

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

*A STUDY OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING
CHILD ABANDONMENT IN NAIROBI*

BY
JASSIE NJOKI GICHUKI

*A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in Christian Education*

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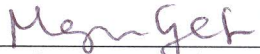
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July, 2007

Student's Declaration

A STUDY OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILD ABANDONMENT IN NAIROBI

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to any other College or University for academic credit.

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology or the Examiners.

(Signed) 

Jassie N. Gichuki

July, 2007

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the factors influencing child abandonment in Nairobi. Data were collected through open-ended interviews at Lang'ata Women's Prison with thirteen women who were jailed for child abandonment. Thereafter, data were analyzed and transcribed.

The findings revealed that desperation is the governing factor explaining the phenomenon of child abandonment. Nevertheless, some combination of three contributing factors drove these women into desperation, resulting in child abandonment. These factors, namely: destitution, isolation and injustice, taken singly may not have resulted in the same sense of hopelessness, but combined they resulted in desperation.

I concluded that the new phenomenon of child abandonment is spreading all over Kenya, especially in the urban areas. This conclusion paved way for recommendations that appeal for programs that will foster unity and teamwork in eradicating the phenomenon.

TO

This work is dedicated to my dear husband, George Gichuki and our wonderful children: Jacque and Dennis, Rosemary and Kinyua, Ed, Eva and Robert for the immeasurable support they gave me during the overwhelming moment of study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A baby had just been born and was abandoned along a sidewalk in a Nairobi suburb of Kayole. The police rushed the baby to Nairobi Children's home, a temporary government home for abandoned children. I was called, and the baby was immediately committed to my orphanage, with all the relevant documents concerning his brief history. When I took the baby in my arms I was shocked to find the pathetic state the cute little boy was in. He wore nothing but a small tattered cloth. I dressed him warmly and, after feeding him some milk, drove off with my little prince to the orphanage. We named the boy after my husband, George Gichuki. We have bonded so well that my family has decided to meet all his basic needs in terms of food, tuition, medical expenses and clothing. George is one child whose arrival to the orphanage has, indeed, enriched my life for I have experienced real joy and fulfillment in the work that God has called me to do, in serving Him. Sometimes, I look at the adorable child and just wonder, "Why did his mother just walk away from her innocent child?" My study seeks an answer to this disturbing question.

Child abandonment, a new phenomenon in Kenyan society, is becoming alarmingly rampant and disturbing, especially in the Nairobi area. It is affecting society economically, politically, socially, spiritually and emotionally.

I am conducting this study from personal experience because I manage a home for abandoned children and have witnessed the real problem of child abandonment and its complexities. According to the records held by the Orphanage and the

Children Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, abandoned children have been rescued from diverse and extremely harsh environments. Some were born and left in hospital maternity-wings as their mothers walked out on them. Others were born and left along sidewalks in plastic bags. Worse still, some were left in strange places, like along riverbanks and in pit-latrines. Still others were dumped into forest thickets and vegetations, where they were left to die. A case in point that shocked the whole city was that of *Baby Angel* who was dumped in the bushes of Dagoretti Corner. Nevertheless, God in His immeasurable wonders used a dog to rescue the baby who was rushed to Kenyatta National Hospital where she was left under the care of the doctors and nurses.

Sadly, many of these children will never know who they are or even understand why they were ever abandoned in the first place. Others barely survive; more often than not they succumb to death, for the harsh conditions deny them the chance to live. Indeed, these children do not deserve to go through these dehumanizing moments, and it is for this reason that the researcher finds it necessary to explore and understand the factors that influence women to abandon their own children.

Problem Statement

Child abandonment in Nairobi is alarmingly on the increase and is intensely affecting the whole society. This practice, unknown to traditional African cultures, is poorly understood. In particular, the stories of the mothers who abandon their children have yet to be heard. Hence, this study will explore the factors influencing women to abandon their children.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate and understand the factors influencing child abandonment from the viewpoint of thirteen women at Lang'ata Women's Prison, who have actually abandoned their children. For the purpose of this study child abandonment is the act of giving up and leaving a child in different circumstances, with no intention of future reclamation or reunion.

Significance of the Study

The study will be a real benefit to all relevant stakeholders as enumerated here below:

- i. The Kenyan Government
- ii. The private proprietors of the Homes for abandoned children
- iii. The Church
- iv. The ten participants, other vulnerable parents and children
- v. The NGOs

Indeed, the relevant stakeholders will better understand the plight of child abandonment and its complexities. In anticipation, they will respond with affirmative action in resolving the problem.

Research Questions

Based on the research topic, the following central research questions guided this study:

Central Questions:

What are the real factors that influence women to abandon their own children? How do women who have abandoned children perceive the contributing factors leading them to act in this manner?

Sub-questions:

1. How do the participants view and describe child abandonment?
2. How do participants describe the process of deciding to abandon their child?
What life factors contributed to their decision?
3. How has the phenomenon affected the lives of the participants?
 - a. Do they have regrets?
 - b. Given the same circumstances would they do the same today?
 - c. What changed circumstances might have allowed them to keep their children?

Delimitations

This study was confined to interviewing thirteen inmates at Lang'ata Women's Prison, Nairobi. This study sought responses to open-ended questions from the selected women who were drawn from diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, locality, religion and age respectively.

Limitations

The researcher regrets that she did not interact with participants of different social classes, which could have included a bigger population. Inmates of low social-class characterize the prison. In addition, the findings were limited to observations and interviews, since the prison did not keep statistical records.

Definition of Terms

In this study the following terms were used:

Child Abandonment

For the purpose of this study child abandonment is an act of giving up and leaving a child under different circumstances with no intention of future reclamation or reunion.

Children's Homes

Children's homes are the rehabilitation residences that are established by the Government, private proprietors or the Church, for the purpose of housing and nurturing abandoned children.

Children's Department

Children Department is a Government Department in the Ministry of Home Affairs that deals with the problem of child abandonment and its complexities. All registered children homes and operations fall under the Children's Department.

HIV-----Human Immunodeficiency Virus

AIDS-----Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

UNICEF-----United Nations Children's Fund

NGOs-----Non-governmental Organizations

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Creswell, the role of the literature review in qualitative research is to “provide a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as a benchmark for comparing and contrasting the results of the study with other existing theories” (2003, 30). Hence, the aim of this chapter was to shed light on the topic of research “Factors Influencing Child Abandonment.” A summary is also included at the end of the chapter.

World Vision reports that more than 100 million children worldwide are without proper parental supervision. “They’ve been abandoned, orphaned or separated from their parents due to poverty, disaster, war, and disease, including AIDS” (<http://www.worldvision.org>). International bodies like the All Africa Conference of Churches and UNICEF point to several interrelated conditions that create an environment favoring child abandonment. They include: 1) the breakdown of African traditional cultures, 2) crushing poverty, 3) political strife, 4) gender injustice, 5) health problems, and 6) religious issues, as analyzed here below.

The Breakdown of Traditional African Cultures

Child abandonment was not unheard of in traditional African cultures, but it occurred under certain relatively rare conditions. For example, some tribes, in their taboo beliefs, viewed children born with physical or mental handicaps or deformities as a bad omen, and such children were thus thrown away and left to die. Nevertheless,

the extended family unit played a very important role in the community in terms of child nurturing. Moral training was traditionally done from home by parents at the earliest age to prepare children for future meaningful life and any form of misconduct was met with hostility and severe punishment, in order to instill good behavior.

Joseph Lijembe, a great supporter of cultural values assertively writes on the dimming cultural role, “Adolescents were sent by their parents to selected elders, men and women of outstanding position in the location, whose function was to start training by maxim and direct instruction, for future parenthood and adult behavior in the tribe” (1967, 18). As a result, fear played a big part in the growing up of children and character development. Regrettably, due to rapid urbanization (see below) many traditional values and practices have disintegrated. The family unit is broken and scattered. Thus, traditional values, beliefs and practices are no longer respected.

Crushing Poverty

According to the Kenyan Bureau of Statistics (1980-2000), the country’s population is growing at an alarming rate, especially in the urban areas. Kenya is going through long periods of intensive economic struggle. Rural development plans were never implemented because of poor governance and corruption. Hence, poverty has forced people to move to the urban areas in search of work so that their families can survive. In marking the World Habitat Day the Local Government Minister [Musikari Kombo] spoke on the worrying rate of rural-urban migration, “It is now official; population in the rural areas has dropped from 80 percent to 60 percent. The rest have migrated to towns. The rise in the urban population has led to mushrooming of slums, increase in crime, environment pollution, poverty, diseases and unemployment” (*The Standard Newspaper*, 3 October 2006, 6). The rural poverty has

forced many families to move into the city for survival and traditional values and beliefs of the past are long gone. Consequently, under the new urban social structure, parents have lost the grip over their children and parent-child relations remain strained. In the event of conception a girl may choose to abandon her baby at birth for lack of moral and material support.

Rapid Urbanization

The rate of rural-urban migration is increasing and Nairobi, in particular, is exploding. Consequently, jobs are scarce and employment levels have enormously declined. Indeed, people are suffering on all fronts: socially, economically, morally, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Families are unable to provide for their basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing and education. Kilbourn reiterates, “Poverty forces some parents to abandon one or more of their children to street life in the hope that their other children will survive” (1997, 14). Jean asserts, “Certain situations increase the risk of child neglect. These situations are: unemployment, financial difficulties, poor relationships, drug abuse, and single parents are overwhelmed by their responsibilities” (1987, 266).

Prostitution

Some women and girls view prostitution as an opportunity for generating income instantly and thus, the vice has become a common means of livelihood. However, in the event of conception, some opt to either terminate the pregnancy or carry it to full term and thereafter, abandon the newborn babies because of the hostile environment they live in. Kilbourn states, “Since the street is a hostile environment in which to raise a baby, it is common for those who do give birth to witness the death of their babies from cold and sickness” (1997, 36).

Political Strife

Government policies have been politically bogged down, resulting in poverty, corruption, insecurity, and family disintegration. These factors fuel child abandonment. For instance, when political and powerful people instigate land clashes because of greed, they fuel tribal conflicts. The resultant civil unrest and strife destroys families: parents are killed, extended families are scattered and children are displaced. Displaced children often are orphaned or abandoned. Sometimes they are placed in institutions. Kilbourn asserts, “War in all its forms causes the destruction of traditional family life. Children are lost, displaced, separated or orphaned in the panic of flight from armed conflicts. Often the street becomes their life” (1997, 27).

Gender Injustice

In most societies women are the strong pillars in their respective family units. However, the government has not adequately addressed the issues of discrimination against women. For instance lack of access to credit, job opportunities and unfavorable terms of employment, poor health-care, and sexual harassment is the norm that women face in their daily effort in pursuit of family survival. Single mothers [the divorced, widowed and unmarried] are the most affected. Often, they turn to small-scale projects that might never grow without substantial capital investment. Thus, women are physically and emotionally unable to sustain their large families. A sense of desperation and hopelessness may force them to abandon their children.

Health Problems

Health-care facilities and services are declining in urban centers and people live in unhealthy conditions for ignorance and lack of teaching. Corruption in the Ministry of Health has left the local dispensaries, including the referral hospital, Kenyatta National Hospital, without drugs. Hence, the overwhelming health issues are increasingly contributing to child to abandonment.

HIV/AIDS

The HIV/AIDS Pandemic is wiping out societies. Children particularly are hard hit. Muraah, quoting UNAIDS Report of June 2000, affirms, “The rates of HIV infection from mothers to their children range from 13% to 40%. This is to say that up to 4 out of 10 children born to HIV positive pregnant mothers, will contract HIV” (Muraah 2001, 40). Nevertheless, some traditional families, in their taboo beliefs, do not have a place for the HIV/AIDS infected and orphaned children. These children are rejected and treated as outcasts. Urban streets become their refuge.

Street life is characterized by immoral deeds, such as rape, that often result in unwanted pregnancies. Girls caught up in this mayhem are traumatized. In the event of conception, especially in this era of an HIV/AIDS pandemic and intense poverty, they may choose to abandon their children. Forsythe in his fact-finding mission writes about the impact of HIV/AIDS on child abandonment, “The situation worsens when orphans are forced on to the streets where they are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The Undugu Society randomly tested 22 street children for HIV and more than a quarter of these children tested HIV positive” (1996, 46).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse has not spared urban society either, especially where drugs are easily accessible. The vice is common to both men and women. Their reasoning

power eroded by substance abuse, thus leaving them vulnerable to illicit sex and rape, which often results in unplanned pregnancies. Children conceived in such circumstances are neglected or abandoned because their drugged parents are not capable of meaningful parenting.

Child Deformity

Some children are unfortunately born with some deformities, physically and mentally. Several tribes in their taboo beliefs will view such cases as a bad omen and a child is thus, thrown away for the dead.

Religious Issues

The establishment of rehabilitation centers and feeding programs by the church could be seen as encouraging child abandonment. Parents are neglecting their children and walking away from the parental responsibility because they can easily place their children in such homes where love and care is assured.

Greed in the urban church is also a real stumbling block to true preaching. The church is focused on the gospel of prosperity, rather than addressing moral issues, such as: polygamy, sexual abuse [infidelity, rape, incest prostitution] divorce and remarriage, that more often than not promote child abandonment. Church leaders are compromised and thus not adequately confronting real issues that are accelerating poverty in the country. Grigg fervently comments, “The poverty of the third-world urban poor is a direct result of social forces and oppression, not of personal sin” (1997, 16).

SUMMARY

The literature review in this chapter that was fundamental for the study included the factors that supposedly influence child abandonment, namely: the breakdown of traditional African values, the crushing poverty, political strife, gender injustice, health problems and religious issues.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

In this chapter I describe how the qualitative method of research was used in the study. Creswell identifies three types of research design: quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods (2003, 18). The qualitative research paradigm is the most appropriate for a study seeking to explore and understand emerging social issues that affect individuals and families. Child abandonment is a relatively new phenomenon in Kenya and little research has been done on it. Factors influencing child abandonment have not been explored adequately. Hence, the researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study because the anticipated goal was to discover theory rather than test hypotheses.

Creswell asserts, “Qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prefigured” (2003, 181). Hence, during the five days of intensive interviewing, I meaningfully interacted with the participants. According to Creswell, qualitative research employs various strategies of inquiry, such as narrative, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology or case study. I used a grounded theory approach in which “the researcher attempts to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study” (Creswell 2003, 14). This approach required me to interact closely with study participants in order to hear their stories and understand their perception of child abandonment. To achieve this end, the researcher used socially constructed knowledge claims that seek “to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell 2003, 8). I conducted open-

ended interviews to allow participants' free expression in seeking to understand their perceptions of the phenomenon.

Research Participants

Women in the urban society who have abandoned their children are difficult to find because they tend to conceal their identity for fear of rejection or prosecution. Nevertheless, a large number of these women are confined in various Kenyan prisons. For this study, the researcher conducted grounded interviews at Lang'ata Women's Prison.

Entry

Permission to interview participants at Lang'ata Women's Prison was required. Therefore, I requested the administration of Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) through the office of the Academic Dean to write a letter of introduction to Lang'ata Women's Prison. As a result, permission to conduct the interviews was granted by the Officer-in-Charge, Prisons Headquarters, Nairobi.

The Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is described as, "The primary data collection instrument" (Creswell 2003, 200). Hence, for data collection, I visited the prison and interacted with the participants concerning the subject of child abandonment, for the purpose of constructing meaning out of the study situation. I provided participants an opportunity to share their life experiences in their historical and cultural context. My purpose was to explore and understand the deep causes that led the participants to give up their children. During the interviews, I focused on

participants' behavior while observing pattern themes related to the phenomenon, for deeper understanding.

The interviews took place in a security-risk setting where security measures were to be observed. Therefore, prior to the interview appointment I sought permission from prison authorities to audio record the interviews. I entered into the protected area with only the allowed items necessary for the interview: writing materials and a tape recorder.

Data Collection Strategy and Procedures

Each interview took approximately twenty to thirty minutes. An interval of about five to ten minutes was allowed between sessions to allow smooth change of participants and writing down important notes. I took five days to complete the interviews.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to Creswell, three coding procedures are used in grounded theory for data analysis: open, axial and selective coding (2003, 191). I used the aforementioned coding processes to generate a theory that captures the participants' understanding of the child abandonment phenomenon. Ultimately, the data were put into categories and a pattern established to determine how these categories were linked with each other.

Validation and Verification Strategies

According to Creswell qualitative researchers employ various verification strategies that include triangulation, member checks and use of an external auditor.

Creswell asserts, “Proposal developers need to convey the steps they will take in their studies to check for the accuracy and credibility of their findings” (2003, 195). Hence, the researcher used the following strategies for checking accuracy and credibility.

- *Triangulation*: Different information from different sources was integrated to shed light on the central theme of the research.
- *Member checking*: Creswell describes member-checking strategy as “taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants to determine whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (2003, 196).
- *Audit trail*: Creswell describes an auditor as “new to the researcher and the project and can provide an assessment of the project... at the conclusion of the study” (Ibid.).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DATA INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to explore factors influencing child abandonment in Nairobi. Data were collected from female inmates at Lang'ata Women's Prison, Nairobi. A total of seventeen women were interviewed but four were found to have given out conflicting information containing anomalies. These were, therefore, not considered during the analysis. Hence, only thirteen cases were included in the study. This chapter begins with a description of participants' background, then describes the factors precipitating child abandonment, and finally discusses participants' perception of the phenomenon.

Study Participants' Background

Over half (7 of 13) of the participants were divorced at the time of the study. Two were married. One was a widow. The remaining three had never married.

A large number of participants (70%) were found to have given birth to between one and three children. Those who had four children were only two (15.4%), and an equal proportion had five or more children.

The majority of the participants (61.5%) had 6-9 siblings and another (15.4%) had 10 and above siblings. Those who had 2-5 siblings constituted only 23.1% of the total.

A sizeable proportion (38.5%) of the participants reported both parents were alive at the time of their imprisonment. Another 23.1% claimed only their mother was alive. Only one participant said her father was alive, and another said she had lost both parents. Three participants (all single mothers) declined to provide information concerning their parents.

The vast majority, 10 of 13 participants, had very little formal education. They had, at best, a primary school education. Two had attended secondary school and only one had reached the tertiary level.

Four participants had been engaged in small-scale trade. Three were casual laborers. One had done office work. Two had done domestic work and two others were prostitutes. Only one participant declined to state her former occupation.

A large proportion of participants were found to have some religious background, with a majority (76.9%) claiming to be Christian. Only one was Muslim. The rest (15.4%) failed to provide information regarding their religious background. Among the Christians, a large number belonged to the Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches (61.5%). Only 15.4% were Roman Catholic.

An overwhelming number of participants (76.9%) were residing in Nairobi's poorer suburbs at the time of their arrest (e.g., Githurai, Kayole, Dandora, Kariobangi, Makadara, Kibera, Kangemi and Kawangware). Only one came from an affluent area of Nairobi where she was employed as a domestic worker.

Factors Precipitating Child Abandonment

When the subject of conditions and circumstances that had compelled the participants to abandon their children was explored, a number of interrelated issues emerged from their individual responses. Desperation emerged as the governing factor explaining the phenomenon of child abandonment. However, some combination of three contributing factors consistently triggered this sense of hopelessness. These were destitution, isolation and injustice. Taken singly any one of the factors may not have resulted in the same sense of desperation, but in conjunction they led these women into a state of hopelessness that resulted in child abandonment. Figure 5 represents the relationship between the three main factors contributing to child abandonment.

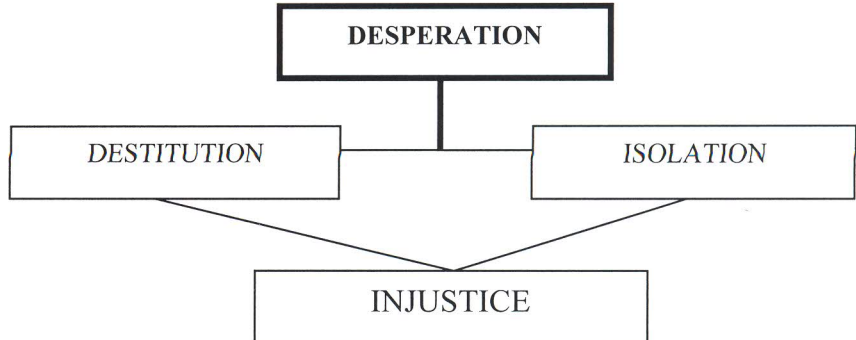


Figure 5: Determinants graphic

Destitution

The inability to satisfy basic human needs was the lamentation of nearly all the women interviewed in the study. They explained that due to their poverty they were not able to support the children that they had brought forth. For example, one mother exclaimed,

Mummy! What did you expect me to do, just watch him die in my hands? I live in the streets and for me it was nil by mouth because in the street life, food is scarcely available. For three days, I was feeding my newly born baby on water. The baby was getting weak and sick and I had no money to buy medicine. So, I did not have much choice but to abandon him and hoped that some Good Samaritan would pass by and rescue him, instead of helplessly watch him waste away and die.

Another mother reported,

I have three children who are a real burden to me because I am unable to provide for them. So, when I brought forth the fourth child, it became too much for me to bear. In the midnight hour, I walked to a children's home that is managed by a Catholic church and left the sleeping baby at the entrance. Unfortunately, passersby noticed the weird act and intercepted me. There was hue and cry in the neighborhood; police were called and I was arrested and convicted of child abandonment.

A third mother, who engaged in commercial sex work, remarked,

Because my work highly pays at night, I had no alternative but to feed the baby on alcohol then lock him up in the house till morning, as I go out to look for money to sustain him. One day he cried so much that neighbors came to find out what was happening. When I came back, they warned me against leaving the baby alone in the house. But I did not listen. In any case they did not know what I was doing to earn a living. Then it happened a second, third and fourth time. They reported me to the police and I was arrested and jailed for the crime.

Destitution pushed another respondent into illicit brew production and prostitution, for survival. These activities caused her to neglect her children to the point of malnutrition. Finally, the Children Department took her children for placement in an orphanage and sent the mother to prison for child abandonment.

Isolation

One respondent specifically linked isolation to poverty as a cause for child abandonment, “I cannot stand the shame!” She complained, “With my little gross salary of 2000 shillings per month and *nobody on site to help me* [emphasis mine], I was not going to live maternity with him because he would starve and [eventually] die, anyway.”

Two main factors emerged as contributing to a perception of isolation among mothers who had abandoned their children. They were family rejection and destructive sexual behaviors.

Family Rejection

One cause of family rejection was conception out of wedlock. One woman described her situation,

I already had another child staying with my parents. When I became pregnant with a second child, I was devastated. Fear gripped me of being treated as an outcast in the family and in the community. I contemplated abortion, but on seeking advice I was told that abortion is illegal in Kenya. Therefore, I decided to go the full term of pregnancy and secretly dump the baby in some place after birth. Nevertheless, I was apprehended and imprisoned for the crime.

The study points to hostility in the mothers’ family environment, brought about by the patriarchal values and beliefs that impede on women’s rights. Premarital pregnancy is vehemently dismissed as “disgusting” and children born in such circumstances are referred to as “Mwana wa ihu” [bastard] by the Kikuyu tribe. It appears that the traditional cohesion and mutual feeling for one another that is embedded in the African extended family has given way to individualism in the urban social structure. The family failure to extend love and acceptance to such a member, may lead to a sense of rejection and alienation, thus resulting in child abandonment.

One respondent narrated her experience,

When I became pregnant with my son, my own mother could not hear of it. She started treating me like an outcast; I was rebuked and alienated for betraying the family values and beliefs. My parents are staunch Christians and elders in the church. O my God, I cannot believe my own mother did this to me. She vehemently dismissed me as a total failure and a disgrace to the family. I was under attack and rebuked the whole time of pregnancy. Finally, the baby arrived and sadly, he was dismissed as a “bastard.” I was rejected and ejected from the family home. With no means for survival, I decided to just abandon the baby in some place and lied to my parents that the baby had died of some sickness. But, before long, the police came for me and I was convicted and jailed for the crime.

Issues of ethnicity also contributed to family rejection leading to isolation.

One Kikuyu respondent reported that she got involved with a Boran man despite parental warning. The community rejected her totally and consequently, she left for the city with her two children. Urban poverty became too much for her, yet her own brothers warned her to keep away from home. When I inquired about the reason for their warning, the respondent was quick to state, “Mum, I have two boys and my brothers would hate to imagine that my children might share in my father’s estate.”

Destructive sexual behaviors

Destructive sexual behavior on the part of the participants and their partners also contributed to mothers’ isolation. Some women reported having conceived as a result of promiscuous liaisons and were not certain about the real father. One such respondent summarized,

Instead of trying here and there to find a man who could admit responsibility, I decided not to bother and just hid the baby in some place. I did not even want any of them to know that I had been pregnant in the first place. But unfortunately for me, somebody picked the baby where I had left him and reported the matter to the police who then started investigating the case. I was eventually found out, arrested and imprisoned.

Another respondent was involved in extra marital affairs though she claimed to have been pushed into it by the ills of polygamy. She narrated,

That man was always making unnecessary noise and always threatening me with divorce. He claimed that I was useless and an ugly woman. He was deeply involved with another woman and ready to bring her in as a second wife despite my resistance. He stopped providing for the family and in desperation I got involved with another man for survival. Unfortunately, I got a child out of wedlock and I had no choice but to abandon the baby in some place in order to conceal my unfaithfulness. The immorality and its complexities had indeed, placed me in a dangerous situation that would have jeopardized my marriage.

Nevertheless, the secret came to light when the respondent was caught as she attempted to abandon the baby. She was arrested and imprisoned.

The intensity of sexual abuse on the part of men also resulted in the isolation of women who abandoned their children. One woman narrated a regrettably typical scenario leading to child “abandonment.”

My husband has been sleeping with our daughter and this has been going on without my knowledge. When I learnt about the ordeal, I was devastated and confused; it was too much for me to bear. I could not handle it and so I left him with his ‘new wife’ [victim]. I left all the children with him and eventually, he reported my desertion to police. False charges were pressed against me [adultery and child abandonment] and I am the one behind the prison bars instead of the man who goes to bed with his own daughter. Indeed, corruption in this nation will continue to oppress the innocent poor.

The above instance leads me to a discussion of social injustice. Several women in this study viewed themselves as victims of an unjust system.

Injustice

One respondent reported she was living in the streets of Nairobi as a result of land clashes in Rift Valley Province back in 1991. More often than not, land or ethnic clashes are politically instigated and often result in civil strife, death and displacement. Sadly, women and children are the chief victims. This respondent came to Nairobi streets under such circumstances. She engaged in hawking business that sometimes took her to unsafe places. In one such place, several men raped her. The ordeal resulted in conception, complicating an already traumatic situation. When the

baby girl arrived, the mother dumped her in a heap of garbage. Fortunately, the child was found alive, but the mother was apprehended and imprisoned for the crime. The woman was in deep pain for being unjustly jailed and lamented,

In the first place, I am in the streets because Government was a major player in the land clashes that led many of us into the street life where women remain vulnerable. The same government has put me in prison for the consequences of their action, instead of pursuing those who subjected me to the immoral act of rape and deal with them accordingly.

Several women believed they were jailed without sufficient reason and unjustly. One woman's story clearly links poverty and injustice. She had three children between the ages of three and ten years old and was arrested for leaving her two younger children under the care of her ten-year old daughter. She went out to look for food but the task took longer than expected [three days]. Neighbors, having heard the children crying, alerted the police about the crying and abandoned children and surveillance was immediately put in place. The mother innocently appeared, only to be apprehended and jailed for the crime. She bitterly argues,

I do not understand why I am behind bars. I love my children and I will go down fighting for them. Mum, I had only gone for a while in search of food. In any case, they were not alone; in our kind of life, a ten-year old girl is old enough to look after the young ones.

The respondent saw nothing but injustice against humanity and especially the poor. Nevertheless, she hoped to be reunited with her children upon completion of her jail term.

Mothers' Perception of the Phenomenon

When participants were asked about what they understood about the concept of child abandonment, whether they had any regrets about what they had done and whether they would do the same thing given a second chance, the picture that

emerged was fascinating. They all regretted their actions and would never repeat them. One woman lamented, "If I knew the consequences of child abandonment, I would have kept my child."

On the whole, the participants poorly understood the concept of child abandonment, even though they were already declared guilty of the crime and imprisoned. Several refused to acknowledge that what they had done was in the sense criminal. They did not view themselves as criminals; instead, they anxiously looked forward to a time when they will be reunited with their children. One woman very casually said, "I do not look at myself like a person who abandoned her own child. I only left him hoping that some Good Samaritan would find him and take care of him until he grows up so that we can meet again. When I leave this place [prison], I hope to be reunited with my child."

Other mothers viewed child abandonment as a means of easing the already heavy parental burden in their lives. A mother of three explicitly remarked, "It is better to let go one child, to save others." On the other hand, nine of thirteen participants viewed child abandonment as a social crime. They dumped their children secretly to avoid rejection and isolation by their respective communities. One woman affirmed, "When the expected date of delivery approached, I was already very far from my familiar environment, with intent to conceal identification." Nevertheless, her plan did not work out; she was apprehended though by people she did not know and she was imprisoned for the crime. In spite of the dreadful experience, the respondent hopes to go back to her unsuspecting community and press on with life normally, after the jail term.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was to explore and understand the factors that influence child abandonment in Nairobi. The study participants were thirteen women inmates who were imprisoned at Lang'ata Women's Prison for child abandonment. During the interview a number of interrelated themes emerged from individual respondents, namely: destitution, isolation and injustice. The findings revealed that desperation is the governing factor explaining the phenomenon of child abandonment. However, some combination of three contributing factors consistently triggered this sense of hopelessness. Taken singly any one of these factors may not have resulted in the same sense of desperation, but in conjunction they led these women into a state of desperation that resulted in child abandonment. In light of these findings, I make the following recommendations to the stakeholders: government, the church, private proprietors of the homes for abandoned children, NGOs, the participants and society at large, for immediate implementation.

Parental Responsibility

Fundamentally, the family unit is a sacred institution through which God reveals His nature: love, righteousness and justice for the mankind. Hence, parents are charged with the responsibility of godly nurturing that brings fulfillment to their children. To achieve this highest good, parents are called to instill discipline in their children from

early age, for character development and morality. Failure to obey the divine command will indeed, lead to public shame later in life (Proverb 29:15). To avoid this abhorrent situation, there is need for both parents [fathers and mothers] to be practically involved in the upbringing of their children so that the task is not exclusively left to mothers. Both parents have the responsibility of teaching and preparing their children for future challenges so that they will remain strong against moral issues, as suggested here below.

1. Parents are the best models to their children for positive character development and personality. Narramore, a child psychologist asserts, “It is in the home that children self-perceptions and evaluations take place, and it is here that children first learn to value and respect themselves or belittle and reject themselves” (1980, 103). I strongly agree with Narramore because the art of living is primarily learnt at home; children look to their parents as their role models. Therefore, parental training is essential and thus, must start right from the cradle. Thus, it is parental responsibility to protect their children against social ills: pornography and substance abuse such as alcohol and drugs that may lead to illicit sex, premarital pregnancy and child abandonment.
2. Parents should avoid having marital quarrels in the presence of children so that their self-esteem is not eroded. With this strong discipline, children will not follow the crowd in doing wrong (Exodus 23:2). Hence, moral issues like child abandonment will never feature in their lives, to the glory of God.

3. Parents should teach good morals to children from early age so that they may learn that disobedience will only lead to destruction (Exodus20:14; 1Corinthians 5:9; Galatians 5:19-20). Hence, premarital pregnancies and child abandonment may be prevented in totality. Nevertheless, where unplanned pregnancy occurs, parents must avoid threats and rejection but rather give support in terms of unconditional love, encouragement and assurance of moral and financial support, even after the child is born. As a result, such a mother will not indulge in the evil act of child abandonment that indeed, imprisons conscience with regrets and guilt.
4. Parents have the moral obligation to do what it takes to provide for their children's basic needs, namely: food, clothing and shelter. In addition, meaningful parenting aims at nurturing a child to full maturity, that is: physically, psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, socially and morally so that children may experience fullness of life.
5. On the whole, child abandonment is illegal according to the law of this land and culprits must be dealt with accordingly. Child abandonment is a serious crime and not a lesser evil as casually perceived by some respondents. On the contrary, every person is very important in the eyes of God, for we are created in His own image (Genesis 1:27). Ultimately, every child is a gift from God (Psalm 17:3).

God expects parents to take care of the children that have been entrusted to them. In any case, child abandonment does not make parental responsibility any less. Instead, it intensifies suffering for the abandoned child and also the mother who may end up in jail for the crime against humanity. Therefore, the prudent thing to do is to

seek help in terms of counseling, material support or alternatively give the child for adoption in accordance to the stipulated Children's Act.

Governmental Responsibility

Government has a critical role to play especially in the formulation of developmental policies, with intent to eradicate poverty that has extremely reduced mothers to destitution, resulting in child abandonment. The following recommended measures are both practical and achievable.

1. Rural development plans should be implemented in all provinces for the purpose of creating more jobs and equal distribution of wealth. Thus, industrialization in rural areas will influence rural migration and restore the drained cultural values and beliefs that unify the family unit. As a result, child abandonment will be a thing of the past.
2. Women should be empowered economically. Unfortunately, the city remains an economically hostile environment for women. Unless this situation is adequately addressed, poverty in the city [especially as it impinges on women's economic welfare] will continue to be an immeasurable contributor to child abandonment in this metropolis. To avert the situation, government in liaison with NGOs need to remain gender sensitive in terms of job and business opportunities. Women should be given equal opportunities with men so that they stop over-relying on men for their own sustainability and that of their children.

3. Competent legal representation should be available to all social classes. Its inaccessibility has led to unjust imprisonment of the poor, particularly destitute women.
4. Legal structures should be put in place to address decadent sexual practices, which contribute to child abandonment. Women need government protection from sexual abuse, including law enforcement with respect to child defilement and the protection of widows. Further, educational programs on reproductive health should be developed for women empowerment.
5. Counseling centers should be established to advise women in the event of pregnancy crisis. Mothers who wish to give their newborn babies for adoption should be accorded free legal advice and without intimidation.
6. HIV/AIDS must be destigmatized and anti-retroviral drugs made available in all district hospitals so that HIV positive children can be medically assisted to revitalize their health. Such actions will decrease chances of rejection of the HIV positive children born by their mothers.
7. Government, the Church and NGOs should participate in creating awareness that “giving a child for adoption” is acceptable. As a result, parents who wish to give their children for adoption will do so freely, instead of abandoning their children in earlier mentioned harsh and strange environments, such as: pit latrines, river-banks, side-walks in

plastic paper bags, forest thickets and vegetations where they face risk of death.

8. Men must be sensitized to their role and responsibility in contributing to child abandonment. Often, it is men who generate the problem, but it is women who suffer the consequences. It is the high time the society started to look at this problem holistically and as a phenomenon, in which both men and women are equal partners.

Recommendation for Further Research

More awareness needs to be created around the subject of child abandonment and its intensity so that people can begin to realize the scope and seriousness of the problem and its devastating consequences. Therefore I make the following recommendations for further research.

1. This inquiry only focused on Nairobi. It remains unclear whether the findings would be applicable to other parts of the country. There is, therefore, need for research in the rural areas and other Kenyan cities.
2. Further, more research is needed with respect to meaningful intervention for the prevention of child abandonment across Kenya's social-economic strata.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guiding Questions

Based on the research topic, the following central research questions guided this study:

Central Question:

What are the real factors that influence women to abandon their own children?
How do women who have abandoned children perceive the contributing factors leading them to act in this manner?

Sub-questions:

1. How do the participants view and describe child abandonment?
2. How do participants describe the process of deciding to abandon their children? What life factors contributed to their decision?
3. How has the phenomenon affected the lives of the participants?
 - a. Do they have regrets?
 - b. Given the same circumstances would they do the same today?
 - c. What changed circumstances might have allowed them to keep their children?

VITA

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