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Beyond vulnerability: child carers informing discourses and interventions in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

Child carers are a unique group of children looking after sick adults. Most of the research on this particular group of children has been preoccupied with vulnerability and the negative effects of the caring process. This thesis foregrounds and argues that child carers in the context of HIV and AIDS in Africa are competent and capable social actors whose experiences should be understood from their own perspectives. It does not attempt to idealize their existence but to draw attention to their agency and active role within their constraining structures in which they exist. This qualitative study was conducted in a rural Zimbabwean community. Using a participatory child-centred methodology, 30 child carers took photographs and drew pictures to portray their daily experiences. The child carers' everyday lived experiences were utilised to form the backdrop to explore the appropriateness of community and programmatic responses. The study drew on the Rights Based Approach (RBA) which departs from focusing on children as targets at which interventions must be aimed at and calls for children not to be described and labelled by their situation but to be perceived in terms of obligations and rights due to them.

The empirical findings indicate that most of the interventions targeted at child carers in this study are needs-based, service delivery and framed within the vulnerability discourse. The Non-Governmental Organisation in this study uses words such as "beneficiaries" and "vulnerable children" to identify child carers, portraying them as passive and dependant receivers of hand-outs. By drawing upon the child carers' accounts it is, however, evident that they are strategically and actively manoeuvring the caring landscape to ensure survival and wellbeing in the context of looking after sick adults. These enormous tasks taken on by child carers challenge the adult discourses that regard children as merely "vulnerable". A structural, hermeneutic analysis of the research data reveals that care giving is occurring against a background of numerous adversities which highlights the agentic nature of the children as they continue to care for sick adults in this complex context. Through their images, the child carers show the broad spectrum and multiplicity of their experiences, making any attempt to contain them in the vulnerability capsule is rather simplistic and limiting in its scope. Furthermore, the child carers positively self-identify and recognise their self-worth. They do not claim vulnerability as their identity; neither do they identify themselves through their needs, limitations, difficulties or deficiencies, but rather through their meaningful relationships and contributions in household sustenance. This study brings to the fore the incongruence between the positive self-constructions of child carers, their lived experiences and the prevailing adult discourses that basically cast child carers as vulnerable. This thesis, through the voices of child carers, calls for a fundamental rethink of the vulnerability discourse to recognizing their rights, dignity, worth, capacities, strengths and positive contributions to their families and communities. Communities and development agencies could therefore draw from the rights based approach which will see a shift from charity-based interventions to fulfilment of rights.

Keywords: Vulnerability; Agency; Child carers; OVC; Needs based approach; Rights based approach.