



Forced into Adulthood: An Exploration of Psycho-Social Dynamics in Child-headed Households

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Abstract

Child-headed households are a common family arrangement in the coastal region of Kenya and beyond. These households are mainly precipitated by situations in the lives of parents that force children to take up social roles that are usually reserved for adults. While children have rights just like adults, their well-being is compromised without parents' involvement in their lives because of missing parental obligations. Children in child-headed households are forced to handle responsibilities that are not appropriate for their developmental age, often denying them a sense of childhood comfort and burdening them emotionally, socially and psychologically. Such children end up with numerous psycho-social challenges, including low self esteem, early marriages, exposure to child labour, prostitution, trafficking and social exclusion, among others. The situation is a vicious cycle, bound to recur since such children also become parents at an early age. This paper uses data from coastal Kenya to show the inevitability of child-headed households and the need to treat such households as part of the larger repertoire of nuclear family set ups in the society.

Key Words: Psycho-social dynamics; child-headed households; alternative family units

Résumé

Les foyers dont le chef est un enfant sont une forme d'organisation familiale que l'on trouve assez fréquemment sur la région côtière du Kenya et au-delà. La plupart de ces foyers sont le fait d'événements inattendus survenus dans la vie des parents et qui obligent les enfants à assumer des rôles sociaux normalement dévolus aux adultes. Si les enfants ont en principe des droits au même titre que les adultes, leur bien-être se trouve néanmoins compromis sans l'implication des parents dans leur vie ; ils sont ainsi privés des devoirs parentaux à leur égard. Les enfants des foyers dirigés par un enfant sont obligés d'assumer des responsabilités incompatibles avec leur âge. De ce fait, ils ne peuvent souvent profiter du confort insouciant de l'enfance, révélant ainsi un poids émotionnel,

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social et psychologique dont ils souffrent. Ces enfants finissent par développer plusieurs types de troubles psychosociaux dont notamment la perte d'estime de soi, le mariage précoce, la vulnérabilité au travail, à la prostitution, au trafic d'enfants et à l'exclusion sociale. Il s'agit d'un cercle vicieux et forcément récurrent, dans la mesure où ces enfants eux-mêmes deviendront aussi des parents à un jeune âge.

Introduction

The Kenyan Coast is a high tourist destination (Akama 1999; Dieke 1991; Sindiga 1999) with the majority of the activities around the coast related to tourism and use of natural resources around the beaches and other marine bio-life. One prevalent source of livelihood for many in this region is fishing (Ochiewo 2004). Many people also explore the ocean for shells that they easily hawk to tourists and local visitors at the coast as others are involved in mining activities especially in Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa and Magarini districts. With the prevalence of tourism and other forms of socioeconomic activities along the coast, there is a general assumption that employment can easily be found there, and that tourists will readily spend money on simple chores like local tour guiding and domestic work. As a result many people migrate from other parts of the country to seek employment in the tourism industry only to arrive and realize that there are few lucrative economic opportunities available (Oucho 2007). In reality, the majority of the jobs available are casual jobs like working on mining farms, domestic work, small scale businesses and basic beach operations. These jobs provide very meagre pay and often force individuals to consider alternative livelihood sustaining mechanisms, some of which are quasi-legal such as commercial sex work and making local brews. This mismatch between expected economic boom and the reality of low paying jobs leads to a number of social challenges including high rates of poverty, HIV/AIDS and family disintegration that have left many children without the care of parents. This has contributed to the existence of child-headed households.

The 2001 Children's Act of Kenya¹ defines a child as a human being under the age of eighteen years while a child of tender age to be one below the age of ten. Our research confirmed that there are many households with individuals that fit this definition who have full control over their households. Children in these households assume an adult role of nurturing, feeding and caring for themselves and others. These households provide a new model of the nuclear family that contradicts traditional African child rearing practices where children are fitted in an extended family setting and taken care of by an adult, even in the event that they lost both parents. This is not to say that there are no traditional familial or organized systems of taking care of children

in the coast region. However, a number of interacting factors have triggered the emergence of these kinds of households that call upon social scientists to rethink the nature and structure of the African family.

For a long time, parents and guardians have been considered a mandatory figure in the lives of children. With socioeconomic, political, and even structural changes as witnessed during the course of our research for this project, this notion is changing as some children enter into social arrangements where they are able to live alone and still make ends meet. What needs to be explored are a few issues, including, first, whether this is a comfortable setting for children considering the implications of taking up responsibilities before their rightfully perceived developmental stage for these kinds of tasks. Second, is the need to understand the development issues that children encounter because of these circumstances and ask whether they are forced to undergo various development stages at the same time or if they miss out on some of the stages; and third, how this affects their lives even when they become adults. Granted, children and parents have distinct roles and responsibilities that are outlined in the 2001 Children's Act of Kenya as follows:

- (1)... 'parental responsibility' means all the duties, rights, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and the child's property in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.
- (2) The duties referred to in subsection (1) include in particular-
 - (a) the duty to maintain the child and in particular to provide him with:
 - (i) adequate diet;
 - (ii) shelter;
 - (iii) clothing;
 - (iv) medical care including immunization; and
 - (v) education and guidance;
 - (b) the duty to protect the child from neglect, discrimination and abuse;
 - (c) the right to
 - (i) give parental guidance in religious, moral, social, cultural and other values;
 - (ii) determine the name of the child;
 - (iii) appoint a guardian in respect of the child;
 - (iv) enforcement of rights.

This Act emphasizes the role of parents in the lives of children and confirms that children in child-headed households are overwhelmed by responsibilities that are not rightfully theirs even when they cannot avoid them. In this paper I explore the various realities of child-headed households and the ways in which they assist us in understanding the changing nature of the African family, especially when it comes to the role of parents in socializing children into members of their communities.

Methods used to Collect the Data

Data for the study were collected through structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation. Two-hundred and fifty children were interviewed in the study in Magarini, Kilifi, Malindi, Kwale and Mombasa districts in Kenya's coastal province. Further, eight social workers from different organizations within the coast province were also involved in a focus group discussion that focussed on the psycho-social dynamics of children in child-headed households. The social workers were also engaged in participant observations on 24 selected households in the mentioned areas.

Child-headed Households as Stable Social Units

As child protection systems are emphasized by the government through the children's department and by both local and international organizations, child-headed households are gradually gaining stability and semi-independence. With various organizations focusing on different areas supporting children such as educational sponsorship and provision of other basic needs, many children are finding a way to fend for themselves even in the absence of parents. Social workers from various organizations actively offer such services as guidance and counselling and link children to essential health care services through government and private facilities. Some parts of the coastal region in Kenya rely on relief food and children in child-headed households are given priority where they are known to the local administration. It is rare to find children with malnutrition at the Kenyan coast because of the availability of certain foods that provide a balanced diet. Fruits like mangoes, paw paws, pineapples and coconuts grow readily in different parts of the region. Wild vegetables can also be found easily, while fish is accessible to those who live near the Indian Ocean shores. Children are able to get starch from rice, maize meal and cassava which are staple foods at the coast. All these go to show that even when children are living in households where they do not have adult care and supervision, they are likely to survive. The existence of these households is propelled by various interacting dynamics that affect the day-to-day lives of people in the coastal region including diseases, access to land, imprisonment, and peer influence, as discussed here below.

Diseases

HIV/AIDS continues to claim many lives in sub-Saharan Africa. The Kenyan coast in particular has high rates of HIV/AIDS infection because of its focus and often dependence on the tourist industry. While the industry does provide a large share of the national income it 'has failed to deliver significant benefits and employment for host communities', and as a result exacerbated and increased the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation (Jones 2006:vi). The area has also attracted many employment seekers and has many fisher folk, a high prevalence of commercial sex workers (both children and adults) and intravenous drug users, all of whom are most at risk of contracting HIV. These risky socioeconomic practices often lead to the death of both parents leaving children to fend for themselves. With poverty levels at the Kenyan coast going as high as 65 percent in some districts,² it is not unusual for a family to consider it economically burdensome to take care of HIV/AIDS orphans because of high treatment and nutrition costs. As some scholars have shown, 'in communities where death due to AIDS has forced many adolescents to take on adult roles, the transition from childhood to adulthood is disappearing' (Ondimu 2005:5). While it is common practice and even expected that orphaned children will be taken in by relatives, migrant families that have kin in other parts of the country present some challenges for these children. Indeed it may be that some orphaned children may find it hard to migrate back to their ancestral homes if their parents had migrated to the coast and had claims of home in another location in the country. Moreover, some of the children are born after the parents have moved from their ancestral homes and may not be known to their kin and vice versa. As a result, these children do not have any attachments to their families. As some of our focus group discussions revealed, many children can have a stronger bond with neighbours as compared to their relatives, some of whom they are likely not to have ever seen.

When it comes to legal considerations, however, the children can only be taken care of by a close family member in the event that their parents are not there. Non-family members are discouraged from taking care of children who are not related to due to the current complicated procedures of adoption, fostering or giving guardianship that are stipulated in the country's laws on child care. It is for such reasons that most of the children prefer to remain in their homes and take care of their household than go live with relatives. Even when communities may have local mechanisms of taking care of such children, those children whose parents migrated from another part of the country may not benefit much since they are seen as foreigners and not beneficiaries of community resources. This is closely linked to the fact that the majority of the parents are likely to have been casual workers and

considered a minority in the community they live. Stigma also affects the response of individuals towards HIV/AIDS orphans. Some people assume that their own family members are likely to be infected if they interact closely with HIV/AIDS orphans. This limits the chances of orphaned children being prioritized in their immediate community and in traditional social protection mechanisms.

Access to Land

The land question within the Kenyan Coast is complex due to its peculiar historical and legal origins. The process of land adjudication and registration under the Land Titles Act (Cap 292) in Kenya deprived many members of the indigenous Coastal communities of their land. This led to the area having the largest single concentration of landless indigenous people living as squatters. It also gave rise to the problem of absentee landowners (Session Paper 3 of 2009 on the National Land Policy)³.

These loopholes make it easy for children to settle in a given place where they put up simple shelters with no one evicting them from the land. Moreover most of the traditional coastal houses are made from locally available materials – mud walls and the roofs from pine leaves – making it easy for these children to construct their own shelter inexpensively. With the availability of warm and friendly weather almost year round, it is also easy for children to live without the need of much covering to protect them from harsh weather. Those living around the ocean can fish for food. These factors together with availability of food in some places make it easy for children to survive in a subsistence way, despite the absence of their parents.

Imprisonment

Children have also been left without parents who may have been sentenced to spend time in prison for both criminal and civil cases. This is likely to happen if the parents of the children have relocated to the coast from a different place, leading them to being socially excluded by other community members who often label them in relation to the crimes that their parents committed. Sometimes parents are jailed because of reasons related to the children, leaving their children without a parental figure. This reality was expressed in focus group discussions with the social workers, who revealed that they were giving psycho-social support to children who were living alone because their parents were sentenced to jail for a crime related to their children, such as defilement, child neglect or even physical abuse. Quite often these children are shunned by family members who perceive them as traitors and inconsiderate to their parents. The situation is made even worse when the children are witnesses in court testifying against their parents.

Given this complex social relationship, as our focus group discussions revealed, many families choose to downplay or even not report at all any cases of abuse to child protection authorities. They instead prefer to solve the issues amicably and will not treat the children involved kindly, should the children cooperate with authorities to pursue the cases legally. Should the children get support from the authorities, family members refuse to provide for them while the parents are serving their sentences and even discourage those who are willing to help them for fear of being shunned from the extended family. It is not uncommon for organizations to step in and offer to assist these children through the provision of basic needs and education, but their relatives will often not support them and may even take away the things they are given and use them for their own personal gain. This kind of frustration makes the children choose to leave their homes and begin surviving on their own as they enjoy relative peace.

Negative Modelling from Peers

Some of the children interviewed ran away from home and quit school because of what they considered extreme pressure to meet academic obligations from their parents. Some of the children said that they perceive working on the beach as an option since they may be lucky enough to meet foreigners from the West who would provide resources that would transform their lives. To this end some hang around the beach and wait for tourists to come by, and earn their living from giving tourists directions on the beach, or take tourists for boat rides to see fish in the deep ocean. They may also be involved in illicit business like selling drugs and even prostitution. In the course of all these, there are those who get married or end up in close intimate relationships where their partners provide for them fully. This kind of lifestyle is often discouraged by many parents who acknowledge the negative consequences of such behaviour. The children consider it a short cut to getting the life they desire and hence run away from home to pursue this life. It is through these and other related issues that we find many child-headed households in Kenya's coastal region. Such tasks of heading households for children maybe the only or even a better option for many children but they do come with many psycho-social challenges as we will see below. Some of the psycho-social challenges push children further into autonomy and increase the number of households with no adult caregivers.

Psycho-social Issues of Children in Child-headed Households

Children, adolescents and adults differ from each other in their style of thought, emotional experience and expression, and behaviour (Corey 2005). Children and adolescents tend to manifest several of the thought styles

associated with cognitive distortions in adults. Dichotomous thinking, over-inclusive thought, idealized rather than realistic appraisal of situations, and catastrophic thought are common among young people (Dattilio & Freeman 2000). The realization that children can make ends meet against all odds can boost their self esteem and motivate them to find solace in the kind of life they live. As Maxwell notes, 'When children experience breakthroughs, they're able to move further down the road toward the fulfilment of their full potential. Sometimes, the breakthrough enables them to choose the better fork in the road. Other times, the breakthrough allows them to overcome an obstacle or potential obstacle with relative ease, and it gives them an extra burst of energy that speeds them on their journey' (Maxwell 1996:4). But often, it is reason enough to harbour anger, vengeance and despair in life in retaliation to their experience. This raises the questions: Do the circumstances of children in child-headed households magnify or compromise their dignity as children and what is the worth of a parent in a child's life? While a child is entitled to his or her basic human rights just like an adult, there are limitations that arise because a child is below the age of consent for many issues. A child cannot represent him/herself in certain areas, making it a hindrance to the full realization of his/her rights. A child cannot fully engage in work or access financial services, among other challenges. Even free and mandatory services like health care, are usually given through the National Health Insurance Fund, upon provision of a parent's identification documents. Children's rights cannot be isolated from parental responsibilities. This makes it difficult for children to depend wholly on themselves and enjoy their lives in the absence of a parent or guardian. Children in child-headed households undergo various psycho-social challenges where they are not only burdened with the stress of fending for themselves but also with the challenge of medical care, social exclusion and violation of basic rights.

In traditional African culture, children who lose both parents are taken care of by other immediate family members. Usually, different relatives opt to stay with the children and to provide for them. The children grow up with their own relatives without necessarily going through cumbersome legal adoption procedures. In Kenya for example, according to the nations Children's Act of 2001, adoption orders are only issued by the High Court of Kenya and not any lower court. Once issued, the order is served on the Registrar-General (Marriages and Adoptions Office) for entry into the Adopted Children's Register and issuance of the Adoption Certificate. If the parents had property, it is given to the selected people to manage it on behalf of the children. Sometimes the children are not even aware of the property, nor do they understand their entitlement to it. As a result, they do not follow

up on it even once they become adults. The property may be sold before the children attain the age of consent, or the children may simply be sidelined during the sharing of the property. On realizing that they have been cheated by their relatives some children move from their patrimonial home and live alone. Seventeen households involved in this study, for instance, reported mistreatment from extended family members after the death of both parents.

When children are left by their parents for whatever reason they become vulnerable to employment practices even as they take advantage of the available labour market (though illegal). According to 2007 findings on the worst forms of child labour in Kenya

... children primarily work in the informal sector. They work, often with their families, in subsistence and commercial agriculture, on tea, coffee, rice, and sugar plantations. Children also work in herding and in fisheries. Children also work in domestic service, construction, transport, quarries, and mines, including gold mines. In urban areas, some street children are children who managed to escape from abusive domestic service situations.⁴

Children are engaged in commercial sexual exploitation and are reported to engage in prostitution in bars, discos, brothels, massage parlours, and on the streets. While the majority of children exploited in prostitution are between 13 and 17 years, children as young as nine are reported to be involved. Many girls who hawk or beg during the day reportedly engage in prostitution at night (Jones 2006). In the agricultural sector, girls are sometimes forced to provide sexual services in order to obtain plantation work. Sudanese and Somali refugee children are also alleged to be involved in prostitution in Kenya. The growth of the tourism industry has been accompanied by an increase in children's involvement in prostitution, including in the coastal towns of Malindi, Mombasa, Kilifi, and Diani.

In their responses to questions about livelihood opportunities posed during interviews for this study, children who work in salt mines were not aware of their rights as labourers and worked without realizing that they were being exploited. Many consider it a privilege rather than a violation of their rights to be employed. When children work to provide for themselves, they automatically fail to go to school and are not able to enjoy their right to education. During participant observation sessions, children from child-headed households were found to spend so much time looking for money that they did not get time to play and socialize with other children as compared to children from parent-headed households. Some undergo physical bodily harm, some of which may even cause them to be physically compromised or even lead to disabilities, more so if they are exposed to heavy labour and to toxic substances as it is in urban areas where children pick scrap metal

for sale that exposes them to tetanus. Even if employed these children are not given medical insurance cover by their employers. Children in such situations undergo intense self pity and feelings of helplessness when preoccupied with the thoughts of providing for themselves. Many despair and end up in depression. However, children are not to be blamed for this predicament. At times parents involve their own children to work on the farms and mines. In our study, 43 children working in the salt mines on a weekday were interviewed in the Magarini salt mines at Gongoni sub-location. Some of the children interviewed had this to say:

There is no need of staying with a parent if you can also provide for yourself just like they do.

When I come out here to help, I feel good because we can get more food at home...

I would rather tire on the farm for myself than to contribute to the family because I still can't get everything I need from home.

While some children were found to be working alongside their parents, others had chosen to work independently and use the money on themselves rather than to pool their money to a family basket.

There are other forms of work that lead to child exploitation and call for more intervention from adults. Child prostitution is a common phenomenon at the coast even despite the intervention of various stakeholders on how to mitigate the menace. 'The children who sell sexual favours to tourists tend not to be a homogeneous group. Sex work is transient and mobile and children will move to where there are greater opportunities, particularly children orphaned or forced to leave home for economic or other reasons' (Jones 2006). Child-headed households can partially be attributed to this. Children are highly vulnerable because they are considered cheaper sexual prey as compared to adults. In the study conducted 86 children aged between 11 and 17 confessed to be repeatedly involved in sexual intercourse in exchange of food (for themselves alone or the entire household), clothing or money. Similarly, it is worth noting that incentives are not the only reasons for children to be involved in prostitution. Many children may be exposed to sexual exploitation when they seek out opportunities that can offer them a sense of belonging. As I have shown elsewhere

... poor interpersonal relationships at home can cause learners to have close interpersonal relationships with their peers, teachers or other people. Everybody needs a place to belong. The first ideal place where one should get love is at home. In the absence of love at home, an individual finds himself clinging to any other relationship that will provide this feeling of belonging and acceptance (Muyomi 2009:51).

When not lured into prostitution some children, especially girls, are likely to consider marriage as an option of solace for themselves and their siblings. Responding to the question of what options they are considering to improve their well-being, a girl of 14 years responded: 'At this juncture I find it better to get married then move to my home with the younger children. I would not turn down an offer from an understanding man'.

When they get married, their siblings move with them to their matrimonial home. They mix and play with other children in the home and also contribute to the day to day activities of the home like tilling their garden, fetching water and even babysitting. In exchange for these services, they receive accommodation and food. Children in such marriages are, however, highly prone to abuse. According to a study by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, 'women who married at younger ages were more likely to believe that it is sometimes acceptable for a husband to beat his wife and were more likely to experience domestic violence themselves'.⁵ Their spouses are usually aware of their dependence and may take advantage of the fact that the children do not have a home to return to. This was pointed out by four respondents in our study who had been married then left the marriage after their spouses turned abusive. One respondent said, 'He kept on reminding me that he was everything to me and I had nowhere to go. He forgot that he found me living alone with my siblings and we were not going through the kind of mistreatment he was exposing me to'. Children do not have the authority to protect them from getting married no matter their age and child rights abusers take advantage of this loophole. During focus group discussion, the social workers participating mentioned that the inability to negotiate for a dowry was another factor that may predispose children to marriage at an early age. Cultural demands of making this commitment are less since the children may not have anyone to negotiate on their behalf. Such children may therefore be considered an easy prey for marriage.

Another area of concern is education. In Kenya, it is easy for children in child-headed households to access basic education since it is free (Mondah and Ngo'ngah 2004). In rural areas, it is even easier since there is little emphasis on correct school uniform because of the high levels of poverty. This is helped by the fact that the children are likely to get assistance from various organizations that meet the academic needs of children. The greatest challenge that these children are likely to experience is the lack of parental involvement in their education. Such children may also not get much attention from teachers who are aware that there is no parent to follow up on the academic performance of the child. The children may also be ridiculed by others during play and may be intimidated when others laugh at them for not having parents. From our research, we noted that despite free primary

education in Kenya, many children aged between five and nine were not attending school for various reasons including mockery from other children and the persistence of teachers that children should bring their parents to school for various reasons. We also noted in our participant observation sessions that most of the children who were socially withdrawn during child play were children from child-headed households. Out of 180 children observed, 57 were socially withdrawn and 32 of them were from child-headed households.

In other cases we also noted that older children had to forfeit their own education to allow younger ones to attend school, not because they understand the significance of education in the lives of their siblings, but because of certain factors articulated by respondents at our interviews. First, older children get time to engage in socio-economic activities without thinking of the safety of the younger ones who may wander off to play. Second, those engaged in dehumanizing and embarrassing activities like child prostitution do not want to expose it to younger children. Moreover, some schools have feeding programmes that assure some children of eating at least one meal a day, simply by being there. As studies in other parts of the country have shown, 'The effects of the school meal programme on the well-being of rural Kenyans cannot be overstated. Through providing daily meals, schools are able to meet immediate food needs, provide future safety nets, and offer long-term assistance and empowerment to children, families, and communities' (Langinger 2011:36).

Children are pushed to criminal activities for survival when they lack a way out. They may be involved in petty theft or even be used by adults to engage in more serious crimes for which they are rewarded with money or exchange of other basic needs. One of the children interviewed said, 'You cannot just sit and watch your siblings suffering when you have a way of helping them'. Social workers also revealed that at least one of the children in the child-headed households they were supporting had been involved in crime, mostly theft, to support his/her siblings. This becomes a habit and even though the children may not face serious charges and consequences because they are children protected by the law they will later face minor juvenile charges or even be put on probation.

Children receive a lot of social, physical and psychological security from parents. But a lack of this assurance makes a child feel handicapped, uncertain of his own abilities, fearful and therefore on the defensive. When failing to provide emotional security to the children, parents cause unhappiness, lack of loyalty and tension (Wanda 2007:53). Children from child-headed households are likely to miss this kind of security. They develop defence

mechanisms to protect themselves such as aggressive behaviour when they play with other children as noted in our participant observation sessions. The remote awareness that they have to stand up for themselves makes them aggressive in order to control the situations around them. This way they become bullies. As Crosson-Tower highlights the residual effects of family maltreatment leads having difficulty trusting others, having low self esteem, anger, impaired objects relation, impaired parenting abilities, lowered intelligence, impaired development, verbal inaccessibility, inability to play, difficulty with relationships, abuse of alcohol and drugs and perception of powerlessness (Crosson 2000:374).

Children from child-headed households are also targets of child trafficking where they become domestic workers or used as sex pets. When perceived to be desperate and in need of basic needs, they become all the more vulnerable to this predatory behaviour. As noted by other scholars, such children are vulnerable to being misused because, 'In an attempt to preserve what resources they retain, they become passive or withdrawn and tend to seek reassurance from others' (Dattilio and Arthur Freeman 2000:67). The people who entice such children either employ them directly or give them out to work for other people while receiving the payment on behalf of the child. In the end they do not use this money to benefit these children.

Loss of human dignity brought by these experiences of abuse interferes with the self worth and self concept of children. When they are required to provide for themselves at an early age, survivors of neglect might be expected to develop some degree of proficiency. Although past victims demonstrate an ability to survive despite incredible odds, they lack a true sense of trust in themselves. Not only have they lacked encouragement and stimulation to develop a positive self image but they have modelled themselves as parents who thought little of themselves also (Crosson-Tower 2005). Children are in several cases forced to go without some basic provisions, something which compromises their dignity. For example, some female children do not wear inner linen or use sanitary towels because of the opportunity costs involved. They are forced to choose between buying food and other basic provisions and their personal needs. Such difficult situations can make children grow up with feelings of bitterness and may be at times overwhelmed when faced with other challenges.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear that there are situations in which the existence of child-headed households cannot easily be avoided, and that some of these social arrangements are successful in their own right. There is a need, therefore,

to recognize this as a family unit that needs to be supported in the absence of the traditional form of family where parents or adult guardians are present. Scholars and practitioners in children's issues are encouraged to rethink assumptions about children being powerless and incapable of assisting themselves. This does not, however, mean that child-headed households should be encouraged as a new form of social arrangement but that they be recognized as possible sites for child socialization that can act as bridges to adulthood or to traditional family set ups. Rather than discouraging them or being oblivious to their existence scholars and caregivers alike ought to seek ways of providing psycho-social support for children in such households. Moreover, organizations that assist such children should not only focus on the material needs of such children, but also on their psycho-social well being through the provision of counselling and mentoring programmes. Although children can live without the direct involvement of parents, the significance of parents' involvement in the lives of children cannot be ignored. The failure of parental guidance exposes children to many challenges and unless this cycle is broken, more child-headed households will emerge.

Notes

1. Children's Act of Kenya, 2001.
2. See Coast Rights Forum for statistics of poverty in Malindi district at http://coastrightsforum.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=26&Itemid=43.
3. Ministry of Lands, Government of Kenya, Session Paper 3 of the National Land Policy 2009, available at http://www.lands.go.ke/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=81&Itemid=46.
4. See Findings on the worst forms of labour at, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USDOL,,KEN,456d621e2,48caa47941,0.html>.
5. See, UNICEF, 2005, 'Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice', available at www.unicef.org/publications/files/Early_Marriage_12.lo.pdf.

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