

Approaches for the Seamless Integration of Male Leavers into the Community from Selected Children's Homes in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu Counties, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The progression from institutional care to the community is still a huge obstacle for many care leavers, especially for male institutional care leavers whose reintegration needs have not been effectively met in Kenya. While institutional care offers support and protection during childhood, little is known about what strategies help to make it easier to rejoin community life upon leaving. This study sought to find out the approaches for the seamless integration of male leavers into the community after leaving care. This was a qualitative study that utilized a case study methodology, where purposive sampling was used to select twenty male care leavers from the selected children's homes in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu counties using a snowball sampling technique. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and a modified Attride-Stirling Thematic Network Analysis was used to analyze the data. Ethical standards and steps taken to guarantee the trustworthiness of the study were followed throughout the study. The results indicated that successful community integration requires institutional, family, community and policy interventions that are coordinated. Key strategies found were improving aftercare, promoting economic empowerment through education, vocational training and employment, strengthening psychosocial support, building good family and community relationships and strengthening collaborative partnerships between children's homes, government and the local communities. These strategies were seen as necessary to help deal with social and economic problems after-care. The study adds to the existing scarce literature on male care leavers in Kenya by providing evidence-based strategies on how to improve post-care services, policies and programs for sustainable integration within communities.

Keywords: Institutional care, male care leavers, aftercare, community integration, reintegration strategies and Kenya

INTRODUCTION

One hundred and five out of every one hundred thousand children in the world live in residential care (UNICEF, 2023). This includes children in all forms of institutional care, including children's homes and orphanages, which typically have severe developmental and behavioral impacts on children. The reason why institutional care has escalated is the high number of orphaned children. Millions of children in Sub-Saharan Africa have been orphaned not only as a result of AIDS, but also by other diseases and conflicts. By 2022, nearly 13.9 million children are estimated to have lost one or both parents due to AIDS alone, causing the orphans to grow up in difficult and traumatic conditions, lacking the support of their immediate families, which places them at greater risk of experiencing poor health, malnutrition and limited access to education and protection (UNAIDS, 2023). Furthermore, children's problems are also being complicated by the break-up of the traditional family system. Today, some communities and families have lost their extended family structure, which would have taken care of such children. As a result, they have no one to take care of them, and the government authorities, in most cases, may take such children to children's homes.

Lumos (2020) and UNICEF (2019) emphasize that institutionalization should never be viewed as the first option, as experience shows that children raised in families have better psychosocial, educational and livelihood outcomes than those brought up in group homes. Nonetheless, in most African and Asian settings, the process of

deinstitutionalization is sluggish due to cultural acceptance of children-home neighborhoods and the inability of governments to fund family-based solutions (Petrowski et al., 2017). East African region has its own set of challenges. A study in Uganda indicates that a significant number of children leave care to enter unstable situations, and there is a lack of follow-up support (Nsubuga & Ssenyonga, 2018). Young people who leave institutions in Ethiopia are facing challenges in accessing land, education, and jobs, and they are left to rely on informal and precarious livelihoods (Pankhurst et al., 2020). These results are similar to the situation in Kenya, where young men are often socially isolated due to a lack of kinship ties and denied access to economic means, such as land (Landesa, 2020; Zeanah et al., 2020).

The Gender Schema Theory (GST) can be utilized to explain the special plight that is observed in male leavers, in theory. Bem (1981) thought that an internalization of the roles of males and females endorsed by society will impact behavior and identity. For the male leavers in Kenya, the masculine schemas of toughness, independence and provision are in conflict with institutions' low preparatory levels, leading to what scholars call role strain (Izugbara & Egesa, 2019). Without interventions that acknowledge gender schemas in reintegration processes, the risk exists of continuing the stigma and vulnerability. It is important to address this imbalance to create effective support systems and interventions that will be specific to the needs of male leavers and help them to develop a more comprehensive understanding of their post-care experiences. Normally, the reintegration time is the time when the focus of the care that was formally in the hands of the institution shifts to the young leaver. This is usually a highly critical period that requires proper planning of systems and processes. It requires appropriate or extended psychological preparation to address all the fears invested in the children before they are placed in the outside world's care, and eventually brought back into the care of their families or society. Building on this notion, Ochanda (2016) notes that the reintegration process is traumatic, and some of the children face suffering due to the loss of institutional support and no other means of support.

However, for male care leavers, the integration process is often difficult, as is their financial stability in society, due to society's stereotypical expectations of men. The young men in question tend to have trouble with the way of establishing and sustaining relationships, as the traditional masculine norms tend to discourage emotional expression and expression of need. Economically, they are often restricted by low levels of education and vocational training, which makes them unable to have stable jobs. There are few countries that have a policy on care leaving, which compounds the difficulties. The role of providing and making decisions is predominantly assigned to men, but this is not the skill or resource set that is provided in institutional care.

Statement of the problem

The National Care Reform for Children (2022-2032) aims to reduce the harmful effects of institutional care through the prevention of separation from family, reintegration with family, supported independent living and comprehensive aftercare for care leavers (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2022). The strategy recognizes that reintegration is a continuum and needs to be supported in the long-term beyond leaving institutions through socioeconomic, educational and psychosocial services. Even with this progressive policy change, there are still challenges that need to be addressed to achieve these goals for many care leavers in Kenya.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the approaches for the seamless integration of male leavers into the community from selected children's homes in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu Counties, Kenya.

Objectives of the study

The study is guided by the following specific objective:

- To identify strategies for the smooth integration of male leavers into society.

Research question

The research question guiding this study was:

- What strategies can be put in place to facilitate the smooth integration of the male leavers into society?

Significance of the study

Although institutional care and its consequences have been extensively researched on an international level, most of this literature has focused on general trends or female children, whereas male leavers are relatively understudied (van Breda & Frimpong-Manso, 2020). This study provided context-bound evidence by analyzing the strategies that can be put in place to facilitate the smooth integration of male leavers in Kenya; thus, contributing to the global body of knowledge and enhancing the gender and development scholarship.

Scope of the study

The study area was also restricted to institutions in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu Counties respectively, as opposed to the whole country. Nakuru and Uasin Gishu counties represent a more urban and cosmopolitan setting, while Nandi County gives the study a rural experience in institutional care.

Limitations of the study

This study has some limitations, including a small qualitative sample size of 20 male care leavers, the use of purposive and snowball sampling which could have caused selection bias and a restricted representativeness of the findings. The study also took place in selected children's homes in different counties in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu; therefore, findings may not necessarily represent the experiences of children in other counties and/or settings, as care-leaving experiences are context specific (Ucembe, 2016). There may also have been some recall and selective reporting of experiences by participants and people with especially positive or negative experiences might have been more likely to participate. These results should therefore be considered in the context of the particular method and context of the study.

Assumptions of the study

The research was conducted on the basis that the participants would be cooperative and provide honest answers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies for smooth integration of male leavers into society

Several studies have highlighted the special issues affecting male care leavers who left residential care and are living independently. Van Breda (2018), for instance, studied the challenges and resilience strategies of care leavers in different contexts. The results showed that male care leavers tend to have problems in developing and maintaining social relationships with others, which are the key to successful integration into society. This is unlike their female counterparts, who tend to have greater social networks and support systems. The research notes that there is a need to have gender specific interventions that consider the unique needs of male care leavers. Moreover, Stein and Munro (2008) investigated the idea of transitioning to independent living by male care leavers and the role of aftercare support. The research established that although these individuals were able to recall and utilize learned skills, most of them had difficulties applying skills to real-life situations. It is important to note that continuous support and opportunities to apply social skills in practice after institutional care should be provided.

More recent studies stress the need to include gradual reintegration, economic empowerment and psycho-social resilience as critical components in successful aftercare of male leavers. Pankhurst et al. (2020) suggest gradual independence models, in which African care leavers would gradually move out of institutional care into semi-supported living and then receive full independence. The National Care Reform Strategy for Children (NCCS, 2022) has outlined a framework for the transition between institutional and family-based care, yet gaps in the implementation process still exist, especially when it comes to the needs of male leavers, which are gendered. As Ahmed, Waithima, and Karume (2023) note, mental health intervention is needed, which should focus on male care leavers who are often exposed to anxiety and social exclusion. Reintegration outcomes of these individuals can be enhanced by establishing special counseling programs that deal with self-esteem and emotional well-being issues.

Research Gaps

Inadequate policy frameworks for aftercare.

The deficiency in the development of a comprehensive aftercare policy, in particular, for male care leavers, is a major concern globally. Arnett (2015) writes about the fact that the shortage of regular aftercare services makes the situation of young adults who transition out of care more challenging. In particular, male care leavers have worse experiences because of gender expectations of autonomy and lack of use of the existing services (Goyette & Turcotte, 2004). These gaps in most countries tend to lead to a high level of vulnerability to homelessness, unemployment and mental illness. Male care leavers in Kenya are at even greater risk since there is insufficient organized governmental support. Although the National Care Reform Strategy (NCCS, 2022) has already acknowledged the necessity of aftercare and reintegration into the community, this process is quite slow and unequal. The current provisions are mainly focused on deinstitutionalization and family-based care, but lack clear and actionable pathways in supporting young adults upon release from institutions. This research fills this gap by examining how policy gaps contribute to the socioeconomic and psychological problems that male leavers encounter and how policy deficiencies can be addressed to solve these problems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is the structure of established theories, concepts, and definitions that a researcher uses to guide a study. This study was guided by Gender Schema Theory.

Gender Schema Theory (GST)

The Gender Schema Theory (GST) developed by Sandra Bem in 1981 (Bem, 1981) can be used to consider the experiences of the male institutionalized leavers. This theory posits that people acquire schemas at an early age, which take the form of internalized expectations for gender in society. In institutional care settings, children are usually raised in a controlled, gender neutral or gender-blind environment where traditional caregiving roles (which often require nurturing and emotional support) are often performed by females. By living in such environments, male children absorb hard and fast norms about what masculinity is and what it is not, and they base these norms on dependence, emotional restraint and reluctance to consult. GST can be used to understand the emotional isolation that may result from the expectations of masculinity, and that the male leaver might not feel confident in exhibiting any vulnerability or in asking for help (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). The gender norms, so deeply rooted, make the expression of emotions, building of relationships, and access to systems of support challenging and a concern for male leavers who have left institutional care. As Martin and Ruble (2019) point out, these internalized masculinity schemas lead to behaviors in which boys, including male leavers of institutional care, suppress emotions, which can complicate social reintegration and hinder their ability to develop meaningful relationships.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative Research Approach

The research approach is the overall plan or direction that will help to make the research process successful in collecting the data, analyzing the data and interpreting the data to solve the problem of the research, as mentioned by Gray (2022). Patterson et al. (2023) believe qualitative research possesses strong power since it is designed to enable the researcher to "get inside" the social realities of the people. Their systematic review highlights the need to pay close attention to all the steps of the research process and record them in a thorough manner to achieve reliable results. Moreover, Gibson and Brown (2009) emphasize that the qualitative designs should be flexible to allow the researcher to respond to the emerging patterns in the data. It is not that this flexibility is incompatible with rigor, but rather it improves it by enabling the researcher to incorporate a deeper, context-specific understanding without undermining the consistency of the research process. At the same time, the qualitative nature of the study also allows the researcher to be honest and sensitive to the lived experiences of the research participants, to obtain research results that are authentic and data-based.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Yin (2018) states that case studies are especially effective when there is no clarity in the boundaries between the phenomenon under analysis and its real-world context. The experiences of institutional care male leavers are closely intertwined with the overarching societal expectations of masculinity context, which makes a case study approach highly suitable. In addition, the study explored the role of gender norms and expectations of masculinity in society in determining the reintegration process of male leavers. The case study approach allowed for a thorough examination of how these gender schemas affected emotional development, social behaviors and economic performance of the male leavers during the integration process and how the strategies for a smoother integration facilitated it. The use of case studies to investigate gendered experiences was supported by Gustafsson (2017), who urged that case studies can help a researcher to capture how social structures and expectations influence individual behavior.

Selection of Participants

Tracy (2023) suggests that the sample of ten to fifteen participants in qualitative research is adequate because it is sufficient to explore all themes comprehensively, but not excessive to saturate the researcher with a massive amount of data. This is in line with the suggestion of Creswell and Creswell (2018) that qualitative inquiries should be narrowed to smaller, well-selected groups of participants to maximize the richness and depth of insights that can be gained, which led to a recommended sample size of 20 respondents. Snowball sampling was used as it was suitable for the study and a qualitative sampling technique to access hard-to-reach or special populations. It is a method that can be helpful when studying populations that are not readily identifiable and when the researcher is not easily accessible, with the assistance of initial participants who can refer the researcher to other participants who meet the study criteria. The methodology is consistent with the principles of intensive case-oriented analysis and the focus on quality rather than quantity in data collection. Hence, the researcher concentrated on attaining data saturation to secure a profound exploration of each case instead of predetermining a certain number of participants.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher opted for in-depth semi-structured interviews with the male participants placed in their institutions and those who have departed their institutions, to get their true views as expressed in their own words. The researcher adopted modified Attride-Stirling (2001) Thematic Network Analysis (TNA) to analyze data, which made it possible to systematically identify collective themes and interpret recurrent themes related to strategies for a smooth integration of male leavers into society.

Data Collection Procedures

Twenty male care leavers from Children's Homes in Nakuru, Nandi and Uasin Gishu counties in Kenya were sampled through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method used, giving the researcher the chance to delve deeper into the experiences of the interviewees (Creswell, 2014). In addition, analysis of the institutional records and policies pertinent to the accounts of the participants offered some context (Mendes & Snow, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

The ethics committee of the institution reviewed and approved the study before data collection. Permission slips were also obtained from the respective children's homes and other relevant authorities to carry out the study. Participants were told the aims of the study, that they would be taking part voluntarily and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. All participants gave written informed consent before the start of interviews and confidentiality was also observed (Pescott, 2022). Participants' privacy and anonymity were preserved throughout the study by using pseudonyms and by securely handling the research data. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the participants' experiences, interviews were conducted with sensitivity and support to help avoid psychological distress, and participants were assured that the information they provided would be used only for academic purposes.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was ensured by adhering to the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In-depth semi-structured interviews strengthened the credibility of the study, and rich descriptions of

the study context and systematic documentation of the research process strengthened the transferability and dependability of the study. Confirmability was obtained by using participants' narratives for support and having consistency in the data collection and analysis.

Data analysis procedures

Modified Attride-Stirling (2001) Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns and themes related to the male leavers' reintegration into society.

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Data were analyzed using modified Attride-Stirling (2001) Thematic Analysis, which offers a systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data in a hierarchical structure.

Strategies for the smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

The research question was: What strategies can be put in place to facilitate the smooth integration of the male leavers into society?

The researcher obtained interview data from twenty participants who completed the interview process and the data were transcribed.

Analysis stage A: Reduction of the Text for the strategies that can be put in place to facilitate the smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

The researcher began the analysis by scaling down the assembled data on strategies for the smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

Step 1: Coding the Collected Data on strategies for smooth integration

The first step of thematic analysis required coding of collected data. The researcher established codes for the interview data by finding common patterns that showed how male leavers achieve successful social integration after institutional care. The researcher sorted out the abundance of data by coding the most significant issues, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Displaying, scrutinizing Codes and selecting elementary Themes

Codes (Step 1)	Scrutinized Codes (Step 2)	Elementary Themes (Step 3)
1. Develop	1.Start Begin Initiate	1.It is good to start proper aftercare structures to provide financial aid, support in housing, and mental health.
2. Provided	2. Furnish Give Impart Prepare	2. There is a need for support with skills for life and independence
3. Regular education	3. Academic Education Formal training	3. Care leavers often have formal education, but they need job-specific vocational skills

4. Lack	4. Absence Shortfall Unavailability	4. Many care institutions have females as role models, making them miss male role models, which is vital for identity formation and social integration after care.
5. Trace	5. Track down Pursue Mark out	5. There is a need to find their families or have community-based support groups.
6. Reveal	6. Unmask Disclose Unveil	6. There is a need to expose them to counseling services to deal with trauma and emotional issues.
7. Stepped	7. Phased Progressive Step-by-step	7. Initiate gradual independence programs
8. Delegate	8. Accredit Allow Permit	8. Empower them economically through giving small grants and entrepreneurship training for self-sufficiency.
9. Link	9. Unite Wire Join	9. Connect male care leavers to community organizations, youth groups, professional networks, and savings groups.
10. Reduce	10. Lower Downsize	10. Initiate programs that break stigma for care leavers and promote inclusion.
11. Operationalize	11. Enforce Activate Effect Apply	11. Implement the policy, especially the Children Act 2022, by funding aftercare programs.

12. Design	12. Make Execute Initiate	12. It is good for society to create supported independent living arrangements, especially in the critical post-care transition.
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Step 2: Selection of themes

Themes were identified by isolating them from the coded text to come up with elementary themes, collective themes, and finally a universal theme, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Isolation of themes from coded text

Elementary Themes	Collective Themes	Universal Theme
1. It is good to start proper aftercare structures to provide financial aid and support in housing.	1. Funds	Empowerment
2. There is a need to support them with skills for life and independence	2. Work	Empowerment
3. Care leavers often have formal education, but they need job-specific vocational skills	3. Work	Empowerment
4. Many care institutions have females as role models, making them miss male role models, which is vital for identity formation and social integration after care.	4. Copy	Empowerment
5. There is a need to find their families or have community-based support groups	5. Enable	Empowerment
6. There is a need to expose them to counseling services to deal with trauma and emotional issues	6. Enable	Empowerment

7. Initiate gradual independence programs	7. Enable	Empowerment
8. Empower them economically through giving small grants and entrepreneurship training for self-sufficiency.	8. Work	Empowerment
9. Connect male care leavers to community organizations, youth groups, professional networks, and savings groups.	9. Copy	Empowerment
10. Initiate programs that break stigma for care leavers and promote inclusion.	10. Copy	Empowerment
11. Have structures that implement the policy, especially the Children Act 2022, by funding aftercare programs.	11. Funds	Empowerment
12. Create supported independent living arrangements, especially in the critical post-care transition.	12. Funds	Empowerment

Step 3: Development of thematic networks on strategies for smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

The researcher established a universal theme beginning with elementary themes and proceeding through collective themes. Thematic networks emerged as interconnected elements that created thematic networks, as Figure 1 illustrates

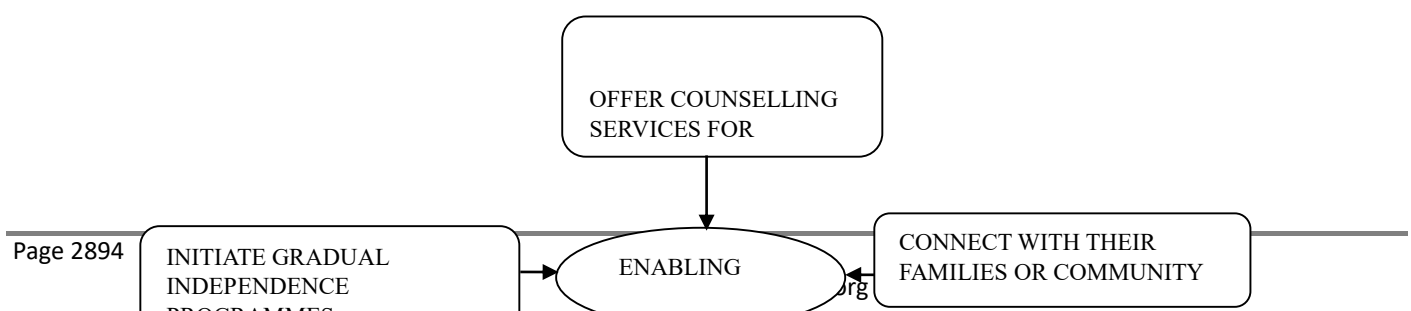


Figure 1: Framework of thematic networks on strategies for smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

Analysis stage B: Examination of the text

Interviews yielded immeasurable material on the strategies for smooth integration of the male leavers into society. The analysis of the text carried out by the researcher involved discussion and analysis of thematic networks.

Step 4: Interpreting and discussing thematic networks on strategies for smooth integration of the male leavers into society.

The researcher analyzed and presented thematic networks on strategies for the smooth integration of the male leavers into society. The thematic networks developed for this study display a universal theme of empowerment, which shows that the male leavers from institutional care needed to be empowered to be able to transition smoothly into their families and communities. The four main collective themes were: Imitation, provision of funds, employment and provision of an enabling environment.

Imitation and Continuous Follow-Up Support

One of the main collective themes that arose from the data is that the provision of an environment where positive imitation can take effect is essential for male leavers as they exit into their families of origin and the community at large. During the transition period, participants consistently stressed the necessity of guidance and monitoring.

To illustrate this, P2 states,

“The institution management needs to continue monitoring you until you are stable.”

Similarly, P4 noted that,

“Life is easy with someone to direct you and guide your steps as you move towards independence.”

Also, P6 emphasizes the importance of mentorship in overcoming real-life adversities,

“Lazima uwe na mtu atakushika mkono na kukuelekeza kwa sababu bila io maisha huwa ngumu sana na unaweza potoka kwa urahisi (Having role models who can guide you ensures that you remain on the good path; otherwise, it is very easy for one to lose focus).”

These assertions indicate that mentorship is not only a source of practical advice but also emotional support, assisting male leavers to gain confidence and stability. Such follow-up systems might not be available, which can cause feelings of abandonment and vulnerability.

Mentorship engagement is essential outside care institutions. Many care institutions have females as role models, making male care recipients miss male role models, which is vital for identity formation and social integration after care. This sentiment is supported by P5, who asserts that,

“Most caregivers in our care institution were women, yet having male caregivers would have given us an upper hand in fitting well with society.”

There is also a need to connect male care leavers to community organizations, youth groups, professional networks and savings groups. This is supported by P15, who argues that,

“You should have someone who can assist you; people around.”

P9 asserts that,

“Having friends, family, and being attached to societies in the community whom you can count on helps you to settle both physically and mentally.”

When the male leavers are old enough and ready to reintegrate into society, they need to have an attachment to some strong systems that are already in place that break stigma for care leavers and promote inclusion.

Similarly, P20 contends that,

“Acceptance in society makes a great difference during integration.”

The above findings imply that integration does not necessarily rely on individual effort, but it is also affected by the availability of supportive social networks and inclusive community settings. Initiation of programs that break stigma for care leavers and promote inclusion is also paramount.

P20 also supports that,

“You will be expected to solve your own problems, as we were raised to believe that seeking help as a man was a sign of weakness.”

Funds for Economic Empowerment and Financial Stability

Economic empowerment has become a very important approach to ensuring that one becomes well integrated in society. The participants stressed the necessity of financial aid and the possibility of gaining economic self-sufficiency.

Similarly, P2 acknowledges the presence of institutional transition support structures by postulating that,

“The institution had a sendoff party for us, and they did give us some money to begin with... the little capital did assist in paying for rent, a little shopping, and even starting a business.”

This indicates that the institution had put up structures to assist care leavers on transition, by offering some small economic support to help them with their transition needs and move towards economic independence.

Moreover, P3 emphasizes the significance of financial preparedness by postulating that,

“You ought to go away with some savings from the income generating activities we used to have, to sustain you and help you start living alone.”

Thus, these findings suggest a seminal role of financial stability and independence in integration, as it helps one obtain housing, food and other basic needs. In its absence, the male leavers might not settle, and therefore, they become unstable and might be excluded socially. When asked about the experiences in terms of support in independent living, P2 expounds that,

"They gave us advice and some money to start life."

P11 identifies that there is inadequate financial support during the transition from institutional placement, by stating that,

“You simply just go, and you discover things on your own.”

Employment and Development of Skills

The other significant collective theme is how developing skills can contribute to improving employability and self-reliance among care leavers. The respondents emphasized the need to learn practical and vocational skills.

P4 states that,

“You are required to learn skills that eventually assist you in securing a job or initiating something of your own, thus making you independent.”

Similarly, P8 postulates that,

“Training in various skills was helpful in that it has made me able to survive anywhere.”

Additionally, P1 emphasizes that,

“You know when you have a talent, you are not as bad, as you can get outdoors and entertain people, thus earning from it.”

These reactions underscore the significance of providing market relevant skills to institutional care children, which increases their capacity to secure jobs or participate in income-generating activities upon exiting institutional care.

Enabling Environment

This collective theme of having an enabling environment emphasizes the role of social relationships and community integration. The participants have stressed the importance of social support in facilitating the transition process. P15 alludes to the fact that,

“You should have someone who can assist you, people around.”

Similarly, P20 argues that,

“Acceptance in society makes a great difference during integration.”

These imply that integration depends on multiple social variables that include supportive social networks and inclusive community settings. For male leavers, these may include self-help groups, recreational clubs and societies, cultural and spiritual/faith-based groups, among others that can support male leavers to develop a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The participants also emphasized the significance of counseling and emotional support to help in overcoming psychological issues. P17 asserts that,

“Attending counselling services made me have a better understanding of myself.”

Similarly, P13 stipulates that,

“You should have someone to share with regarding your experiences because problems shared are usually half solved.”

Additionally, P19 contends that,

“Speaking up and sharing what was on my mind did assist me to cope with stress and difficult situations.”

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The research findings for the current study suggest that social integration is not just a single transition moment but a continuous process that needs continuous support in structural, emotional and economic aspects for male leavers. All participants highlight the importance of organized aftercare to complement institutional care, and emphasize that proactive aftercare support for male leavers in the early years of independent living is essential for successful reintegration into society. The leaving care process is not a step straight into adulthood for participants, but rather a journey of reintegration that involves mentorship, counselling, financial assistance and connections to social networks and community that support reintegration. Integration appears to be a socially and institutionally mediated process that is part of the negotiation of manliness and belonging within the post-care environment. Consistent across all the participants, mentorship and counselling services are seen as important in assisting them to move towards an independent adulthood from the institution. Counsellors are viewed by many as role models who can help them in decision-making, emotional management and improve their life skills, which they need to undertake their responsibilities as adults. Mentored participants describe themselves as more confident, more competent to solve issues and better prepared to plan for the future. These results indicate that mentorship is a relationship network that socializes youth into accepted ways of being an adult, rather than simply a blueprint for living.

Mentorship is especially important as it offers alternative conceptions of what it means to be a man, one that can overcome feelings of isolation and emotional suppression and include mentees in a process of guidance, communication and learning. These results are consistent with those of Stein and Munro (2008), who state that aftercare and mentoring systems can improve the emotional wellbeing, vocational development and long-term integration for care leavers. The present study further contributes to this knowledge by showing how mentoring also plays a gendered role in the construction of a male identity that is reshaped as a process that involves learning through reflection, relationship and support seeking beyond self-reliance. The findings also show that counselling services can have a significant impact on the emotional processes of young male people that take place when they leave institutional care, during which they are working on reconstructing their identities. Participants report that counselling is a systematic environment in which they can process past experiences, deal with stress and learn coping

skills that will assist them later in life. These experiences are not seen solely as a psychological treatment, but rather as a gendered opportunity to disrupt dominant norms of masculinity that often prohibit men from expressing emotions. In this context, counselling can be a place where male leavers start to negotiate the presence of an alternative masculinity which permits the experience of vulnerability, emotional expression and self-awareness. Reintegration support should not only support youth to reintegrate but also take into account gender norms and expectations of youth as adults when distress is expressed, when seeking support and when forming adult relationships.

Financial support is also an important component of the “transition to life out of the institution” process, as mentioned by the participants. Many consider small loans or financial gifts when they leave care as a crucial step to housing, in starting activities to provide income and to avoid early economic marginalization. It is destabilizing without economic support, and when they are on their own to become independent, for some, the risk of unemployment and homelessness increases with age. The findings suggest that economic support is an important enabling factor, which affects the successful reintegration or precarious reintegration. Similar to Mann-Feder and Goyette (2019), care leavers frequently have a rushed transition into adulthood without access to resources and support, leaving them with a need to become financially independent. This argument is extended in the context of the present findings, which demonstrate that economic support is also gendered, given that society's expectations of masculinity set men on the trajectory of being economic providers even if they are not structurally prepared to provide for the financial needs of others. Thus, financial empowerment becomes an economic intervention and a means to help build a socially recognized masculine adulthood. The results also showed that quality vocational training and skills development are an integral part of successful reintegration. Formal education is seen as offering basics, but vocational skills that are specific to the job are needed for accessing employment or economic independence. Entrepreneurship training, knowledge and skills that help them be their own boss in a job market where formal jobs are scarce, are also stressed. The stories suggest that vocational development (along with economic and social integration) can enable male leavers to acquire skills that can serve them as they try to survive and thrive in community life. Vocational skills also help to construct a notion of male identity in that they give the gendered expectation of social roles and responsibility, productivity and economic stability, which are culturally valued attributes. However, participants' experiences suggest that these skills, if not accompanied by appropriate support systems, are not enough to ensure stable integration, showing the need to support the linking of those skills with continued social and economic support.

Participants also expressed strong concerns about the need for ongoing post-care and structured discharge programs after leaving care. Many talked about how a lack of follow-up systems is a significant void in current care systems, as this has been shown to render care leavers vulnerable to problems such as unemployment, social isolation and maladaptive coping strategies if they are not being followed up from their care placement. Some also emphasize the need to reconnect with families, to create support groups in the community and to enter into youth organizations as means of belonging and social reintegration. The results indicate that longer periods of institutional involvement in reintegration are more effective in achieving reintegration. This finding is consistent with SOS Children's Villages International (2023), who find that holistic aftercare interventions, such as psychosocial aftercare, mentorship and economic empowerment, have a great impact on care leavers' outcomes. In this current research, it is also illustrated that these aftercare strategies are gendered: they offer a space for structured negotiation of identity for male leavers, as they re-establish social connections and alternative understandings of masculinity that are about inclusion, support and collective belonging rather than exclusion. Participants also highlight the critical role of having family tracing mechanisms and community-based services that enable reconnection to family networks after leaving institutional care in successful reintegration. Many report feelings of disconnection from biological families and cultures, showing that reintegration is not only an economic and institutional change but also one of relationships, and that the affective and relational aspects entail a genuine rebuilding of relationships with family members and with the wider community networks. The results indicate that social reintegration is not merely a process of adaptation, but also a process of reconstituting lost kinship relations as an integral element in forming an identity and social belonging. This is where a process of reconnection with family is an important pathway for male leavers to redefine a culture-based identity and establish a role in society. There is consistent emphasis on the role of community-based support groups, youth organizations, professional networks and savings groups as forms of support which enable reintegration. Many of them report they have social capital, mentorship and informal support from such networks that help them when moving towards independent adulthood. The understanding of this points to the fact that

reintegration is embedded in relational systems, social spaces where opportunities to access are not always through formal reintegration mechanisms, but through social ties as well.

Viewing these networks through a gender lens also reveals them as structures that enable young men to engage in socially conditioned and accepted discourses on responsibility, cooperation and participation in their community. When masculinity has strong implications of economic contribution and social visibility, accessibility to social networks may be a key factor regarding the possibility of male leavers to successfully enact culturally valued masculine activities. They also point to the need for stigma and social exclusion to continue to be challenges to achieving successful reintegration. The participants share their experience as they have been labelled and treated differently after their history of institutional care is known in the community. This stigma can affect their employment prospects, relationships with partners and involvement in the community. It is evident from those experiences that indeed, reintegration is not only a material situation, but a personal one, of how people feel about care leavers and how they believe they fit in with a community. There are extra connotations of stigma for men as they are expected to be successful, stable and independent. The label of “children from homes” undermines the social and sense of manhood status of male leavers, thus impacting their manhood performance. The need for male role models as a much-needed gap in institutions and post-care support is also observed by the participants. Many have observed that the institutional context can be dominated by women caregivers who have little contact with men who might facilitate role play of adult masculinity. These results indicate that male role models have a very significant influence on the understanding of responsibility, identity and social behavior of young men during and after care. In terms of Gender Schema Theory, a key component of boys developing masculinity schemas is the availability of role models. Where these models are missing or limited, male leavers might find it hard to see how institutional sanctions and obligations of responsibility relate to wider community norms on masculinity, such as leadership and independence, and social and political power. As a result, participants express a need for deliberate involvement of male mentors who can help with identity reconstruction and social adjustment in reintegration. The results also prove that stigma reduction and inclusion programs are key components to effective reintegration. Participants highlight the significance of community sensitization events that would help to break the stereotype around care leavers and ensure acceptance in local contexts. The stories evoke the idea that reintegration is a process of individual preparation and community change, with social values around institutionalization transformed to enable an inclusive rather than exclusionary approach. Reducing stigma also helps to enhance the stability of the formation of a masculine identity for male leavers, as they are enabled to hold socially recognized roles without being restricted by negative labels or assumptions about their background. Together, these results suggest that reintegration is a relational process and a process of negotiation between the individual and community. Beyond the basic care of institutional settings, long-term interaction with families, communities and social institutions that impact identity and opportunity is crucial to successful integration. From a gendered standpoint, these processes are crucial since masculinity is not a fixed or finished project but a phenomenon that is socially constructed, performed, lived and legitimated through social relationships and the process of recognition and involvement in the life of the community.

Participants also stress that reintegration needs to be supported beyond leaving care and that it is dependent on the continuity of national policies and sufficient funding for aftercare provision. They emphasize the significance of the Children Act 2022 and other child protection policies; although these may exist, they are only effective if they are implemented, have adequate resource allocation, and there is institutional accountability. The current research reveals that the problems people experience in achieving reintegration are much influenced by the gap between policy development and implementation. The unease of this gap is seen by participants as part of poor post-discharge care, lack of support systems and less continuity of care in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Structurally, the stories indicate that reintegration is not possible without the visibility of the policy and a political and institutional commitment to the care leavers to offer them support. The results also highlight the importance of supporting independent living to help someone move into the community from an institutional setting. It is always reported that there was a need for gradual independence programs; it was suggested that male leavers should ‘phase out’ of care, not ‘phase off’. Many people view transitional housing, supervised or structured independence programs, as necessary settings for learning to live independently, safely and in an environment that is supervised, as well as for learning how to become financially responsible and gain confidence. The findings show that the best way to re-engage the child with ‘normality’ is to encourage independence gradually and supported by a solid reintegration system that links the re-engaged child with a stable place in the community. The gradual nature of these transitions makes things particularly important from a gender viewpoint, as male leavers can learn socially expected male skills,

such as decision-making, managing the economy and being self-reliant, without being expected to take more adult responsibility. Participants also emphasize the need for economic development programs as essential components to ensure positive reintegration outcomes. Many believe that the small grants, entrepreneur training and means to generate income for them would help them have a stable livelihood after care. These results indicate that a sense of financial empowerment is not just a means of short-term support but is also a fundamental aspect of long-term independence. Economic empowerment, from a gendered perspective, is bound up with masculine identity as it is expected that men will be the providers and economically responsible actors in society. Access to financial support is therefore crucial to help male leavers take on socially recognized masculine roles and minimize the risk of unemployment and poverty during the transition. The results also show that reintegration is enhanced when care leavers are linked to wider institutional and community networks, such as youth groups, professional networks and savings groups popularly known as *chamas*. Participants talk about these as key avenues to access opportunities and develop social capital and continuing support networks outside of formal care. The results indicate that reintegration is an ongoing process, rather than a singular moment, and relies on ongoing connections to many social ties. Gender also plays a role in how such networks contribute to the formation of masculine identity; they also create room for economic and civic participation as a socially valued way of being, where young men learn to cooperate and be responsible.

Overall, the results of these studies highlight the importance of an integrated approach to successful reintegration involving both policy implementation and economic empowerment as well as social support systems and, over time, mechanisms for gradual transitions. They provided basic protection and social development opportunities to the participants, but also considered the interrelatedness of the needs for identity, belonging, economic stability and social recognition and the positive response of systems of post-care to these needs, if they are to be successful in offering integration into society in the long term. These processes are at the heart of how male leavers construct and perform masculinity as adults and handle expectations of independence, responsibility and social contribution in contexts where there may be structural support present or absent. The results of this study show that, far from being just technical interventions, the strategies for the transition to adulthood of male leavers are social processes deeply shaped by gender considerations. As reintegration is turned into a multifaceted approach, it covers, individually and collectively, economic empowerment, social reintegration and reconstruction of identity and the adoption of policies. Each of these processes interacts with the other in shaping the individual's perception of himself as a man in his society, with respect to his expectations of independence, responsibility and social contribution. The study, in conclusion, illustrates how good aftercare provision cannot just be a provision of services, but also a provision of the experience of a community and being a man. Finally, the study highlights how services and support in the aftercare phase of care must extend beyond simply providing care to constructing socially legible and sustainable modalities of manhood for male care leavers within the community.

A gender-sensitive design of institutional care is important in facilitating positive masculine identity and a smoother transition to adulthood. The findings also suggest that the journey of reintegration is a gendered transition into adulthood and that strategies for the seamless reintegration of male care leavers should take this into account. Support interventions need to consider how male care leavers are dealing with society's expectations of males, which go beyond independent living to being self-reliant, responsible, in work and in society. A gender-responsive approach must, therefore, involve interventions that can help young men develop positive identities, as well as interventions that question restrictive gender norms that might inhibit emotional expression, seeking help and the use of supportive relationships. This is consistent with the principles of gender transformative scholarship, which posits that gender transformation will not be achieved unless gender social norms and power relations that shape and create masculinities are addressed (Jewkes et al., 2015). Moreover, integration beyond leaving institutional care needs to be ongoing. Transition from care research emphasizes that support for young people leaving care is often needed to continue to provide them with relational, psychosocial and practical assistance as they grow into adulthood and gain independence (Harder et al., 2020). For care leavers who are males, this support should include mentorship, living skills preparation and support to build and grow supportive social networks, alongside the gendered barriers to adult male care leavers becoming socially recognized. Re-integration strategies should therefore extend beyond providing material assistance to also include strategies that will tackle the structural barriers and gendered expectations that impact the lives of the male care leavers.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The results achieved under this objective showed that a community-based and long-term empowerment strategy is needed to ensure smooth integration of male care leavers. It was agreed that access to financial resources and livelihood opportunities are key in decreasing economic vulnerability and encouraging self-reliance; and that mentorship, positive role models, psychosocial support and reinforced social networks can be used to help build healthy identities and meaningful relationships within communities. Further, the results showed that assistance should not stop upon exit from care but continue via structured aftercare, family and community reintegration, and ongoing support as one transitions into adulthood. Overall, the discussion highlighted the need for coordinated and integrated economic, social and psychosocial support, which consider that young men have gender-based expectations and can navigate through adulthood with greater confidence, independence and belonging.

Conclusion

Male care leavers need coordinated institutional, family, community and policy support which goes beyond the care leaver's own leaving care. The study underscores the need to enhance aftercare services as a key strategy to ensure sustainable reintegration, as well as economic empowerment and psychosocial support. This research adds to the evidence available on post-care transitions and offers practical advice to enhance policies and programs that are in place to support male care leavers in their communities.

Recommendations

- Improved aftercare is key to successful community reintegration. Children's homes should have transition programs, including mentoring, life skills training and ongoing psychosocial care, in place to support male care leavers in preparing them for the next steps of living independently.
- A key principle in sustainable reintegration should be the economic empowerment of people. Government departments and development partners should increase opportunities for male care leavers to access education, skills training and employment and entrepreneurship schemes to enhance their long-term socio-economic wellbeing.
- Community support systems play a key role in the promotion of social inclusion, which must be done in collaboration with the community. Children's homes, families, community leaders and relevant stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate to create supportive family environments for families to be reunited, with a reduction of stigma and increased community acceptance of male care leavers.
- Long-term effectiveness of post-care interventions should be assessed in future studies. It is important to have longitudinal research with a variety of types of care leavers to produce evidence about the sustainability of reintegration and to guide context-sensitive policy and practice.

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Statement of Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests.

List of Abbreviations

CCIs	–	Charitable Children's Institutions
GST	–	Gender Schema Theory
NCCS	–	National Council for Children's Services
SOS	–	Save Our Soul
UN	–	United Nations
UNICEF	–	United Nations Children's Fund

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