Better Care Network

Addressing Violence Against Children in All Forms of Care

At least 50% of children between the ages of 2 and 17 years experienced one or more forms of violence (excluding spanking, slapping and shaking) across Africa in the past year.

Safe and stable families of all types protect children from violence, neglect and exploitation, strengthen resilience, and lead to better outcomes for child well-being and development that last into adulthood, positively impacting societies.
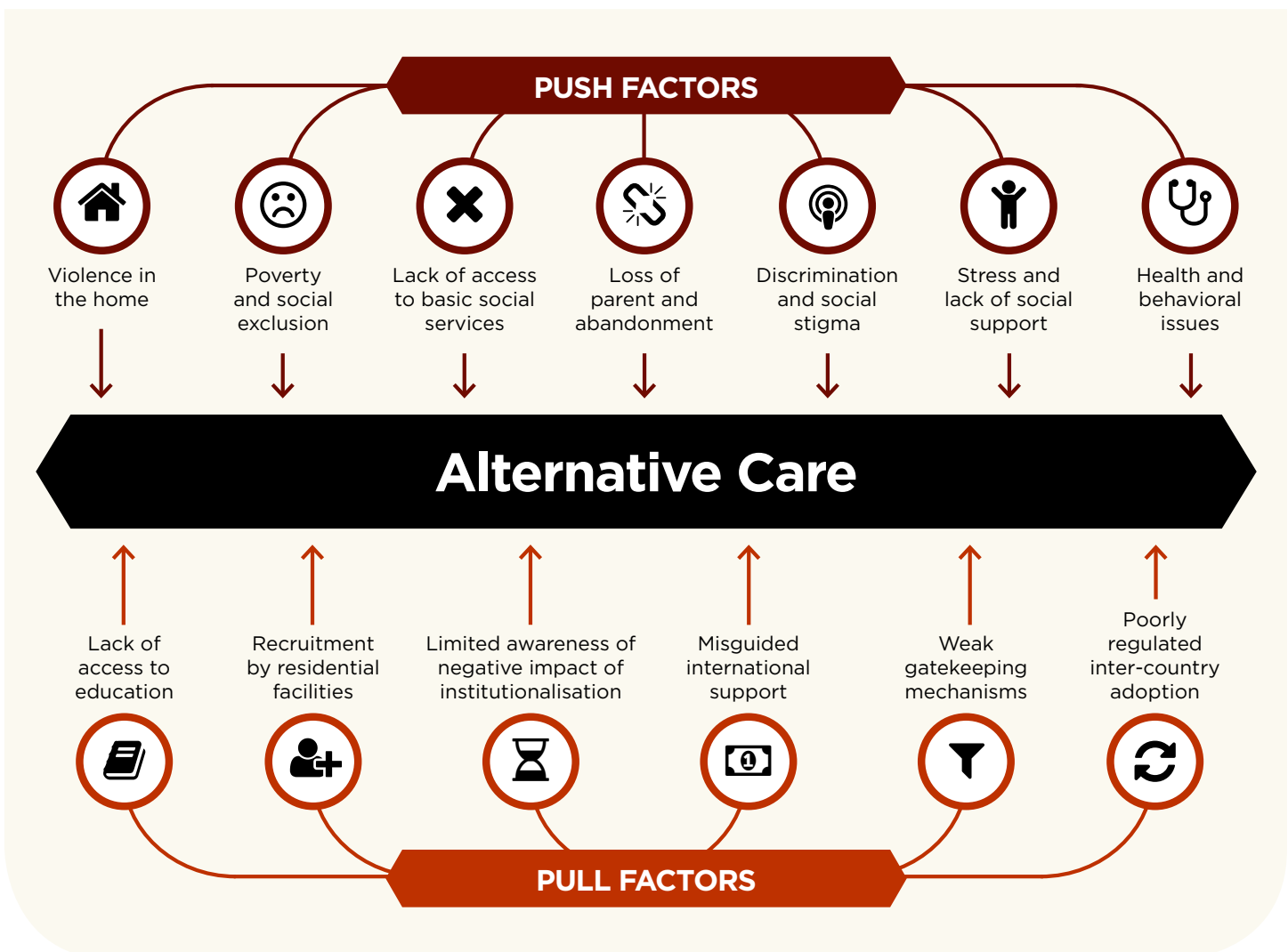
Consequences of violence in a child's life

The consequences of violence in childhood can last a lifetime, leading to life-long physical, cognitive, social, and emotional health problems. Studies show that boys who experience or witness violence are more likely to continue the cycle of violence against their partners, families, or others. Girls who experience any form of childhood trauma are more likely to experience physical and sexual intimate partner violence as women. The impacts of violence against children can reach across generations, undermining the gains made by rapid economic transformation.

Evidence now shows that removing a child from an abusive home and placing them into alternative care does not always mean an end to violence against children.

Children in alternative care often face an increased risk of exposure to violence, with younger children and children with disabilities being particularly vulnerable.

Factors leading to a placement of children in alternative care settings

PUSH FACTORS

- Violence in the home
- Poverty and social exclusion
- Lack of access to basic social services
- Loss of parent and abandonment
- Discrimination and social stigma
- Stress and lack of social support
- Health and behavioral issues

Alternative Care

- Lack of access to education
- Recruitment by residential facilities
- Limited awareness of negative impact of institutionalisation
- Misguided international support
- Weak gatekeeping mechanisms
- Poorly regulated inter-country adoption

PULL FACTORS

The essential role a safe, stable, and nurturing family plays in a child's well-being and development is at the core of the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). In 2009, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The Alternative Care of Children Guidelines make specific recommendations for governments to address violence against children in all alternative care settings. Additional guidelines can be found in:

- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
- The AU's Plan of Action on the Family in Africa
- The AU's Social Policy Framework for Africa
- The Addis Ababa Declaration on Strengthening the African Family for Inclusive Development
- Africa's Agenda for Children 2040

Several African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, have developed national frameworks, policies, or guidelines recognizing the impact of violence on children's care, and placing the responsibility upon the government and other national actors to ensure the availability and accessibility of preventive and family support services to reduce factors, such as violence, exploitation and neglect that lead to unnecessary family separation. In order to fulfil this responsibility, governments must establish a functioning regulatory system to oversee the provision of alternative care.

Types of Alternative Care

Residential Care

Numerous studies, including first-hand reports from careleavers, across Africa and around the globe have shown a high risk of violence against children in residential care and suggest that violence in these contexts is widely underreported, particularly as most of these institutions are unregistered and unregulated.

Kinship Care

Kinship care plays a significant role in ensuring children remain in family care. In 40 out of 54 countries in Africa, 15% of children under 15 live apart from parents, the vast majority (95%) in their extended families. Children in kinship care can also be at risk of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. This risk can be elevated when family resources are stretched thin.

Foster Care

Informal foster care has always played an important role in Africa and increasingly formal foster care systems are being established to provide family-based care on a short-term, long-term or emergency basis. Evidence from countries where foster care is well established shows that children in foster care can be at risk of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse by their caregivers as well as potential stigma and discrimination.

Recommendations

PREVENT CHILD/FAMILY SEPARATION AND THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE CARE BY ENSURING:

- Effective support to families and communities to empower them to care appropriately for their children.
- Access to social services to address needs of particular vulnerable children and families
- Stigma and barriers that affect the care of children with special needs, including children with disabilities, children affected by HIV, conflict, violence etc. are addressed.
- A skilled and resourced social service workforce is in place to support children and families in their communities.

ENSURE SUITABLE ALTERNATIVE CARE IS AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN THROUGH:

- Effective gatekeeping mechanisms to ensure the care provided is suitable for the needs of that particular child.
- A range of family-based alternative care options are established, supported and monitored
- Ensuring use of residential care is limited to cases where it is strictly needed and can provide individualized and small-group care.
- An effective regulatory system to oversee the appropriateness and quality of alternative care is put in place.
- A ban on young children, especially children under 3, being placed in residential care.

Source: *Violence Against Children and Care in Africa, A Discussion Paper* - Better Care Network, 2017