

Step-Parents - Step-Children Relationship Nurture: The Invisible Clerical Role of Religious Leaders in Uganda

Magumba Patrick John
Busoga University

Abstract

This study displays the phenomenon of step-parenting that has existed since pre-industrial Europe. On the global scene, it is estimated that over one billion step-children are subjected to diverse forms of abuse and a quarter of the incidences occur in Africa. In Uganda, out of the eight million vulnerable children, 70 percent of the boys suffer from step-family instigated physical violence. Relying on historical literary analysis methodology, this study examines how human social engagements unfold and how crafted ideologies affect the present, the literary sources that shed light on step-families were examined. Here, it is suspected that the clerical roles of religious leaders lack visibility of the scenario of the nurture of step-parents – step-children relationship. The study results unveil that step-parents burn their step-children, put poison in their food, deny them quality education, and push sticks into their sexual organs. Some step-parents get involved in sexual affairs with their step-children! Other step-children are beaten severely, tortured, hacked to death, sexually defiled, and are denied basic human rights. As a result, some of the step-children have turned out to become street scavengers, prostitutes, drug addicts, and lead culprits in criminal activities. The resulting impact of this development in society is the same; some step-children connive with their divorced biological parents to humiliate, abuse, and use lethal means to harm their step-parents. In turn the step-children abused by their step-parents become a disorienting social phenomenon in the society in Uganda, but are unnoticed by government and religious institutions. This paper argues and recommends that if Christian and Muslim religious leaders took the lead to influence constitutional amendments to include the role of step-parents in the Children's Act, incorporate step-family structure in the religious education curriculum in the primary schools, and enforce formation of clubs that serve the interests of step-families, these scenarios of hostile incidences at play, which are soiling step-family relationships country wide would be minimised.

Key Words: Step-Parent, Step-Children, Clerics, Laws, Curriculum

Introduction

The terminology 'step-parent' traces its beginnings in Anglo-Saxon period. Step-parenting was applied to orphaned children during Europe pre-industrial period. As the years progressed, due to increased incidences of divorce and remarriages, the term became diversified and applicable to children taken care of by non-biological marital partners. Under the remarriage arrangements, one of the marital partners was a non-biological parent, hence the coining of the term 'step-children.' Step-families became so associated with domestic conflicts, that it destabilized households and severely affected the emotional health of children. Relational boundary issues due to intrusion of

non-biological parents became igniters of hatred, anger, fear, rivalries, and hostilities (Ayittey et al., 2022, pp.423-424).

During the European pre-industrial period, not all divorcees and widows/widowers remarried. Remarrying depended on several factors such as age of the person, number of dependent children, and profession of the individual. Persons in their youthful age had higher chances of remarriage compared to middle aged adults. Studies conducted in the early 18th century in Europe revealed that men remarried at a rate of 50 percent, compared to women, who were rated at 20 percent. (Ihinger-Tallman, 1988, pp.25-48). Currently, on the global scene, every year that passes by, remarriages take place and it is estimated that over one billion step-children are subjected to diverse forms of abuse and a quarter of the incidences occur in Africa (Mpairwe et al., 2023, pp.76-77; Sseranja et al., 2020).

Uganda, like any other African country, is associated with family instabilities resulting from death of biological parents, divorce, and separations. Household instabilities have led to the formation of step-families. In 2011, it was found that 56 percent of children were in households with both biological parents, 24 percent were under the foster care of one biological parent, and 20 percent were looked after by extended family members. Of all the Ugandan children, 54 percent were born by unmarried women (Jourdan, 2017, pp.29-31). Uganda national household census conducted in 2011 revealed that 17 percent of children aged 0 -14 years were not under the custodianship of their biological parents. Under this age bracket, 97 percent were living in informal kinship care, while 91 percent had one biological parent (Datzberger et al., 2024).

In Uganda, out of the eight million vulnerable children, 70 percent of the boys suffer from step-family instigated physical violence. It has been noted that abused step-children in Uganda exhibit antisocial behaviour patterns, suffer traumatic stress and depression, are fearful, display low self-esteem, drop out of schools, and many who are exposed to hazardous environments die prematurely (Mpairwe et al., 2023, pp.76-77; Sseranja et al., 2020).

Gone is the age when it took the entire African community to raise up a child. The integration of African social systems with secularism has led to unprecedented disintegration of communities and their replacement by individualism. In the current digital era, the African spirit of communal upbringing of children is lost. Children who find their space in society as a result of remarriages due to divorce, death of one biological parent, or a child smuggled into the family as a result of

infidelity, are facing it rough at the hands of their step-parents (Nakanwagi, 2013). Relying on historical literary analysis methodology, we examined how human social engagements unfold and how crafted ideologies affect the present (Bering, 2024, pp.189-191). Thus, we exposed the issue of step-parents - step-children's relational nurture and the extent to which religious clerics are part of the game in Uganda.

1. Child Abuse in Uganda

Child Neglect: Child neglect is the number one social evil inflicted on step-children by their step-parents in Uganda. Step-children, especially those residents in rural areas are denied food, shelter, quality education, and medical treatment (ANPPCAN Uganda Chapter, 2020, p.6). Neglected children in the process of fending for their survival have found themselves on city streets. While on the streets, they engage in begging, scavenging for food in garbage heaps, getting employed to offer manual labour in hazardous environments, prostitution, whilst others are indoctrinated into anti-social behaviour like suicide bombings and robberies (Bureau of International Labour Affair, 2017, pp.1-2).

Notably, step-parents are not mandated by Ugandan laws to offer caring services to step-children as is the case for biological parents. For the law requires no biological parents to seek child custodian rights. To make matters worse, some of the step-children are products of infidelity. When such children join the family, they become sources of inconvenience and shocks hit the grounds of marital infidelity. Even when one of the caregivers is a biological parent, there arises unbalanced decisions when it comes to resource allocations to cater for the life basic growth needs of the step-children.

Sexual Violence: Defilement of girl children in Uganda stands at 94.7 percent compared to boy children (5.3 percent). Although there are several factors and circumstances under which sexual violence occurs, the reality on ground is that the girl children under the mentorship of their biological mothers tend to be better protected than their counter girl children, who are under the illegal guardianship of their step mothers. When sexual violence manifests its ugliness, biological parents take on legal actions to seek justice for their daughters compared to the step-parents. Of course, child sexual abuse is a crime that everyone in society is obliged to fight. However, the pursuit of justice by a caregiver holds more weight when the guardianship rights are mandated. In

Uganda, legislations that ring and face step-parents-step-children relational nurture are none existent (ANPPCAN Uganda Chapter, 2020, p.6).

Physical Violence: Child brutality is on the increase in Uganda. Physical violence occurrences in the guise of disciplining children occurs in every social setting in Uganda where children are nurtured (ANPPCAN Uganda Chapter, 2020, p.9). However, in recent years, deadly manifestations have been reported among step-families. Ugandan social media is awash with incidences of step-children murdered by their step-parents (Kyamandum, 2024; Matovu, 2024; Enanga, 2023). Step-parents are torturing their step-children due to rivalries and hatred towards the ex-sexual partners (Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza, 2007).

When frustrations arise in a step-family, the anger is directed on innocent children. Step-children are clobbered severally. The situation is worse when step-children tend to be brighter in school compared to those who enjoy custodianship of their biological parents (Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza, 2007). It is not easy to contain a step-child who outshines my biological child. Human nature is envious and strives to be on top of others. To celebrate the success of a child who outshines my own means that I have taken on deliberate efforts to overcome envy, cultivate a psychic energy of emotional intelligence, and abandon greedy attachment to earthly resources. Definitely, coming to terms that the step-child placed under my custodianship is a divine plan. It is not an easy God-given responsibility to own, but it is a worthwhile life adventure to offer my best to society.

Studies show that most of the widowed and divorced people remarry, but not all couples have the guts to cultivate relational bonds with their step-children (Humanuim, 2023). It is true that not all step-parents are devilish, for some strive to offer their best. Others hardly endeavour to pay the price of parenting. Aware that children transit to adolescent stage, the stage is a manifestation of a cocktail of anti-social behaviour that require the step-parents to patiently help the young person navigate through their social universe. Apparently, the navigation of moral lifestyles of adolescents drives arrows into the guts of their caregivers. Step-parents suffer from a pregnancy of bitterness and anger. It is at this stage that physical violence manifests its ugliness. Few step-parents seek spiritual medical attention to diagnose the root causes of acidic relationships with adolescents. Although pregnant with adolescent navigation of life dilemmas, before the step-parents produce their supposedly better adults, many give birth to still babies caused by the brutal punishments to which they subjected them, including driving them out of their lawful homes, and denying them

life's basic necessities. To the extreme, other step-parents take on lethal means to deoxygenate the children with physical impairments to the grave (ANPPCAN Uganda Chapter, 2020, pp.11-13). To compound it all, Canadian Funders of Evolutionary Psychology carried out research and established that occurrence of infanticide was 60 times higher among step-families (Humanuim, 2023). In Uganda, child homicides among step-families are driven by marital problems, alcoholism, psychological disorders, drugs and substance abuse, and social isolations (Enanga, 2022).

Scholarly works indicate that step-family arrangement is associated with disruptions and injurious consequences that affect young adults, adolescents, and toddlers in terms of physical health, emotional growth, education career pursuit, and harmful lifestyles. Step-children are deprived of resources necessary for their holistic growth compared to children who grow up under the custodianship of both biological parents. The negative in-fillers that step-children absorb linger on in adulthood to the disadvantage of building meaningful relationships with family members in the affected household (Adjiwanou et al, 2021, p.631).

To make matters worse, step-parents have been found to be less committed to the developmental needs of their step-children compared to the biological parents. Step mothers compared to step fathers have minimal positive interactions with step-children to build their positive outlook. In African family settings, mothers are nurturers of children compared to the fathers who are ever in the marketplace, pre-occupied with hunting for monetary resources for the family survival. In African marital responsibilities, step-children brought into the family by a biological mother tend to flourish. However, in certain instances, their step fathers deny them financial support necessary for their education careers but they are far better in terms of physical and emotional health compared to the biological children who subscribe to their fathers (Adjiwanou et al, 2021, p.632).

Painfully, step-children abused by their step-parents is a phenomenon that goes unnoticed by government, and religious and cultural institutions. The abuses seem to be dotted incidences and for that case, they are caged in the docket of child abuse. In that sense, international and local legalisations have been enacted to minimise occurrences of child abuse but the legislative mandate of step-parents to care for the step-children is silent.

2. Theories of Step-parents - Step-children Nurture Relationships

Several theories have been advanced to explain the relational encounters of step-parents with their step-children. Some of the theories are examined as follow:

Social Evolutionary Theory: Also referred to as sociobiological, the theory posts that step-children are victims of physical violence and neglect due to the step-parent's inherent envy of the sexual scavenger rival who produced the child. Sexual rivalries detach step-parents from responding to the development needs of their non-genetic offspring. As such, step-parents do not invest their finances, time, care, and energy to nurture offsprings that do not possess copies of their genes (Segal et al., 2015; Schnettler & Steinbach, 2011, pp.4-9). Although the theory brings to light what human nature is when it comes to emotional attachment to genetic offspring and the crawlies exhibited to protect marital boundaries, the theory does not compare checking why biological parents neglect and abuse their children. In addition, the theory does not paint the picture on the remedies that can be undertaken to medicate the negativities exhibited by step-parents towards their step-children.

Stress Theory: The theory postulates that stepfamilies experience traumatising stress and domestic violence at higher levels in the nurturing process of step-children compared to intact families. In step-families, there exists conflicting expectations on step-children parenting, emotional adjustments in parent-child relationship building, and clashing cultures that make relational adjustments chaotic. In addition, step-children with behavioural problems make family life unbearable and violent occurrences put household marital relationship on tension. Subsequently, the after effects of step-family instabilities are child neglect and child physical abuse (Botwe, 2019, pp.6-7).

Nonetheless, stress theory is disputed by the **Family Systems Theory:** The theory brings forth an argument that even if step-children are painted as victims of abuse; the relationship between family structure and child abuse is false. This is because, since violence towards step-children may lead to litigations and the affected biological parent can file for divorce; as such, conscious step-parents rarely subject their step-children to violent physical abuse. According to the theory, each family has unique cultural expressions, regulations, expectations, and purpose boundaries. When the step-family's uniqueness is constructively reconciled, a state of homeostasis is achieved. However, the theory posts that abusers of step-children are step-parents associated with low self-esteem, weak

emotional intelligence, insecurity in their marital relationships, addiction to alcoholism and drug abuse, and lack of ethical values of celebrating human dignity (Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2018).

In Uganda, horrible stories are told of step-parents who dig their claws in their step-children to squeeze life out of them and shatter their future. The media is awash with stories of step-parents who burn their step-children, put poison in their food, deny them quality education, and push sticks in girls' private parts (Nakanwagi, 2013). Some step-parents are involved in sexual affairs with their step-children (Kanaabi, 2012). While other children are beaten severely (Ninsiima, 2012), tortured (Omara, 2012), hacked to death (Karemera, 2012), sexually defiled (Wandega, 2013), trafficked to be subjected to commercial labour and at times to extract their delicate organs (UYDEL, 2009), and denied their basic human rights (Calcutt, 2013). As a result, some of these children have turned out to become street scavengers, prostitutes, drug addicts, and they are involved in criminal activities (Ssalongo, 2012). The opposite is the same; some step-children connive with their divorced biological parents to humiliate, abuse, and use lethal means to harm their step-parents (Nakanwagi, 2013). However, not all step-parents are demonic; there are those who are doing their best. The story of Viola as recorded by the New Vision (2013) sounds like fiction but to the reporter, it is a real-life sobering story that goes:

Viola regards her stepmother as an Angel. From toddlerhood, she was taken care of by a stepmother who never identified her identity not until Viola was 20 years old. While at the university, during her first-year studies, Viola came to learn that the woman she was emotionally attached to was not her biological mother. Viola did not learn of her identity through rumours but her parents prepared her and calmly let the cat out of the bag. At first, Viola developed emotional anger towards her parents, questioning them why they had kept such a secret for a long time, however, the bonding parental attachment capital that had been invested for a long time, helped to quicken the healing (New Vision, 2013).

As time rolled, Viola wondered how her caregivers had managed to keep the secret of her identity from family friends, step siblings, and extended family members. To Viola, since her guardians got married while they were abroad and by the time, they returned to Uganda in 1987, the family had five children; it was difficult for the native social environment to know her identity (New Vision, 2013).

Viola was told that the romantic relationship between her biological mother and father was a nasty one, as such, they parted company. Since then, her biological mother remained abroad, got married, moved on with her life, and she had little time to visit her. Viola recalls that her stepmother treated her the very way she handled her biological children. To Viola, there is no single day she ever recalls her stepmother barking at her or denying her the basic life necessities even when her father, on many occasions, was away on business trips. Even when Viola reunited with her biological mother on her Wedding Day, her stepmother occupies the front seat of her career life as a hero (New Vision, 2013).

Listening to Viola's experience was not enough, the New Vision (2013) reporter went ahead to interact with the stepmother. The stepmother narrated that a few days towards their wedding day, her husband shared his nasty past romantic experience. He told her that his ex-girlfriend with whom he had fathered a pregnancy had issued threats of putting an injunction to their wedding. They discussed the matter with legal minds who assured them that romantic affairs out of wedlock were non-binding. What would be required of them was to provide all the necessary support for the upkeep of the baby until when the child will become of required legal age to be in their custody (New Vision, 2013).

The counselling support received from the legal experts drove fear out of the couple. The bride accepted to take up the space of a mother as soon as the baby was handed to them. It did not take long, seven months after the holy matrimony, the baby, aged eight months was damped at the husband's office and then taken home. It was an upsetting moment for the wife who worried about what would be the reactionary outcome of the biological mother of the child and how best she was to perform her stepmotherly roles to please her husband. Feelings of betrayal, anger, and frustrations wrestled her. In anguish, she telephoned her biological mother to share her traumatic experiences and to seek support. Her mother, a woman with cultivated Christian ethics, advised her to depend on God in prayers (New Vision, 2013).

During their phone conversations, her mother told her to never reject any child brought in her marriage. She told her that such children are innocent victims of circumstance and they are God's gifts. Rejecting them and to the worst mistreating them, it would be a gateway of chasing away blessings from her own biological children. She was encouraged to treat the step-child with

compassion using the same yardsticks she would utilise to handle her biological children and, in that way, God would reward her handsomely. To Viola's stepmother, words from her mother oiled her emotional wellbeing and she took on the step-parenting role wholeheartedly (New Vision, 2013).

From a critical look at the step-family life relationship nurture of Viola, it can be deduced that: a) since the biological mother of Viola was miles away, she was not interfering in her ex's marriage, b) Viola was a tiny girl in the hands of her stepmother, hence this could have provided opportunity for bonding, c) the stepmother of Viola had embraced Christian moral values as her guiding principles; this then made it easier for her to accommodate a step-child, d) the stepmother of Viola had a romantic marital relationship with her husband; such deep emotional love might have been the magic behind their non-disclosure of the identity of Viola to safeguard her from sibling rivalries, protect her mind from being poisoned by relatives to hate her stepmother, and to minimise a genetic attachment craving for her biological mother; and e) the mother of the stepmother to Viola was such an encouragement and a role model, for she encouraged her daughter to view Viola as a victim of circumstances and a divine doled out gift.

However supposing that: a) Viola was in close proximity with her biological mother who could visit her as often as possible and vice versa; b) the father liked her less than any other children of her stepmother, c) the father on many occasions joined her stepmother on disciplining her, and d) the father was so cruel and fond of joining the stepmother in complaining about her immoral behaviours; then, it is uncertain whether Viola's stepmother would have nurtured her to become a responsible adult. But given the fact that the stepmother held strong Christian values such as prayer, tolerance, and forgiveness, she no doubt depended on those powerful weapons to chisel and celebrate the career life of Viola.

Celebrating the dignity of a step-child is a call that takes deliberate steps to acknowledge that human beings are imprinted with the image of God. As such, nature rewards every individual's earthly stewardship responsibility. Of course, step-children can be sources of thorns in one's marital relationship but if well nurtured whilst dressed in the apron of patient parental endurance, they are most likely to turn out to become community icons to the advantage of skylifting their non-biological parents in great honour.

3. Child Protection Systems in Uganda

Uganda is a signatory to international laws that protect the rights of children. In her effort to contextualise international treaties, the country developed several policies and action plans at national and local levels that regulate child protection interventions (Okurut & Anyabolu, 2013, pp.8-11).

Anyone aged below 18 years is regarded as a child according to the legal framework of the Republic of Uganda. The rights of children are spelt out in children's act that was revised in 2016 (The Republic of Uganda, 2016). The act stipulates that it is the duty of biological parents and legally authorised custodians to ensure that the child accesses education, medical care, and all the basic necessities of life (Black Hall Publishing, 2019). However, the act does not stipulate the roles of step-parents and how they can be held accountable for their parental devilish commissions and omissions. Yet, in most instances, it is stepmothers who play significant roles in nurturing children as compared to fathers who rarely engage in kitchen routines and nursing chores. In reality, formal and informal step-family marital arrangements have been in existence in Uganda since days immemorial and step-families will never cease to exist. Legislators, if they are to minimise violent child abuse and neglect, need to open their eyes and regulate the step-parenting mode of childcare that affects the wellbeing of innocent children in Uganda.

Child protection systems in Uganda are both formal and informal structures that have been established to provide protection to children (ECLT Foundation, 2024). These systems are structured into three levels:

a) The first level consists of the **National Structures** that include: the Justice for Children Steering Committee; the National Orphans and Vulnerable Children Steering Committee; the Ant-traffic Task Force; the National Council for Children; the Justice, Law, and Order Secretariat; the National Steering Committee for Child Labour, and National Child Protection Working Group (Ssembatya, 2016, p.14).

Child protection mandate at national level is shared among five government entities that include: i) Ministry for Gender, Labour and Social Development that is mandated to coordinate delivery of child protection services including setting child protection standards; ii) Ministry for Justice and Constitutional Affairs mandated with responsibilities to ensure that children access justice; iii)

Ministry of Education Services empowered to mentor and provide education services to children; iv) Ministry for Internal Affairs that encompass Uganda police, immigration, Non-government organisation board. The ministry addresses the issues of crime and violence against children; and v) Ministry of Health that offers recovery, rehabilitation, and health services to children (Ssembatya, 2016, pp.10-12).

National structures that trickle to the local structures provide services to lucky children who are supported by their caring guardians and good Samaritans. However, it is uncertain, whether runaway children from hostile households are aware that there exist structures that offer them such justice and safe haven. Obviously, if such knowledge was well-known in religious institutions, popular in community social settings, and widely spread among local populace, then incidences of city street children scavenging and infanticides would be minimal in Uganda.

b) The second level of child protection are **District Structures** that include: District Orphans and Vulnerable Children Coordination Committee, District Child Protection Working Groups, District Chain-Linked Coordination Committees, and Sub Country Orphans and Vulnerable Children Committees (Ssembatya, 2016, p.15). Even when the district structures are in touch with the local population to coordinate the affairs of children, it is uncertain whether within their framework, there are specialised packages that address step-parents - step-children nurture relationships. If such arrangements were in existence, then specialised clubs that offer counselling services to step-families would be visible in the local communities of Uganda.

c) The third level of child protection in Uganda is composed of alternative structures that include kinship care under the guardianship of extended family members and family friends; and institutional care – some formalised by government while others operate as religious homes (Ssembatya, 2016, p.22). In most instances, alternative structures absorb orphans but not traumatized children under the guardianship of their step-parents.

4. Clerical Roles of Religious Leaders in Uganda

In Uganda, the major religions of visible influence are Christianity and Islam. According to the census report of the year 2014, 82 percent of Ugandans are documented as Christians and Muslims constitute 14 percent (U.S. Embassy in Uganda, 2023). The two faith religions are constitutionally mandated to develop and regulate Christian and Islamic religious education curricula that are

implemented in education institutions. Embedded in religious education curricula are strands that inculcate moral values in the learners to become patriotic and responsible adults in their future social capital engagements (Muhumuza, 2018, pp.31-33). However, a screen shot at the religious curricula reveals that there is nothing indicated that prepares young people to confront circumstantial step-family challenges. Similarly, the clerical mandate of religious institutions to provide government facilitated therapeutic services to stepfamilies is not spelt out in the constitutional framework of Uganda.

In addition to passing on academic religious values to learners, religious leaders are self-driven individuals who offer voluntary services to society. A week does not pass without cases of people, who are seeking their spiritual care and guidance. Religious leaders are always in touch with children, young adults and the elderly. No community social function takes place without their honorary availability to grace them. Religious leaders are trauma shock absorbers that people rely on to find comfort when they are tormented by life challenges. Certainly, child abuse occurs because some people even when they may be aware of the punitive consequences, they are weak to overcome family stress. Consequently, step-parent - step-children conflicts are hidden scuffles that only come to public attention when lethality nightmares become visible. Given the fact that some of the abusers of step-children are driven by envy and moral decadence lifestyles, it may not be easy for them to confide in religious leaders to offload their challenges. This then sheds light on why religious leaders have not given maximum attention to step-parents - step-children relational nurture.

In order to nurture step-families, religious leaders derive their teachings from sacred books and religious traditions. Nonetheless, Biblical and Qur'anic scriptures are silent about the role of step-parents in the upbringing of step-children. Yet the voices recorded in the sacred books encouraged people to remarry and in such remarriage arrangements, step-children should have been part of the game (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:39; 1 Timothy 5:14; Quran 2:230-237; Quran 65: 1-6).

But then, in Islamic traditions, step-parenting seems to be a neglected Sunnah voice. Prophet Muhammad is recorded to have modelled a lifestyle of a step-parent. The Prophet married Umm Salamah who had four children from a previous marriage. When the Prophet approached her for marriage, they engaged in a lengthy open discussion about step-parenting and in the end, the Prophet unreservedly took care of the step-children (Nana, 2022).

Certainly, the step-parenting arrangement modelled by Prophet Muhammad if taken on by Muslim stepfathers can be beneficial to step-children in the sense that in Islamic traditions, mothers are home makers, hence children in the custody of their biological mothers enjoy all the kitchen and parental nurture delicacies (Sisters Magazine, 2019). Nevertheless, Islamic traditions do not display scenarios where Muslim women since time immemorial have successfully nurtured step-children.

In order to minimise the challenges associated with step-families and foster step-parents - step-children relational nurture, the following needs to be done:

a) Premarital and Postmarital Counselling Curricula: Religious leaders need to energize the existing premarital and post marital counselling curriculums to bring out the aspect of the dutiful mandate of step-parenting. Step-parenting needs to be a deliberate effort of religious leaders to prepare couples to handle the challenges associated with step-families. Of course, it may not be the wishful dream of virgin romantic lovers to foresee that either due to life uncertainties, any can become a step-parent, but it is important to let them know that step-parenting is ongoing in their surroundings. Definitely, the acquired knowledge can benefit the struggling neighbours or the vice versa. Henceforth, marital counselling curriculum needs to spell out: how issues of a stepchild - discipline, rewards, and family chores can be handled; hobbies and interests that encourage step-parent - stepchild bonding can be crafted; emotional boundaries of step-children that should be respected; clear codes of behaviours that must be respected by step-family members; and how family meetings to - plan, resource, implement, monitor, and evaluate progress can be documented.

Curriculum based marital counselling can be appropriate for literate couples who have the ability to engage in intellectual research but to the illiterate couple, such an approach may not yield quick results. In Uganda, before couples are joined in Holy Matrimony, religious leaders equip them with family life marital management skills. The clerical roles of religious leaders continue until the knowledge seeking couples become role models to support others. Nonetheless, not all people who are in marital relationships in Uganda seek marital counselling services of religious leaders. Many Ugandans are in cohabitation marital relationships. In Uganda, the law does not recognize nor protect cohabiting couples even when one cohabits for 50 years (Namutebi, 2012).

Certainly, sexual partners who are living together in illegal marital relationships have created unstable homes, not only for children who are neglected and abandoned, but also for their personal emotional wellbeing and the society at large. Studies show that children of cohabiting couples are associated with anti-social behaviours such as drug abuse, hooliganism, stealing, street scavenging, loitering in the community, depression, and dropping out of school compared to children hailing from intact married couples (Natukunda, 2012).

b) Step-parent's and Step-children's Clubs: Religious leaders in Uganda need to influence formation of step-families clubs in local communities and in education institutions. Formation of clubs involves logistical expenses but religious organisations in Uganda are well structured and the human resource is well equipped with resource mobilizations skills. Certainly, well-equipped and facilitated clubs are most likely to provide fertile grounds to: offer counselling services to traumatized step-parents and step-children, minimise hostilities associated with step-parenting, and provide a platform to stepfamilies to share their success stories. Step-families that are role models can be celebrated and this can encourage other step-families to rethink of their relationships.

c) Religious Education Curricula: The structure of a step-family needs to be integrated in the current religious education curriculum being implemented in primary schools in Uganda. When young people acquire knowledge on how to respectfully overcome challenges associated with step-families, then incidences of mental health, school dropouts, and runaway children among the affected children are most likely to reduce. In addition, schools through music, dance, and drama activities can prepare young people to radiate their angelic voices to fight child abuse in society. Above all, children from intact families come to learn that the future ahead of them, there exist marital life uncertainties that can result into step-parenting. Therefore, acquiring step-family life management skills is very necessary.

d) Legal Framework on Children's Rights: The international treaties on children's rights to which Uganda is signatory and the localised Ugandan child protection structures do not spell out step-parent - step-children nurture relationships. Ugandan laws do not hold step-parents accountable when they deny step-children the basic necessities of life. Yet step-parents are custodians of innocent children and for that reason, religious leaders need to raise their voices to

ensure that the legislations on child protection are revised by parliament to clearly spell out the privilege space of step-children in legal and cohabitation step-family marital relationships.

e) Children Born as a Result of Infidelity: Religious leaders need to seriously look into the challenges intact families experience when a child born as a result of infidelity comes in the marital space. It is heart breaking and traumatizing. Religious leaders need to come up with intervention strategies to support affected couples to ensure that marriages remain intact and the innocent child survives. In addition, the custody survival of children born as a result of infidelity need to be clearly defined in the legal framework of Uganda. If such children are not well protected and provided for, then abortions, infanticides, and child abandonments are most likely to be on the increase. A child born out of infidelity is hard to be taken care of by a step-parent. Such a child is always a remainder that a sexual partner is unfaithful. However, a well-prepared marital partner, through clerical counselling, grieves for a while but makes a conscious choice to offer selfless services to God's creature.

Conclusion

Step-children abused by their step-parents are a phenomenon that has existed for decades and the ugliness that surrounds step-families is ongoing in Uganda unnoticed by government and religious institutions. Uganda has enacted legislations and built structures from national level to grassroots to protect the rights of children but the policy frameworks do not display the relational mandate of step-parents to their step-children. As such, step-children are experiencing brutal attacks and are being denied life basic necessities by their caregivers who are expected to nurture them into fulfilled responsible adults. If then, the question of curtailing hostilities visible among stepfamilies in Uganda is not voiced by religious leaders to influence constitutional amendments, the nation is most likely to experience increased infanticides, teenage moral decadence, and the exodus of children to city streets with associated criminalities.

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