

## Article

# Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Transitioning out of Residential Childcare Facilities: A Zimbabwean Perspective

Sipho Sibanda<sup>1,2,\*</sup>  and Pamhidzayi Berejena Mhongera<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6009, Australia<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0028, ZA, South Africa<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0028, ZA, South Africa; pmhongera@lsu.ac.zw

\* Correspondence: sipho.sibanda@uwa.edu.au

## Abstract

Effective transition of youth out of care has been a concern for social workers, policymakers, residential facilities, and other related stakeholders. This paper reports on the livelihood strategies and transition experiences of adolescent girls in and out of two institutions in Harare, Zimbabwe. Using the sustainable livelihood approach, this qualitative research explored and compared the livelihood strategies of 16 girls still in care with 16 who had exited. Framework analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings show that girls in institutions mainly rely on institutional support for their livelihoods, while those who leave employ a wider range of strategies including support from relatives, foster parents, institutions, and spouses. Social networks emerged as a key strategy for both financial and social security. However, differences in the resources available through these networks significantly impacted the girls' livelihood outcomes, either positively or negatively. Overall, many adolescent girls remained unable to sustain themselves or cope with the challenges of transitioning to adulthood and life beyond institutional care. The study recommends that transition programmes that address early marriage as a means of security, expanding family and fostering care options, reducing institutional dependency, tackling economic exclusion and unemployment be developed.

**Keywords:** adolescent girls; livelihood outcomes; residential childcare facilities; sustainable livelihood strategies; transition programmes; Zimbabwe



Academic Editor: Lisa Jean Moore

Received: 19 August 2025

Revised: 6 October 2025

Accepted: 16 October 2025

Published: 22 October 2025

**Citation:** Sibanda, S.; Berejena Mhongera, P. Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Transitioning out of Residential Childcare Facilities: A Zimbabwean Perspective. *Societies* **2025**, *15*, 293. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15110293>

**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

The transition to adulthood is increasingly recognised as a complex process shaped by ongoing societal transformations and the dynamic interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors during adolescence [1–3]. This complexity necessitates that institutions continually adapt to better address the evolving needs of young people, particularly those involved in government systems like mental health, foster care, juvenile justice, special education, healthcare, and services for runaway and homeless youth [2,4]. Vulnerable youth within these systems require tailored strategies to navigate the transition successfully, emphasising coordinated care and sustained support across multiple domains [5]. Recent frameworks stress the importance of providing socially and economically appropriate support, strengthening transition programmes and improving system integration to enhance outcomes for young people moving into adulthood [4].

Successful transitions rely on the youths' physical and mental health, access to income, marketable skills development, and opportunities for lifelong learning [6]. Core

indicators of positive outcomes include stable independent living, economic participation, and social contribution [2,7]. Transition programmes play a central role by fostering self-determination, advocating for youth rights, facilitating access to education and employment, and promoting social and community engagement [8]. For young people in institutional care, these programmes function as vital livelihood strategies that support meaningful adult roles.

To facilitate successful outcomes, governments and residential care facilities are encouraged to implement programmes that link youth to livelihood opportunities using comprehensive frameworks such as the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA). This approach, endorsed by international development agencies, offers a holistic structure to understand and address the multifaceted factors shaping youth livelihoods, encompassing human, social, physical, financial, and natural assets [9,10]. SLA highlights how policies, institutional environments, and cultural norms affect access to assets and livelihood strategies, emphasising the need for safety nets to prevent the negative coping mechanisms often associated with poverty [10,11].

Using the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA), this study explored the livelihood strategies and transition experiences of adolescent girls leaving two residential childcare facilities in Zimbabwe. It is part of a broader investigation into how various livelihood assets relate to the services and support the girls received during their time in care and after leaving, and how these influenced their livelihood outcomes and transition experiences [12]. The research compared girls transitioning from two types of institutions: a government-run, dormitory-style facility (Institution A) and an NGO-run, family-based facility (Institution B). It examined how outcomes differed based on the institution type, the nature of transition programmes available, and the livelihood results for girls who had left care compared with those still residing in the facilities.

Findings from the broad study showed that many adolescent girls lacked access to well-structured, adequately resourced, and comprehensive transition programmes. This gap meant that girls leaving care faced greater poverty and more difficult transitions than their peers who remained in care. Additionally, girls from the family-based model generally experienced better transition outcomes than those from the dormitory-style institution. This was largely due to differences in living arrangements, funding, and material resources. The study concluded that successful transitions depend on providing comprehensive support, including strong relationship-building, education and financial assistance, accommodation, employment opportunities, family tracing, and after-care services. These forms of support are crucial to reducing the poverty risks and social vulnerability after leaving care [12].

This article examined a specific aspect of the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) from the study above by exploring the following research question: What livelihood strategies do adolescent girls use during and when they leave residential childcare facilities in Harare, Zimbabwe? The objective of the study was to evaluate the livelihood strategies employed by adolescent girls both during their stay in and after their transition from residential childcare facilities in Harare, Zimbabwe, to understand the factors influencing their strategic choices and their subsequent impact on sustainable livelihood outcomes. Based on the SLA, the hypotheses test how the vulnerability context (leaving institutional care, a situation of high vulnerability) interacts with the human, social, physical, financial, and natural assets to shape livelihood strategies, which in turn lead to livelihood outcomes. The article aims to guide evidence-based policies and programmes that better support adolescent girls during their transition out of residential care facilities, thereby promoting sustainable and positive livelihood outcomes.

### 1.1. Background

The transitions faced by young people globally continue to be fraught with challenges, characterised by social unrest and economic insecurity [2,7]. Since the early 2010s, youth-led protests have persisted around the world, driven by issues such as unemployment, inequality, and demands for social justice. The Arab Spring in 2011, initiated in Tunisia due to youth disenfranchisement and authoritarian governance, ignited a global wave of activism that extended to southern Europe with movements like Spain's Indignados and Greece's anti-austerity protests. In the United States, the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement highlighted stark economic disparities, particularly between the wealthiest 1% and the broader population. Student and youth protests in Chile and the United Kingdom further underscored the global frustrations with education inequality and austerity measures [13–15].

Poverty remains a critical obstacle to effective school-to-work transitions for young people. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) emphasises that sustainable development and poverty eradication are intrinsically linked to youth access to stable and productive employment [16]. The school-to-work transition, defined by the ILO as the phase when young people aged roughly 15 to 29 move from finishing education to securing stable or satisfactory employment, continues to be precarious; stable employment typically involves contracts of at least 12 months or satisfactory self-employment offering continuity [16]. Successful transitions require policy interventions that enhance youth skills aligned with the labour market demands and improve pathways to decent work, thus supporting the broader goals of poverty reduction and sustainable development [16,17].

Critically, perspectives that focus solely on labour market metrics may overlook the complexity of youth experiences. A narrow labour market focus neglects the diverse ways that young people navigate economic and social shocks. The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) provides a more holistic, people-centred framework, acknowledging that young individuals and communities actively respond to and shape their economic realities [18]. SLA emphasises the dynamic use of various capitals: natural, human, social, physical, and financial, within livelihood strategies that evolve according to changing contexts and external influences such as policies and environmental factors [10,19].

Livelihood strategies, a core concept within the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) framework, refer to the diverse range of activities, resources, and decision-making processes that individuals or households utilise to secure income, manage risks, and improve their overall well-being. These strategies are shaped by complex interactions between socio-economic, environmental, and institutional factors and often involve a mix of agricultural production, wage labour, small-scale enterprises, and social networks [19].

The variation in livelihood strategies across different geographic regions and demographic groups highlights the critical importance of context-specific approaches in development planning. Factors such as local natural resources, market access, cultural norms, and institutional support systems influence the choice and success of these strategies. Moreover, livelihood diversification, engaging in multiple economic activities, stands out as a key mechanism for building resilience against shocks such as transitioning from care. Therefore, effective development initiatives must be tailored to local realities, aiming to build sustainable and resilient livelihoods through enhancing asset bases, strengthening institutions, and fostering inclusive economic opportunities. Such strategies contribute not only to poverty reduction, but also to long-term social and environmental sustainability [18,19].

### 1.2. Strategies Used for Young People Transitioning from the Child Welfare System

Young people transitioning from the child welfare system need specialised and comprehensive programmes tailored to their unique livelihood needs. The following examples

highlight key strategies designed to prepare these youth for independent living and self-sufficiency by helping them access critical livelihood assets.

#### 1.2.1. Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood

Comprehensive preparation for adulthood is defined as a “conscious, purposeful and collaborative process” that is systematic, developmentally appropriate, and continuous [20]. This holistic and integrative model promotes shared responsibility among young people, families, the state, and civil society through youth-centred policies and practices. Increased collaboration and stakeholder commitment are essential to help vulnerable youth successfully transition and achieve positive livelihood outcomes. According to [20], the integrated approach to youth permanency and preparation for adulthood is made up of transition domains and desired outcomes, as described in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Preparation for adulthood outcomes.

| Transition Domains                | Desired Outcomes                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Employment                        | Young people generate a sufficient income to support themselves by obtaining and retaining steady employment, leading to a viable career path                                                                         |
| Education                         | Young people acquire sufficient education, training, and opportunities that provide them with choices to pursue post-secondary education and/or the means to obtain and retain steady employment                      |
| Housing                           | Young people have access to safe, stable, appropriate, affordable housing in the community that is near public transportation, work, or school                                                                        |
| Life Skills                       | Young people demonstrate mastery of basic study skills, work skills, money management, social development, self-care, and practical daily living skills                                                               |
| Personal and Community Engagement | Young people have supportive relationships in place and can access services in the community to achieve their personal goals, and are supported in their efforts to contribute to the civic life of their communities |
| Personal and Cultural Identity    | Young people demonstrate a healthy sense of ethnic or cultural identity, personal identity, and spiritual identity                                                                                                    |
| Physical and Mental Health        | Young people have sufficient and affordable health insurance for both physical and mental health                                                                                                                      |
| Legal Information and Documents   | Young people have the skills, information, and assistance to access essential legal documents on their personal, family, medical, and educational histories                                                           |

#### 1.2.2. The Treatment Family Model

The treatment family model (TFM) is described as a therapeutic approach used at Boys Town to prepare youth for adulthood [21]. Transition preparation begins with creating an individualised life plan tailored to each young person. The TFM provides a systematic framework, utilising workbooks, to help high school youth develop essential life skills and plan for education, careers, and independent living. The programme includes life skills training, motivational systems, building trusting relationships with peers and adults, living in a family-style environment, encouraging moral and spiritual growth, and promoting self-control and self-governance [21]. Family teachers, typically married couples, provide daily support, guiding youth to reinforce positive behaviours and develop new ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting. Having evolved over 30 years, the TFM is one of the most extensively researched residential care models and has successfully supported many adolescents in transitioning to independent adult life after institutional care.

#### 1.2.3. Transition to Independence Process System

The Transition to Independence Process (TIP) system is a community-based, strengths-focused strategy that supports vulnerable youth aged 14 to 29 who are at heightened risk due to emotional or behavioural challenges and are often involved with correctional

or social service systems [22]. This approach builds a service delivery system to assist young people in setting and achieving goals related to employment, education, housing, personal effectiveness, and community participation. The success of the TIP model relies on collaboration among government agencies, families, and community stakeholders who work closely with youth to plan and deliver developmentally appropriate services. These coordinated efforts empower young people to move towards self-sufficiency and achieve targeted outcomes across all areas of transition [22]. Figure 1 illustrates the transition domains of the TIP model.

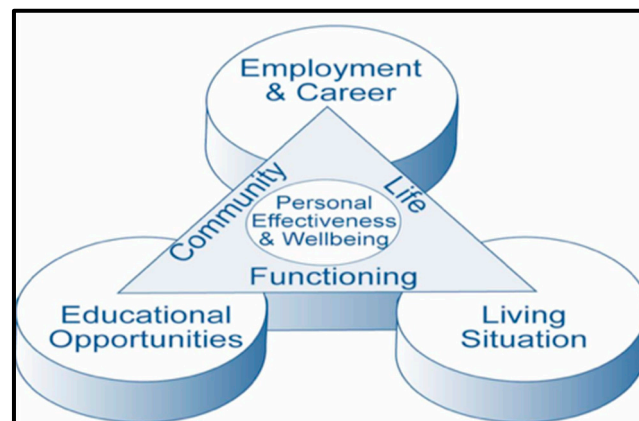


**Figure 1.** The TIP model.

As discussed above, successful transition programmes for youth leaving the child welfare system are comprehensive, collaborative, and tailored to individual needs. They go beyond providing basic care by preparing young people for self-sufficiency, focusing on essential areas such as education, employment, and housing. Ultimately, a holistic and integrated approach with shared responsibility among youth, families, and the community is crucial for helping this population achieve positive life outcomes and make a successful transition to independent adulthood.

### 1.3. Transition Programmes in the Global South

In the Global South, transition programmes, also known as positive youth development (PYD) programmes, began about twenty years ago as a response to the rising adolescent population and as a strategy to address early marriages, school dropouts, unintended pregnancies, unemployment, and HIV infections [23,24]. These programmes typically reach young people through youth centres, peer education, family life education, and youth-friendly health services. They offer structured activities and experiences that help adolescents develop social, moral, emotional, physical, financial, and cognitive skills, thereby improving their chances for sustainable livelihoods [2].

Effective PYD programmes aim to increase young people's access to essential assets, including services, support, and knowledge in areas such as financial management, health-care, family planning, social skills, home management, continued education, employment, housing, legal, and community services [21]. However, access to these programmes often depends on factors like material resources, power dynamics, and the specific context in which services are delivered. PYD approaches have demonstrated positive outcomes in health, education, and employment by building skills, fostering healthy relationships, and empowering youth to participate actively in their communities.

### 1.3.1. Youth Transitions in Zimbabwe

Livelihood opportunities for vulnerable youth in Zimbabwe are severely limited due to the rising poverty levels and ongoing socio-political challenges. While some young people remain in school or attend training institutions, many have turned to the informal sector as an alternative means of survival [25]. The shrinking formal economy offers few job prospects, and those available often do not pay enough to lift young people out of poverty. As a result, many youths have sought livelihoods in politics, cross-border trading, or have emigrated to neighbouring countries in search of livelihood opportunities [25].

Unemployment among young people is particularly acute. Recent statistics indicate that over 47% of Zimbabweans aged 15 to 35 are unemployed, with the rate rising to nearly 59% among those aged 15 to 24 [26]. In 2024, 1.4 million youths between 15 and 24 years old were not employed, in education, or training [27]. The lack of formal jobs has forced many young people, including graduates, to take up informal work such as street vending or driving commuter omnibuses, as education alone is no longer a guarantee of stable employment [26]. The broader context is equally concerning. Estimates suggest that up to 80% of the general population is unemployed, 78% live in absolute poverty, and 55% are below the food poverty line [28]. These harsh realities have increased the demand for social protection in Zimbabwe.

In response to these challenges, the government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) has established a child-sensitive social protection system, aligning with its commitments as a signatory to multiple regional and international declarations on children's rights. This system is designed not only to address the immediate needs of children, but also to support other vulnerable groups, including orphans, the elderly, people with disabilities, and unemployed youth. This is guided by the principle that social protection reduces poverty and vulnerability by ensuring access to basic needs like food, health, and education [29]. The system's core objectives, which are child-sensitive, include improving child well-being, preventing abuse, reducing child labour, and preparing adolescents for independent livelihoods. This focus on a successful transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency is now considered essential to the national social protection agenda. Recent analysis from [27] confirms that such targeted programmes are critical for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and building human capital, underscoring the continued relevance of this strategy in Zimbabwe.

### 1.3.2. Transition Programming in RCCFs in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe is signatory to international frameworks and regional child protection conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children. These declarations establish the duty of states to protect children growing up without parental care [30]. When families and communities are unable to provide through adoption or foster care, residential childcare facilities (RCCFs) often serve as a critical safety net, preventing homelessness and offering essential support like shelter, food, education, and clothing [29,31].

In Zimbabwe, this commitment is operationalised through the National Residential Child Care Standards (NRCCS), which provide a comprehensive framework for quality care [32]. The NRCCS outlines 15 standards covering all aspects of care, from safety and health to education and staffing. Crucially, Standard Six specifically addresses the "leaving care" process, providing guidelines to prepare young people for their transition to independent living. This standard is foundational to ensuring that children in RCCFs receive not only custodial care, but also the skills and support necessary for a successful adulthood [32].

Effective transition programming must equip adolescents with the capacity to build sustainable livelihoods. As defined by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), a livelihood comprises the assets, activities, and choices people use to make a living [11]. These strategies are highly contextual and differ across societies. For adolescent girls leaving institutional care, a uniquely vulnerable group, positive livelihood strategies must be deliberately fostered to reduce poverty, enhance food security and improve overall well-being. Research confirms that without targeted support, care-leavers face significantly higher risks of unemployment, homelessness, and social exclusion, underscoring the urgent need for programmes that build their economic resilience and self-sufficiency [33,34].

#### *1.4. Theoretical Framework*

This article is grounded in the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) and the feminist interpretive framework (FIM). SLA is a holistic and actor-oriented framework that shifts the analytical focus from people's needs and deficiencies to their strengths, assets, and agency in constructing their lives. Originally developed by development scholars and practitioners [35,36] and popularised by institutions like the UK's Department for International Development [11], the SLA provides a robust structure for understanding how individuals, particularly in vulnerable contexts, navigate complex environments to achieve livelihood outcomes.

The SLA's core philosophy is profoundly aligned with the feminist and evaluative design of this research. It rejects a top-down, needs-based analysis in favour of one that begins with an understanding of people's own realities and the strategies they employ. The framework positions individuals as active agents, not passive recipients of aid. It seeks to understand "what people do" and "what they have" rather than just what they lack [36]. This resonates powerfully with the feminist aim of focusing on and validating the experiences and coping mechanisms of adolescent girls, viewing them as experts of their own lives. The SLA explicitly locates livelihoods within a vulnerability context, which encompasses the external environment of shocks, for example, economic crises, personal illness, and trends such as unemployment [19]. For the girls in this study, this context includes the shock of institutional discharge and the trend of high unemployment in Zimbabwe.

The central analytical device of the SLA is the "livelihood pentagon", which categorises the resources or "capitals" that people draw upon. The study's investigation was structured around how the institutional context and the transition out of it shaped the girls' access to the five key assets, namely, human, social, physical, natural, and financial. Human capital represents the skills, knowledge, ability to labour, and good health that enable people to pursue different livelihood strategies [19]. Social capital refers to the social resources, networks, membership in groups, relationships of trust and reciprocity, and access to broader institutions of society upon which people draw in pursuit of livelihoods [18]. According to [35], natural capital refers to natural resource stocks such as land, soil, water, biodiversity, and environmental services from which livelihood benefits are derived. Financial capital denotes the financial resources available to people including savings, regular inflows of money, pensions, remittances, and access to credit and debt instruments [18]. Finally, physical capital comprises the basic infrastructure, producer goods, and tools required to support livelihoods [19]. This includes shelter, transportation, water supply, and communication assets.

The SLA posits that people's access to and use of these five capitals are not direct but are mediated by the transforming structures and processes. These are the institutions, organisations, policies, and prevailing social norms that shape livelihood options [11]. In this study, the residential childcare facilities are a primary transforming structure. Their

internal policies on education, life skills training, and most importantly, the discharge and aftercare process, directly determine the girls' asset portfolio upon exit. One of the key structures includes the Zimbabwean Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare. On the other hand, the key processes include government policies on child protection and social welfare, cultural and gendered norms that may restrict the girls' mobility and livelihood choices, and the power dynamics within households and communities that the girls enter post-discharge.

The interaction between the girls' asset base and these structures and processes leads them to adopt specific livelihood strategies, for example, seeking domestic employment, reliance on precarious relationships, and seeking formal employment. These strategies, in turn, result in livelihood outcomes such as increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, or, conversely, increased poverty and social exclusion.

Moreover, this article employed a feminist interpretive framework to critically examine the systemic power imbalances that shape girls' livelihood strategies. This lens, as established by [37], is essential for moving beyond a superficial analysis of assets and structures, instead interrogating the very power dynamics that underpin them. Central to this approach is a set of critical questions: How do patriarchal norms actively restrict girls' access to financial capital or circumscribe their livelihood choices? Do existing institutional structures genuinely empower girls' agency, or do they inadvertently foster dependency? Furthermore, what social capital is deemed valuable, and how do power imbalances within these networks create vulnerabilities to exploitation? By foregrounding these inquiries, the feminist framework ensures that the analysis remains attuned to the roots of inequality rather than its symptoms.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study used an evaluative qualitative research design framed within a feminist interpretive approach, which is well-suited to exploring the complex, gendered experiences of adolescent girls. The feminist perspective focused the analysis on the power dynamics, gendered access to resources, and structural constraints affecting young women [38]. As an evaluative strategy, this approach not only aimed to understand the problem's complexity, but also to assess the intervention effectiveness to promote social change and empowerment [37].

Participants inside and outside (Institutions A and B) were recruited through purposive sampling to reach a hard-to-access group, reflecting the mobility and often unstable living situations of adolescent girls, especially those who have left institutional care. The sample included thirty-two girls: sixteen living in two selected residential childcare facilities (Institutions A and B) and sixteen who had exited these institutions within the past three years. The study took place in an urban district of Harare, Zimbabwe. Two of the six local institutions were chosen based on ownership (government-run versus faith-based) and living arrangements (family-style versus dormitory-style) to capture a wider range of institutional experiences. Institution A is a government-run and dormitory-style facility, whilst Institution B is NGO-run and a family-based facility. Both institutions only accommodate female residents.

Data collection used multiple methods, namely, semi-structured interview schedules, focus group discussions, and direct observations. This was conducted to enhance the validity and richness of data through triangulation [39]. The data collection methods are further explained below.

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 32 participants. During the interview sessions, participants were accorded an opportunity to provide detailed personal accounts of their livelihood strategies, aspirations, and challenges. The

flexible interview schedules allowed participants to emphasise issues most important to them.

- Focus group discussions were held with the 16 institutionalised girls, forming groups of 6–8 participants to explore the shared norms and collective experiences in the institutional setting.
- The principal investigator conducted systematic observations, whereby she observed and noted the daily routines, social interactions, and physical environments for the in-institution participants, while the living conditions of those who had exited care were documented through detailed field notes.

Data were analysed using framework analysis, selected for its systematic and transparent approach appropriate for policy-oriented research and aligned with the sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) [40]. As noted by [41], framework analysis is concerned with describing and interpreting what is happening in a particular setting to improve efficiency and outcomes. The analysis followed five key steps: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to gain a holistic understanding; (2) identifying a thematic framework, developed initially from research questions and the SLA (e.g., human, social and financial assets) and refined inductively using the data; (3) indexing the data by applying the framework systematically to tag relevant text; (4) charting the data into a matrix with themes as columns and cases as rows, allowing for comparison across cases and themes; and (5) mapping and interpreting to identify patterns, associations, and explanations leading to an overall interpretation.

Ethical approval was granted by an Institutional Review Board of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Zimbabwe Ministry of Public Service, Labour, and Social Welfare and the participating institutions. Informed consent and assent were rigorously obtained: guardians and institutional directors consented for minors, while participants over 18 years of age, who had exited institutional care, consented themselves. All participating adolescent girls in the institutions gave signed assent after receiving an age-appropriate explanation of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained via the use of pseudonyms and the storage of data in a secure, password-protected file [42]. This ethical rigour was vital for protecting the vulnerable participants' safety and dignity. The principles of non-deception, voluntary participation, and avoidance of harm were also adhered to throughout the study.

By synthesising data from the interviews, focus groups, and observations through framework analysis, the study provides a comprehensive description and interpretation of the livelihood strategies used by adolescent girls during and after their institutional care experiences in Harare, Zimbabwe.

### 3. Results

The findings are presented below, beginning with the biographic profiles of the adolescent girls inside and outside Institutions A and B. Next, the livelihood strategies of adolescent girls within the two institutions are highlighted, followed by those of their peers who have exited these institutions. A comparative analysis of the livelihood strategies between the two groups is then provided. Finally, the authors discuss the findings, draw conclusions, and offer recommendations.

#### 3.1. Biographic Profiles of Participants

This study involved 32 adolescent girls, with an equal split between those currently living in institutions (Institutions A and B) and those who had exited from the same institutions; there were 16 girls in each group. The ages of the girls residing in the institutions ranged from 15 to 18 years, while those who had left ranged from 18 to 21 years of age.

Their age distribution was as follows: girls aged 18 years made up the largest group, constituting 34.38% of the total sample, followed by 19-year-olds at 15.62%, adolescents aged between 15 and 17 years accounted for 12.5%, and the smallest group was those aged 20 to 21 years, representing 2.25%. The adolescent girls were placed in institutional care due to various socio-economic challenges including poverty, orphanhood, abuse or neglect by family members, abandonment at birth, and ill-health of a surviving parent.

### *3.2. Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls*

Livelihood strategies are context-specific and vary across different social sectors. They are asset-based, which means that they rely on available resources and evolve in response to shocks. According to [18], a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and manage to enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future while not undermining the natural resource base. The transition to adulthood and out of care are shocks and stresses that affect the capabilities and assets of adolescent girls. This study analysed the livelihood strategies used by adolescent girls to realise their livelihood goals as they transitioned from Institutions A and B, and the findings are as follows.

#### *3.2.1. Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls in Institutions A and B*

Adolescent girls residing in institutional care environments represent a highly vulnerable demographic, necessitating multi-stakeholder support to sustain and improve their livelihoods. Most of these girls are placed in care due to systemic disadvantages such as poverty, lack of inheritance rights, absence of land ownership, or financial neglect by relatives. Others are in care due to abandonment by their biological parents, which further exacerbates their vulnerability and dependence on institutional support.

The livelihoods of these girls are therefore heavily dependent on the provision of essential assets through programmes and services provided by the institutions themselves. Institutions A and B have a defined mandate to deliver these livelihood assets, which are crucial not only for survival during the period of institutionalisation, but also for empowerment and self-sufficiency after leaving care. These assets typically include education, vocational training, psychosocial support, health services, and social capital facilitation.

However, resource constraints within these institutions often limit the scope and quality of the assets they can provide. This insufficiency constrains the capacity of the girls to make diverse and robust livelihood choices, potentially diminishing their quality of life both during and after care. The lack of sufficient resources within institutions restricts access to education, skill development opportunities, and networks that are vital for securing sustainable livelihoods.

Analysis from this study revealed that Institutions A and B function as the central providers and facilitators of livelihood assets for the adolescent girls under their care. While other stakeholders such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups, and extended family may contribute indirectly or intermittently, the institutions act as intermediaries and primary resource mobilisers. They connect the girls to broader support systems by leveraging their organisational capacities and outreach.

Notably, the study found that all 16 adolescent girls who participated relied exclusively on the institutional support system as their main livelihood strategy. This exclusive dependence highlights both the critical role of institutional care in shaping livelihood outcomes and the need for enhanced resource allocation and multi-sectoral collaboration to diversify livelihood pathways. The girls' reliance underscores the significance of institutions not only as providers of immediate care, but also as pivotal agents in building resilience and fostering sustainable transitions into adulthood.

Expanding livelihood strategies to include broader stakeholder engagement through structured and comprehensive transition programmes, community integration initiatives, and partnerships with local organisations may strengthen the sustainability of livelihoods for these adolescents. Tailored interventions that build both human capital (skills, education) and social capital (networks, relationships) will enhance their ability to cope with future shocks and thrive independently, fulfilling the sustainability criteria stated in [19].

### 3.2.2. Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Outside Institution A

Adolescent girls discharged from Institution A employed diverse livelihood strategies supported by various social networks to achieve stability and meet their needs. Analysis of data from semi-structured interviews and observational studies revealed the following distribution of support mechanisms:

- 50% of the girls were married and depended on their spouses for financial and emotional support, highlighting marriage as a primary livelihood strategy for many who lack alternative family networks.
- 25% resided with foster parents, indicating foster care as a significant avenue for both social and economic sustenance after institutional discharge.
- 12.5% received direct assistance from relatives, demonstrating the role of extended family networks in providing crucial support.
- 12.5% were beneficiaries of institutional support, reflecting ongoing engagement with organisations that offer resources or services post-discharge.

These findings underscore the critical role of social networks such as marital relationships, foster care arrangements, extended family ties, and institutional assistance in shaping the livelihood landscapes for adolescent girls' post-institutionalisation. Each network supplies distinct types of economic, social, and sometimes emotional support that significantly influence the girls' access to resources essential for their daily survival and well-being. The livelihood strategies for adolescent girls outside Institution A are visually captured in Figure 2.

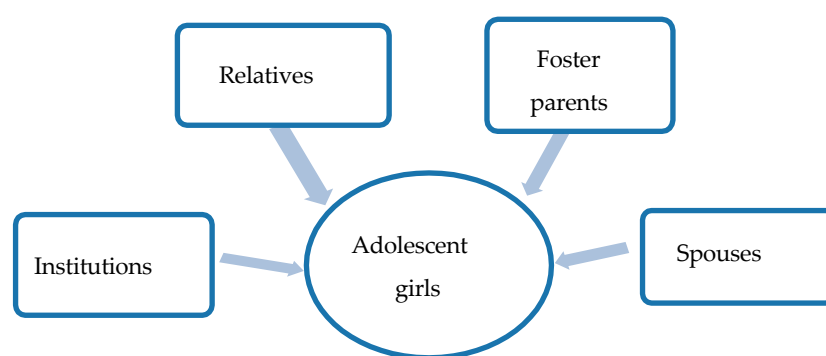


**Figure 2.** Livelihood strategies for adolescent girls outside.

The reliance on social capital was particularly pronounced, with many girls leveraging these relationships as their primary resource base. Notably, marriage emerged as a pivotal strategy for those lacking stable family support, suggesting that half of the young women leaving Institution A entered marital unions as a means of livelihood security. This trend may reflect limited alternative livelihood options and the pressing need for economic survival mechanisms.

Building on this, the subsequent analysis shifted focus to the livelihood strategies employed by adolescent girls after discharge from Institution B to provide comparative insights and a broader understanding of post-institutional support dynamics and their implications on girls' socio-economic trajectories.

### 3.2.3. Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Outside Institution B

The livelihood strategies employed by adolescent girls outside Institution B reflect a range of social support systems and personal choices. Detailed analysis revealed that these girls primarily relied on three key strategies to achieve their livelihood goals: institutional support, family and relative networks, and marriage.

A total of 37.5% of the adolescent girls were currently engaged with various institutions, indicating that institutional affiliation remains a significant pillar in sustaining their livelihoods. This involvement often provides access to educational opportunities, vocational training, and psychosocial support, which enhances their prospects for future independence and stability. Notably, two girls had proactively specifically transitioned to different institutions to pursue higher education, highlighting a strategic move towards academic advancement and empowerment.

Family and relative support constituted the most prevalent livelihood strategy, with 50% of the adolescent girls residing with kin. This arrangement not only offers emotional and financial support, but also a protective environment that facilitates healing and social integration after discharge. The critical role of familial networks underscores the importance of community-based resources and extended kinship ties in fostering resilience and continuity in the girls' lives.

Marriage accounted for 12.5% of the livelihood strategies observed, where adolescent girls had established marital relationships as a means of securing economic stability and social legitimacy. While marriage may offer immediate livelihood benefits, it also presents complex challenges and risks, necessitating careful consideration within broader social protection frameworks.

The livelihood strategies for adolescent girls outside Institution B are visually captured in Figure 3.

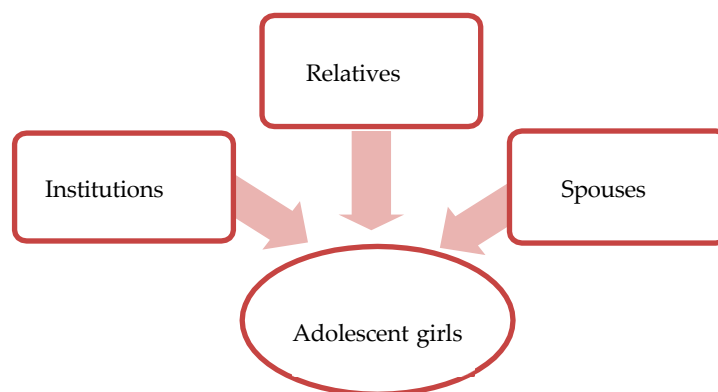


**Figure 3.** Livelihood strategies for adolescent girls outside Institution B.

Overall, the diversity in livelihood strategies among adolescent girls outside Institution B reflects a dynamic interplay between institutional resources, family support systems, and personal life choices. This underscores the need for tailored interventions that address the distinct pathways through which these young women navigate their transition to independent living and social inclusion.

### 3.3. Comparative Analysis of Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls

The findings revealed nuanced distinctions and overlaps in livelihood strategies adopted by adolescent girls depending on their institutional context and care status. Livelihood strategies encompass the range of activities and choices individuals pursue to achieve their livelihood goals, which vary significantly based on contextual factors [11]. This analysis deepens the understanding of how adolescent girls navigate these pathways within and

outside institutional care. This section presents a comparative analysis of livelihood strategies for adolescent girls inside Institutions A and B, followed by a comparative analysis of livelihood strategies for adolescent girls inside and outside of care.

### 3.3.1. Comparison of Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Outside Institutions A and B

Adolescent girls who had exited both Institutions A and B relied primarily on external support systems to pursue their livelihood goals, including family relatives, institutional provisions, and spouses. A key differentiator was the presence of foster parents in the support network of girls in Institution A, a factor absent in Institution B. This additional layer of foster care support in Institution A may suggest a more structured or personalised caregiving environment. Nonetheless, across both institutions, there was a shared pattern where none of the sixteen interviewed girls had attained full self-sufficiency, highlighting ongoing vulnerabilities and dependency within institutional settings. This suggests potential gaps in capacity-building or empowerment programmes aimed at fostering economic independence among institutionalised adolescent girls.

An analysis of the livelihood strategies adopted by adolescent girls after leaving institutional care revealed significant trends that highlight both the adaptive responses and systemic challenges affecting their well-being and social integration.

A total of 31.25% of the sixteen adolescent girls studied were married. Marriage frequently emerged as a critical strategy for social and financial security, particularly for those who could not return to unsupportive, unstable, or abusive family environments. This finding reflects broader patterns observed in similar contexts, where girls without access to secondary education face constrained life choices, often leading to early marriage and childbearing. In many cases, these girls seek protection and economic support through relationships with older men, a response that, while pragmatic, can expose them to additional risks, including exploitation and health vulnerabilities.

An equivalent proportion, 31.25%, had been reunified with their biological families or extended relatives. This reunification suggests some level of family reintegration; however, the quality and stability of these family environments remain uncertain, especially if initial removal from the institution was due to adverse conditions. In contrast, fostering accounted for only 12.5% of the girls' post-institutional living arrangements, indicating that formal fostering remains relatively rare. This rarity is strongly influenced by prevailing cultural beliefs and social norms that discourage fostering and formal adoption, limiting alternatives for care outside the biological family.

Furthermore, 25% of the girls, comprising those whose families could not be located and those continuing their secondary education, had transitioned into other institutional settings. This highlights the scarcity of viable alternatives and safety nets for girls lacking family support or adequate community-based resources. The persistence of institutional care as a fallback underscore gaps in social protection systems and community-based reintegration programmes.

Together, these findings emphasise multiple vulnerabilities inherent in the transition from institutional care to independent living or family-based care. The limited options, coupled with insufficient social support and inadequate involvement of key stakeholders in the transition process, contribute to precarious livelihoods and increased risks of poverty, social exclusion, and adverse developmental outcomes for these adolescent girls. This calls for enhanced policy attention to develop sustainable and culturally sensitive alternatives, including improved educational access, community-based support mechanisms and protection interventions to break cycles of dependency and risk.

### 3.3.2. Comparison of Livelihood Strategies for Adolescent Girls Inside and Outside Care

When expanding the comparison beyond institutional boundaries, the livelihood strategies diversified substantially. Girls inside Institutions A and B predominantly relied on institutional support as the cornerstone of their livelihood strategies. Conversely, adolescent girls outside these institutions employed a broader array of mechanisms, including support from institutions, foster parents, marriage (via spouses), and relatives. This expanded mix indicates that outside care environments may offer more varied social capital and opportunities, reflecting different socio-cultural and economic dynamics at play. The reliance on marriage as a livelihood strategy warrants critical attention due to its implications for the girls' autonomy and long-term well-being.

This comparative analysis elucidated critical gaps and opportunities in supporting adolescent girls' livelihood strategies, emphasising the need for comprehensive policies that address both care environments and socio-cultural realities. The comparative data, showcased in Table 2, underscore how care status influences access to resources and livelihood diversification, potentially impacting resilience and self-reliance outcomes.

**Table 2.** Livelihood strategies for adolescent girls outside Institutions A and B.

| Livelihood Strategy Outside Care | Institution A | Institution B | Totals |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------|
| Foster parents                   | 2             | 0             | 2      |
| Family/relatives                 | 1             | 4             | 5      |
| Marriage/spouse                  | 4             | 1             | 5      |
| Institution                      | 1             | 3             | 4      |

## 4. Discussion

This study revealed that adolescent girls in Institutions A and B formed a highly vulnerable group whose livelihoods depended almost entirely on institutional support due to systemic challenges like poverty, abandonment, and lack of family assets. Similar findings were made by [2,7], who found that females in residential care centres were characterised by dependency on support from the institutions. Within these institutions, livelihood strategies centre on education, vocational training, psychosocial support, and health services [2]. However, limited resources restrict the quality and variety of these supports. This strong reliance highlights the institutions' crucial role, however, a central paradox exists: the institutional care framework intended to support these girls can simultaneously constrain their strategic choices. Ref. [43] emphasise that institutional care, especially in resource-limited settings, often struggles to provide the dynamic, individualised support found in family environments.

The finding that all 16 institutionalised girls depended solely on institutional support supports this idea of a “dependency syndrome”, where external aid becomes their only livelihood strategy. This is not a personal failure but a systemic one. Refs. [3,7] note that the transition from care is a vulnerable period, with young people facing risks of social exclusion. Without diverse and practical life skills training, their vulnerabilities deepen. The study found that resource limitations directly reduce the “scope and quality” of assets available, thereby restricting the girls' ability to pursue varied and resilient livelihood options after leaving care.

In contrast, adolescent girls outside institutions utilised a wider set of livelihood mechanisms, including support from institutions, foster parents, marriage, and relatives. This diversified support network suggests that care environments outside institutions may offer richer social capital and opportunities shaped by differing socio-cultural and economic factors. For many girls outside Institution A, marriage (50%) was a key livelihood strategy, providing financial and emotional support, but raises concerns about autonomy

and exploitation risks. This aligns with [7], who describe early marriage as an economic survival tactic in vulnerable populations. While offering short-term security, reliance on marriage can entrench poverty cycles and reduce educational attainment, thereby increasing the susceptibility to exploitation [27]. Foster care (25%) and extended family support (12.5%) also contributed significantly. The limited uptake of foster care, influenced by cultural norms discouraging formal fostering, points to systemic gaps in alternative care pathways [30,44].

For girls formerly in Institution B, livelihood strategies leaned more heavily on family and relatives (50%) and continued institutional engagement (37.5%), with marriage being less common (12.5%). This divergence illustrates distinct socio-cultural dynamics and support networks. Comparing these contexts highlights key gaps and opportunities in supporting adolescent girls' livelihoods, underscoring the importance of comprehensive policies that integrate care environments with socio-cultural realities [2]. The continued recourse to institutional care when family reintegration fails reflects shortcomings in social protection and community reintegration programmes, consistent with studies by [30,45].

Overall, these findings demonstrate that social networks, including marital relationships, foster care arrangements, extended family, and institutional assistance, play a pivotal role in shaping livelihood options for adolescent girls' post-institutionalisation. Each support network offers unique economic, social, and emotional resources critical for survival and well-being. Reliance on social capital is especially pronounced, with many girls using these relationships as their main resource base. These livelihoods mirror broader socio-economic and cultural contexts guiding adolescent girls' trajectories during and after institutional care [43]. Ref. [19] highlights that livelihood strategies depend heavily on context, and the evident dependency patterns call for strong transition programmes that facilitate sustainable livelihoods.

One of the objectives of Zimbabwe's National Orphan Care Policy is to engage, motivate, and sensitise communities across the country to develop support strategies and interventions for orphans [32]. In line with this, the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children has adopted measures to identify, mobilise, and coordinate resources to support orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) [46]. Despite these policies, institutions are still mandated to provide programs that develop practical skills for independent living and prepare young people for work or further education [32]. However, this study revealed that many institutions lack adequate resources to fully support adolescent girls. A similar observation was made by [2].

The findings that while in care, adolescent girls' livelihoods are sustained primarily through the resource mobilisation efforts of the institutions is confirmed in the literature by [43], who states that the presence of this safety net for children placed in institutional care hinders their development of survival skills needed to face the harsh realities of the outside world where independence is paramount, thereby hampering their success of transitioning out of care. Although other stakeholders contribute resources either directly or indirectly, access to these resources is often mediated through the institution. After discharge, adolescent girls rely on multiple livelihood strategies that depend heavily on their social capital, such as spouses (through marriage), foster parents, family, relatives, and institutions. Despite these supports, the study found that none of the adolescent girls were yet able to sustain themselves socially or economically. Importantly, the findings suggest that at age 18, these girls are not yet prepared to live independently due to a lack of essential financial and social resources. Similar findings were noted in a study by [2], who found that the transition of female adolescents out of residential care facilities is a complex phenomenon influenced by complicated family dynamics, lack of resources, socio-economic challenges, as well as the unsupportive reintegration processes of many institutions.

In summary, support networks serve as the primary livelihood strategy for adolescent girls transitioning from care. Institutional care provides relatively uniform, formal support systems, whereas outside care fosters diverse networks involving family and marital ties. Girls outside care experience greater livelihood diversification, which can enhance stability but also introduce risks like early marriage. The lack of self-sufficiency among institutionalised girls signals a need for improved livelihood skills training, economic empowerment, and psychosocial services within institutions. These differing strategies reflect broader socio-economic and cultural influences, emphasising the importance of tailored, context-specific interventions rather than universal solutions.

## 5. Conclusions

The study evaluated the livelihood strategies adolescent girls used during and after their transition from residential childcare facilities in Harare, Zimbabwe. The findings confirm that the challenges of leaving institutional care strongly shape the girls' strategic choices. Adolescent girls face major hurdles in achieving independent livelihoods due to systemic poverty and social vulnerability. Despite policy intentions, discharging girls at age eighteen without sufficient support leads to dependency and negative coping mechanisms. Girls outside institutions have broader support networks but still face risks that can worsen poverty and vulnerability.

The study closely aligns with the sustainable livelihoods approach by demonstrating how the vulnerability context of leaving care directly influences the girls' access to essential livelihood assets such as social networks, education and financial resources. This interaction plays a crucial role in shaping the livelihood strategies they adopt. These strategies, developed both during their time in care and after reintegration into their communities, are not merely voluntary choices, but rather necessary adaptations to the limited resources and opportunities available to them. Consequently, many of the strategies the girls employ result in adverse consequences, including economic instability, social exclusion, and a heightened risk of returning to poverty and dependency. This highlights the complex challenges faced by care leavers as they strive to build sustainable and independent lives. Without targeted support to strengthen the girls' asset base before and during this critical transition, vulnerability will continue to force them into a narrow set of risky livelihood strategies. These findings meet the study's goal by not only evaluating the strategies used, but also identifying the causes and harmful effects behind them. This evidence offers essential guidance for designing policies and programmes that can better support these girls, helping to break the cycle of poverty and social vulnerability and promote sustainable livelihoods.

### 5.1. Significance and Implications of the Study

The study underscores the need to engage with the phenomenon of adolescent girls and youth transitioning from residential childcare facilities and child welfare systems, highlighting the importance of comprehensive, collaborative, and tailored strategies for successful outcomes. This study's findings that systemic poverty and social vulnerability severely limit the livelihood options of girls align with the need for specialised and comprehensive programmes designed to meet unique livelihood needs. The transition programmes discussed in this article, namely the integrated approach to youth permanency and preparation for adulthood, the treatment family model (TFM), and the Transition to Independence Process (TIP) system, help youth access critical livelihood assets that promote positive livelihood outcomes. Similarly, the girls in this study need targeted support specifically to build their social networks, education, and financial resources before and during their transition to prevent negative coping mechanisms. Integrating these

models with the study's findings highlights that without a comprehensive, collaborative, and tailored approach that strengthens essential livelihood assets and shares responsibility, vulnerability among care-leaving adolescent girls will continue. This vulnerability leads to risky livelihood strategies and poor outcomes. This synthesis offers important evidence-based guidance for policy and programme development focused on breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting sustainable independent living for youth transitioning from residential care.

### 5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, adolescent girls in institutional settings need targeted interventions that broaden their livelihood options and activities to help them achieve sustainable livelihoods. To address this, governments, residential childcare facilities, and other stakeholders involved in child welfare and youth development should create comprehensive transition programmes. These programmes should offer continuous support, allowing girls to build stocks of assets adequate to ward off poverty and social vulnerability. Such interventions can enhance their economic capabilities, boost self-confidence, and provide protection against gender-based violence. Ultimately, this leads to the adoption of more positive livelihood strategies for adolescent girls. To address the challenges associated with the livelihood strategies being employed by adolescent girls in this study, the authors recommend several interventions, which are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Key interventions.

| Challenge                                    | Intervention Example                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Early marriage for social/financial security | Cash transfers, education incentives, and reproductive health services |
| Limited family/foster care options           | Family tracing, foster care support, and community sensitisation       |
| Institutional dependency and lack of options | Transition programs, aftercare, vocational training                    |
| Economic exclusion and unemployment          | Microfinance, job placement, entrepreneurship training                 |

The following recommendations are proposed to address the challenges faced by adolescent girls and youth transitioning out of residential care facilities and child protection systems.

To expand access to education and skills training for adolescent girls at risk of early marriage or with limited family support, it is important to provide scholarships, conditional cash transfers, or fee waivers specifically targeting secondary and post-secondary education. Alongside this, vocational and life skills training programmes should be developed to align with local market needs and the girls' own aspirations, incorporating job placement support and entrepreneurial training. Flexible learning options and safe educational spaces are also essential, particularly for girls balancing household responsibilities or facing mobility constraints, enabling them to continue their education without disruption.

Strengthening transition and aftercare services involves implementing comprehensive transition programmes that include individualised plans, ongoing counselling, and life skills development such as budgeting, self-care, and job readiness. Establishing drop-in centres and peer support groups for care leavers will provide much-needed guidance, mentorship, and social connectedness, reducing isolation and vulnerability. Regular contact with personal advisors or mentors who offer emotional support, career guidance, and advocacy is crucial to help care leavers navigate their post-care lives.

Promoting family and community-based alternatives requires an investment in family tracing and reunification services, with continuous support to ensure safe and stable reintegration where feasible. Cultural barriers to fostering and adoption should be addressed

through community sensitisation campaigns and incentives for alternative care arrangements. Providing support to foster families and relatives caring for care leavers, such as financial assistance, counselling, and training on adolescent needs, will help create a nurturing environment that meets the developmental requirements of these young people.

Economic empowerment and livelihood support for care leavers can be enhanced by facilitating access to microfinance, seed funding, or small grants for self-employment and income-generating activities, especially for girls unable to return to their families or continue their education. Partnerships with local businesses and NGOs should be developed to create apprenticeship, internship, and job placement opportunities. Additionally, financial literacy programmes covering budgeting, savings, and responsible borrowing are necessary to ensure that young women can manage their finances effectively and sustainably.

Addressing early marriage and gender-based vulnerabilities involves implementing community-based interventions to raise awareness about the risks associated with early marriage and promoting alternative pathways for girls. Providing reproductive health education and youth-friendly health services is vital to reducing early and unwanted pregnancies, empowering girls to make informed decisions about their bodies and futures. Engaging men and boys in gender equality initiatives plays a crucial role in shifting social norms and alleviating the pressure on girls to marry early for security.

Enhancing policy and system-level support requires advocacy for legal and policy reforms that guarantee care leavers access to social protection, healthcare, and housing support after leaving care. Establishing feedback mechanisms, such as the Zimbabwe Care Leavers Network, will help incorporate the voices of adolescent girls in shaping transition services and policies. Furthermore, training social workers and care staff in trauma-informed, youth-centred approaches to transition planning and aftercare will improve the quality and responsiveness of support offered to these young people.

All interventions identified above should be implemented in a coordinated and holistic manner, carefully considering the unique needs and aspirations of adolescent girls while involving them actively in the design and evaluation of programmes to ensure sustainable impact. Additionally, further research can be conducted to explore differences in livelihood strategies among adolescent girls transitioning from various forms of residential care facilities in rural areas. Moreover, there is also a need to capture the transition experiences of adolescent boys and young men. To increase generalisability and test the research hypothesis, future research should be conducted nationally using quantitative research methods.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualisation, S.S. and P.B.M.; Methodology, S.S. and P.B.M.; Software, S.S.; Validation, S.S. and P.B.M.; Formal analysis, S.S. and P.B.M.; Investigation, P.B.M.; Resources, P.B.M.; Data curation, S.S. and P.B.M.; Writing—original draft, S.S. and P.B.M.; Writing—review and editing, S.S. and P.B.M.; Visualisation, S.S. and P.B.M.; Supervision, S.S.; Project administration, S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pretoria, South Africa (protocol code 20140713HS, 13 July 2014).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to ethical restrictions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. Arnett, J.J. *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, 3rd ed.; Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2024.
2. Ramohai, J. Female Care Leavers' Experiences of Transition into, Through, and Out of Residential Care Centres in South Africa. *Child Youth Serv.* **2025**, 1–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Stein, M. Supporting young people from care to adulthood: International practice. *Child Fam. Soc. Work* **2019**, *24*, 400–405. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
4. Malvaso, C.; Klassman, K.; Delfabbro, P.; Moulds, L. Principles of Service Provision for Young People with Complex Needs: Insights from the Australian Service System. *J. Child Fam. Stud.* **2025**, *34*, 448–463. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Grage-Moore, S.; Wainwright, H.; Newton, D.; Mendes, P.; Skouteris, H. Factors enabling smooth transitions from out-of-home care: A scoping review. *Child. Aust.* **2025**, *47*, 3026. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Davies, J.; Brennenstuhl, S.; Allemang, B.; Salman, S.; Sainsbury, K.; Cleverly, K. Transition readiness among youth accessing mental health services with physical health co-morbidities. *Child Care Health Dev.* **2024**, *50*, 70009. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
7. Pote, C.; Dykes, G.; Carelse, S. Social Support networks for youths aging out of residential care to promote positive transition outcomes—A scoping review. *Soc. Work/Maatskaplike Werk* **2022**, *58*, 84–100. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Wehman, P.; Sima, A.; Ketchum, J.; West, M.; Chan, F.; Luecking, R. Predictors of successful transition from school to employment for youth with Disabilities. *J. Occup. Rehabil.* **2015**, *25*, 323–334. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
9. Morse, S. Having Faith in the Sustainable Livelihood Approach: A Review. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 539. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
10. Scoones, I. *Sustainable Livelihoods and Rural Development*, 2nd ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2023.
11. DFID. *Sustainable Livelihoods Guidance Sheets*; UK Department for International Development: London, UK, 1999.
12. Mhonger, P.B.; Lombard, A. Poverty to more poverty: An evaluation of transition services provided to adolescent girls from two institutions in Zimbabwe. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **2016**, *64*, 145–154. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
13. International Labour Organisation (ILO). The youth employment crisis: Time for action: Fifth item on the agenda. In *International Labour Conference, 101st Session 2012, Report 5*; ILO: Geneva, Switzerland, 2012.
14. International Crisis Group. Understanding the Arab Spring's Legacy. In *Brussels: ICG Report*; International Crisis Group: Brussels, Belgium, 2019.
15. OECD. *Youth and COVID-19: Response, Recovery and Resilience*; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2022.
16. International Labour Organisation (ILO). *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2023*; ILO: Geneva, Switzerland, 2023.
17. World Bank. *Navigating Youth Transitions in a Changing World*; World Bank: Washington, DC, USA, 2024.
18. Natarajan, N.; Newsham, A.; Rigg, J.; Suhardiman, D. A sustainable livelihoods framework for the 21st century. *World Dev.* **2022**, *155*, 105898. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
19. UNDP. *Guidance Note: Application of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework in Development Projects*; United Nations Development Programme: Panama City, Panama, 2017.
20. Frey, L.L.; Greenblatt, S.B.; Brown, J. *Call to Action: An Integrated Approach to Youth Permanency and Preparation for Adulthood*; Casey Family Services: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2005.
21. Ringle, L.; Huefner, J.; James, S.; Pick, R.; Thompson, R. 12-month follow-up outcomes for youth departing and integrated residential continuum of care. *Child. Youth Serv. Rev.* **2012**, *34*, 675–679. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
22. Clark, H.B. *TIP System Development and Operational Manual*; Brookes Publishing, Co.: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2004.
23. Gunda, S.; Sibanda, S. Expansion and Deepening of Social Support Systems for Female Caregivers Who Attended a Group-Based HIV Prevention Programme in Soweto, South Africa. *J. Soc. Serv. Res.* **2025**, 1–14. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
24. Lukas, T. Constella Futures for the Health Policy Initiative, Task Order 1. In *Reducing Adolescent Girls' Vulnerability to HIV Infection: Examining Microfinance and Sustainable Livelihood Approaches. A Literature and Programme Review*; United States Agency for International Development (USAID): Washington, DC, USA, 2008.
25. Murenje, M. Human Rights and Migration: Perspectives of Zimbabwean Migrants Living in Johannesburg, South Africa. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia, 2020.
26. Alabi, O. Zimbabwe's Youth Unemployment Crisis. 2024. Available online: <https://zimadvocate.com/2024/02/22/zimbabwes-youth-unemployment-crisis/> (accessed on 13 June 2025).
27. UNICEF. Adolescent and Youth Skill Development, Employability and Entrepreneurship. 2024. Available online: <https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/media/13096/file/Adolescent%20and%20Youth%20skills%20Development,%20Employability%20and%20Entrepreneurship.pdf> (accessed on 14 July 2025).
28. Mpako, A.; Moyo-Nyede, S. Young Zimbabweans See Their Government as Falling Short on Employment and the Economy. 2023. Available online: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/AD744-Young-Zimbabweans-see-government-failing-on-jobs-and-economy-Afrobarometer-5dec23.pdf> (accessed on 19 April 2025).
29. Tladi, O.; Sibanda, S. Money in Foster Care: An Exploration of How Foster Care Grants Are Used by Foster Parents in South Africa. *J. Soc. Serv. Res.* **2025**, 1–14. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

30. Sibanda, S. Addressing challenges faced by social workers in providing family reunification services to children in out-of-home care: A South African Perspective. *Pract. Soc. Work. Action*. **2025**, *2025*, 1–16. [[CrossRef](#)]
31. Sibanda, S. Best practices for rendering family reunification services to children in alternative care placements in South Africa. *Child Prot. Pract.* **2025**, *5*, 100182. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Ministry of Labour and Social Services. *National Residential Child Care Standards 2010*; Ministry of Labour and Social Services: Harare, Zimbabwe, 2010.
33. Gwenzi, G.D. The Transition from Institutional Care to Adulthood and Independence: A Social Services Professional and Institutional Caregiver Perspective in Harare, Zimbabwe. *Child Care Pract.* **2018**, *25*, 248–265. [[CrossRef](#)]
34. Tanga, P.; Gutura, P. The impact of the child support grant on participation in the labour market in rural Eastern Cape. *Soc. Work/Maatskaplike Werk* **2014**, *49*, 128–140. [[CrossRef](#)]
35. Chambers, R.; Conway, G. *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century*; Institute of Development Studies: Falmer, UK, 1992.
36. Scoones, I. *Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis*; Institute of Development Studies: Falmer, UK, 1998.
37. Hesse-Biber, S. Feminist approaches to triangulation: Uncovering subjugated knowledge and fostering social change in mixed methods research. *J. Mix. Methods Res.* **2012**, *6*, 137–146. [[CrossRef](#)]
38. Kabeer, N. *Feminist Economics: A Transformative Paradigm*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2022.
39. Flick, U. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th ed.; SAGE: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.
40. Gale, N.K.; Heath, G.; Cameron, E.; Rashid, S.; Redwood, S. Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Med. Res. Methodol.* **2013**, *13*, 117. [[CrossRef](#)]
41. Srivastava, A.; Thomson, S.B. Framework Analysis: A Qualitative Methodology for Applied Policy Research. *J. Adm. Gov.* **2009**, *4*, 72–79.
42. Creswell, J.W.; Poth, C.N. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed.; SAGE: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2018.
43. Moodley, R.; Raniga, T.; Sewpaul, V. Youth Transitioning Out of Residential Care in South Africa: Toward Ubuntu and Interdependent Living. *Emerg. Adulthood* **2020**, *8*, 45–53. [[CrossRef](#)]
44. Munthali, A.C.; Zulu, E.M. The timing and role of initiation rites in preparing young people for adolescence and responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour in Malawi. *Afr. J. Reprod. Health* **2007**, *11*, 150–167. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
45. Richter, L.M.; Norman, A. AIDS orphan tourism: A threat to young children in residential care. *Vulnerable Child. Youth Stud.* **2010**, *5*, 217–229. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Ministry of Labour and Social Services. *National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children: Phase II (2011–2015)*; Ministry of Labour and Social Services: Harare, Zimbabwe, 2011.

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.