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21 “OUR CHILDREN ARE NO LONGER OURS”: CHILD SOCIAL WELFARE SERVICES AND DIMINISHED PARENTAL AUTHORITY AMONGST AFRICAN MIGRANT FAMILIES IN SWEDEN

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INTRODUCTION

The largest African migrant communities in Sweden come from the Horn of Africa region, namely, Somalis, Ethiopians and Eritreans. These communities came to Sweden during the long years of war, which resulted in the independence of Eritrea and anarchy in war-torn Somalia and drove millions of people out of these countries. Other significant numbers of African migrants in Sweden are from The Gambia, Nigeria, Morocco and Egypt. In recent years, Sweden has witnessed an increase in the number of refugees from the Central Africa region, mainly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi. In addition, during the 2015 migration crisis, Sweden received 163 000 refugees. A majority of them came from Syria and the Middle East. However, a significant number amongst them came from Africa, through different routes across the Mediterranean to Southern Europe, from where they found their way to Scandinavia. Prior to the crisis, Sweden had maintained a policy of family reunification; therefore, the African diaspora in Sweden continued to grow slowly but steadily. Currently, a significant 25.9 per cent of the population in Sweden has “an immigrant background”, including people born in Sweden with both or one parent identified as “foreign-born”.³ By December 2020, the African diaspora in Sweden was estimated to be 237 000.⁴

On arrival in Sweden, migrants find themselves in a completely new system, with different values and ideas about individuals and their relationships with the family, schools and a myriad of agencies that are linked together by the provision of social services, and the society at large. When refugees and migrants join language classes to learn Swedish, they are also told about life in Sweden, particularly how to access the social services. This is based on an underlying assumption that people coming from fragile and conflict-affected societies are not familiar with Sweden’s super-organised system. They need help to learn and to be integrated into the Swedish society, and relevant policies have been put in place for this purpose.

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3 Statistics Central Bureau (SCB). 2021. *Summary of Population Statistics 1960-2020*. Stockholm.

4 Statista. 2021. “Sweden: African immigrants by country of birth 2020”, 15 March.

Many migrants who participated in our studies said that “the whole process feels like a re-education so that one can fit here, and without going through it, an immigrant family or individual cannot fit in this society.”⁵ The process of inserting newcomers into the Swedish society has been changing, with the aim of expediting the integration of immigrants, and political debates about integration have been ranging for nearly two decades. In June 2019, the government appointed a migration committee, consisting of experts and members of parliament from all political parties, who were commissioned to investigate and make recommendation on what the future migration policy should look like. In the autumn of 2020, the Migration Committee presented its investigation with proposals for legislative changes in matters concerning the length of the residence permit and requirements for a permanent residence permit, humanitarian reasons, family reunification, housing and maintenance requirements.⁶

In this chapter, we examine parenting amongst African families in Sweden in a specific migration context, which presents them with a new social and cultural environment. One of the first challenges to the migrant families is the integration of children into the new society faster than their parents. Hence, the parents are faced with the struggle to understand the change in their children, for whom they can no longer serve as role models. Certainly, while on the one hand this is a shock for the parents because they did not anticipate a sudden change in the relationship with their children, on the other hand the children are confused. Therefore, both the parents and the children must learn how to deal with a new and unfamiliar situation in which the families find themselves. The parents feel that the family is under the control of the social services (“the Social” as it is informally called), which deprive them of the cultural parental authority that they are used to exercising over their children in their countries of origin.

In their effort to adjust to the new environment, the children also take advantage of the new social circumstances and often remind their parents that there is no room for strict or authoritarian parental control in Sweden, and in many cases, school children can report the parents to the teachers or BRIS, which is the leading children’s rights organisation in Sweden.⁷ The parents are bewildered when the children report them to the social welfare authorities, who often take away the children to foster homes if they are convinced that the parents are breaching the Swedish parenting regulations. It is evident that the social workers hold the view that African migrant parents are unfamiliar with the Swedish parenting culture, and therefore, that they are unlikely to respect the rights of their children. There is an underlying suspicion that African migrant parents are strict and they can often deprive children of liberty

5 Interview with John Ogunle by A Kubai, Upplands Väsby, Sweden, 20 June 2019.

6 See Government of Sweden, Ministry of Justice, “Kompletterande promemoria till betänkandet En långsiktig hållbar migrationspolitik” (SOU 2020:54). [Supplementary memorandum to the report: A long-term sustainable migration policy].

7 BRIS (Children’s Rights in Society), established in 1971, is one of the leading organisations working to strengthen children’s rights in Sweden.

or control them, contrary to the Swedish idea that children should grow in a free environment and good living conditions, as envisaged by the social service agencies. What is concerning is that although the use of protective custody for the children is generally on the rise, African migrant children are much more likely (17.5 times) than others to be taken away from their homes and placed in foster care.

With the above concerns in mind, this chapter examines cases of African Diaspora families in Sweden, where children have been taken into foster care homes or to holding centres while investigations into the allegations of violence or maltreatment of children are in progress. We highlight the changes to the relationships within the family, as the parents learn to negotiate with their children, on the one hand, and to navigate through the parenting regulations, on the other. As one parent put it, he and his wife found themselves in a hard place between the children and the social service agencies.

METHOD, SOURCES OF DATA AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, we seek to examine of the experiences of child welfare services and protection amongst African immigrant families, with a view to bringing an insider, non-policy-oriented knowledge and experience to the fore. The focus of the study, therefore, is the experiences of African migrant families in the encounter with the child welfare and protection services in Sweden. The social service agencies have the mandate for the apparatuses of child protection and control, while the parents must negotiate, rather than challenge these apparatuses. We take as our analytical focus the dynamic interaction between the sites where child protection is located, namely the relevant law, the home, school, and the social service workers. To do this, we have adapted Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework.⁸ We are aware of the criticism and limitations of this approach; nonetheless, an adaptation of the ecological conceptual framework helps to situate the child within a specific migration context, fraught with myriad factors that contribute to changing the relationship between parents and their children amongst African migrant families in Sweden.

A qualitative approach is useful for this study, because it allows the participants and the researcher to focus on personal experiences and subjective viewpoints. Fifteen key in-depth individual interviews, and four focus group discussions were conducted with the members of diverse African migrant communities,⁹ with a view

8 Bronfenbrenner U. 1992. "Ecological systems theory", in Vasta R (ed). *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues*. London/Bristol, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 187-249. Bronfenbrenner U. 1986. "Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives", *Developmental Psychology* 22(6):723-742.

9 Creswell J. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

to eliciting their experiences.¹⁰ Open-ended interview guides were used to allow research participants to explain and describe in their experiences in own words. The interview technique is particularly useful for this type of research, because it provides the interviewees with the possibility to describe their experiences of how child welfare interventions impact their family relations and their lives in Sweden. We did not record individual interviews or focus group discussions for ethical considerations, when it became clear to us that using a voice recorder would make the respondents uncomfortable and even unwilling to participate in the research. Instead, extensive field notes were taken during the interviews. However, two research participants opted to write their responses to our questions. In two cases, two research participants offered to document not only their “traumatic experiences” but also their “perspectives” and submitted written narratives. To get a wide range of perspectives from the African migrant families, the following categories were identified for the research: (a) parents whose children have been placed into protective custody at one time or other; (b) parents with ongoing investigation and court cases whose children are currently placed in foster families; and (c) those placed at the holding centres run by private organisations contracted by the social service agencies to look after the children, often together with the parents, as they wait for the investigations to be concluded and decisions to be made.

Part of the data for this chapter were gathered first in a large study on the women’s experiences of violence amongst African Diaspora in Sweden.¹¹ One of the emerging issues from the research project that required further research was the challenges for children caught up in family violence and the growing number of children in African families, who are 17.5 times more likely to be in homes for special supervision and protective custody by social workers.¹² The emerging issues could not be adequately examined within the research project time frame and resources. Therefore, further research was carried out amongst seventeen families from different educational and economic backgrounds and diverse African migrant communities. Interviews were conducted with men, women and young adults over 18 years of age. Following Swedish Research Council ethical guidelines, children under 18 years were not interviewed; therefore, it was not possible to learn about their experiences from their own perspective. The youth who were interviewed described their experiences as they could remember them a few years later.

In order to get an official perspective on child welfare and protection, two people with experience of working in the Swedish school and child welfare services were interviewed: a primary school social welfare and counsellor (known as a *kurator*) and an independent consultant for child welfare and social services. The

10 Moriarty J. 2011. “Qualitative Methods Overview”. London: NIHR School for Social Care Research.

11 The research project (2010-2015) was funded by *Brottsoffermyndigheten* (Swedish Crime Victim Authority).

12 Hessel S and Vinnerljun B. 2000. *Child Welfare in Sweden – an Overview*. Stockholm: Stockholm University, School of Social Work, 15.

perspectives of the parents and the children provide us with one side of the story. Therefore, the perspectives of those on the other side, that is, the social workers and the school, who work together to ensure child welfare, are necessary for us to get a balanced view of the system and ultimately the factors behind the growing number of children from African migrant families in protective care. For our purpose, a theoretical thematic analysis is useful in making sense of the data: identifying the emerging themes and interpreting and explaining the patterns in the data by examining the interview transcripts. The names of research participants have been changed to protect their identity.

CHILD SOCIAL WELFARE AND PROTECTION IN THE SWEDISH WELFARE SYSTEM

To orient the readers to the Swedish context, here we provide a brief description of the child welfare and protection in the country. In Sweden, protecting the rights of the child entails safeguarding the rights and interests of children and young people in society.

These rights are all encompassing and cover all activities that affect children, including parenting, education, culture, social services and migration. In addition to the Parental Code Act, which is the primary legislation on children, there are Special Provisions on the Care of Young People,¹³ which stipulate that "a child can be taken into protective care by the state in order to care for their physical or psychological well-being."¹⁴ The risk of physical or mental abuse at home is the basis for child protection under the law. Available evidence suggests that "Swedish social workers respond more readily to any signal that a child is 'in need'" and that "social intervention is founded on the guiding principles of solidarity, parent rights and upholding the child's best interest."¹⁵ It is important to note that, within the ambit of the relevant law, "the social workers have the professional latitude to focus on non-statutory interventions to ensure that the child has good enough living

13 See the translation of the provisions in "Lag (1990:52) med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga" [Law (1990:52) with Special Provisions on the Care of Young People]. Changes to Law (1990:52) were adopted in SFS 2020:1259, specifically that:

1 § Efforts within the social services for children and young people must be made in agreement with the young person and his or her guardian in accordance with the provisions of the Social Services Act (2001:453). The efforts must be characterised by respect for the young person's human dignity and integrity.

2 § Decision in favour of protective care must be made if, there is physical or mental abuse, deficiencies in care or any other situation in the home, or a significant risk that the young person's health or development will be harmed.

14 Hofverberg, "Child protection Law and Policy", 175.

15 Khoo G, Hyvönen, U and Nygren L. 2002. "Child Welfare or Child Protection: Uncovering Swedish and Canadian Orientations to Social Intervention in Child Maltreatment", *Qualitative Social Work* 1(4):466.

conditions.¹⁶ They exercise this professional latitude to make decisions about real and perceived violence against children at home.

Furthermore, there is an inclination towards an emphasis on the psychological circumstances or conditions at home for the families concerned. When the social workers suspect that a child is having difficulties at home, they suggest psychological therapy, often for both the child and the parents. Most African parents are shocked by this approach, and they see it as an attempt or plan “to destroy” their families. From their own perspective, they “see children being turned against their parents.”¹⁷ Many of them say they cannot understand what is happening to their children at school. In the following excerpt a concerned African migrant parent describes his family situation thus:

It seems that the teachers and Social think that because our children are energetic and active among their peers in class, they have psychological problems. They are very quick to suggest that such children should be taken to see a psychiatrist. The teachers and the school social workers take time to interview the children about their home situation, and the parents. They ask all sorts of questions. The children are interviewed in a way that the Social win their trust and often when they feel pressured to say something about their families they answer “yes” and thus put their families under scrutiny and more often, they put themselves at risk of being taken away from their parents.¹⁸

However, as social work researchers Evelyn Khoo and her colleagues emphasise, in Sweden the emphasis is “on a much broader notion of best interests and of a child’s needs and rights” and therefore, there is “a greater willingness of the state to intervene in the private realm of the family”.¹⁹

Children are included in the 1980 Social Services Act. It is described as “a primary law, a goal-oriented enabling act that is based on voluntary efforts and stipulates general guidelines for municipalities concerning their social service obligations.”²⁰ Pursuant to Section 12 of the Social Services Act, investigation of cases of maltreatment of children is conducted by the local social welfare committees in the municipalities. The social welfare committee “should be especially observant of the development of children and young people who show signs of developing in an unfavourable direction, and in close co-operation with their families, provide these children and young people with the protection and support they need.”²¹ It is emphasised that the best interest of the child shall always be taken into

16 Khoo, Hyvönen and Nygren, “Child Welfare or Protection”.

17 Interview with Kayuki Waitha by A Kubai, Tierp, Sweden, 7 July 2021.

18 Interview with Laurencio Kabilu by A Kubai. Upplands Väsby, Sweden, 20 June 2019.

19 Khoo, Hyvönen and Nygren, “Child Welfare or Protection”, 467.

20 Andersson G. 2006. “Child and family welfare in Sweden”, in Freymond N and Cameron G (eds). *Toward positive systems of child and family welfare: International comparisons of child welfare, family service, and community caring systems*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 6.

21 Andersson, “Child and family welfare in Sweden”.

consideration, but migrant parents who are investigated for alleged violence against their children often claim that the professional latitude accorded the social service workers leaves the interpretation of "best interest of the child" vague and open to interpretation during the investigation process and in the individual decisions by social workers which may be based on intuition rather than supporting evidence.

It is also not clear how the social workers identify foster families for placement of children that are deemed to be "in need". How do they review the family to ascertain its suitability for the child in question? Several parents whose children have been taken into foster care express a sense of frustration that the social workers do not care "how it feels not to be involved in a choice where you have no role to play in deciding about your child."²² This became evident when we came across two similar cases where placement in foster care did not go well because of what can be termed "incompatible" religious and cultural traditions of the families concerned.

In one case, the foster family were Muslims from the Middle East and the other family were Christians from the Southern Africa region. The Christian parents explained that their family religious tradition and cultural practices were quite different from those of an Arab Muslim family. They described the situation thus:

When we were asked to give consent for our children to be taken into foster care, the social workers said the manes of the family, we realised that the family is from Middle East and they are Muslims. We raised the issue of the difference between our family's culture and Christian religious beliefs and the Islamic culture and religious beliefs of the Middle East. The social workers said they have looked into the background of the family where our children were being taken and these are good people, and religion is not a fact to take into consideration.²³

Thus, the Christian parents expressed their concern that their children were being placed in the care of a Muslim family. They felt that the social workers dismissed their concerns about their children being placed in the care of a Muslim family as invalid. The father of the children said that his family was dismayed by the fact that the social workers dismissed the concerns about the difference between the religious beliefs and practices of their Christian family and the Muslim foster family. The father further explained that when the social services investigated the prospective foster family, he did "not know what they were looking for in order for a family to be considered good that it can take care of a child from anywhere".²⁴

After the children were placed with the Muslim family, their parents were not allowed to meet them for prayers or to take them to church. For a family where the father is a pastor, this was a matter of concern for the parents. As the father put it, apparently, there is a sense in which "an unwritten a systemic prohibition is embedded with the system which does not allow religious aspects of families to

22 Focus group discussion with A Kubai, Tierp, Sweden, 19 May 2019.

23 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 10 June 2021.

24 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire, 10 June 2021.

be manifested or upheld when a child is taken into foster care, for example these children did not go to church or prayer meetings and activities as they used to do together with their parents".²⁵ As the parents put it, for all the time the children are placed with the foster family, they are cut off from religious ritual and practices.

In another case, the foster care arrangement also did not go as expected due to religious and cultural differences. The children complained that the environment in the foster family was not conducive for their well-being because they could not practise their religion. Though religious practice was the issue, the emphasis was placed on the nature of the general family environment in order to provide reasonable grounds for moving the children to another foster family.

These two cases illustrate the ambiguities of the place of religion in the investigation and assessment of families to determine placement of children in foster care. This attitude to religion can be attributed to the prevailing notion that, in Sweden religion is a private matter. A full discussion of debates on secularism in Sweden is beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice it to say that while freedom of religion and belief is upheld by law in Sweden, matters of religious ritual, beliefs and practices are relegated to the private realm. As is evident in the example above, cross-cultural foster care can, and often does, create cultural and legal challenges for African migrant families in Sweden, who expect religion to be taken into considered when determining placement of their children in foster care.

Bo Edvardsson, who has a long experience of training many social workers at different universities in Sweden, has voiced scathing criticism of child protection investigations in the Swedish social services.²⁶ He interrogates the system based on many years of experience and observation, asking questions such as: "[A]re they really children's best interests", or "Is a 'hunting the monster theory' influencing social work decisions?"²⁷ We shall return to Edvardsson's arguments later in the discussion.

SITUATING AN AFRICAN MIGRANT CHILD AS A FREE INDIVIDUAL IN THE SWEDISH SOCIETY

About one-fifth of Sweden's national population of 10 million are under 18. Children are well protected by the law and their rights are defended. In 1993, the government put in place the Ombudsman for Children, an agency charged with the protection of children's rights.²⁸ It monitors the implementation and compliance to

25 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire, 10 June 2021.

26 Edvardsson B. 1996, rev. 2010. "Child protection investigations in the Swedish social services – are they really children's best interests? Is a 'hunting the monster theory' influencing social work and decisions?". Report, School of Law, Psychology and Social Work, University of Örebro.

27 Edvardsson, "Child protection investigations in the Swedish social services".

28 For more information on the office of the Swedish Ombudsman for Children, see <https://www.barnombudsmannen.se/om-webbplatsen/english>

the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in Swedish society. It ensures its implementation across 290 municipalities, regional councils and government agencies. More recently, in 2020, Sweden became one of the first countries to incorporate the UNCRC into the national Swedish law.²⁹ Regulating children's behaviour can be seen as curtailing their freedom to think and act freely. Therefore, exercising any form of control of children by parents or teachers, can be interpreted as violence against children, from which they are protected by the law. Furthermore, children "should be treated with respect for their individuality" and the "state ascribes to itself the right to intervene if basic needs are not respected [sic] or fulfilled".³⁰ Thus, the family social welfare policy should be understood within the broader context of the state social welfare framework, through which Swedish society functions in a super-organised manner.

As expected, arrival in Sweden is something that many immigrants see as a success, mainly because the Swedish international image is that of a good place to live. A parent described himself and members of his family on arrival as "beaming with great excitement and expectations of our new family life in the diaspora ... here our boys were, stepping into what we thought was an opportunity of their lifetime at a very young age in Europe."³¹ However, for some, the excitement and optimism are short-lived. Unfortunately for this family, within a short time after the children were enrolled in two different schools, signs of the socio-cultural turbulence that would rock the family to the core, began to emerge after the children's encounter with the school system.³² They described how incessant email reports and phone calls from the school poured in every week, "bleeding away a life of peace, joy and hope, as [they] knew it back home in Africa".³³ Every report would implore them to talk to one or both of their sons. The school urged the parents to talk to John, the younger boy, so that he would avoid bumping into other pupils in the corridor at school.

In an effort to address the issue, the school invited John's parents to a meeting with the headmaster, school nurse, a psychologist, and the class teacher. "The school suspected that John had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), warranting investigation. The school advised that some form of treatment would calm him down in class ... One can imagine how this shuttered our world. That John had a lot of energy had never been a thing for treatment to us because back

29 On 1 January 2020, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was incorporated into Swedish law. The implication of the domestication of the UNCRC is that courts and law enforcement agencies must take into account the rights that follow from the CRC. The rights of the child shall be taken into account in considerations and assessments made in decision-making processes in cases and matters concerning children. The incorporation of the CRC contributes to making the rights of the child visible. It creates a basis for a more child rights-based approach in all public activities.

30 Hessel and Vinnerljun, *Child Welfare in Sweden – an Overview*, 4.

31 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 7 June 2021.

32 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire, 7 June 2021.

33 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 19 July 2021.

home in Africa, the society would be worried if a child was calm like an adult. We agreed to start the investigations but objected to the idea of using drugs to calm our child.”³⁴

As explained in the diagram below (Figure 21.1), African migrant families find themselves situated within a social ecological system with different norms and values, which they should espouse, internalise and practise. Several parents identify this as an unwritten rule, to which they are obligated to adhere. They talk of the ambiguity about what it means to be a “good parent” or an “adequate parent”. They are baffled when they are informed that they need training by the social services because they are found to be lacking in these qualities. They are not sure how to relate with “the Social”.

Figure 21.1: Authors' adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development³⁵

At a young age, children learn about their rights. Many African migrant children tell their parents about the discovery that they have a right to do whatever they want and that their parents may not control them or curtail their freedom in any way. A mother narrated how her nine-year-old son, on learning about his rights at school, came home and recited the information about children's rights and informed her that she “should not talk to him the way they talk to children in Nairobi”.³⁶ The mother was surprised, because the family left Nairobi when the child was two years old and too young to know how parents in Nairobi speak to their children. Then she began to understand why the child was being difficult at home, why he was becoming increasingly disrespectful to her, often insisting on doing whatever he wanted against her advice and despite her objection.³⁷

³⁴ Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 20 August 2021.

³⁵ See Bronfenbrenner, “Ecological systems theory”; Bronfenbrenner U and Morris PA. 2006. “The bioecological model of human development”, in Damon W and Lerner RM (eds). *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of child development*. Sixth Edition. New York, NY: Wiley, 793-828. Interview with Bridget Jenina by A Kubai, Stockholm, Sweden, 10 May 2019.

³⁶ Interview with Bridget Jenina by A Kubai, Stockholm, Sweden, 10 May 2019.

³⁷ Interview with Jemima Rose by A Kubai, Stockholm, Sweden, 10 May 2019.

Describing the experience of growing up in a migrant family and going to school in the neighbourhood, a young adult gives fascinating insights into why many children in migrant African families tend not to listen or follow the instructions given by their parents as they are expected to. When asked why he did not listen to his mother, or accept her advice most of the time, he gave the following response:

I wanted to exercise my sovereignty as an individual in this society by informing my mother that I was now *byxmyndig* (old enough to engage in sex).³⁸ I was expecting a negative reaction from my mother because by declaring that I was *byxmyndig*, I wanted to challenge in a provocative way the cultural norms that I was raised with at home. And despite me knowing that I wasn't being raised in a textbook traditional Kenyan way, I was still conscious of the fact that I wasn't being raised exactly as the typical Swedish kid in that environment. I grew up in a home that was more of a hybrid of both cultures (Kenyan and Swedish). And whether it was an attempt to reinforce my "Swedish side" that I had adopted while growing up here or just a generic case of a pre-pubescent rebellious phase, I felt that it was necessary to declare provocative "truths" about the things that were acceptable for a fifteen-year-old to do in the eyes of the Swedish law and culture.³⁹

Furthermore, when asked whether he felt confused growing up in a complex social hybrid environment with competing demands and expectations of how he should conduct himself, surprisingly, his response was that the knowledge imparted by his teachers "became something that I could weaponise and assert my false sense of authority. That knowledge became something that I could use to go 'Aha! I don't have to listen to my mother because in the eyes of the Swedish law, I am an individual. And as an individual, I have my own rights'."⁴⁰ However, he was careful to point out that although his teachers did not necessarily tell him how to behave at home, they advised him about the behaviour that he should watch out for, such as parents screaming at him. They encouraged him to report incidents of parents verbally abusing him to BRIS.

"DE LYSSNAR INTE": DIMINISHED PARENTAL MORAL AUTHORITY

When the relationship between the parents and the children changes, it becomes a big challenge to many African migrant families. The parents do not understand what has happened to the children, and this is even more baffling when they find out that it is their own children who have reported them to the authorities. The parents are confused when they see their children have been turned against them and they listen more to the social workers than the parents. Many of them said

38 *Byxmyndig* literally means "trousers mature", that is to say, one has attained the age of consent and may legally engage in sex. In Sweden, 15 years is the age of consent.

39 Interview with Liria Kabulu by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 10 July 2021.

40 Interview with Liria Kabulu by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 13 July 2021.

they were humiliated and frustrated by the way they were treated by “the Social”, especially during the investigations into the allegations of violence against their children. In most cases, the parents are happy to have their children back from protective custody. However, usually the return of the children is conditional and such families are kept under some sort of surveillance. One of the conditions is the mandatory home visits by social service workers to observe if the home has “good enough” living conditions, and how they interact with each other in the family. Many parents find the home visits particularly difficult to deal with.

The programme also involves training meetings. A parent explained that everything felt bad during the training sessions. He could not help feeling as if he “belonged to a sub-culture, which was unwelcome in Sweden”.⁴¹ It became clear from the meetings that he could no longer talk to his child freely, let alone get angry with him without being reported to the authorities. As a father, he felt helpless because he was the one who was accused of being violent to the children. He felt that the home visitation by the officials to

monitor how we behave at home, made the whole situation like a stunt. I had never been so unnatural in my life as I was that day ... making me too conscious of whether and how I was smiling, looking, talking, breathing and literally living my life, like some kind of specimen under the microscope. I did not know what the officials were assessing or looking for on me, so I was apprehensive, fearing to do what would cost the future of my family and my own image, now that I was the centre of attention ...”⁴²

Evidently, this parent describes his experiences of the home visits in a graphic way. He provides a detailed description of the process that led to the children being taken into protective custody and an investigation that lasted four months, incorporating separate interviews with him, his wife and the second child. In his own words, “the encounter with the Swedish child welfare and protection services is a traumatic experience for me and my family”.⁴³

In another family, the children and the mother were taken to a holding centre while their case was under investigation. After three months, the father joined the family for two weeks and noticed a change of behaviour in the children. “The tables were now turned; they were dictating to their mother. The children were saying to the mother, ‘we are here to learn’, ‘we are here to teach you’.”⁴⁴ He tried to change this behaviour and told them, “We are your parents and we are accountable. You have to listen to your parents.” The children did not change; they continued with this behaviour even after they were allowed to return home and the parents continued to deal with the children’s defiance. In his words, “It is like the children were hung somewhere, something they were told – they refused to answer the phone

41 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 10 May 2021.

42 Interview with Pastor Paul Wadebe by A Kubai, Uppsala, Sweden, 19 July 2021.

43 Interview with Pastor Daniel Edire, 10 May 2021.

44 Interview with Pastor Paul Wadebe, 19 July 2021.

when I called them. When I asked them why they did that, they said the teacher told them not to answer my phone calls. They banged the phone on the father!" In the presence of the social workers, he said to the children, "I am your father. Do not allow anybody to stop you answering my calls. If you have a bad record, it reflects on me." Now, it is not easy. The parents "must obey the children in a way, for instance, when the children wanted to go swimming, the father was tired, but he felt that he would "rather go with them so they don't believe in the social service workers".⁴⁵ This case clearly demonstrates that the parental role is challenged; it is diminished in these circumstances. He said that the children are serving two masters, and this is something he is still struggling to deal with.

IMPLICATIONS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPE OF RELIGION FOR AFRICAN FAMILIES

Most of the African families who participated in this research said that religion cannot be ignored, even though in Sweden it is considered to be a private matter. They elaborated how religious beliefs and practices are often instrumentalised during the investigation of allegations of violence against children in African migrant families. For example, Pastor Daniel Edire and Pastor Paul Wadebe were unequivocal that the social service officials invoked the Special Provisions on the Care of Young People to take away their children without their consent.⁴⁶ Indeed, during meetings, the social service officials claimed that African fathers, especially those who are pastors or ardent Christians, tend to be authoritarian and extra hard on their children. The officials further explained that Christian fathers and pastors are known for using the Bible to justify corporal punishment, including depriving women and children of their freedom. Therefore, these two pastors became targeted for further scrutiny as the authorities broadened the investigation to include possible violence against their wives. Their wives said that they were advised to corroborate the children's stories. The pastors said that they felt they were religiously profiled.

On one occasion, the social services officials expressed disapproval that during a bible study at Pastor Edire's home, the parents raised the question of homosexuality with the children. The pastor explained the aim of the bible study was to open a discussion in the family around a question the younger son had asked him. The boy had asked his dad what he would say if the boy were gay. In their report and submission to the Magistrate's Court, which was charged with deciding the Special Provisions on the Care of Young People case involving the children, the social workers made an issue that the family discussed the question on homosexuality

⁴⁵ In this conversation recounted in this paragraph, Pastor Paul Wadebe describes how his children's attitude towards the parents has changed after coming into contact with social services officials at the temporary holding centre, where they were kept for three months together with their mother while the family was being investigated by the police and social workers.

⁴⁶ "Lag (1990:52) med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga" (cited in Hofverberg, "Child Protection Law and Policy").

from a biblical point of view. Nonetheless, Pastor Edire felt that though both their Christian faith and their specific African cultural orientation regard homosexuality as unnatural, they were tolerant of values that the Swedish society upholds. However, social services officials claimed that the family home was unsafe for the children and that the parents showed gross deficiency in parenting and building a family in Sweden. Once again, Pastor Edire saw his family in what he called a head-on collision with Swedish law, which in his view, is intolerant to immigrants' religious and cultural values.

Pastor Edire also described what he sees as the influence of the prevailing negative stereotype of religion on his children. During a family therapy session for parents and children, two years after the children were returned to their parents, religion became the focus of discussion. The children submitted that they understood that according to law, Sweden is a secular country, adding that they knew from school and society that there is no God. They complained to the therapist that their parents were forcing them to be Christians. They argued that they were never given a chance to choose to be Christians or not, protesting that the parents were being unfair by making them go to church just because they are their children. The therapist highlighted the relevant law and pointed out that because of their age and the fact that they are still living at home under their parents' care, they do not have much choice.

However, the therapist emphasised that no one in Sweden, including parents, should force them to do what they do not want to do. With that official clarification, the parents realised they would go to church alone, leaving their children home playing video games or visiting their friends. The parents, as they put it, were keen not to attract any more trouble from the authorities. Pastor Edire came to the conclusion that though one can appreciate how Swedish laws define children's rights and freedoms, and how religion is taught in schools and viewed in an increasingly post-Christian Swedish society, it is a matter of contestation for immigrant families. It is illustrative to point out that, in Sweden, there seems to be a conceptual distinction between identifying as a member of the Church of Sweden or as a Muslim and being religious. In some sense, being religious has pejorative connotations. For some, this distinction is attributed to what is perceived as Swedish secularism.

THE SOCIAL BAROMETER OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

In Sweden, images of "suffering" and probably traumatised immigrants loom large in ordinary peoples' imagination. The results of the Swedish national social barometer 2010 report show that 59.3% of the sample agree that diversity "develops" the Swedish culture; however, at the same time, those who agreed with the statement that immigrants "have an obligation to adapt to the habits of our country" constitute an even larger majority of 83.8%.⁴⁷ Though there seems to

47 Orlando M and Palm I. 2010. *Mångfaldsbarometern 2010* [The Diversity Barometer 2010]. Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, 4.

be an openness to accepting other cultural elements, they must be integrated into a common Swedish culture. About 64% of Swedish society say that "there are groups of immigrants who are unable to integrate into our culture".⁴⁸ In the survey results, social distance is reported using a distance curve, ranging from 0 to 6. Zero indicates no cultural distance, and 6 is the maximum cultural distance. According to this measure, cultural distance is lowest in relation to inhabitants of neighboring Nordic countries, followed by the English, Germans and Americans, who belong to the Western European community. Ethnic groups who are farther away on this scale include Turks, Kurds, Chinese, Iranians, Iraqis, Romans and Somalis.⁴⁹ Thus, in this scale, Somalis are placed furthest from the Swedes.

To some extent, geographical distance is important for the experience of ethnic distance, but it does not explain everything. Religion, other cultural expressions and historical events are also important. Nationalities and ethnic groups in which Christianity is the dominant religion are perceived to be closer than those in which Islam is the dominant religion.⁵⁰ Even so, religion is still considered to be a private matter in Sweden and overt public expression of religious beliefs is often frowned upon.

The latest social barometer reveals deteriorating attitudes amongst young people, who feel that "Many people with a foreign background come to Sweden just to take advantage of our social benefits."⁵¹ The results also show that the older a person is, the more negative attitudes they have to diversity in the four indexes used for the survey: culture, work, religion and housing. The barometer shows that younger age groups have more positive attitudes towards diversity and have also become more negative towards the claim that social welfare benefits foreign-born people.⁵² The results of the social barometer are quite revealing: the conclusion is that most people in Sweden have a generally negative attitude towards diversity. There is no doubt that a negative attitude can influence the interaction between the immigrant communities and the rest of the Swedish society, especially when "the social workers have the professional latitude to focus on non-statutory interventions to ensure that the child has good enough living conditions".⁵³ As intimated above, the use of professional latitude to make decisions about real and perceived violence against children at home depends largely on individual discretion.

Edvardsson has provided a catalogue of the weaknesses of the investigations conducted by social workers following allegation of violence against children. He lists thirty-three damning "critical observations",⁵⁴ based on his extensive

48 Orlando and Palm, *Mångfaldsbarometern* 2010, 7.

49 Orlando and Palm, *Mångfaldsbarometern* 2010, 7.

50 Orlando and Palm, *Mångfaldsbarometern* 2010, 7.

51 Ahmadi F and Palm I. 2020. *Mångfaldsbarometern 2020* [The Diversity Barometer 2020] Department of Sociology, University of Gävle.

52 Ahmadi and Palm, *Mångfaldsbarometern* 2020, 4.

53 Khoo, Hyvönen and Nygren "Child welfare or child protection", 466.

54 See Edvardsson, "Child protection investigations in the Swedish social services", 2-5.

experience training social workers and researching social work in Sweden. These include instances which Edvardsson describes thus:

The perspectives of the investigator are not made explicit in the text, e.g. why so many small and trivial defects of the parents and the children are accumulated and not the strengths or why the knowledge of the clients is not worth taking into consideration. A negative and pessimistic view of humans is one of the foundations of the child protection investigations ... The investigations are not holistic in their perspective as they are to a large extent preoccupied with negative data about the family.⁵⁵

All of the families that participated in our study echo Edvardsson's critical observations. They complain that social workers do not listen to the parents' explanations or concerns. They stick to their own story without regard for the necessary evidence to support the allegations of violence or maltreatment of children. The case of Pastor Daniel Edire, for example, gives a glimpse into the workings of the social services machinery, and it also corroborates Edvardsson's observations.

Although the court did not find any evidence to support the allegations that Edire was violent to his children, the authorities did not allow him to be near them. Until proven innocent, he was viewed as a danger to them. The reports from doctors concluded there was no evidence of violence on the children's bodies, and a psychologist confirmed that the children had no evidence of psychological trauma. The police, too, submitted their report confirming lack of evidence of violence in the family and closed the case. These results were presented during the court sessions that sought to decide whether the children should remain in foster care or be returned to their parents. Surprisingly, the court ruled in favour of the child welfare officials. The children's father explained that it was clear they suspected that violence had taken place in the family, and that this may have escaped detection during the investigations. As if to show lenience, the social services offered a parenting course as a condition for the children to come back home to the family. The family lawyer advised them to comply, since this would give them back their children.

The results of the two social barometers clearly show that negative attitudes towards migrants abound, and that a majority of Swedes believe that immigrants are obligated to adopt Swedish habits and norms. We argue therefore, that the underlying prejudices and assumptions about migrant families from conflict-affected countries, came to life particularly during the investigation by the social workers. For instance, when the social services invited Pastor Edire and his wife for further interrogation sessions, which took place in Swedish with an interpreter using a phone on loudspeaker, they told them unequivocally that African parents, especially fathers, are authoritarian and that they suspected that the pastor was

55 In his study of the investigations of family violence against children, Bo Edvardsson, rebukes the social services for conducting investigation on alleged violence against children where the "fundamental principle is to accumulate as much negative data as possible, irrespective of their importance for the questions at hand. See Edvardsson, "Child protection investigations in the Swedish social services", 3.

strict with his children. This apparently negative stereotype of religion is further expounded below.

To the parents, it does not make sense when the officials invite them to the local social services office and inform that their children have been taken from the school or will be taken to foster care following a report of extreme violence in the family. They are advised to wait for the police to start interrogations regarding alleged violence against the children. At the same time, parents are supposed to cooperate and approve the placement of their children in foster care by signing relevant legal documents. Some of them are unwilling to do so because, after all, their signature does not really matter because it is a just formality, as they put it. However, pursuant to the relevant laws, social workers can take the necessary action without the consent of the parents, if deemed necessary. In such cases, the matter is left in the hands of the police for investigation and medical examination. The results of the investigations are used to determine whether it is befitting for the children to be placed under permanent foster care or be restored to their parents. The Edire case was decided in favour of the social services, though there was no evidence from either the police or the psychologist to suggest that the parents had violated or maltreated the children.

According to a former *skolkuratör* (school social welfare and counsellor) interviewed for this study, there are a number of reasons why African children are more likely to be taken into foster care.⁵⁶ Based on her experience, she said that for example if parents beat their child, they should go to the social workers and report that they got angry and beat their child, and ask for advice on how they can raise the child in a different way. If parents go there before anybody reports them for violence against their children, then they get help how to do it. If parents cannot handle their children, they should go to the social services and tell them about it. However, the African parents keep saying "in our culture we raise children, we advise them and give them instructions".⁵⁷

But the parenting rules in Sweden are different. For example, the former *skolkuratör* described a case of a child who came home and told the parent that she was bullied and beaten by other kids at school. The father told her to "beat them back"⁵⁸ if they beat her again. Then the school contacted social workers and claimed the father told the child to beat other children. When the school contacted social workers about this, the child was taken away from the parents. Furthermore, when social services calls for a meeting with all the parties concerned, the parents tend to take it personally. In their view, being called to a meeting with "the Social" officials suggests that "your home is not your domain and that they have the power to tell

56 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka by A Kubai, Stockholm, Sweden, 6 July 2021. This social worker has experience as a *skolkuratör* (school welfare and counsellor) and she is a qualified lawyer.

57 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka, 6 July 2021.

58 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka.

you how to raise your children".⁵⁹ The parents do not understand. They wonder why they cannot decide over their children and shape them as they grow up and why they should not yell at the children if they make mistakes. Apparently, parents do not understand that if they upset the children, "they need to apologise to them, to beg them ... you must say you are sorry".⁶⁰ However, according to the African cultural norms to which African parents are accustomed, age is accorded respect. Therefore, begging small children for forgiveness for yelling at when they make mistakes is alien to the cultural understandings of respect. Evidently, such norms clash with the provisions of the Swedish Parental Code Act.⁶¹

The social worker also suggested that many parents work all the time and that they have several jobs to make ends meet. Others are single mothers struggling to survive with their children, and this also puts pressure on them. They are likely not to spend quality time with their children. They are not at home most of the time. In Africa you have the support of aunties and others in the extended families keeping an eye on the children. That kind of family support is not available in a migration context, and the parents can feel frustrated. Often, they just come home and ask the children "Have you cooked?" In such cases, they have little communication with their children. When parents are not present at home or are not involved in their children's life, they have a weak emotional bond. They do not know what their children feel or what they are capable of doing. The children could be growing into criminals, for example, and the parents are shocked when they hear that their children have shoplifted. In such a case, the most likely reaction of a parent who is shocked is to yell at the child or even beat the child. If a child is beaten, they can report their parents to the school. The teachers listen, and usually they contact the child welfare officials. For the parent then, it seems that the children are listening to somebody else. In such cases, the children are lost, and the parents too are lost. They lose each other. The result is loss of identity, loss of everything and the family begins to sink to the lowest level.

The parents are caught unawares of the deteriorating relationships in the family when their children begin to answer back or even to scream at them. The parents complain that "they don't listen" (*De lyssnar inte*).⁶² In such cases, the social workers say the African parents are mad, or traumatised, and they must go for parenting classes. On the one hand, the parents do not appreciate the idea that someone should teach them how to raise their children. On the other hand, their attitudes towards being trained to be good parents infuriate the social workers, who believe that since the parents cannot be trusted to care for the children, they need to be

59 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka.

60 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka.

61 See the Parental Code Act, ch 6 and ch 21: "Children are entitled to care, security and a good upbringing. They shall be treated with respect for their person and their distinctive character and punishment or any other humiliating treatment." *Lagen om Föräldrabalk* [The Parental Code Act], SFS 1949:381. Amendments (SFS 1998:319).

62 "*De lyssnar inte*" means "they don't listen". This was frequently said by African parents of their children, even by parents who were not investigated for child maltreatment.

trained in parenting according to the Parental Code Act.⁶³ The social worker we interviewed suggested that the parents who felt unnatural during the home visit by the social services staff should have told them that they felt this way, so that they could discuss the issue. The social workers do things automatically, and they have their own issues, versions of the story, and challenges in understanding what the parents want. The parents say, "The social workers do not listen to me", but the social workers say, "Don't tell us about yourself. You are centring yourself. Centre the child instead."⁶⁴ Here, while the social worker brings a sobering view to our discussion, she also illuminates our understanding of the perspective from the other side, namely, the social services perspective.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of how different cultures, social welfare services and child protection institutions intersect to shape parenting practices and childhood experiences amongst African families in Sweden. The encounter of African migrant families with the social services produces a struggle for migrant parents to understand what is wrong with the way they raise their children. Many of them feel having their children taken into protective custody and having to attend training sessions to learn how to be "good" or "adequate" parents in Sweden to be humiliating. What they need to learn and accept is that liberal parenting practices are entrenched in the law of the land, and there is no place for strict regimes to regulate children's behaviour at home.

This chapter has illustrated how the African migrant families encounter the Swedish child welfare and social service agencies. For the African families, the first point of contact with the Swedish system is the school, which works in tandem with the social services to ensure that children are raised in a safe environment according to the Swedish law and practice. The clashes with the law, religion and culture seem almost inevitable as allegations of violence against children lead to criminal investigation of the families concerned. Children of African families continue to be taken into protective custody or foster care while the parents are left baffled.

It seems that some cultural clashes around religion and authoritarian child-rearing practices occur because the African parents are not used to law and the state having such an intrusive role in their family lives. This may be, in part, due to a variety of cultural reasons, including their more communal and traditional norms and values in which interpersonal and intra-family relations are embedded. Narratives of the African parents, thus, paint a picture of a distressing process of investigation of alleged violence and placement of children, especially when parents are reluctant to authorise foster care for their children. When the social workers take away children and place them in foster care, parents are baffled as to what exactly could have led to such extreme measures by the authorities, while they remain convinced that

63 *Lagen om Föräldrabalk* [The Parental Code Act], SFS 1949:381. Amendments (SFS 1998:319).

64 Telephone interview with Beatrice Waseka, 6 July 2021.

everything at home was going on smoothly. This sense of bafflement afflicts African parents in Sweden, who feel that neither their children nor the social services are listening to them and that their children are no longer theirs.