

Children who care for the sick

Gloria Ganyani, Zimbabwe

An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

Four-year-old Mavis Phiri* looks after her sick mother. She knows where her mother's tablets are kept and she knows when to give them to her.

Every morning she cleans the house using oil to make the floor shiny. If she goes out to play with friends in the neighbourhood, she rushes back home whenever people come to their house. She knows she has a responsibility to attend to visitors who come to see her mother.

Mavis is one in a growing number of children who are affected by HIV and are being forced by circumstance to care for a sick parent.

"We are realizing that there is an increasing number of children who are caring for a sick parent," said Mrs Veronica Nhemachena, Programmes Manager for the Midlands AIDS Service Organisation (MASO), in Zimbabwe.

"In most cases, there is no other person who can be a caregiver in that household. Sometimes one parent will have passed on. The extended family structures no longer exist and people are now separated from relatives. This leaves the children with little, if any, choice but just to look after the sick parent."

According to a report, *Africa's Orphaned and Vulnerable Generations: Children Affected by AIDS*, published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 12 million children aged between 0–17 years in sub-Saharan Africa have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

"Children are experiencing the greatest parental loss in southern Africa, where HIV prevalence rates are highest," says the report.

Zimbabwe has not been spared and as a result there now exist many child-headed families and child caregivers in the country.

In Gweru, as in many other places in the country, some children are actually given time off from school to go back home to nurse a sick parent. The authorities now accept the responsibilities that such children have, which impact negatively on the child's social, emotional and economic development. If a child such as Mavis fails to complete her education, chances of advancement are slim.

Besides the numerous challenges of keeping up at school, these children also suffer the consequences of stigma and discrimination because of their association with a person living with HIV.

One child who is taking care of her ailing mother said it was not uncommon for children in school to chase her away from their circles saying: "My mother says we must not play with you because your home is full of AIDS."

Questions arise as to whether having children look after relatives at home is not tantamount to child abuse? Should the children not be the ones to be looked after?

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are entitled to a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. The

convention also states, however, that the parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.

"It may not be ethical for children to be caregivers but that is the reality on the ground," said Mrs Nhemachena.

She suggests that children should be trained in home-based care and given universal prevention skills so that they know how to look after their parents as well as how to protect themselves from infection.

Most of all, there is need to ensure that children such as Mavis are given adequate psychological support so that they can manage the pressures of looking after a chronically ill relative or cope with the loss of a parent.

* Mavis Phiri is a fictional name

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