

**Effects of Family Breakdown on Children: The Case of  
Shedder Refugee Camp Fafan Zone, Somali Regional State,  
Ethiopia.**

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***Abstract***

*This study was designed to investigate effects of family breakdown on children at Shedder Refugee Camp Fafan Zone, Somali Regional State, Ethiopia. The study focused particularly on the children whose family had experienced divorce/separation in the Shedder Refugee Camp. Descriptive and exploratory research designs and qualitative approach were used. The methods employed to collect data were an in-depth interview, key informant interviews and document analysis. The study sample was consisted of fifteen family member participants from divorced /separated families and five key informants comprised of administration of refugee, community and religious leaders. Data were analyzed thematically and presented in the form of description. Purposive sampling method was used to participate the participants. The findings of the study revealed that the effects of divorce/separation on children regardless of sex had economic, social, psychological and academic problem. Divorce/separation also had internal behavioral effect on female children and external behavioral effect on male children. Concerning, the handling of the problem, the study pinpointed the importance of involvement in relative, social group, governmental and non-governmental and host community in diverse interventions to rehabilitate the children that were affected by family divorce / separation in the study area.*

**Key Words:** family breakdown, children affected by divorce/ separation, social, economic, educational and psychological support.

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## **Introduction**

Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society. It is entitled to protection by society and the state (UN, 2015). This concept is also expressed by Fagan & Churchill (2012) as family is the building block of society and that is used as primary socializing unit of children to shape their identity and personality. It is the source of the children needs of survival, security, love and affection. The family is the children's first social setting. Within the family and the family's cultural context, children quickly learn what is expected of them and learn what it means to be a member of a social group (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2016).

As to Serkalem (2006), family is important for reproduction, production and socializing function. Family undergoes many challenges to meet its functions and sometimes this creates stresses and pressure that lead to family breakdown and its members. Family breakdown leads to diminished social and economic well-being of children and divorced parents are exposed to unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, a weaker sense of personal control, anxiety, depression and greater use of mental health services. According to Mooney, Oliver and Smith (2009), parental divorce or separation leads to repeated changes in family structure from a two biological parent family, to lone parent, to stepfamily status, and repeated family transitions increase the risk of negative child outcomes. Family transitions are also linked with a number of other changes including moving house, school and/or neighbourhood and as a result of these multiple changes negatively affect the children all round development.

Family has no viable substitute. It remains an institution where a child finds love, warmth, care, acceptance, support, and personal development.

Anderson (2014), despite these differences, divorce has been shown to diminish a child's future competence in all areas of life, including family relationships, education, emotional well-being, and future earning power.

As to the observation of the researchers of this study, marriage in Ethiopia is constructed on tolerance, mediation and negotiation. This systematic way of handling family related problem is considered as part of community skills building to reduce the suffering of children due to family breakdown. However, the marriage in refugee camp, noticeably, it was found in an instable condition for different reasons that are elucidated below.

According to Jones (2019), women left alone with children after divorce without adequate economic and psychological to take care of their children. Most husbands do not continue to support their families after family breakdown although they are often legally required to pay for the child support. Divorced mothers, therefore, are frequently forced into poverty with their children. In the refugee camp, family breakdown, is almost always accompanied by considerable psychological, social, cultural, emotional and financial strain.

Jones (2019) states that the majority of family breakdown occur in marriages of less than ten years duration, and as a result, children who are most dependent and vulnerable are likely to feel the effect of family breakdown. Family breakdown exposes the children to stigmatization such alienation from socialization, loss of self-confidence and creativity. The children are likely to feel fear, anger, depression and confusion. This increases the suffering of the children because of lack of adequate social, economic and psychological support of the family that expose the children to a lone parent, step family or blended family (Mooney *et al.*, 2009).

Family breakdown has strong negative consequences for the mental, physical, health and socio-economic lives of both spouses and their children. These negative effects include an increased fatality, an increased incidence of physical illness, suicide, violence, homicide, and mortality from stress. Thus, family breakdown destructively affects the children's lives (Mehari, 2013).

As to Kim, Lee, and Jang (2016), the effects of socio-economic status of divorced family on self-esteem are viable. Low socio-economic status of a single parenthood children has lower self-esteem than high socio-economic status of both parented hood children. The effects of this is stronger with increasing age of the children with increasing basic needs.

The loss of financial resources and a loss of parental involvement are generally associated with a divorce or separation, while parental involvement is known to positively affect a child's educational achievement (Park, Byun & Kim, 2011). The growth in the number of divorced or single parent families implies that many children are confronted with the negative effects of single parenthood. According to Amato (2010), family breakdown results in economic deprivation, a decrease in the quality and quantity of parental contact, and a decline in parental support and effective control. Divorce has a detrimental effect on children's well-being, development and access to social and basic services.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Description of the Study Area**

*Shedder* is a town located in the western *Fafan* in the *Somali* Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia. The mid-north of SRS is *Fafan* Zone, which

accommodates the three refugee camps of *Aw-Barre*, *Sheder* and *Kebribeyah*. At the end of 2019, 37,086 refugees, representing 7,061 families (average FS 5.3) were living in the three refugee camps of *Fafan* Zone. Predominately hosting ethnic *Somali* peoples, 27% of the population is youth (15 to 25 years old) and most (92%) are enrolled in the biometric system, with 89% having received individual identity documents. A significant proportion (38%) of the total refugee population have been in country for 20 years or more, and some as long as three decades. The *Kebribeyah* area hosted refugees from 1989, and the camp was formed in 1991 (UNHCR,2020). The Ethiopian Administration for the Refugee and the Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) together opened a new refugee camp at *Shedder*. The current population of *Shedder* is 11116 (5161 males and 6045 females). An intention survey conducted for the entire population showed five percent (5%) would like to return, 88% would not like to return, and seven percent (7%) is undecided (UNCHR,2020).

As to UNHCR (2020), the most common economic / occupational activities recorded among refugees are students; housekeeping and restaurant workers; and laborers in mining, construction and manufacturing. The top three skills recorded were tailors, dressmakers and hatters; drivers and mobile-plant operators; and health professionals. Overall, in refugee camp, there is a very low level of recorded skills. The Somali Regional State Education partners report of 2019 shows as 13,338 refugee students that included pre-primary 2,469; primary 8,792 and secondary 2,077 were registered for education.

## **Research Design**

Research designs are a strategy for answering the intended study research question to meet the objective of the study. Creswell (2009), research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. Accordingly, this study was employed descriptive and exploratory research designs to enable the researcher to collect data from a number of participants to using diverse research instruments to make analysis. Describe a phenomenon as they exist and achieve new insights into a phenomenon respectively. Descriptive research design where the real-life experiences and their perceptions figure out in the form of describing in detail the life situation of family members who experienced family breakdown. On the other hand, exploratory research design was employed to provide insights understanding about the phenomena understudy.

## **Research Approach**

Furthermore, this study employed qualitative research approach to collect required data for this study. Concerning this, Yin (2003) has confirmed that qualitative method is very important to understand complex sets of social phenomena and allows to retain the whole data of meaningful societal life. This concept is also more strengthen by Creswell (2013), qualitative approaches to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and report writing differ from the traditional, quantitative approaches. Purposeful sampling, collection of open-ended questions analysis of text or pictures, representation of information in figures and tables, and personal interpretation of the findings were applied in the qualitative methods.

## **Population of the Study**

The target population of the study involved 220 family members who had experience of divorce/separation from in *Shedder* Refugee Camp. The effects of family breakdown on children in this refugee camp is known very little. This was the main driver for undertaking this research to improve the life of the affected children and create awareness about the importance of providing protection to the family.

## **Sampling Method**

In this study, the researcher used probability and non-probability sampling methods. Purposive sampling was used to select those who were known to have needed information about the family breakdown and its effects on their children. One of the most acceptable standards in qualitative research is to allow the data to reach data saturation (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2018). Data saturation is a data adequacy point where no new information could be obtained from participants in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, the sampling strategy is usually chosen based on the methodology and topic, and not by the need for generalizability of the findings (Higginbottom, 2004). Thus, the sample must be appropriate and include participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research under study.

Sample for qualitative study are often small in order to allow an in-depth, detail examination of a specific issue. Consequently, from 220 target population 15 knowledgeable target group participants were participated until data saturation occurred. Through purposive sampling method the key informants were also participated in the study. Then, 5 key informants who have knowledge about family breakdown in the refugee camp participated

from office administration, community leaders and religious group. The key informant interview also allowed the researchers to obtain detail responses that were useful for the study. In general, 20 participants were participated in the study.

### **Data Collection Tools**

In-depth interviews, key informant interviews and document analysis were used to collect the data. Pilot testing of data collection tools was used involving three participants from target population and two key informants. Based on their feedback of the participants the tools were revised and refined to conduct the main study.

Accordingly, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data from target group sample participants through open-ended questions. This instrument was used considering its yielding of highest cooperation and lowest refusal rates, allowing for longer, more complex interviews, high response quality and taking advantage of interviewer's presence to collect accurate information from study participants. The interviewer probed the interviewees to establish information on the effects of family breakdown on the children at *Shedder* camp in *Somali* Regional State.

The study was also conducted 5 key informant interviews to obtain further information about the effects of family breakdown on children at study area. Key informant interview guide was used with the aim of substantiating the data gathered through in-depth interview, probing views and opinions, and giving chance for informants to expand on their responses.

The documents, the published and unpublished on refugee issues from government official administration for Refugee & Returnee Affairs



(ARRA) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were used to analyze the cases, events and experience that more clarify the subject under study.

### **Data Analysis**

The participants provided their informed consent for interviews to be audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and data analysis was undertaken by the researcher. As to Moretti *et al.* (2011), the advantage of qualitative research is the richness of the collected data and such data need to be interpreted and coded in a valid and reliable way. The researcher recognizes a systematic process of data collection to carry out a thematic analysis that prescribed by Brawn and Clarke (2006) to provide the six-steps guide, which are very useful framework for conducting this kind of qualitative data analysis.

Thus, the study was guided by Brawn and Clarke (2006) on how to achieve trustworthiness in qualitative content analysis, and utilized their data analysis techniques such as familiarization with data, generating initial data, searching for themes, reviewing themes, identifying and naming themes and producing the report in meaningful way.

### **Results and Discussion**

Effects of family breakdown on children in *Shedder* camp have been obtained through target participants in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and document analysis. The information obtained from data collection sources were thematically categorized, carefully analyzed and interpreted to get accurate results of the study. Thematic analysis is a

qualitative method for uncovering a collection of themes, “some level of patterned response or meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants**

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Female	9	45
	Male	11	55
	Total	20	100
<b>Age</b>	< 29 years Old	4	20
	29-38 Years Old	7	35
	39-48 Years Old	5	25
	≥ 49 Years Old	4	20
	Total	20	100
<b>Educational Background</b>	Illiterate	3	15
	0-8 grade	6	30
	9-12 grade	5	25
	Diploma		
	Degree/Masters	6	30
	Total	20	100
<b>Duration in the Camp</b>	1-2 year	6	30
	3-6 years	12	60
	7- 12 years	2	10
	Total	20	100

Source: Own Survey data ,2020

The above Table 1, reveals that 45% and 55% were female participants in the study. The participants age also comprised from 29-year-old to 49 years-old and above to get balanced and rich information from them. The

educational background of the study participants covered from illiterate to masters“ degree holders, to obtain diverse experience and views. Concerning the length of years of the participants in the refugee camp, 60% of the participants stayed in the compound from 3-6 years.

**Table 2. Divorced/Separated Family in Duration**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Frequency of parents</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
1-2 years.	12	80
3-4 years	2	13
5-6 years	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own Survey data, 2020

The above Table 2 Shows that majority of parents in Shedder Refugee Camp had been divorced or separated between 1-2 years (80%). The findings imply that divorce / separation in *Shedder* Refugee Camp occurs quite frequently to parents with children in pre-primary. Fewer numbers of parents had separated / divorced for as long as 5-6 years. William (2008) stated that the majority of family breakdown occur in marriages of less than ten years duration and as a result, young children who are most dependent and vulnerable are especially likely to feel the effects of family breakdown.

## The Effects of Family Breakdown on Children

### Theme I: Social Effects

As the result of family breakdown, women and children are more vulnerable to diverse social, psychological, emotional, stress and mental health problems. The family who is divorced or separated, their priority option was to join and live with their family or their relative. Overtly, divorced family children who live with their relative come across different social problems such as feeding, clothing and other basic needs. Children may also feel missing of one of the parents, which lead to loneliness, frustration and marginalization by their friends. One of the Female Participants (FP-1) who has been living in the camp for six years explains her situation *“There was a frequent conflict between me and my husband because of spending most of his time chewing chat instead of working hard and supporting the family. Our children were very disappointed and frustrated. I could not comfortable with that kind of life divorced four years ago. I moved to here where my family is living. My children were not happy of living far apart from friends and neighbors.”*

Female Participant (FP-2) expressed her view as *“I divorced from my husband almost two years ago. I have two daughters and a son. Life is miserable for female children from the divorced family who prefer to live with her mother, since community perceive them as they have less dignity compared a girl living with both of her parents. This perception has created negative effect on female children, which created social stigmatization*

Concerning this issue, one of the Key Informants (KI-1) expressed her view in the following way. *“There is a bad perception of the refugee community about female children, if her mother was divorced, it means she was not a*

*good wife and more likely her daughter goes the same way as her mother went through.” One of the Community Leaders (CL-2) said that “the children whose parents divorced were ignored by the community, less valued and respected among their camp community. Moreover, young girls whose parents divorced face problem with marriage. They may have less chance to get marriage compared those who have both parents. As a result, the children lost their confidence.”*

Related to this point, Female Participant (FP-14) described her opinion as follow, *“I know, I can get a chance to marry again, but I’m afraid to make decision, because I have seen so many times my neighbor how their husbands treating their step children badly.”*

The above diverse views of study participants are reflective of the importance durable marriage for children social and psychological wellbeing.

## **Theme II: Educational Effect**

Children from divorced parents are facing challenges with academic problem after the divorce. As the family broken down, divorce or separation, children start to live in one of their parents and sometimes father and mother may not agree with whom the child prefers to live with, also parents may let their child to live with their relatives or some other caregiver, sometimes alone in the camp.

This creates negative effect on their academic life. Regarding this, one of the Male Participants (MP-1) explained the academic problem his children were facing:

*“I’m a single father living with my two sons. One of them is fifteen years old and the other one is thirteen years old, my family situation has really impacted my children’s education, they are always complaining about this difficult life of the camp, they need to live with their mother and I couldn’t let them to go back to Somalia, I already started my resettlement program, Last year, my elder son was grade 8, he could not perform well. As a result, there was trouble with the school and he refused to attend the school. I’m really worried about my son’s future.”*

Children from divorced family pass through interwoven challenges which they could not overcome, even with support of their custodies. Female Participant (FP-3) whose age is fifty-nine years old expressed her view as: *“I’m the grandmother of the children, their mother followed new husband, their father also left his children on me because he is working on somewhere far from our village, I’m suffering a chronic disease like diabetes and blood pressure. In addition to that I am getting old; I don’t know how I can help my grandchildren’s diminished school achievement and performance”.*

Children whose family broken down suffers from lack of adequate support, to continue their education, they lack educational facilities that exposed them to poor educational achievement. Concerning this, the Male Participant (MP-2) and Female Participant (FP-3) expressed their perceptions as *“children from divorced family come across a lot of problems while trying to deal with their education. High class absence, dropout and poor performance, are common problems of divorced parent children compare to intact parent families.”*

One of the religious Leaders reflected his view as *“the children from divorced parents are suffering from lack of feeding, clothing, educational facilities, physical and mental fatigue.”*

They also need to get help from anywhere so that they can continue their education without being dropped out from school or being late behind from their other classmates and may not be able to fully get involved in school activities. Both female and male children from divorced parents strive to continue their education from the day of divorce but still they face challenges from their foster care parents. So, they shift from one care giver to other so as to find comfortable situations for their education.

In conclusion, both male and female children from divorced parents encountered the challenges of academic problem at post-divorce condition. Students from single parent sometimes perform poorly due to the fact that they do not get adequate support from mother and father. Accordingly, divorce is associated with increased risk of academic problems throughout their life.

### **Theme III: Behavioral Effect**

Children from the broken family are always facing behavioral problems such as anger, anxiety, frustration, fear and isolation. After their parents divorced, the children lose a confidence and hope which lead them to a better future. Female Participant (FP-7) expressed her view as follows:

*“My children and foster care parent never have a good relationship, they are always in conflict, because she does not want to send to school like her children, she is forcing them to do all the housework, like cooking, and cleaning. I never feel happy and I don’t want to discuss this issue with any one, they never understand my children problem, but I don’t want to lose hope, one day I will reunite with my parents.”*

The one of the Community Leaders (CL -2) reflected his view as *“children who experience parental divorce have an increase in antisocial behavior,*

*anxiety, and depression, along with increased delinquent and aggressive behavior. Self-blame and abandonment fears are exhibited.’”*

As to one of the Admin Officer (AO-2) *“children whose parents divorced were visible to be inhibited with the problem of external behavior. Since, they lack close follow up, advising, consulting, these children open to follow the life others. Through time, children whose parents divorced could lose shaping of their personality and easily join street children and develop an ethical behavioral.”*

One of the Community Leaders (CL-1) put his observation as:

*“I saw my neighbor elder son chewing Chat and smoking cigarette with his friend’s house, his mother didn’t know what her son was doing, she goes to work early in the morning. I know before her family was broken down, the child father was serious in shaping his children behaviour but now the children’s behavior is changing, the elder son is aggressive towards his mother, sometimes he comes home late at night and mother starts shouting on him. As single parent, it is difficult to manage her children and work to secure the family delay bread.”*

The above description of the community leader indicates that the single mothers had busy schedule to win the daily bread of their children because of their poor economic status. These single parented students were not well monitored and supervised that led them to addict substances abuse, smoking, using alcohol and involving in petty crime.

#### **Theme IV: Economic Effects**

It is obvious that parents, children and any family members who experience any type of family breakdown are encountered to economic problems.



Because of this, they are forced to do several activities in order to achieve the difficult life situation at post-divorce/separation.

However, their income might be limited only to their daily life situation. As regards to this, one of the respondents (F-2) described his views as follow; *“I simply work at home and prepare food while my children are in school, I can’t find better job even if I try ,because I’m not educated, my husband can’t help his children he marry another wife ,I only depend on the monthly ration which I gain from the humanitarian aid ,I can’t be happy with difficult life but I hope God will help me one day and change my life, ”* This shows that female parents are suffering economic difficulties and monthly aid is not enough and also most fathers couldn’t support their children after the divorce /separation.

In addition, female children were mostly exposed to financial problem after their parents get divorced. Since they depend on their custodial parents at post-divorce, they are forced to engage in house chores activities which probably do not have a payment. Regarding this, one key informant (F4) explained as, *“I always dream of getting job, so that I can help my family but I couldn’t find that job I was dreaming about except working some one’s families washing their clothes and even the money they are giving me is not enough, but I never lose my hope.”* This indicates that female children face many economic problems that their male counter parts after their parents depart. From the above idea it can be possible to understand that girls from divorced parents were likely to have the financial problem because of they spend their time on household works. Related to this, Smyth and Weston (2000) found that females were still likely to experience financial hardship after divorce.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

The major effects of family breakdown on the children were concluded as economic, social, psychological and educational. Moreover, divorce/separation had the behavioral problem on children of divorced families. It had effect on internal behavioral and external behavioral problems on female children and male children respectively.

There were different stakeholders' engagement in a variety of interventions in the study area to bring positive change on the refugee community, but the attention that was given to family breakdown effects on children was insignificant to intervene the problems of the affected children.

Refugee community requires the helping stakeholders at their destination. Social group support of relative, friends and host community engagements are critical important to mitigate the plight of children of divorced /separated families. Governmental and non-governmental support of economic, psychological, educational and resettlement programs are required to be integrated with healthy family formation and sustainable family life. It is expected of role players to be involved in mitigating the suffering of children of divorced families from mental disorders, delinquency, impulsive behaviors, and conflict with peers.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of the study are the drivers of the following recommendations:

- Family is the primary social institution. Protection of family is securing the smooth function of the society. The engagement of Government

Organizations (GOs), Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) are recommended to resolve family problems systematically and timely through education, awareness creation and other appropriate support.

- Children are potential human capital of any country. Educating, guiding and proper socialization of this segment of the society is needed.
- The host community or neighborhood participation is important to share their best practice of tolerance, negotiate or mediation skills of family problem solving.
- Social workers as social engineers, it is expected from them to a voice of the voices refugee community particularly for children who are leading measurable life in the area.

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