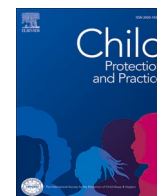




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Drivers of child-parents separation informed by children and young people: findings from an eight country comparative study

Christine Gale^a, Mehrigiul Ablezova^b, Charlotte Bredahl Jacobsen^c, N.'Dri Kan David^d,
 Andhita Nurul Khasanah^e, Ian Milligan^f, Cecilie Kolonda Moesby-Jensen^g,
 Paola Maria Navarrete Galvez^h, Roseline Olumbeⁱ, Rosalind Willi^{j,*},
 Joumana Stephan Yeretzian^k

^a School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom^b Department of Sociology, American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan^c Department of Social Work, University College Copenhagen, Denmark^d School of Business and Social Sciences, International University of Grand Bassam, Abidjan, the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire^e Department of Psychology, Universitas Islam Bandung, Indonesia^f Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS), School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom^g Centre for Social Work, University College Absalon, Næstved, Denmark^h Dirección de Investigaciones, Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador, San Salvador, El Salvadorⁱ Institute of Child Development, School of Applied Human Sciences, Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya^j Evidence and Learning Unit, SOS Children's Villages International, Vienna, Austria^k Higher Institute of Public Health, Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

Children around the world are being separated from parents and placed in alternative care. It is believed that for thousands of children, this separation is unnecessary. Our research sought evidence on the antecedents of such separation and how the placement of children into formal alternative care might be prevented. The study was undertaken in eight countries each presenting varied socio-economic contexts and realised through partnerships with national universities. This article, whilst emphasising the importance of the research methodology, has placed a primary focus on findings from the research with children and young people and the information they provided indicating the drivers of separation. Recognising how the participation of those with lived experience is vital in understanding real-life situations and relevant solutions, the use of participatory research workshops allowed for consultation with 517 children and care-experienced young people. Their voices were pivotal in gathering evidence about factors that keep families united and situations that might lead to separation. A particularly prominent finding was the many parallels in the insights children and young people shared with us across the countries. A conclusion drawn from the evidence is that the separation of children from parents and placement in alternative care can be prevented. This requires investment in legislation and policy that ensures universal access to basic and specialist services and addresses a range of interconnected socio-economic factors. The research findings were used to inform a set of recommendations aimed at policy makers and other stakeholders at both a national and international level.

1 Throughout this article, we use the term 'young people' to refer to those aged 18 to 25 although we also engaged with 17-year-olds in the young people's workshops. This differs from the UN definition of 'youth' as being 15–24 year olds (United Nations, 2013).

2 We use the terms 'children' and 'child' to refer to 0–17 year olds as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989).

* Corresponding author. SOS Children's Villages International, Brigittenauer Lände 50, 1200, Vienna, Austria.

E-mail address: rosalind.willi@sos-kd.org (R. Willi).

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3 Our use of the term ‘disability’ has been informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006) that includes ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis’.

1. Introduction

1.1. International guidance and the use of alternative care

Recognition has been given to the importance of preventing the separation of children from their parents and their placement in alternative care (Csaky & Gale, 2015). This paper explores research undertaken across eight different national socio-economic settings with a view to understanding the reasons children are separated from parents and placed in formal alternative care. An emphasis has been placed on the views of children and young people in relation to such reasons. A principal objective was the gathering of evidence to help motivate and inform changes to policy and service delivery that could prevent such actions (Gale et al., 2024; Willi & Arisi, 2024).

The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) clearly states that a child, ‘for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding’ (para 6). States Parties that have ratified the Convention hold responsibility to support families and address the circumstances that may lead to risk of separation.¹ The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (the Guidelines) (United Nations, 2009) underlines the importance of efforts fully ‘directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members.’ The handbook ‘Moving Forward’, written to accompany the Guidelines, highlights the principle of ‘necessity’ (Cantwell et al., 2012). This means no child should be deprived of parental care unless rigorously assessed as a necessary safeguarding measure and an action taken in their best interests. Such principles are also upheld in the 2019 United Nations Convention on the Promotion and protection of the rights of children (United Nations, 2019) and the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006). In the latter, a directive clearly states that under no circumstances should a child be separated from parental care on the basis of disability of either the child or one or both of the parents.

Formal care is described in the Guidelines as that ordered by a ‘competent administrative body or judicial authority’ (United Nations, 2009) provided in a family environment, as for example, foster care and formal kinship care. It also includes any residential setting whether or not ordered by such official bodies. Efforts have been made to gather accurate data on such factors as numbers and individual circumstances of children within child protection systems and alternative care around the world. However, evidence shows the lack of such data in many countries (Delap & Mann, 2019; Desmond et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020; Martin & Zulaika, 2016; Petrowski et al., 2017). Some have estimated that, despite efforts to develop national child protection systems that adhere to principals of ‘gatekeeping’, (Csaky & Gale, 2015, p. 2), millions of children continue to be placed in alternative care, and most especially in large residential institutions (Desmond et al., 2020; Goldman et al., 2020). Millions of children are also thought to be living in informal kinship care, often with extended family (Delap et al., 2024; Groza et al., 2011; Martin & Zulaika, 2016).

Some authors have indicated that many placements in care were unnecessary with decisions based on factors unrelated to the safeguarding of a child or consideration of their best interests (Chaitkin et al., 2017; Goldman et al., 2020; Martin & Zulaika, 2016; Wilke et al., 2022). Previous endeavours have also been made to gather evidence on

the drivers of child-parents separation and reasons for placement in alternative care (Laumann, 2015; Nankervis et al., 2011; Wilke et al., 2022). However, perceived gaps in the evidence exposes the need for further research and a better understanding of the antecedents to such placement in different contexts (UNICEF & Eurochild 2021; Wilke et al., 2022). Such evidence is vital for the development of effective approaches, service provision and other interventions that would help prevent separation (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Goldman et al., 2020; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; Michail et al., 2023).

Preventing placement in alternative care is especially vital in light of findings illustrating the detrimental impacts such experience can have on well-being including increased risk of suicide, physical and mental health issues, imprisonment, lack of income, and vulnerability to all forms of exploitation (Goldman et al., 2020; Gypen 2017; Howard et al., 2023; Simkiss, 2019; Stein, 2005, 2012; Stein, 2005, 2005, 2012, 2012, 2012, 2012; Stein & Munro, 2008; Waddoups et al., 2019; Weiler et al., 2016).

1.2. The importance of participatory research methodology and promoting the participation of children and young people

To our knowledge, multi-dimensional studies on drivers of separation have systematically failed to consider the direct perspectives of children and young people thus highlighting a significant evidence gap (Nankervis et al., 2011). This is coupled with a concern that significantly more investment has been made in studies undertaken in high as opposed to low and middle income countries, and overall, the lack of participation of children and young people in differing contexts (Acharya & Pathak, 2019; Hasan et al., 2021; Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017; Murray & Xie, 2024; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Zeinali et al., 2020). This situation persists even though acknowledgement is given to the right of children as laid out in Article 12 of the UNCRC to ‘express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously’ (United Nations, 1989; Chrifou et al., 2024; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Furthermore, recognition has been given to the value of the unique perspectives of children and young people, the richness of knowledge they can contribute based on their own experiences, and the way this enhances research (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Clark & Statham, 2005; Halliday et al., 2019; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; Proefke & Barford, 2023). To this end, importance has been placed on their active involvement in helping to shape their ‘own social worlds’ (Gilchrist et al., 2013, p. 577), and the services they and their families might receive (Bell et al., 2023; Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Dar & Chopra, 2024).

Essential to enabling the meaningful participation of children and young people in research, and allowing their voices to be heard, is an understanding of appropriate tools and methodology. A body of literature provides insight into the principles and methods of participatory research and supporting the meaningful participation of children and young people (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Bromark et al., 2023; Dar & Chopra, 2024; Grant 2015; Jamieson et al., 2021; Kirby et al., 2003; Laws & Mann, 2004; Nguyen et al., 2019; Proefke & Barford, 2023; Shamji, 2007; Welty & Lundy, 2013). Discourse on participatory methodology also includes consideration of tools and approaches utilised in community-based research, as for example, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Mountz et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021). YPAR is an approach that builds on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and described as a methodology that increases meaningful youth participation in research, often with a view to achieving social change (Benninger et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). PAR has been identified as a way of challenging traditional methods and offering researchers different ways to gather knowledge within a community setting (Mountz et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021; Smith-Carrier & Van Tuy 2024). Whilst critiques of PAR and YPAR include concerns on such issues as power imbalances and possible tokenism (Dedding et al., 2021; Lake & Wendland, 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017), such approaches have contributed to

¹ All countries except the United States of America have ratified the UNCRC.

methodology incorporating a more creative approach with the use of what Stenbom and Turunen describe as ‘aesthetic, experiential, embodied and emotional ways of knowing and creating knowledge’ (Stenbom and Turunen, 2018:449). To this end, creative research tools such as games, storytelling and drawing, are seen as appropriate ways to question, explore, and generate knowledge about factors impacting the everyday lives of research participants (Chevalier, 2019; Herrmann et al., 2023; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; Kesby, 2000; Scott et al., 2023).

2. Background to the study

Our study was motivated by a concern that, as identified in section 1.2., not only are there perceived gaps in comparative research on the multi-dimensional factors relating to antecedents of placement of children in alternative care in different socio-economic contexts (Nankervis et al., 2011; Wilke et al., 2022), but also a failure to systematically include the voices of children and young people in such studies. To address this situation, research was commissioned by SOS Children’s Villages International and completed in 2023 and 2024 in eight high, middle and low-income countries: El Salvador, Denmark, Cote d’Ivoire, Indonesia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Uruguay. The research focussed on situations within households that might impact family unity and lead to separation of children from parents and use of alternative care. It also considered positive aspects of family life that could be built on to maintain a loving and supportive environment, as well as identifying gaps in multi-level and multi-sector approaches and services that might help diminish the reasons child-parents separation happens. An understanding of issues that impact decision making by professionals, parents and other family members when choosing to place a child in formal care was also sought (Gale et al., 2024).

Implementation of the research was supported by national member organisations of SOS Children’s Villages. A call was made within the organisation for participation that would allow for representation of low, middle and high income countries and consideration of size of land mass and populations within the five UN world regions.² A process to select the participating countries was undertaken by a project steering group internal to the organisation.

In each country, partnership was sought with a national university and the engagement of at least one national researcher. The final research team comprised an International Lead Researcher, nine national, and a UK based researcher, all of which were co-authors of respective national research reports.³ All but one are also co-authors of this paper along with a researcher based in SOS Children’s Villages International. In-country research was supported by national research assistants.

3. The research framework

The research framework was informed by a set of theoretical considerations and ethical research principles.

3.1. Theoretical considerations

The research theoretical framework was informed by a child-rights-based approach. This relates to a recognition that the UNCRC is a comprehensive and holistic framework that directs all actions relating to children (United Nation’s Child Fund ECARO, 2018). In addition, understanding that it is multiple, inter-related factors that impact life within a household (Benninger et al., 2021), the use of a socio-ecological framework based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977; 1986, 1994) was imperative in guiding the

search for evidence on family life. Bronfenbrenner’s model places the child at the centre of concentric circles organised into four levels that help understanding of bi-directional and inter-related factors impacting their lives both within the family and in the wider society (Antony, 2022; Davidson et al., 2019; Font et al., 2015). With the aim of studying the efficacy of decision making in relation to placing a child in alternative care, the research framework also considered a systematic approach as applied to the delivery of a national child protection system (Wulczyn et al., 2010) and how this influences such determinations.

3.2. Research ethics

Ethical considerations applied to the governance framework of the research included clearly defining the parameters of children and young people’s participation, and that of other stakeholders, whilst taking into consideration methodological options and the reality of timeframe, budget and other available resources (Duckett et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2021). An application for ethical approval for the research was submitted to, and granted by, a national university in each country.

Careful thought was given to developing age and language-appropriate information sheets for potential participants and the seeking of informed assent from children and consent from other young people and adult participants through the use of assent/consent forms (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Grasser et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023). The practice of seeking assent was applied in relation to the willingness to participate by those able to understand the proposed research but still legally a minor in a country (Cotrim et al., 2021). Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity in any reporting (Haag et al., 2022; Hanson et al., 2023). Data transfer and storage was undertaken in accordance with the General European Data Protection Regulation.⁴

Understanding documented concerns regarding power balance between researchers and participants, and especially any imbalance as a result of adults’ domination of children and young people, careful thought was given to the issue of reflexivity by the researchers and attention was paid to their own perspectives, ideas, and beliefs (Haag et al., 2022; Hermann et al., 2023; Kalenjuk et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2023). This included their approach to ensuring sensitive interaction with children and young people and working in a supportive manner that allowed for, and respected, their active and meaningful participation (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Hanson et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2021). Safeguarding was also an important concern (Furey et al., 2010). A safeguarding protocol, including a referral process, laid out the expected conduct of all researchers. A social worker or equivalent was also present on the same premises as the workshops with children in the event anyone became distressed.

The duty to create an environment of safety, trust and dignity, and an approach in which participants felt valued, was an important consideration (Cluver et al., 2020; McAra, 2016; Welty & Lundy, 2013). Essential to our study was the engagement of national researchers who were aware of the cultural context in which the research was taking place (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020), especially as an emphasis was placed on inviting participation from those living within vulnerable families and/or communities (Bauer & Wiezorek, 2016). Furthermore, recognition was given to the importance of representation, and especially the inclusion of children and young people whose opportunity to having their voices heard may have been previously excluded based on such factors as gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture and disability (Bauer & Wiezorek, 2016; Clark & Moss, 2011; Hasan et al., 2021; Moesby-Jensen, 2021).

4. Methodology

A vital component of the research was listening to those with real-life

² <https://www.un.org/en/model-United-nations/groups-member-states>.

³ <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/publications/research-and-positions/global-report>.

⁴ <https://gdpr.eu/>.

experience, and most especially, gathering the views of children and care-experienced young people. This was informed by a number of considerations including an understanding of the benefits and possible challenges of participatory research with children and young people, as well as being mindful of certain realities, such as available resources, and how this might impact the degree of their involvement (Ducket et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2021).

These considerations were also applied to the participation of other key stakeholders including adult family members and professional workers predominantly drawn from the social services workforce. The study involved the collation and triangulation of both primary and secondary data.

Recognising the importance the project placed on developing appropriate participatory research methodology, it is the intention of the authors to produce a further paper providing more in-depth information on this factor. Further details on utilised methodology can also be found online in a series of national and inter-national reports.⁵

4.1. Desk review

A desk review of hand sourced academic and grey literature was undertaken focussing on several topics including theories and discourse related to attachment (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1969; Zeanah & Smyke, 2008), family dynamics and influencing factors, (Casaburo et al., 2023; Hill, 1949; Watson, 2012), Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019), resilience (Masten, 2018) and approaches to positive parenting (Sanders, 2023). Literature relating to the participation of children and young people in research was a further important consideration. Secondary research also included a review of data, mainly drawing on grey literature, focussing on the socio-economic conditions, the national child protection system, and the use of alternative care in each of the eight participating countries. Disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data on children entering the child protection and alternative care system in all eight countries was sought. However, only current, full, and reliable data was available in Denmark.

4.2. Gathering of primary data

Primary data was collated through a series of participatory research workshops with children and young people. This was complimented by workshops with adult family members and interviews and surveys with professionals.

4.2.1. Participation of children and young people

We felt it essential that our research sought the ideas and perspectives of children and young people on the positive and negative factors that influence family unity, and solutions that would help mitigate identified challenges. Utilising a purposive sampling process, primary data was gathered during a series of participatory research workshops with 517 children and care-experienced young people in the eight countries. This included 266 children, 140 girls, 125 boys and 1 non-gendered, aged 13–15 years old (11–16 years old in Denmark) who engaged in the research in all countries except Uruguay where governmental permission was not granted. In addition, 251 young people (132 females and 119 males) aged between 17 and 25 years who had experienced alternative care and were now living back in the community, participated in the research in all countries except Denmark.

The research process began by inviting a group of children and a group of care-experienced young people in El Salvador and Lebanon to participate in a series of research co-design workshops. The aim being the development of research questions and methodology that could be

used with other children and young people across all participating countries. By way of testing, evaluating, and adapting a series of age-appropriate exercises, these children and young people helped develop a set of research questions and methodology for workshops employing different creative and inter-active exercises (Arias-Uruena et al., 2023; Fayette & Bond, 2018; Levac et al., 2019; O'Grady, 2022) they thought applicable for use in both their own and in other countries and could be transferred across different county contexts and languages. Following the design and piloting of the methodology, a further 54 participatory workshops with children and young people were completed across the eight countries. In each country apart from Denmark, the first workshops with children and with young people involved the evaluation of the research methodology to ensure applicability in that setting.

Firmly believing all children have valid and relevant perspectives on matters concerning their own life and that of their family and, in the knowledge that children with disabilities have been particularly excluded from research (Huus 2021; Parsons et al., 2020; Shakespeare, 2015), it was important to ensure their participation. With some minor adaptations realised during the workshops themselves, the research methodology allowed for two participatory workshops with children with disabilities in Lebanon and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, at a later period in the project. (Cecilie Kolonda Moesby-Jensen - co-author) further developed the research methods for workshops with children with disabilities in Denmark and Indonesia (Moesby-Jensen, 2019; Moesby-Jensen, 2021 – both co-authors).

4.2.2. Primary data collection with adults

The methodology and questions developed during the co-design process in El Salvador and Lebanon also informed those utilised during adult family member research workshops conducted with 290 predominantly female participants. In addition, also applying a purposive sampling process, 95 semi-structured interviews were completed with a range of professional stakeholders including ministry heads of department, social workers, judges, lawyers, other members of the social services workforce from government, national NGOs, and international agencies. An online survey utilising Qualtrics software sent out to professionals with the same profile, was completed by 231 respondents in all countries apart from El Salvador where there was insufficient response.

4.3. Analysis

Data from each country was analysed followed by a cross-country and thematic analysis involving all the collated research findings. Attention was given to the importance of not losing children and young people's voices in the process of analysis and reporting and bearing in mind the discourse highlighting what has historically been the more assertive perspectives of adults (Kousholt and Juhl, 2023), including the dominance of researchers, in the reporting of research findings (Angelöw & Psouni, 2025). To obtain an accurate understanding of their input, the contribution of children and young people was initially analysed independently of adult participants. In total, they provided 4738 written answers on the factors they understand impact the unity of families, both positive and negative, and 1136 responses when asked about solutions to address the challenges they identified. All written answers were transposed into digital Word documents and imported into NVivo 11 data analysis software. A text query process was used to extract and collate 'instances' of similarities and variances to inform emerging and core themes.

Data gathered from adult participants was also entered into NVivo 11 and the analysis process was replicated. The online survey issued to professionals utilised Qualtrics software and allowed for quantitative and qualitative data analysis produced by the programme in graphs and charts. All the primary research results were triangulated (Robson, 2002), and, along with findings from the desk review, were used to inform a set of findings and recommendations for both a country and

⁵ <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/publications/research-and-positions/global-report>.

international level.

5. Results

The research findings have not only provided a coherent understanding of country-specific issues related to situations that can impact the unity of families and the possibility of placement of children in alternative care, but also a cross-country account illustrating many similarities in the multiple and inter-related factors that can lead to this situation. The findings below are initially presented from the unique perspective of children and care-experienced young people. They are then triangulated with data collected from adult family members and professionals.

Of particular interest is the overall comparability of information shared by children and young people across low, middle and high income countries whilst also noting differing degrees of suggested prevalence, and a few country-specific exceptions. When asked about solutions that would help address the challenges they had identified, once again, there was a general agreement among children and young people about what this might entail. In addition, the workshops with children with disabilities elicited comparable findings to those gathered from other children and young people and therefore, when reporting on findings, we have not segregated the information from these different groups. When the data gathered during research with children and young people was triangulated with that provided by adult participants, there were also similarities in the findings relating to factors that contribute to unity or breakdown in a family and solutions.

5.1. What children and young people told us

During the research workshops, children and young people provided their insights when asked about factors that might impact a family as representative of those living in their local community. They also offered a set of solutions that would help address identified challenges.

5.1.1. Factors impacting unity in the family home

In the first instance, analysis of children and young people's narratives regarding a typical home environment within their own communities and factors that contribute to strengths in the household, as well as threats to the unity of families, provided rich data and a convergence of the issues under discussion. Children and young people's responses illustrated how families can be impacted by multi-dimensional and interconnected factors linked to the specific circumstances and contexts in which they live. The analysis of these factors further led to the emergence of three overarching primary themes across the collected narratives: all forms of violence, both against children and between adults in the household, poor familial relationships, and issues related to poverty.

5.1.1.1. Violence. A recurring theme was physical violence and sexual abuse as experienced, and witnessed by, children and young people in the home, with suggested prevalence varying from country to country. Verbal violence was frequently mentioned, with some highlighting the way these behaviours contribute to an environment of fear and insecurity. Findings also illustrate their awareness of violence between adults in the home and concerns of domestic and gender-based violence. When asked about factors impacting unity at home, examples of what children and young people wrote include *'violence against children'* and *'not feeling safe'*, *'you are forced to do bad things or to do work that does not make your body or you yourself happy'*, *'verbal violence and touching'*, *'screaming'*, *'gender-based violence, anger'*, *'punishment'*, and *'home doesn't feel like home but like a punchbag'*. There were many concerns about *'parents being angry'* and receiving of, *'physical abuse from their parents'*. One child wrote, *'violence is very common, then children go to orphanages, they don't have parent love, then they can even forget about parents'*. Answers to

questions about household unity also included violence and poor relations between adults including references to *'domestic violence'*, *'psychological violence'*, *'fighting'*, and parents who *'argue all the time'*. One child wrote, when *'a father comes home being drunk he can start beating not only his wife but also children'*. An exception to these findings was the overall absence of such information from children in Denmark.

5.1.1.2. Emotional neglect and poor family relationships. When asked about unity in households, answers revealed concerns regarding emotional neglect, poor family relationships, and loss of attachment. Children and young people referred to those who feel they are *'not being loved'* and *'not being cared about'*, and experience *'emotional abuse'*. They said children and young people are not *'trusted'*, there is a *'lack of emotional psychological support'*, *'no understanding'*, *'disrespect'*, and they *'are not listened to'*. This they said, translates into feelings of *'insecurity'*, *'isolation'*, and *'solitude and loneliness'*. One young person wrote that *'no love and affection makes you feel worthless.'* The lack of attentive communication, parents *'not giving time to their children'*, nor engaging in recreational activities or eating meals together, and overall parental absence, exacerbate negative emotions suggesting that both emotional support, bonding, and quality family time are critical for fostering a secure home environment. Children and young people said, *'parents loving one child more than the other'*, favouritism in the family, and the imposition of *'high expectations'* of parents, further contribute to feelings of inadequacy and distress. Children and young people feel the burden of not letting parents down or of making them angry. For example, many mentioned the need to *'do well at school'*, refrain from what parents perceive as *'bad behaviour'*, how they should be *'respectful'*, and not have *'bad'* or *'toxic'* friends. Other concerns related to family breakdown included issues of *'separation'*, *'divorce'* and infidelity, especially that of fathers, although this topic was less prevalent in Denmark. Death of a parent/s and fear of being left without parental care were further concerns.

5.1.1.3. Issues related to poverty. Issues related to poverty frequently appeared in the information provided by children and young people in all countries although, overall, this was reported to a slightly lesser extent than issues related to violence and emotional neglect. When asked about factors impacting the unity and happiness of families in their community, responses clearly show that children and young people are aware of and concerned about the struggles parents face with *'bad financial situations'* and such daily challenges as *'lack of food'*, *'not having a house to live in'*, *'not being warm'*, and inability to access *'basic needs'*. There are worries when *'people in the family get sick and they have no money for medicines'* or cannot pay for utilities such as *'water and electricity'*. They know parents worry when they are *'unable to send their children to school'* or find adequately remunerated *'employment'*. In Denmark, although references were made to such issues, the degree of poverty appeared to be less acute. Children and young people also referred to concerns regarding parent's use of *'alcohol'* and *'drugs'*. Some answers indicated an awareness of how *'financial problems'* lead to *'fighting'* and disruption in family relationships and that coping with challenging life situations can be a direct cause of stress, tension, anger, and family separation.

5.1.1.4. Positive factors in the household. Conversely, children and young people said there is a sense of happiness and unity in households when *'parents love children and protect them'*. When there is *'understanding'* and *'kind words'* are used. In relation to family solidarity, they highlighted the importance of being able to *'spend time together'*, and *'appreciation'* and *'respect for each other'*. These factors are especially important when offered by, and between, parents and *'that the parents like each other'*. They wrote about happy and secure families when there is *'sharing'*, *'good communication'*, members *'listen to one another'* and are *'supporting each other'*. Where there is *'harmony'*, *'no violence'*, *'a*

peaceful atmosphere', 'trust', 'no conflict', and 'equality between genders'. One young person wrote of 'transparency – between the parents and children – it is more than trust – not to hide anything from each other – to be authentic – they should live in harmony.' The stable presence of parents is also important. Children and young people believe a family is happier and more unified when 'parents have a job', there is a sense of 'security', a 'good financial situation without any debts', they see 'their children in good health' and can 'afford all children's needs'. They said parents want their children to have good futures, to prosper and be happy. One child wrote, 'even if there is no financial stability, if parents love children, they would do anything to make a child happy'.

5.2. Triangulation of all research data

Findings presented by children and young people were triangulated with research results gathered from adult family members and members of relevant professionals in each country. Overall consideration of factors impacting family life in terms of unity and dysfunction that might lead to placement of a child in alternative care revealed distinct similarities in information across all research participants and have been clustered into those pertaining to the wider society and family level (see Fig. 1).

All findings continued to highlight the multiple factors pertaining to the three specific domains of violence, poor familial relationships, and issues related to poverty, which are in turn shaped by various related factors in the wider society. One differential in overall findings was a greater number of workshop answers from children and young people regarding violence and emotional neglect whilst adults gave almost equal weight to all three domains. Understanding of these concerns was further consolidated through data gathered during the desk review process.

As children and young people had already noted, 'lack of access to basic services', and issues related to 'poverty' are causes of stress and anxiety for adults, and in some instances, a direct correlation to negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, anger and violence. Many references were made to 'domestic and gender-based violence', living in patriarchal male-dominated societies, and discrimination and inequality. It is noted that the majority of participants in the adult family workshops were women. In addition, a topic that arose many times was the 'inter-generational' transmission of violence and poor and depleted parenting skills. Adults also noted 'pressure and stress due to life's challenges', and 'psychological distress' as negatively affecting family dynamics. Disability, either of the child and/or the parent(s), was a factor leading to care placement decisions that received more attention from adults than from children and young people. This is especially the case when stigma and discrimination limit the equal opportunities for those with disabilities, and where their access to essential and specialist services is lacking.

Conversely, as with the answers provided by children and young people, adults believe family unity is associated with 'love', 'no violence', 'understanding', 'respect', 'trust', and 'honesty', 'care'. They indicated that 'sharing', 'forgiveness', 'dialogue', 'equality', and 'harmony' are also important. They said having 'economic stability', 'employment', and being able to care for the material needs of all the family, especially the children, all relate to the 'cohesion of the family'.

In some countries an intrinsic belief amongst many professionals, is that a child living in a poor family is better off in a residential institution even if there is love and care in the household. In response, alternative care is perpetuated by funding from state, private and individual donors for institutions that offer 'social care' for children from families facing economic hardship, sometimes labelled as 'boarding schools'.

Specific research questions were asked only of professionals in relation to the efficacy of the child protection system, and in particular, gatekeeping mechanisms (Cantwell et al., 2012; Csaky and Gale, 2015), as well as factors influencing subjective and objective decision making in relation to placement of a child in care (Gale et al., 2024). Where child

protection systems are not fully implemented, and decisions are not made in the best interests of the child, this is often due to insufficient numbers and abilities of the social services workforce, limited access to professional training, and a lack of other resources and data. Even in a well-developed child protection system, as for example, in Denmark, despite the high quality of training, social workers reported that the strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge was not matched by sufficient practical placements to adequately prepare them for real-world decision-making. These limitations hinder an effective response to protection concerns, and delivery of adequate support services that have been informed by rigorous evidence gathering and analysis. Furthermore, there is a distinct lack of an inter-sectoral approach to supporting families.

6. Limitations

Although the principle of full and meaningful participation of children and young people was an important consideration in our research process, and we believe, the richness of the data they provided was plentiful, robust and informative, we recognise the lack of their inclusion in all phases of the research development, implementation, and dissemination. This was due to several factors including limitations on the pre-determined time and budget made available by the commissioning organisation.

Whilst seeking diversity in terms of background and age, a decision was made not to include unaccompanied and separated child migrants as specific participants in the research as reasons for their separation have been well-documented, including studies that included their perspectives (Family for EveryChild, 2022; International Organisation for Migration 2013; United Nations Children's Fund, 2018). A further limitation was the smaller number of child participants and lack of care experienced young people in Denmark, and the omission of children from the research in Uruguay. Furthermore, due to local organisational issues, workshops with children with disabilities were only held in four of the eight countries. Nor did the research engage with a representative number of participants of all ages with disabilities. In each country apart from Denmark, the study was undertaken in two locations, one urban and one rural or semi-rural, which we realise may not have fully reflected the situation throughout especially in such large and diverse countries as Indonesia. In addition, a focus was placed on creative activities to gather information through time-bound workshops rather than discussion and we realise this may have limited the opportunity for more in-depth exploration of some of the issues raised and for researchers and participants to become better acquainted. It is also recognised that by allowing anonymity of responses, as for instance utilising methodology that allowed children to provide their answers confidentially, this may have obscured an understanding of the data from the perspective of participant's sex, gender, age and other attributes.

7. Discussion and solutions

Overall, the findings highlight how it is a range of multi-dimensional factors that can impact unity of a household and contribute to family breakdown which in turn, may lead to placement of children in alternative care. This includes multiple, multifaceted, and interconnected issues linked to social, cultural and economic factors within the wider society coupled with systems of basic and specialist service delivery that fail to meet the needs of the entire population. Findings also suggest gaps in investment in national child protection systems in which, with the exception of Denmark, the result of gatekeeping decisions predominantly leads to the use of alternative care as opposed prevention of child-parent separation.

The evidence as well as possible solutions provided by children and young people, and other stakeholders, has been essential in informing what we believe to be relevant recommendations for the development of

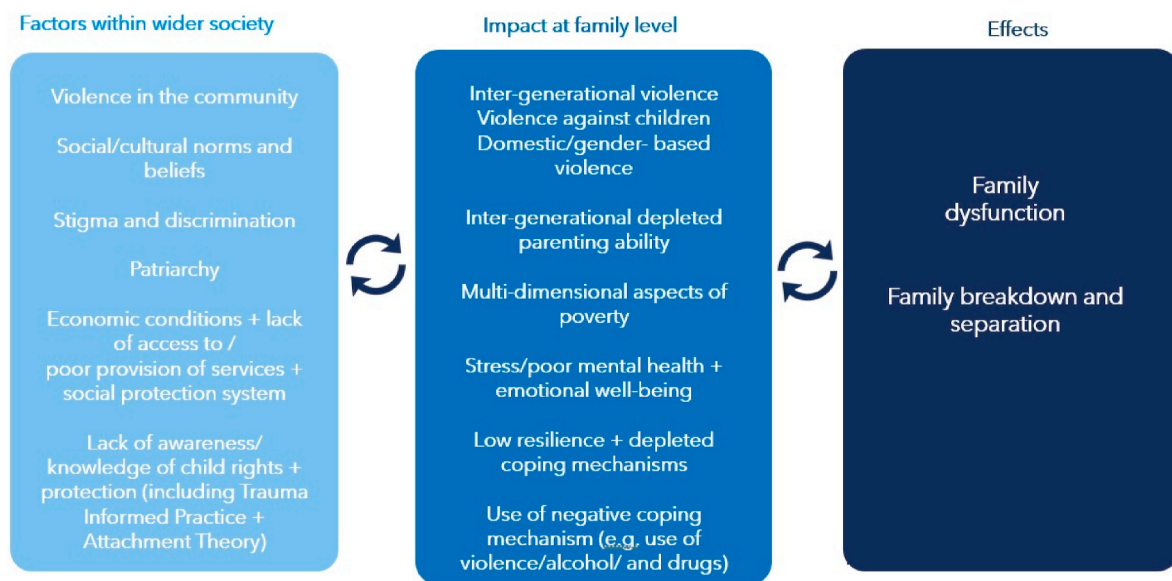


Fig. 1. Multidimensional factors leading to child-parents separation.

national policies and programmes that promote and enhance safety and unity within families and help prevent placement in alternative care in each country.⁶

7.1. Solutions identified by children and young people

During the research workshops, children and young people identified solutions they thought would help address lack of unity, worry and unhappiness in the family. In total, across the eight countries, there were 1136 written responses some of which were individual ideas and others the result of group discussion to prioritise solutions. The information below represents the most common themes that emerged.

The most common word used by children and young people was 'help'. This referred to a range of 'support' needed to 'solve' 'problems' and improve unity in families. Children and young people highlighted the need for actions to help 'provide safety' and 'stop violence' in families including, 'domestic violence' and ensuring 'all children are safe in their home.' References were made to the government's responsibility in this respect with suggestions including 'there needs to be a child protection policy from government' and 'child protection laws' and 'education about protection and rights'. One group of young people prioritised having a 'child protection commission' with 'an adult who helps'.

Amongst the primary solutions as suggested by children and young people, is help in improving family relationships, especially those between parents and their children. A comment typical of many other proffered solutions, was the need for support so that parents can 'spend time with children and respect them and love them and care for them'. Others suggested helping parents understand the importance of giving their children 'emotional support' and 'encouragement'. One young person wrote, 'problems at home can be solved with love'. Other solutions included a need for 'psychosocial' support and help in improving the 'emotional health' of children, young people and parents.

In relation to access to 'basic needs', scoring highly in suggested solutions is help with 'money', addressing 'financial' problems, and the need for 'financial stability'. Ensuring children get an 'education' as well as access, and help with costs related, to 'health' services is also a priority. Adults need 'secure jobs', ability to provide adequate 'housing', 'afford food' and 'clothes', and pay for utilities. Children and young

people said not only is access to 'employment' and related 'training' important but so is help with 'management' of family finances. One request from a young person, and representative of what others wrote, asks 'government [to] give help like money or facilities so the family can increase their financial status so they will have a good life'.

7.2. Recommendations and implications for policy makers

The findings and solutions, and particularly those informed by children and young people, illustrate the need for a multi-faceted and coordinated response to address the factors contributing to family instability and child-parents separation in child protection systems as well as those of social protection, education, and health. Table 1 presents an outline of the nine primary recommendations derived from the findings directed at policy-makers, aimed at enhancing preventative child protection, ensuring basic living standards and social inclusion, and implementing people-centred service delivery. More information can be found in the report of Willi & Arisi 2024. Governments and stakeholders across the eight study countries are encouraged to contextualize these recommendations by grounding them in local and national assessments of prevailing policy issues and systemic gaps.

A key recommendation focuses on the enhancement of violence prevention programmes and the enforcement of legal frameworks prohibiting all violence including that against children, as well as domestic and gender-based violence. They suggest a focus should be placed on ways to break the inter-generational aspect of violence within a family. Resources for programmes and services that support parents when struggling to maintain a home environment that is loving, and where bonding, attachment and understanding are paramount are also necessary.

Findings also suggest that combatting situations that cause stress and tension in the home requires not only free, universal and unhindered access to basic services such as education and health, including psychosocial programmes, pathways into employment, and support attaining adequate shelter, but also specialised support including that for persons with disabilities or those struggling with substance abuse. Financial stability is essential, so for example, social protection systems should be established, or further developed, that provide security when needed through such payments as child allowances, unemployment, disability and sickness benefits. Policies and corresponding resources that support access to work, training and help improve living standards are also necessary.

⁶ <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/publications/research-and-positions/global-report>.

Table 1

Recommendations to improve support systems for families.

Safe and supportive families and communities
Enhance preventative child protection
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Scale-up anti-violence programmes targeting adults and children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct public awareness initiatives to raise awareness of, and reject, violence. • Strengthen legal frameworks and law enforcement that prohibits and prevents all violence. • Provide access to support services for those experiencing violence. 2. Expand parenting support programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase investments in parenting programmes. • Ensure parenting programmes are based on evidence and human rights. 3. Reform child protection systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update and harmonise legal and policy frameworks in line with children's and other human rights. • Strengthen gatekeeping to ensure alternative care is used only when necessary. • Allocate and optimise resources to support prevention of family separation in national child protection systems. • Support signposting and referral to family support and strengthening services. • Empower professionals with necessary skills, working conditions, and resources, so they can adequately provide support to children and families in vulnerable situations.
Inclusive and equitable societies
Ensure basic living standards and social inclusion
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Develop inclusive social protection systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop inclusive labour market policies and opportunities for access to decent work. • Enhance social protection to help individuals and households manage vulnerabilities and shocks throughout lives. • Strengthen social protection support for children. • Develop shock-responsive social protection programmes to support families in emergencies. 5. Ensure universal access to support services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure inclusive access for families to adequate basic and specialised services. • Provide specialised and focussed support services for families before the separation of children becomes necessary. • Remove barriers to accessing support services, especially for the most vulnerable. 6. Promote gender, disability, and age inclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote gender equality in caregiving roles through policy and education initiatives. • Confront patriarchal structures to prevent gender-based violence and caregiving inequalities. • Address intersectional discrimination through legal and policy frameworks. • Promote gender-responsive, disability-inclusive, and age-sensitive services for children and families. • Engage communities in addressing stigma and discrimination.
Effective care and support systems
Implement people-centred service delivery frameworks
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Improve evidence- driven system design and delivery <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include children and families at risk of separation in official data and statistics. • Strengthen inter-sectoral cooperation to close data gaps on child-family separation. • Improve the use of data and evidence for family support, strengthening, and other interventions. • Ensure transparency, accessibility, and comparability of official data on child-family separation. • Invest in research to understand and prevent child-family separation. • Engage communities in addressing stigma and discrimination. • Strengthen monitoring and reporting on children's care and protection. • Promote international knowledge-sharing on child-family separation. 8. Foster multisector collaboration and coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop multi-sector and multi-stakeholder partnerships. • Establish governance arrangements that support integrated service delivery. • Promote person-centred approaches to service delivery. • Develop legal, funding and monitoring structures that support service integration 9. Promote the participation of children and families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build capacity for participatory approaches in care and support systems • Mandate participation of children and families in decision-making. • Support advocacy and self-representation of children and families.

To achieve these aims, it is clear from the results of the research that multi-sector collaboration is essential and that effective child and family support requires partnerships across all sectors with streamlined governance structures to ensure efficient service delivery. Advocacy and programmatic work should also help promote inclusive and gender-equitable societies and address issues of stigma, discrimination and social exclusion.

In all countries apart from Denmark, findings point to the need for more intense reforms to national child protection systems. A much stronger emphasis on gatekeeping is required giving priority to keeping families together rather than use of alternative care and, ensuring all decisions are based on the best interests of the child. The strengthening of legal and policy frameworks should prioritise prevention of family separation and allocation of sufficient financial resources is needed to implement much-needed reforms. This includes increasing the social services workforce, reducing case loads, clarifying roles and responsibilities of professionals and para-professionals, and providing

adequate remuneration and recognition. Improvements to professional training are crucial for all those in differing professions holding a responsibility to protect children. Enhancing knowledge in such topics as attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and trauma-informed practice, theoretical understanding of family stress and resilience theories (Casaburo et al., 2023; Daneshpour, 2017; Hill, 1949; Masten, 2018), positive parenting practices (Sanders, 2023), and awareness of the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on future generations (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019) would be highly beneficial. As highlighted earlier, although reports from governments, UN agencies, and NGOs may provide partial information on child protection and alternative care, most countries in the study, except Denmark, lack comprehensive, systematic, and rigorous systems for collecting, and managing and analysing data that is then made publicly available. Stronger regulation and resource allocation to ensure the collection of comprehensive disaggregated data on children and families at risk or already separated, would significantly facilitate decision-making

regarding critical policy reform and service delivery.

Finally, but by no means least, it is clear that research and policy development should embed participatory approaches by mandating that children and young people's voices, along with those of families and other members of the community, are included in decision making that shapes services as relevant to their actual lives and circumstances.

8. Conclusion

Our research conducted in eight high, middle and low-income countries focused on the drivers of separation from parents and placement in formal alternative care. Placing an emphasis on gathering and integrating experiential data from children and care-experienced young people, triangulated with information from adult family members and social and child protection workers, provided a rich and valid understanding of drivers that can lead to child-parents separation and use of alternative care across diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts. Importantly, the research indicates that causality cannot be attributed to a single factor, as separation typically arises from an interplay of multiple factors that can simultaneously function as causes, effects, and consequences – critical considerations for decision-makers seeking to prevent separation and safeguard children.

We believe the use of creative participatory research methods not only allowed for easy transfer of research tools across different country contexts and languages, but were instrumental in a robust exploration of issues related to the negatives and positives within family life, and appropriate solutions, from the various perspectives of those with lived experience in these different contexts. Although we recognise the use of timebound workshops did not allow for longer term engagement between researchers and participants, the emergence of distinct similarities in the findings show a degree of saturation of evidence that illustrates a confidence in the findings.

Utilising an ecological framework the research identified multiple, multifaceted and interconnected circumstances within the family, and wider society, that impact the unity of families. Of particular interest are the many similarities expressed by children, young people and other research participants indicating how families living in different socio-economic and cultural environments can still face similar challenges, though the prevalence and degree to which factors impact them may be context specific.

Research results have identified how it is multiple factors that contribute to child-parents separation and call attention to policy makers and practitioners across national and international contexts that placement in alternative care is preventable if the necessary and urgent investment in policy, legislation, programmes and services is made. What is also evident is the need for ongoing research into factors that lead to the use of alternative care in different countries that will accurately inform such policy, and service development and delivery, with the aim of preventing thousands of children losing the care of their parents.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christine Gale: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mehrigiul Ablezova:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Charlotte Bredahl Jacobsen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **N.'Dri Kan David:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Andhita Nurul Khasanah:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Ian Milligan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Cecilie Kolonda Moesby-Jensen:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation. **Paola Maria Navarrete Galvez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Roseline Olumbe:** Writing – review & editing,

Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Rosalind Willi:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Joumana Stephan Yeretzian:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation.

Ethical requirements

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the following universities to conduct research in the corresponding countries:

American University of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan.

University College, Denmark.

International University of Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire.

Universitas Islam Bandung, Indonesia.

Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador.

Daystar University, Kenya.

Saint Joseph University of Beirut, Lebanon.

Universidad Católica del Uruguay.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Rosalind Willi reports financial support, administrative support, article publishing charges, and travel were provided by SOS Children's Villages. As described in the manuscript itself, SOS Children's Villages commissioned and funded the research in the eight countries. Local SOS Children's Villages offices provided administrative and logistical support in the eight study countries. The global Evidence and Learning department at SOS Children's Villages International supported coordination and publishing activities around the research. If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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