt the hard way, but it gave me a picture of what I am now observing as an adult.”

One chief also noted that young adults who grew up within informal kinship-based foster care can be resilient when facing the social problems that affect their age group:

“It is a good opportunity that, as an adult who grew up among my own kinsmen, I learnt some of the basic skills required for a young man who will prepare for his future as a man. I am now able to learn from my kinsmen to be resilient to the challenges using my own local means, like adjusting to the needs of finding food in times of need and to adjust to the requirements of climate change as an individual without waiting for other people to do it for me.”

One caregiver noted that young adults are prepared for adulthood through different initiation rites:

“Boys are trained in the duties of being a father, and that included working in the fields, as they are expected to wake up early in the morning. Girls are trained to become a good mother in doing all other household chores by herself.”

**Acquisition of birth certificates.** The head of a local primary school noted that birth certificates are easy to acquire if a child is living with his or her own kinsmen:

“Acquisition of birth certificates, especially for orphaned children under informal kinship-based foster care who are about to write their final examination, are not a problem once the relatives come forward for support from the school. The school just writes a covering note and they get a supporting letter from their local councilor and chief, the child easily gets a birth certificate.”
This was confirmed by one caregiver, who said that she was initially not aware of the support offered by schools (with supporting letters to present to district registry offices) for easy access to birth certificates. She noted:

“I was happy to realize that it was easy for me to have a birth certificate for my grandson until he was in grade seven and was about to write his final examinations. The headmistress just wrote a letter that I took ... together with a letter from the Chief. The birth certificate was given on the same day.”

**Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited by the small sample that was used, so its results cannot be generalized to the rest of the Zimbabwean population. Participants were drawn from only one district – the District of Bikita in Zimbabwe – even though the country has diverse cultural groupings. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study provided a starting point for mapping out the preparation process for young people in informal kinship-based foster care in developing countries, and in Zimbabwe in particular.

**Discussion**

The study revealed that the care-leavers in the study entered adulthood without proper preparation. Experts felt that young adults did not consider their advice, but rushed into making decisions that created difficulties for them. The extended family members needed to play their roles of mentoring the young adults as they entered adulthood. The disappearance of extended family values (especially taking care of every child in need in the community) resulted in children facing difficulties in their life journeys.

The findings showed that care-leavers failed to secure employment, lacked proper life skills, and lacked formal education. They faced numerous decisions, including finding where to live, what to do, and who to hang out with. This was an extended process that involved them in a complex series of transitions.

Challenges faced by care-leavers arose from their stay in rural areas where resources and information for making decisions were limited. Traditional ways of life were still considered
viable for emerging young adults in the study area. The introduction of Economic Structural Adjustment Programme had a bearing on the life of many people, including the young adults in this study. Finding money to fund young adults’ education was seen to be a pipe dream, as most people in rural areas relied on BEAM to fund their education.

The care-leavers emerging into adulthood needed to learn independent living skills that would give them better access to health insurance, food, education, and employment opportunities, in addition to permanent relationships. The community should then make sure that youth transitioning from informal kinship-based foster care acquire all the important documents, such as birth certificates and educational qualifications that gave them appropriate life skills, as educational qualifications would be difficult to acquire after they had left informal kinship-based foster care.

The care-leavers needed to be properly socialized in their cultural values. A community is normally identified by its way of life. Therefore, the care-leavers needed to be grounded in their cultural values before they left foster care, so that they could be integrated with the modern way of life, such as Western models of education. Informal kinship-based foster care is the original and traditional way of protecting children that most African families adopted: every child belonged to every parent in the community. This is different from institutional care, non-relative foster care, and formal kinship-based foster care, where support is provided by government to the fostered children. The study, therefore, noted a significant shift in culture as nuclear families took center stage. Children find themselves not fully prepared to meet the challenges brought by this cultural shift. Thus, they need to be groomed to face the challenges and opportunities of contemporary life. Most young adults who try to find employment without proper educational qualifications obtain only poorly paid jobs.

In order for care-leavers to transition successfully into adulthood, their caregivers need to groom them more effectively to leave informal kinship-based foster care. It is also important that young people in informal kinship-based foster care be meaningfully involved in a thorough process of transition planning that focuses on the development of independent living skills and that addresses their access to health, education, employment, and permanent relationships in the
community. This should be assisted by the provision of good parenting skills by the caregivers, with support from government resources.

Kinship-based foster care should be sponsored by members of the community; and the government should adopt a *laissez-faire* approach, only intervening in cases where resources are scarce in the community. This would be seen as empowering communities to take care of their relatives.

**Recommendations**

Policies should be crafted to govern the support of orphaned children who are in the care of their relatives, so that they can help the young people to transition properly into adulthood. Foster parents should be trained in nurturing, communication, and general parental skills so that they can take care of their orphaned children, and in turn impart those skills to the children as they become adults and leave care.

Policies that meet the needs of children in kinship-based foster care should be crafted through financial support programs. Programs such as *Zunde raMambo* should be supported by the government and be used to rescue families in times of need. Non-governmental organizations should work to assist care-leavers who struggle to support themselves, complementing government’s efforts. They should pay school fees for girl foster children, and assist in providing them with life skills so that they do not marry young before they have properly planned for it.

The role of the social worker in local communities should be to help care-leavers who are emerging into adulthood by working in partnership with them to develop a solid transition plan as they prepare to leave care.

It is also important that social workers identify the unique strengths, abilities, and needs of the care-leavers to empower them to set realistic goals for themselves and to promote their life skills in making decisions that are culturally appropriate. The young adults should be encouraged to respect individual differences, which include race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Social workers should work closely with school development committees that are responsible for selecting children who are suitable for the BEAM program. School authorities should be
informed that children without parents should not be sent home for failing to pay fees, as long as they are registered with the BEAM program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, young adults leaving informal kinship-based foster care have several obstacles to overcome before achieving their desired goals. For care-leavers to transition successfully into adulthood, caregivers need to prepare them fully, using current trends in child rights management to leave informal kinship-based foster care properly. As already noted, such young people need to be meaningfully involved in planning the transition, supported by good parenting skills from caregivers.

Informal kinship-based foster care presents similar challenges to those that young adults face when leaving institutional care; but there are some differences. These lie in the fact that informal kinship-based foster care does not rely solely on support from the state; it depends on the support from the extended family network. Care-leavers from kinship-based foster care grow up among their kinspeople and learn much about the cultural norms and values of their society, despite the fact that the extended family network is slowly becoming extinct. If the government makes no effort to support informal kinship-based foster care by promoting the extended family system, there is a great chance that young adults leaving this type of care will continue to face challenges that will in turn affect future generations. The idea that the family is better for children than residential care will fail them, as they will leave such families ill-equipped to face life’s challenges. This calls for more research to be conducted before the extended family is entrusted with such children. Otherwise more resources will be required to care for care-leavers than those needed for children in residential care.

References


