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# The lived experiences of children living in single room dwelling in Botswana: A qualitative study

Constance GUNHIDZIRAI and M ODIRELENG

## ABSTRACT

*This study explored the lived experiences of children who live in single-room dwellings in Gaborone, Botswana, using the bio-ecological theory. This study focused on the social characteristics of single-room dwellings because children who reside in these premises are experiencing various psycho-social challenges. This study adopted a qualitative approach using exploratory research design. The researchers employed in-depth interview guides as a data-gathering instrument. The sampling framework used was purposive and snowball. The sample size was made up of (15) children between the ages of 16 and 18 years and (4) key informants such as Social workers, Village Development Coordinator and Kgosi. The researchers selected 15 children because of time constraints since the data collection method was in-depth interviews. The data gathered was analysed thematically into themes and sub-themes drawn from the research questions of this study. The findings revealed that single room dwelling affects the social, physical, educational and psychological well-being of children. Furthermore, children are being exposed to all forms of violence from parents or guardians, prone to ailments such as skin diseases, and contagious diseases such as coughing due to lack of proper sanitation and ventilation. The findings also reported that there is a decline in academic performance because the environment is not conducive to study. This shows that children living in single-room dwellings are being deprived from attaining full growth and development. The above findings have implications for social work practice in Botswana.*

**KEY TERMS:** Botswana; child; children; deprivation; overcrowded; single room dwelling; wellbeing

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of overcrowded single-room dwellings is a universal challenge, particularly in the global south. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of children living in a single room dwelling in Botswana. This is an under-researched study in Botswana. Furthermore, Botswana is a middle-income country, and the prevalence of children who live in a single-room dwelling is paramount hence this shows the gap between rich and poor citizens. The disadvantaged families have resorted to staying in single-room dwellings in high-density areas because they are either unemployed or low-income earners who cannot afford to own houses or rent out decent houses or flats. Hence many urban dwellers in Botswana live in dilapidated units and single-room dwellings with their children. This study is based on Old Naledi, a high-density community where there is an increase in high school dropout children, children with behavioural issues and high cases of child violence. This shows that the rights of children living in this neighbourhood area are being infringed as the living conditions affect their attainment of full growth and development because all facets of their well-being domains are unmet. After this introduction, it is followed by the study's research methodology, findings and discussions. Lastly, the conclusions were derived from the findings of the study. Therefore, the researchers made appropriate recommendations to the Department of Social Protection in Botswana on how they can assist children and families with housing issues.

## BACKGROUND

One of the social development challenges facing developing countries is rapid urbanization. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2016:1), it is estimated that by 2050 there will be close to 1.5 billion people living in urban areas. Both developed and developing countries are some of the countries that are experiencing an increase in internal migration from rural to urban and peri-urban areas (Nkosi, Naicker and Mathee, 2019). This has led to a shortage of housing in Botswana. In support of the above argument, about 620,000 individuals are waiting to be granted residential land (Kampamba and Cloete, 2015: 4). This has perpetuated an increase in informal settlements and single-room dwellings.

The issue of inadequate housing affects the quality of life of citizens. Therefore, several treaties have been implemented to ensure that governments prioritise the provision of housing to the vulnerable population. According to the Office of the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Human Rights, (2014), human rights treaties such as the Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) emphasised that housing is an important right which should be upheld by all United Nations members that have ratified human rights treaties referring to adequate housing in their constitutions. In the Botswana context, the government has implemented the Botswana Housing Corporation to specifically distribute residential land and provide low-cost housing for renting out. This shows governments' effort to ensure that their citizens can attain an adequate standard of living.

The Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC) under the Ministry of Infrastructure and Housing Development plays a vital role in the allocation and provision of land and housing units to the Botswana people. The BHC is a statutory corporation established by an Act of Parliament, Act 75/70 (CAP 74:03) with a mandate to provide for the housing, office and other building needs of government and local authorities (Government of Botswana, 2016). Similarly, in South Africa, the Department of Human Settlement provide RDP houses that are low-cost to the poor (South Africa Government, 1994a). Despite such efforts, governments are still experiencing a challenge in ensuring that all citizens have adequate and habitable houses. Fidzani and Read (2012), denote that in Botswana lack of proper housing remains a problem and this is shown by the increase of families who are living in a single house dwelling and others in houses where there are no amenities such as water, electricity and adequate space to accommodate daily activities such as leisure, cooking, sleeping and studying. This is supported by a study by Takaindisa (2020) which reported that economically disadvantaged families and those vulnerable to poverty are living in uninhabitable environments. This shows that the government's failure to address the housing needs of the population brings about undesired social and economic effects.

A child's development is embodied by various factors and among them is the availability of proper housing. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 27 (1) states that "States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (OHCHR, 1989: 8). In support the Botswana Children's Act of 2009, Article No. 2 indicates that children have the right to shelter and privacy (Botswana Government, 2009). A point of interest is that the Children's Act has a section on housing, but the housing policy provisions have not been aligned with the Act. Although the Children's Act of 2009 incorporates some elements of the Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC), some other regulations such as the National Policy on Housing policies have not been changed consistent with the provisions of the Children's Act of 2009. This shows the urgent need for the government to amalgamate the policies so that the best

interests of children are met.

A significant portion of the population who reside in urban areas of Botswana lives in temporary housing, dilapidated units or sub-standard dwellings that lack as stipulated above. This is supported by Denbow and Thebe (2006) who propounded that, due to the high costs of living, many people have resorted to a communal style of living with several individuals or families in a small single-room dwelling in Botswana's famous SHHA (Self Help Housing Agency) shanty compounds of Bontleng, Broadhurst – Extension 27, Old Naledi, White City and Maruapula. Similar observations have been reported by (Alarima, 2018) who stated that in the peri-urban areas, high-density areas and informal settlement families are overpopulated in single-house dwellings. This poses social, academic and psychological challenges to children

They are high prevalence of unemployment and poverty in Botswana. According to Statistics Botswana (2022) reported the unemployment rate was estimated at 33.5% and poverty is more concentrated in rural areas at 32.9% than in urban areas at 8.5%. The above social challenges have perpetuated the phenomenon of single-room dwellings amongst vulnerable groups. The most affected are families with low-income earnings from Gaborone. Fadzani & Read (2014) argue that children who grow up in unfavourable housing conditions are most likely to be affected academically, physically, socially and psychologically as these houses violate safety and hygiene standards. Nkosi et al., (2019) reiterate that children and families living on low incomes and in physical environments which are crowded are in danger of poor nutrition, health risk behaviours and significant implications for mental and physical well-being. A study done by Makhumalo (2015) revealed that poverty in Old Naledi has driven mothers raising young children to engage in activities such as commercial sex, abuse of alcohol and other substances, which often are done in the presence of the children. In support of the argument above, Sayagues (2002) affirms that single room dwelling pushes children into the streets where they experience illegal activities and immoral acts such as violence and abuse of alcohol and other illegal substances This shows that children who live in single-house dwellings are at risk in all facets of their lives.

In addressing the housing issues, The Bank of Botswana (2019) states that the government's strategy was to build an inclusive society through the provision of decent housing and shelter, and a total of P250 million was allocated to implement housing programmes such as Self-Help Housing Agency (SHHA), Destitute Housing, Instalment Purchase Scheme and BHC Turnkey Development Scheme. Despite such government commitment to improve the living conditions of poor families, many children in Old Naledi are living in single-room dwellings. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of children living in a single room dwelling in Gaborone, Botswana. The study answers the research questions: What are the factors that contribute to the single room dwelling arrangement in Gaborone? And What are the vulnerabilities facing children who live in a single room dwelling in Gaborone?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explored both the theoretical and empirical literature review of this study. The theory that underpins this study is Ecological Systems Theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The empirical literature review is structured in line with the study research questions.

### Overview of the housing crisis in the global south

The housing issue is a social concern in developed and developing countries. Most African cities are found to be infested with slums and informal settlements. This is caused by the internal migration from rural to urban areas in search of a better standard of living and economic opportunities (Alarima, 2018). Due to the lack of skills and qualifications needed in formal employment, makes it difficult for rural people to be assimilated into the formal economy (Kamana, Radoine and Nyasulu, 2024). A study done in Cameroon revealed that, most people who fail to find a formal job end up living in poor environmental conditions that are characterized by overcrowding, dilapidated habitation and unsafe location (Wanie, 2019). Furthermore, Moore (2019) reported that in Nigeria internal migrants are living in populated residences with a high degree of overcrowding in between the houses. Most of the poor families are found to be residing in a single room that is rented and has multiple functions as it is used for sleeping, cooking and living). This shows that children living in a single room dwelling are at risk of attaining full development as they are overcrowded.

The Botswana people are experiencing housing issues and this has led to the expansion of peri-urban zones. The Botswana Government (2020) implemented a National Policy on Housing to ensure that every citizen has a decent, safe and affordable house. This led to the formation of the Botswana Housing Corporation which is under the Ministry of Infrastructure and Housing Development to provide low, medium and high-income houses (Botswana Housing Corporation, 2024). A great milestone has been achieved as several houses were constructed and residential land sold to low-income earners in various urban areas in Botswana (Boshoff, Kachepa and Pienaar, 2013). Despite such government efforts, families have inadequate finance to build modern infrastructure

and adhere to the building standards of houses stipulated by the government (Segopa, 2008). The argument above is supported by a study done by (Nkosi et al., 2018) which revealed that the increase of squatter camps in South Africa's metropolitan cities such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town is caused by exorbitant rental fees charged by landlords and estate agents. It can be concluded that lack of income is hindering families from residing in habitable housing.

### **Vulnerabilities faced by children who live in single-room dwelling**

Various vulnerabilities are being encountered by children who live in single-room dwellings. Children who reside in overcrowded houses face educational challenges. A study done by Fidzani, and Marilyn, (2012: 8) reported that most of the children in Old Naledi do not progress to the tertiary level of education because many of them; 70 % of all children attending school drop out of school at an early stage of their education. This shows there is a causal relationship between children who stay in crowded houses and their academic achievements as the children's educational advancement and overall well-being are deeply influenced by the quality of housing they live in (Desai et al., 2024). Gaoswediwe (2016) also affirms that poor social environments and overcrowding expose children to immoral behaviours, which could cause them to experience subtle detachment from their physical environment. This is because children tend to model behaviours and social norms in their environment, that is, if they grow up in disadvantaged environments, they are likely to adopt and live in the same environment as adults (Kennedy-Hendricks et.al., 2015). Furthermore, Makhumalo (2015) states that children who stay in Old Naledi are exposed to the use of foul language, alcohol and substance use, criminal activities, unruly conduct and delinquency because there are a lot of norms and values breakdown due to crowdedness. Furthermore, children who reside in single room dwellings are susceptible to mental and physical ailments. In agreement, Nkosi et al., (2019) indicated that in high-density areas there are high records of illnesses such as stress due to lack of privacy, respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, typhoid and skin diseases because of poor sanitation and overcrowding. This shows that children who stay in environments that are not conducive are at risk in their health domain.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is grounded on the bio-ecological systems theory that was developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1970. The theory argues that child development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interactions between an active child and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment (Krishman, 2010). Therefore, it seeks to advance understanding of the relationship between the environment and its influence on child growth and environment (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998). This theory suggests that the child's development is a product of a variety of critical dimensions including context, process, time and the individual's attributes (Lewthwaite, 2011). To track if children are reaching their developmental milestones, it is vital to observe them in their ecosystems. Bronfenbrenner (1994) stipulates that the environment which influences child development includes micro, meso, macro, chrono and exosystem. The interaction of the child in the above environment and the relationship amongst the environments determines how a child is going to progress in life. The bio-ecological system theory applies to this study because challenges being faced by children are emanating from the family as a basic unit in the microsystem and community environment. In this study, children who live in a single-room dwelling as a family encounter various vulnerabilities in their microsystem. Furthermore, the Old Naledi Community is infested with crime, violence, poor sanitation and taverns, these activities have a direct effect on the well-being of children (Seleke, Sharma and Machingura 2011). Children living in single-room dwellings are therefore rendered susceptible to conditions that the environment may present, hence the need to examine the issue of housing as it affects the development of the children.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of children who live in a single-room dwelling in Botswana using the bio-ecological systems theory. The case study was Old Naledi location which is situated in Gaborone: Botswana. Makhumalo (2015) states that Old Naledi is a location with unplanned houses, overcrowded houses, high rates of school dropouts, increase in outbreaks of health ailments and crime rates. This study is underpinned by a qualitative approach which involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (Hennik et al., 2020). In this study, the population consisted of children and key informants. The sample was made up of 19 participants, children constituted (15) aged between 16-18 years and (4) key informants such as Social Workers, Village Development Coordinator and Kgosi. The purposive sampling was adopted in selecting the key informants and children because they have adequate information about the living conditions in Old Naledi. Two in-depth interview guides written in English were used as a data collection instrument in this study.

The researcher obtained the ethical clearance letter from the University of Botswana Institute of Review Board.

The gatekeepers' letters were granted by the Ministry of Local Government and Lands and the Department of Community and Social Development to interview the participants. To uphold the informed consent ethic, the participants were informed about the nature, purpose and objectives of the study. Upon agreeing, they signed informed consent forms. Confidentiality was maintained by using the alphabetical letters to substitute the participant's names during the data presentation. The findings gathered were analysed manually using Braun & Clarke (2006), six stages of qualitative data analysis. Themes and sub-themes were drawn from the objectives of the study. The results of the study were shared with the village development coordinator, so that he disseminate the findings during the ward meeting to families in Old Naledi.

## FINDINGS

The section below reports on the qualitative findings gathered from the children, social workers, and ward councillors. In reporting the direct views of the participants, a coding system was formulated to represent them as follows: Children (C), Social Workers (SW), Village Development Coordinator (VDC) and Kgosi (K).

### Factors that lead to single-room dwelling

The study's findings revealed that there are factors such as financial constraints and internal migration that leads to single-room dwellings. The above factors are the ones which drive vulnerable families to stay in overcrowded and small spaces in Old Naledi, Gaborone. The main themes and sub-themes were drawn from the research questions that underpinned this study.

#### *Financial constraints*

The participants who took part in this study reported that economic constraints is leading their families to live in a single-room dwelling. The following are the views of the participants:

*.... money! my father earns a small salary, that is why we cannot afford to rent 2 rooms so that we can all have privacy (C3)*

One of the social workers explained that:

*There is an increase in citizens (mothers, fathers' grandparents and youth) who are seeking social welfare services to meet their daily needs (SW1)*

*I have received a lot of information about families of 6 or 8 persons that are living in a single room in my ward. Upon my investigation, I discovered they are unemployed or working on menial jobs. (VDC)*

#### *Rural-urban migration*

The movement of people from rural to urban areas is factor that led to the increase of families that are living in single-room dwellings in Botswana. The following participants alluded that:

*My family moved here 4 months ago from Serowe. My parents are still looking for formal employment, so we cut costs by living in a single room. (C10)*

*Many individuals are bringing in their family members from rural areas to look for better opportunities in urban areas. They end up living in a crowded room as they do not have the means to support themselves. (K)*

Another participant added that:

*The difference in public infrastructure and services between rural and urban areas has led many citizens to move to the main cities (Francistown and Gaborone) in search of better opportunities. The main challenge they face is accommodation, hence resort to live in areas that are very cheap and were landlords are concerned about how many people are living in that space. (SW1)*

### Risks/ vulnerabilities faced by children in various well-being domains

The findings of this study revealed that children are encountering several risks/vulnerabilities by living in an overcrowded single-room dwelling. This affects their social, educational and physical well-being. The above well-



being domains are explained in depth below.

### **Educational risks/ vulnerabilities**

Children who live in a single room dwelling are experiencing academic difficulties at school. The majority of the participants who took part in this study lamented that doing homework and studying for class tests or final examinations pose a challenge when it comes to concentration. This is further indicated by the following participants who stated that:

*I do not feel comfortable to study. There is no space where I can sit and read. There is no table to use during my studies. (15)*

*There is an increase in school dropouts and a decrease in the school final examination pass rates. Upon our investigation, we observed that children who do not have a conducive environment are at risk of failing or repeating their grades. In Naledi, there are a lot of social ills that have a negative effect on the academic outcome of learners. (SW2)*

In support of the above view, the ward councillor affirmed that:

*They are a quite a number of young people loitering around the streets because they dropped out of school. One of the reasons cited by the children is that they did not have time to study as there were always issues under discussion at home. (K)*

### **Social risks/vulnerabilities**

Social well-being entails developing and sustaining good relationships as well as engaging in meaningful and transparent interactions with others. The participants who took part in this study revealed that children who reside in single-room dwellings are prone to social risks. They claimed that:

*Sometimes I misplace my belongings in the house because there are many of us, not because they are stolen but because the house is crowded. When I search in other's bags, it causes misunderstandings as it appears I am accusing others of theft. (C7)*

*They are lot of domestic violence and the use of various substances by adults who reside in crowded houses. Children from these families are imitating their parents, surprisingly a grade 7 child knows how to smoke marijuana. (K)*

In support of the above view, a social worker stated that:

*We are receiving too many reports from schools about learners with disruptive behaviour in classrooms, attending school intoxicated and deviant. This form of behaviour is usually learned at home, amongst peers and in the community. In this community, the living arrangement poses risks to socialization process of children. (SW1)*

Another participant explained that:

*At our home, I have learnt to live with the situation (laughing). Sometimes when I want to bath and my father is in the room, it becomes a challenge. Sometimes he will excuse himself to give me that privacy. (C9)*

### **Physical risk/vulnerabilities**

Physical wellbeing encompasses all things that we can do to reduce or improve our mental, physical health and quality of life. Most of the participants are of the view that staying in a single-room dwelling exposes them to various ailments and affects their mental stability. Some of the participants lamented that:

*My mother sometimes requests the neighbours to accommodate me overnight when she has male visitors. This makes me very angry and bitter, why we are so poor to this extent. (C2)*

*In my home, infectious diseases such as flu and coughing pass from one person to another because of poor ventilation in the room. When one person catches them it rotates amongst everyone else. (C10)*

*There are a lot of disease outbreaks in this community such as tuberculosis and diarrhoea. Skin disease and rashes are very popular amongst young infants. These ailments are all attributed to poor sanitation in this community. (VDC)*

*We are aware of the many cases of early sexual debuts among the children at Tshwaragano Primary School. Recently, the school head called me to witness one of such cases. (SW1)*

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the findings revealed that families in the Old Naledi community are experiencing economic constraints which force them to reside in a single-room dwelling. The major factors affecting them economically are lack of employment and large household members with a single breadwinner. These findings are congruent with those of Takaindisa (2020), who also found out that single mothers from Zimbabwe working in Botswana are earning salaries which are inadequate to meet their necessities such as decent accommodation, food, care needs and clothing. Furthermore, this forces them to live in shared rooms or a single dwelling. The bio-ecological system theory states that the environment has a negative or positive effect on child growth and development. This shows that children who lack access to necessities are vulnerable to various aspects of their well-being domain.

The movement of families and relatives from rural to urban areas has been reported as a factor that is causing single-room dwellings in the Old Naledi community. The gap in infrastructure development, lack of employment opportunities and access to better public goods and amenities are some of the reasons driving people to urban areas. A study done in Nigeria by Alarima (2018) revealed that young people are migrating from Osun State, a rural based, to metropolitan cities such as Abuja and Lagos in search of formal employment and better service delivery such as water and electricity. This has led to the growth of overpopulation in urban areas and the creation of shanty towns in which families are living in human ways. Bronfenbrenner (1994) states that the Chrono-system reflects the dynamic transitions, turning points over time and milestones. In this study, the movement of children from rural to urban areas has a negative effect on their development because they are now forced to stay in a single room which causes adjustment issues.

A review of the study findings shows that children who live in a single-room dwelling are at risk in their educational domain. The main reason cited by participants is that there is no space for reading and levels of noise are high within the room or coming from the outside. This finding conforms with the findings of Stats NZ (2018), which revealed that children from minority ethnicities often repeat grades, underperform in academics and amongst them is an increase in school dropout. Similarly, these findings were also observed in a study by Wanje (2019) which denotes that in Cameroon, children in conflict with the law are mostly those who dropped out of school and are residing in overcrowded and high-density areas where societal norms and values no longer exist. This shows that the bio-ecological systems theory applied to this study because the environment in which a child resides has an impact on their educational well-being.

The findings indicated that children are encountering various social risks in their milieu. These include being exposed to domestic and community violence, lack of privacy and misplacement of personal belongings. These findings are in line with those of Kamana, Radoine and Nyasulu (2024) who found that there are rampant crimes, land and water pollution, and different types of violence that occur in crowded and populated African cities. For children who reside in Old Naledi, this affects their social well-being as societal values and norms have diminished. Furthermore, experiencing a lack of privacy affects their dignity and self-worth.

Physical and mental well-being plays a vital role in the attainment of growth in children. Based on the findings children who reside in a limited living space overpopulated are vulnerable to stress, skin diseases, coughing, infectious diseases and sexual violence. The above findings are consistent with Nkosi et al., (2019) observed that single room dwelling that are used for multiple functions poses health implications because of dampness, the type of fuel used for daily cooking such as paraffin and charcoal are hazardous and aeration is not good. This causes pneumonia, respiratory diseases and skin diseases. The bio-ecological systems theory applied to this study because the immediate environment directly influences children's physical and mental health.

The study's findings are imperative to social work practice because they reported on challenges facing families who live in hostile environments such as the Old Naledi community in Botswana. This will help social workers in Botswana to implement strategies such as advocating for a swift provision of housing and, an increase in cash transfer grants which will intend to solve challenges facing vulnerable families. This is vital because a social worker's role is to restore social functioning and families are at the centre of social work practice. One of the roles of social workers is to provide psycho-social intervention. The findings purported that, children's various domains of well-being are at risk because of the living conditions in their homes. This calls for to provision of individual,

group and family counselling sessions to help them address the challenges they are facing in their milieu. This is of interest to social work practice because the right to housing is not being upheld and it is evidenced by families who are living in single-room dwellings. This is affecting children in different facets of their lives as elaborated on the findings above. This calls for social work intervention to restore the social functioning of vulnerable families by advocating for their rights. This can be achieved through a collaborative effort of providing social welfare services and programmes by different stakeholders which include the Department of Social Protection, private organisations, welfare organisations such as non-government organisations and community-based organisations.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of data reported that economic constraints and internal migration are factors that are causing families to stay in single-room dwellings in which they are populated. Using the bio-ecological systems theory, the data gathered from the children reflected that children who reside in a single-room dwelling in Botswana are facing educational, physical and social risks/ vulnerabilities. This shows that children are being disadvantaged because the risks/vulnerabilities they are facing affect their attainment of full growth and development. Furthermore, they are encountering duo risks/vulnerabilities by staying in an overcrowded single room and volatile environment which has a negative effect on their well-being. Lastly, the bio-ecological system theory applied to this study because different factors which arose from the sub-systems affected posed challenges to children who live in a single room-dwelling.



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