

The Institutionalization of Child-Friendly Bench in a Child Protection System: Practices, Perspectives and Barriers in Gimbi Town, Oromia, Ethiopia

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Abstract: The main objective of the study was to examine the practices, and perspectives of the child friendly bench workers and barriers of child friendly bench at Western Wallaga, Gimbi town. The study employed qualitative research with case study methods as it helped get a holistic and in-depth understanding of views of the study participants. Relevant study participants were purposively selected, and thus, relevant data were gathered through in-depth interview and observation. Out of the raw data, patterns, categories or themes were built, interpreted, triangulated and thematically analyzed. It was revealed that the advent of child friendly bench was appreciated and welcomed as a result of which different child protection cases were attempted to be entertained although the implementation status was not as such satisfactory vis-à-vis the prevalence and persistence of cases. Obstructing factors, including shortage of budget, absence of capacity building trainings, limitation of commitment, lack of collaboration, shortage of facilities, and not yet treatment of cases at separate room were among the barriers of child friendly bench. Overall, child friendly bench failed to have the attributes to qualify for the task it was designed to execute although the existences of some attempts were undeniable. Hence, empathetic and concerted efforts were implied to meet the very objective of child friendly bench, which is child protection.

Keywords: Barriers; Child friendly bench; Gimbi town; Perspectives; Practices

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1. Introduction

Child protection refers to the protection of children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse, and protection from economic and electronic exploitation (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 1989). Child protection is an effort aiming at strengthening the care of the most vulnerable children, and preventing all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse against children ensuring full maintenance of the rights of all children at all times in accordance with the UNCRC and other related international, regional and national instruments (Ruiz-Casares, Collins, Tisdall and Grover, 2017). Globally, ascribed to lack of protection, children face multifaceted risks, such as separation from caregivers, family violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, disabilities, violence in schools and communities, early marriage, justice-related issues, living on the streets, dangerous labor, trafficking, and inability to meet basic needs (Wessells, 2015). Child abuse in Africa is also identified to be a major threat to the achievement of the sustainable development goals on the continent and has become dramatically increasing (Badoe, 2017). In Ethiopia, the problem of child maltreatment and abuse has been rampant, and prevails in all communities and settings. It threatens almost all children and happens to most children in its varied forms. It has been aggravated by complex factors such as poverty, illiteracy, violent conflicts and war, harmful traditional practices and more. In addition, the consequences of child protection violations are catastrophic, profound, enduring and often deadly for children (Pankhurst, Negussie and Mulugeta, 2016).

Due to the fact that children are among the most vulnerable sections of the society owing to the level of their mental and physical immaturity preventing them from protecting their own rights and interests, plethora of human rights instruments and domestic legislations obligates governments to provide special protection (Tesfaye, 2017). Girma (2015) indicated that international and regional human rights instruments obliges states to create a separate justice system as a protection strategy and structure in which a priority is given to the “best interests” of the child in legislation, policy, and practice.

To that effect, the Ethiopian government has ratified and adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention on the Worst Forms of Labor. Following this, there have been ongoing efforts by the government to put into effect national laws, policies, including national child policy, and practices to the international standards level with the ultimate objective of sustaining children’s natural human rights and the constitutional democratic rights although different forms of violence against children continued to be pervasive in the country (Nahom, 2018).

It was unveiled that due to the grave manifestations of children’s maltreatments, child protection is meant as an important response to prevent and address all forms of ill treatment that harm or are likely to cause harm to a child’s or young person’s safety, well-being, development or human dignity in all settings (Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, 2017). The best approach to child protection is to build systems and protective environments in which the rights of children are protected. Making the justice process ‘child friendly’, for example, is a key priority for the children’s rights community (Stalford, Cairns and Marshall, 2017).

Child friendly justice as part and parcel of the concept and practice of child protection is particularly concerned with children who come into contact to a justice system. It denotes justice systems are designed to guarantee the respect and the effective implementation of all children’s rights at the highest attainable level (Baffa, 2011; Wessells, 2015). Child friendly justice is, in particular, justice that is accessible, age appropriate, speedy, diligent, adapted to and focused on the needs and rights of the child (Liefwaard, 2019). Petros (2014), on the other hand, found out that child friendly benches in courts are not effective and physically accessible, and thus, a great majority of children in contact with the law is out of reach of child-friendly justice.

Child Rights International Network [CRIN] (2016) also showed that child friendly justice involves taking special care of children whose lives have become entwined in the legal system as witnesses, complainants, victims and perpetrators during and after the judicial proceedings. It embraces the idea that child friendly justice helps positively shape children's lives, and minimizes challenges that they may face in the legal proceedings. Liefwaard (2020) indicated that the child friendly justice approaches children as actors, entitled to be protected against negative interferences with their short and long-term interests and empowered to engage with and participate in proceedings and decision-making in the context of a formal or informal state response to (alleged) criminal behavior.

A Child Friendly Bench (CFB), which is a specialized form of child friendly justice, can be described as a facility that allows children who have endured any violation of their rights to testify without having to face the alleged perpetrator. As regular court settings and procedures, which can instill fear and intimidation, are not child friendly, CFB is aimed to provide space for children to easily speak about the traumatic events that have happened to them in a separate room. A Close Circuit Television (CCTV) is connected to that room aimed to give the victim, perpetrator or witness child the freedom of being alone with an intermediary supposedly a social worker. Judges, prosecutor, attorney and the other entire audience are supposed to follow the proceedings in a separate court room through CCTV installed in the room (Petros, 2014; Sibusiso, 2018).

In Ethiopia, the movements of making the justice system friendly for children was commenced with the establishment and practice of child protection units mandated to provide and facilitate specialized services of protection and treatment for children. Vulnerable children under a high risk of abuse and offending as well as those who are abused, and those in conflict with the law were the main drivers of the movements. To this end, a child friendly bench was established in 2004 G.C. in Addis Ababa city, within the Federal First Instance Court (FFIC), and later replicated to all regions through the zonal and woreda court structures since 2009 G.C. (Baffa, 2011).

In a nutshell, the critical review of the existing literatures had shown that there was absence of wide-ranging studies in view of CFBs mainly in the Ethiopian settings. The most related study conducted on the subject matter by Petros (2014) itself was limited to accessibility and the criminal investigation aspect of the child friendly justice system, and was also different from the study area. The study conducted by Abate (2013) was also limited to the role of social workers in CFB at Addis Ababa. The most recent study by Nahom, Sisay and Yosef (2020) was limited to challenges and prospects of the criminal justice system in handling child victims and alleged offenders. It was also contextually different from the study under investigation.

Besides the gap of the study that called for investigation, the authors' were motivated to conduct the study on the subject matter due to the fact that child protection concerns were among the serious social problems that plausibly attract the attention of everyone since children are among the vulnerable sections of the society. More importantly, the authors' as social workers do have professional responsibilities to conduct research for knowledge production and/or problem-solving with particular attention to the needs of people who are vulnerable, oppressed and living in poverty.

To this end, among the plausible gaps that were open to investigation, the study examined the practices, perspectives of the workers/stakeholders and barriers in the case of child friendly bench in Gimbi town, West Wallaga Zone. Thus, the study was aimed to: (1) examine the practices of the child friendly bench; (2) identify the perspectives of the workers of child friendly bench; and (3) investigate the barriers of child friendly bench in Gimbi town.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study was conducted in Gimbi town West Wallaga Zone of Oromia National Regional State of Ethiopia. Gimbi town is about 438 km away from Addis Ababa/Finfinne-the capital city of Ethiopia. It, particularly of Second Instance Court (SIC), was where the child friendly bench was situated, and

thus, wherein different child protection concerns were attempted to be dealt with through the collaboration of different likeminded sectors.

The study employed qualitative research approach as it tends to be more open and flexible in discovering new issues and help to have an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon (Kreuger and Neuman, 2006). Accordingly, issues were viewed from the subjective experiences of participants of the study, whereupon their feelings, beliefs, behaviors, and opinions were thoroughly understood and interpreted accordingly. With this, case study was employed for the fact that the practices, perspectives and barriers of child friendly bench were sought to be investigated and presented through detailed contextual analysis and grounded in deep and varied sources of information in which quotes and narratives were used (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006; Creswell, 2007). From the types of case study, instrumental case study was employed by way of (Creswell, 2007) assertion since the study dealt with a single unit of analysis-child friendly workers/ stakeholders.

Among the sampling types, non-probability sampling was employed. As Kreuger and Neuman (2006) stated, qualitative researchers select participants who are relevant to provide substantial contribution to the study. Accordingly, the relevant child friendly bench workers/ stakeholders were purposely selected and interviewed as per the objectives of the study. The sample size for the study was determined by data saturation when gathering fresh data no longer revealed new properties (Creswell, 2014). To this end, 25 study participants were interviewed until thick and rich data were garnered, and thus, all objectives of the study were thoroughly attained.

2.2. Methods of Data Collection

The study employed both primary and secondary data to build an in-depth picture of the case at hand. Yin (2003) discussed that qualitative researchers rely on different methods for gathering data. Accordingly, participants of the study-child friendly bench workers/ stakeholders- involving social workers, judges, public prosecutors, police officers, attorney, focal persons from Women, Children and Youth Affairs Office were in-depth interviewed, and thus, the issues under investigation were deeply uncovered (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The study participants were contacted at least twice for an interview, in which each recorded interview session took one to two hours. With this, as Creswell (2014) affirmed, gathering data through observation was found imperative to complement the data gathered through the stated tool. Accordingly, non-verbal data were collected delving into the social and physical environments of the participants, and thus triangulated against the data collected through interview and document analysis. Besides, documents of the child friendly bench and other relevant materials were consulted as secondary sources of data. Hence, the triangulation of data collected both from the primary and secondary data sources were generated.

2.3. Methods of Data Analysis

The study employed thematic data analysis. As Creswell (2007) stated, coding and categorizing by themes are the most common elements of qualitative data analysis. Accordingly, the data collected from field notes, tape recorder and document analysis were attempted to be reduced into manageable themes. In the process, since coding involves a systematic recording of data, codes to cover key themes, ideas and concepts that were collected from the study site were used. Categories and sub-categories for codes were developed and thematically categorized in accordance with their similarities and differences in account of objectives of the study. Finally, headings and sub-headings of the categorized themes were developed and presented accordingly.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Consideration of ethical issue was crucial as the study dealt with human beings. According to Kreuger and Neuman (2006), researchers should follow proper ethical guidelines even when the study participants are negligent or unaware of that for the fact that no one should be coerced or forced to participate in the study and participation has to be with the full consent of the participants.

Accordingly, ethical issues for the safety, privacy and confidentiality of the participants were maintained, and pseudo names were used to ensure anonymity.

3. Results

The results of the study are organized under themes in light of the objectives of the study. Accordingly, three main themes, i.e., the practices of child friendly bench, the perspectives of child friendly bench workers/stakeholders and barriers of child friendly bench are thoroughly presented. With this, lack of finance, capacity building trainings, necessary facilities, and collaboration are identified as sub-themes of barriers of child friendly bench, and dealt with accordingly.

3.1. The Practices of Child Friendly Bench

According to Mrs. Hawani, a judge, Child Friendly Bench (CFB) is one of the structures of court office which was established to protect the rights of children in collaboration with other concerned stakeholders. It was a project initiated by a non-governmental organization called UNICEF and established in collaboration with the Federal Supreme Court. Different sensitive cases were properly dealt with especially before the ownership of project was transferred to the government. Child cases, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, custody issues, juvenile delinquency, child trafficking and more were addressed with relatively quality intervention. After about four years, it was handed over to the government. Then after, it was rolled-out to all woreda levels of the zone, and activities have, by and large, been being carried out.

Inspector Toltu, a focal person from Women, Children and Youth Affairs Office of the West Wallaga Zonal Police Administration, revealed that Child Protection Unit (CPU) was established in Oromia Police Commission in 2001 G.C. Then, it was cascaded through zonal to woreda levels commencing from 2003 G.C. with a conviction to contribute to child protection in the law enforcement and justice system processes. Since then, collaborative interventions and some achievements thereof were ensured, as the unit has been contributing its best to the successful practices of child friendly bench. "The cases of children that were used to be treated similar to that of adult's by any available police were abated, and have begun to be treated separately by trained personnel," Inspector Chala complimented.

Inspector Tolawak added that when children are brought to the child protection unit having been accused of committing an offence, their parents are contacted as they have the right to know about the situation of their children. Then, preliminary case investigation and report compiling takes place. The children's case/s is/are, then, thoroughly investigated by a specialized police officer, and a focal person from the Office of Women, Children and Youth affairs. Accordingly, a decision is made either to release the child under the responsibility of parents/guardians or to bring him/her to a child friendly court in collaboration with the prosecutors based on seriousness of the case/s.

Since its establishment, as Inspector Toltu explained, regardless of the existing serious hindering factors, they have been doing their best protecting the rights of children. Different forms of violence against and/or by the children were dealt with in collaboration with child protection workers/stakeholders. She specified as:

Child rape is among the most prevalent cases in our zone. In average, forty rape cases face justice per year. This is the only reported ones. As you know, the victims and their families, most of the time, do not want the case to be exposed in fear of stigma and social backstabbing. The structure through which cases reported has also limitations.

This shows that child protection units play proactive as well as reactive roles in their nature, and involve ensuring child friendly treatment within the police and entire justice process, including CFBs. They are established to provide and facilitate specialized services of protection and treatment for particularly vulnerable children. Children under a high risk of abuse and offending as well as those who are abused, and those in conflict with the law are the main clients of the unit.

Mr. Mustefa, the Office of Women, Children and Youth Legal Issues Coordinator, stated that the Office, as one of the entity of child protection has been contributing its best in protecting the rights of children commencing from its inception. A wide range of issues related to children, including child marriage, child labor, trafficking, abduction, female genital mutilation, abuse (mainly of physical, sexual abuse), abandonment, custody and more are sectorial concerns of the office. Accordingly, identification of cases, referrals and interventions in collaboration with child friendly bench and others thereof were daily practices of the office.

Mr. Burka, an expert, from the same office stressed that sexual abuse and/or attempt, child marriage and the resultant divorce, child abandonment and the resultant foster care and adoption were the most prevalent and challenging cases dealt with by the office. In view of that, awareness raising, advocacy, counseling, financial and material support, reporting and referral were among the executed activities in collaboration with child friendly justice offices as Mr. Mustefa supplemented.

Mr. Adugna, a judge, stated a number of complicated cases including unaccustomed child sexual abuses and death related cases that would not have dared to be addressed in the regular courts were successfully addressed due to the separation of the justice system. Mr. Idao, a para-social worker, added that not only criminal cases, but also different civil cases including divorce and custody of children and issues related to child inheritance cases were entertained at a separated child friendly court putting the best interests of the child at the center.

3.2. The Perspectives of the Child Friendly Bench Workers

Mr. Mustefa expressed that the attention given to children in general, and the idea of initiation of CFB to ensure justice for children in particular, is a noble idea. As he unveiled, there is no person or institution/organization that apparently stands up against the protection of children at least at the level of perception. Let alone sectors like the Office of Women, Children and Youth affairs which have fervent responsibility in the protection of the vulnerable segments of the population including children, the child abusers themselves recognize that children are innocent segments of the population, who need to be provided with proper care and protection. "At all levels of bureaucracies, everyone talks a lot about child protection. For me, what is missing, however, is a coordinated action, a sense of ownership, wholehearted and nonstop commitment in making sure the rights of children get protected," Mr. Mustafa stressed.

Mr. Amansisa, defendant's attorney assigned by court, described CFB as a structure recently meant with a conviction to render age-appropriate legal services for children below the age of eighteen. As he stated, child victims, children in conflict with the law and child witnesses visit courts, and then their cases are anticipated to be treated at the CFB separately from that of adult's court with a belief to provide speedy, diligent, knowledge and skill-led services. He feels, however, that anticipations are not put into effect at least most of the time. Failure to put clearly stipulated directives into practice profoundly due to negligence and lack of a sense of ownership were identified to be among the undeniable realities. He vented his views as:

I have been working in this court since the establishment of the CFB. Nonetheless, I have not seen when the cases of children were separately treated as per the requirements. What could be mentioned as an improvement may be the involvement of social worker and the treatment of cases in closed court.

As Mr. Amansisa further uncovered, 'closed court' means that it is not accessible to public, but judges, prosecutors, family members and social workers attend proceedings being in the same room. He furthered his standpoint that he does not personally agree with/to the semblance of closed court for children's case treatment as totally different from adult's cases. While three of the judges, two of the prosecutors of plaintiff and defendant, defendant and plaintiff themselves and their respective family member/s, if any, and social worker attend the proceedings in the same venue, this cannot be considered as a closed court when it comes to children's cases as exhibited. He articulated his interpretations as:

Specially, when the parties- the judges, prosecutors and attorneys wearing black gown and offenders sit down right in front of victims, and see them in their eyes, let alone for minors, it is so stressful for adults. Therefore, for me, the so-called closed court that appears as an excuse does not hold water.

Mrs. Sichale, a para-social worker of CFB feels that through CFB, the rights of children have more likely to be protected, and thus, best interests of the child could be realized if the necessary requirements fulfilled. As she stated, the cooperation of workers/stakeholders in planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and experience sharing is imperative if it is really needed to protect and react to child protection concerns.

Similarly, Mrs. Hawani revealed that the advent of CFB in which the cases of children are assumed to be treated in a different way, and at separate room that help children feel at home, and let them vent their feelings is promising. "Most of the cases associated with children are sensitive by their nature, which look for careful consideration," she added.

Mr. Dinkisa, a team leader of Gender, Social Affairs and CFB, who is also a judge, uncovers that a separate establishment of CFB is super important as the rights of children that could have been bridged due to unavailability of the structure might be protected. He stressed, although there are much more gaps yet to be addressed at the present time, he is optimistic about the futurity of children when it comes to the provision of justice. He believes that the CFB could contribute a lot in mitigating the infringement of child rights and in ensuring justice for children if fully put into practice, as careful, age appropriate and skill based service are anticipated to be provided.

Likewise, Mr. Diriba, a prosecutor, aired his views that the institutionalization of CFB into the court structure is commendable. The mere existence of CFB, however, has not yet contributed to child protection as per the expectation. Simple things that could not require external support, i.e., things that could be addressed in the capacity of the child protection workers were not done so ascribed to lack of serious consideration of the stakeholders, mainly of the administrators. If the existing directives related to the subject matter had been supported with serious considerations and follow up, positive changes could have been realized in defiance of the hampering factors as he expressed.

From the perspective of plaintiff and defendant, Mrs. Sinbone, a judge, feels that both need to be treated impartially as the law dictates. Even if the defendant is proven guilty, the rights he/she has should not be bridged; it has to be treated as per the law. In practice, however, among the justice organs- police and prosecutors take the side of plaintiff and his/her respective witnesses. For instance, if the stated parties come from a long distance and cannot address their basic needs, the needed costs are covered by police or prosecutor's office. On the other hand, there is no penny provided for the defendant and respective witnesses no matter what their economic condition is though the law obliges them to appear whenever called.

Congruently, Mr. Amansisa specified his viewpoint that the long stayed partiality between the plaintiff and defendant could have been addressed with the advent of CFB as it solely believed to focus on and stand up to make sure that the rights of children are equally protected. As pointed out, whenever children are demanded by justice organs either as defendant or witness on behalf of the defendant, there is no any support they are rendered with no matter how economically poor they are or distant place they come from. In view of that, he poses a question and suggests:

How can it be morally thinkable to enforce such children appear before justice organs failing to address at least their accommodation and transportation cost while doing the same for the accuser and his/ her witnesses otherwise? For me, police and prosecutors side taking towards one group and against the other is morally and legally wrong and unacceptable and it needs to be debated over and rectified.

Inspector Toltu revealed that she appreciated and delightedly welcomed the notion of the establishment of the so-called child protection unit in the police structure as one of the stakeholders of CFB aimed to pay special attention for children with the ultimate objective of ensuring justice for them. Accordingly, the unit was, by and large, contributing its best in addressing child protection concerns in general, and child justice in particular. She expressed that special attention was not as such given to children's cases before the commencement of the project. However, serious and special

attention was given to children's cases in a different way after the start of the project. She elucidated as:

Regardless of a number of challenges waiting to be solved, the views and integration of child protection unit into police administration structure as part and parcel of child friendly bench help make certain that children are the future then again vulnerable who must be protected as much as possible.

As Mrs. Iftu, one of the focal persons from the Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, revealed, the establishment of the structure itself, the mental satisfaction gained out of working for children and ensuring justice for them are far more pleasing than doing the same thing for adults. She perceives that children must be protected as they are innocent; and suggests that adults have to be a source of love, affection, hope and safeguarding. Likewise, Inspector Toltu specified that she personally strives to serve the children beyond her job descriptions, and thus get immeasurable satisfaction out of it. "Kan waajjiraa mitiitii, itti gammadeetan horii dhuunfaa koo daa'immaniif baasaatuman oola." Roughly translated as "I do repeatedly spend my own money for children's causes joyfully leave alone the office's budget," she emphasized.

3.3. Barriers of Child Friendly Bench

3.3.1. Financial problems

The study findings revealed that the shortage of budget was identified to be among the tough impediments of child protection in the process of law enforcement and justice systems. Inspector Toltu unveiled that the dearth of budget for the child protection unit in general, and for the Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs in particular, has significantly affected the effectiveness of service provision. It was specified that there was no formally allocated budget for the stated sector though there were a number of activities that could not be executed without budget. Very limited and informal financial support, at times, was provided by the Zonal Police Administration Office and Zonal Office of Women, Children and Youth affairs when the case at hand was believed to be very critical though they themselves had a shortage of budget. "This is the so-called child protection unit and staffed to protect the rights of children with almost no allocated budget. Can you imagine how much difficult it is?" she said.

It was shown that due to financial problems, the very notion of child protection in general, and the rights of children in the justice systems were utterly jeopardized. Regular experience sharing among the workers/stakeholders of child protection, regular field work, monitoring and follow up of the clients, sensitization trainings for the wider community and refresher trainings for the staff, and more were almost disused by the pretext of shortage of budget.

Similarly, according to Mr. Mustefa, acute shortage of budget was the most critical factor of his sector, which also in turn affected the CFB daily activities. He resonated as:

Shortage of budget is the most serious problem that we, as a sector, have been facing. Although we come across a number of critical cases, which could not be addressed without budget, only one percent of the executive budget, which is 720.00 Birr, is allocated for us. Can you imagine! What could be done with this money? To tell you the truth, what is budgeted for a year is consumed within two to three months though a number of people with different unbearable problems knock at our door on a daily basis.

Consequently, as he revealed, a number of staffs leave their job for failure to stand against the daily heart wrenching problems of their clients, mainly of children and women who come to look their support, but return empty handed. "While you are required to address the problems of clients, at least the critical ones, incapable, however, to do so, it is really heart breaking," he added.

Mr. Dinkisa also recognized that the responsibility of full financial sponsorship transference from UNICEF to the government mandate has seriously affected the functionality of CFB. For instance, the very salary of social worker was cut by more than half. Capacity building trainings that used to be provided for CFB stakeholders were totally halted afterwards. Moreover, budget that was used to be allocated for fieldwork was banned as a result of which the scope of the expected intervention was desperately narrowed down: "After the government takeover of the project [CFB], salary, training,

and facility issues emerged as burning questions. For instance, our professional social worker was resigned attributed to the decrement of his salary form about 5,500.00 birr to 2,500.00,” he specified. Mrs. Hawani added: “We could not find a professional and experienced social worker who could be employed by the stated salary.”

It can be understood from the elucidated findings that the attention given to the subject matter, child protection, vis-à-vis the existing facts in view of action on the ground was so discouraging attributed to unprecedented shortage of budget. The discourses through media, and the legal documents on the paper were not practically seen on the ground implemented as ought to be. What is more, absence of like-minded organizations, mainly of NGOs at the study area that could have contributed their best through the provision of different forms of supports; including financial assistance was among the extra contributing bottlenecks. Accordingly, the sustainability of the project (CFB) as per the standard is yet to be seen.

3.3.2. Lack of capacity building trainings

Limitation of capacity building training was identified to be among the constraints. As Inspector Toltu unveiled, there was almost no capacity building trainings for the responsible workers, who were, in principle, supposed to be provided with regular and specialized trainings in order for them to provide up-to-date, and thus, quality services for their client children. The inspector unveiled a kind of Training of Trainers (ToT) was provided at the Federal level presumed to be scaled up/ rolled out through Zone to Woreda to the extent of “*Got*” level three years back. As a result, the supposed training was, by and large, provided only for some focal persons at the Woreda level. Since then, however, there has not even been proper communications, especially from Zone to Woreda through “*Kebele*” and “*Got*.” She recounted the scenario as:

Because of the absence of peace and security that we all know, let alone the provision of capacity building trainings, there is no way to receive any reports. Though we recognize that child protection concerns are desperately increasing more even compared to the past, we kept silent arms twisted.

Mr. Mustefa also mentioned that lack of up-to-date trainings for the staffs as well as awareness raising trainings for the community were among the critical bottlenecks. As stated, because of the lack of awareness raising trainings and other contributing factors, problems that once reduced were critically resurfacing. For instance, HIV/AIDS and the resultant orphan, child sexual abuse, child abandonment, childbirth without marriage wedlock, delinquency and more are alarmingly rematerializing. Mr. Tolossa, one of the experts from the Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, echoed as: “Maybe it is due to lack of sensitization trainings that the child abandonment is highly increasing. There has been no single day passed without seeing at least one abandoned child.”

Mr. Amansisa, similarly, uncovered that absence of up-to-date trainings remains as a bottleneck. As it was revealed, for the last three to four years no training was provided. Surprisingly, the very person, social worker, who is there on behalf of the clients believed to have contributed a lion share, is not a professional social worker or else has not been provided with any training, either before or after she assumed the post.

Mrs. Sichale, a para social worker, uncovered that lack of capacity building training has affected her daily activities. She specified that lack of appropriate knowledge, skills and experiences were among the tough challenges she encountered. As she mentioned, her educational background was Law, although the post requires a professional social worker who must have at least first degree in Social Work (BSW) or Masters in Social Work (MSW). What was more unexpected was that she was not provided with any capacity building trainings. As a result, she felt that she was not competent and confident enough in executing her duties. She could easily be manipulated by other stakeholders, while she should have been competent enough and play a leadership role in dealing with child protection concerns. The other para-social worker, Mr. Gadisa, likewise signposted that lack of the required competencies and capacity building trainings have utterly affected the quality of services he was providing.

To this end, relative to what is expected and uncovered, it can be understood that still far more distance remains to go. The roles of trainings have not yet begun to be recognized and internalized by the concerned institutions. Among different kinds of necessary trainings, at least basic trainings, leave alone the specialized ones, were not provided. Great majority of the responsible personnel, therefore, were doing their jobs simply on the basis of presumption. Hence, designing and implementing different wide-ranging trainings ranging from basic trainings to awareness building through specialized trainings for all of the involved personnel need to be among the tasks necessary to be carried out so that quality services could be delivered.

3.3.3. Lack of necessary facilities

The study findings revealed that there were desperate shortages of essential facilities, and thus affecting the qualities of service provisions. The authors' observation of child protection unit and child friendly bench at the study area also complimented what was stated. Although a separate room with necessary facilities was required, including but not limited to, Close Circuit Television (CCTV), television, sofa, dolls of both sexes, different age-appropriate child play materials, mini-bed, age appropriate entertaining and fiction books, and the like, only very few of the stated materials were available.

Since the establishments of child protection centers basically that of child protection unit and child friendly bench, it was resonated that there was no any necessary facility purchased to be added, especially after the withdrawal of UNICEF. The ones purchased by the support of UNICEF themselves were reduced to very few facilities. Some were recklessly discarded, and some were too old to be used. It did not also seem that the personnel recognized the roles and values of some of the aforementioned materials as the authors observation signified. With this, Inspector Toltu stated: "Even in the future, I do not think that the required facilities as per the standard will be fulfilled by the government."

As the authors' observation implied, lack of the required facilities coupled with that of commitment and sense of ownership, the cases of children regardless of their sensitivity were not treated as per the requirement hitherto. For a number of minor reasons that did not count, the child friendly bench has not fully engaged into work since its establishment at the study area backdated to 2015 G.C.

3.3.4. Lack of collaboration

The study findings revealed that there was no as such strong and practical collaboration among the involved personnel and across the very units established aimed to contribute to the betterment of child protection works. Even though specialized/dedicated collaboration was sought among the concerned stakeholders as they were pooled together to provide specialized services, the nature of their collaboration was found to be simply normal or usual way of collaboration. Real participation in crafting a common vision, mission, goal, strategy and the like to achieve a common goal, and the resultant limitation of collaboration owing to lack of a sense of ownership and integration were missed.

Mr. Mustefa, for instance, pointed out that there has not been meaningful collaboration among the stakeholders. As he discussed, child protection in principle is not a responsibility bestowed upon a single or two organizations. It looks for the collaboration of all sectors be it government organizations, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, families and individuals of different walks of life. The actual practice on the ground, however, has been far beyond from what ought to be. He specified that leave alone the wider communities and other sectors that may have indirect responsibilities; there has not long been significant and real collaboration among the stakeholders ostensibly working for a common purpose, which is protecting children from abusive, violent and exploitative environments. He added as:

Every so often, discourses here and there remain on the tip of the tongue, but consistent, timely and concrete action is often missing. I would rather say that the issues of children similar to many other issues have been politicized as usual.

Mr. Gadisa also uncovered that though the cases of children are anticipated to be prioritized and dealt with as effectively as possible, it could not be realized most of the time, ascribed to bureaucracies, which emanates from lack of strong coordination and collaboration among the stakeholders. He reiterated as: “Miira maal nadhibeetu jira”, which literally means, “There is a sense of why should I care?”

It was emphasized that there was no strong crosswise sectorial platform that may help for the roll-out and replication of high impact for sectorial interventions, if any, and there was no coordinated planning, monitoring, implementing and monitoring of interventions across sectors and among personnel. This resulted in the poor performance of the involved personnel, and negatively contributed to the achievement of the objective of the intervention (CFB).

4. Discussions

The study unveiled that different forms of child protection concerns were widespread and increasing at the study area although child protection intervention- child friendly bench-was meant with an effort to preventing all forms of violence against children and strengthening the treatment of the vulnerable ones. Similarly, Baffa (2011), Wessells (2015), and Nahom (2018) exhibited that different forms of violence against children continue to be pervasive in Ethiopia ascribed to lack of practical child protection. There have been, however, ongoing efforts to ensure the sustenance of children’s natural human rights and the constitutional democratic rights. The irony, as Badoe (2017) pointed out, congruent to the study findings was that child protection concerns have become dramatically increasing.

As the study revealed, child friendly bench, a specialized form of child protection, was established to provide quality, age-appropriate and specialized services for children involved in the justice system apparatus as witnesses, victims and offenders. Similarly, a separate justice system- child friendly bench, inter alia, was meant as a protection strategy and structure in which a priority is given to the children’s rights due to the fact that children are among the most vulnerable sections of the society owing to their mental and physical immaturity (Girma, 2015; Ruiz-Casares *et al.*, 2017; Tesfaye, 2017).

The study uncovered that although the mere establishment of child friendly bench and the attempts made so far to provide child friendly services were praiseworthy as it was at least one step away from none, the achievements made so far were not appreciable to the extent hoped-for. The quality of service provision and scope of interventions were far below than what was anticipated notwithstanding the widely increasing child protection concerns. Petros (2014) consistently showed that child friendly benches in courts were not effective and physically accessible. As a result, a great majority of children in contact with the law were out of reach of child-friendly justice. On the other hand, Wessells (2015) and Liefwaard (2019) indicated that child friendly justice is justice that is accessible, age appropriate, speedy, diligent, and adapted to and designed to guarantee the respect and the effective implementation of all children’s rights at the highest attainable level. In view of that, every participant of the study, in principle, perceived so. The problem, however, was lack of a sense of ownership, absence of wholehearted commitment and the resultant lack of coordinated and concrete actions beyond perceptions.

The establishment of the child friendly bench, among others, was to lead the child victim to a separate private room, which connects the court by video surveillance where such a child through the assistance of a court intermediary, testifies, poses questions and answers questions posed by a judge, prosecutor, or defense lawyer within the proceedings (Sibusiso, 2018; Liefwaard, 2020). The study findings, conversely, revealed that the cases of children involved in the legal proceedings were treated in the same venue of adults. Things improved so far were the engagement of para-social workers, who

themselves were untrained though, and the disallowance of public attendance in semblance of the closed court. However, judges, public prosecutor, police, attorney, social worker, victim, perpetrator, and families of both the victim (if any) and perpetrator get gathered in the same courtroom and attend the proceedings. For failure of preparation of the existing separate room and fulfillment of necessary facilities, the term “closed court” was used as an excuse.

It was shown that making the justice process ‘child friendly’ is a key priority for the children’s rights community. The justice process, including a child friendly bench is required to have the attributes to qualify for the task that it has been designed to carry out. In view of that, all the personnel working at the child friendly bench must be specially trained; the environment must be conducive; the building must be easily accessible and located where the privacy of children is not endangered (Petros, 2014; Stalford *et al.*, 2017; Limante, Vaiciuniene and Apolevic, 2022). Although some attempts were undeniably made, the study findings revealed that several gaps still remain to be addressed. For instance, almost the personnel were not provided with specialized trainings- they were working based on general experiences and intuitions. Besides, the setup of the building was not easily accessible, and thus, the privacy of children was affected. Different associated facilities attributed to various factors were also not fulfilled yet.

5. Conclusions and Implications of the Study

5.1. Conclusions

As it was indicated, the main objective of the study was to examine the practices, perspectives of the workers/stakeholders and barriers of child friendly bench in Gimbi town as part and participle of the child protection systems. As a qualitative research, patterns, categories or themes were built out of the raw data, and the data were interpreted and triangulated in line with the objectives of the study.

Accordingly, it was shown that child protection consists of reducing risks to children’s holistic well-being, making children’s rights a reality, restoring hope and a dignified living where abuse has occurred and creating an enabling environment that supports children’s positive development. However, children’s protection from violence, exploitation, and abuse is weak in much of the world, more badly in developing countries despite the near universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. More often than not, improved legislation is not accompanied by significant changes in a state or private practices and capacity.

Child protection efforts comprise a wide range of proactive and reactive measures, including but not limited to, prevention of the risk of abuse and maltreatment through measures that address causal factors; protection of children at risk through measures that impede possibility of the incidents of abuse as well as mitigate the consequences; and investigation and adjudication of the cases of abuse and maltreatment. The nature of programmatic response as the findings exhibited, however, has tended to be more of curative rather than preventative in nature addressing symptoms rather than the underlying systems that failed to protect children.

Child friendly bench, as a specialized child protection system, was established to provide quality and age-appropriate service for children involved in the law enforcement and justice system processes as witnesses, victims and perpetrators. In view of that, child protection concerns, child trafficking, child sexual abuse, child sexual abuse attempt, child abandonment, child marriage and more were among the cases attempted to be dealt with.

Overall, the very objective of the establishment of child friendly bench, which was the provision of quality, speedy, diligent and age appropriate service for children, however, was not achieved to the extent sought-for. Financial problems, lack of capacity building trainings, lack of necessary facilities, lack of commitment and a sense of ownership, and lack of real and meaningful collaboration were identified as wide-ranging and stubborn obstructions.

5.2. Implications of the Study

The study implied that different interventions are required to ensure child protection through child friendly bench among others. To this end, capacity building trainings; collaboration among the stakeholders; reactive and protective measures; the problem of deprofessionalization; and issues related to financial/budget problems were implied to be seriously considered as articulated hereunder.

I. Provision of capacity building trainings: The study implied that most of the practices of child protection in general and child friendly justice comprising child friendly bench in particular require specialized knowledge, skills and competencies. As pointed out, most of the responsible workforces were short of the above-stated specialized capabilities due to either deprofessionalization or absence of capacity building trainings. Therefore, varied, continuous, upgrading, regular, refresher and specialized trainings should be provided for the primarily involved professionals as well as collaborating implementers.

II. Enhancing collaboration: The study implied that successful execution of child friendly justice entails a system approach. A system comprising the efforts of all involved actors (social workers, judges, prosecutors, attorneys, police officers, focal persons from the office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs and more); and efforts between governmental and non-governmental organizations were found indispensable. Hence, the efforts of creating mechanisms of collaboration among the aforementioned personnel and across different sectors deemed vital ought to be orchestrated and enhanced.

III. Taking proactive and reactive measures: As the study revealed, though the concept of child protection involves prevention as well as response to child protection concerns, the activities of child friendly justice/bench was limited to responding to cases that appear before courts. The most important elements of child protection - prevention was entirely overlooked. Therefore, both proactive and reactive measures have to be considered. In fact, the weightiest focus has to be made on prevention as it, plausibly, is better than curative approach.

IV. Addressing the problem of deprofessionalization: As the study implied, the profession-based roles of social workers' were not recognized to the extent it ought to have been. It appeared as any employee regardless of his/her educational background can assume and successfully work on the position of social workers. This was why two of the study participants who were working on the position of social work were para-social workers. The fact, however, is that social work is a profession with specialized knowledge, skills, values and competencies, which makes social workers unique from para-social workers. Hence, as the post requires professional social workers, the problem of deprofessionalization should seriously be addressed.

V. Addressing the financial problems: As the study revealed, financial problem was reiterated as one of the tough challenges that affected the effective implementation of child friendly bench services. The problem as the study implied was not only the absence of budget, but also lack of a sense of ownership and thus low commitment ascribed to the perception of seeing child friendly justice/court as annexure rather than a sub-system of the whole. Hence, such perceptions need to be challenged and thus extraordinary commitment and a sense of ownership should be realized, whereupon the existing financial resources could be shared and/ or support from other sources be it governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and private organizations should be sought after.

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