RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN AS FAMILY HEADS. AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF CHILDREN IN KAMPALA, UGANDA

Lambert Buzaare,
Comfort Ankunda,
Robert Menge[i]
University of Gothenburg,
Sweden

Abstract:
Child-headed households are a new family modality that has emerged due to HIV/AIDS, parental neglect and abandonment and migration among other factors. Children have taken up parenting and care roles for themselves, their siblings and sometimes other kinsmen. As they take on such roles, they encounter several adversities and experience difficulty acquiring basic needs such as food, housing, education, medical care and clothing. These children, as family heads, interact with physical, social, and cultural environments that bring about adversities but also offer the necessary resources for meeting needs and coping with adversities. Our study sought to explore the specific resources available to children as family heads and how those resources enable child-headed households to meet their needs and cope with the adversities they encounter. We utilised a qualitative methodology with an exploratory case study design to unravel the opinions of six purposively selected children who head families in Kampala, Uganda. We gathered children's narratives through interviews, which were later transcribed and analysed thematically. Study findings indicated that children tapped into a range of resources such as social networks, including relatives, neighbours, friends, state and civil society departments and organisations. Children as family heads also relied on family land, religiosity and participation in income-generating activities to cope with their adversities and acquire basic needs.

Keywords: children as family heads, child-headed households, needs, resources, coping, adversities

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[i] Correspondence email: lambertdraker@gmail.com, robzrobertmenge@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Across nationalities, the structure of the family is dynamic. The family is wasting away as a result of postmodernism and globalisation, for example, people are no longer willing to commit to long-term relationships because of individualistic and selfish tendencies (Esping-Andersen, 2016). As a result, family structures have changed globally. For example, in Africa, the "*traditional family structure*" consisting of parents and children in a common household is reducing due to many reasons, but most notably HIV/AIDS, which has led to mass orphanhood (Thwala, 2018, p. 150). Some parents in Africa are unable to care for their children because of "*ill health, death, political turmoil, or economic constraints*" (Van Breda, 2010, p. 259). The extended family system in Africa which had a pivotal role in caring for orphans and other vulnerable children has been weakened by the ever-rising number of children in need of care (Phillips-Veeze, 2011). As a result, Child-Headed Households (CHHs) have sprung up as alternative family structures in Africa where children are compelled to look after themselves, their siblings and other relatives (Mturi, 2012; Van Breda, 2010). According to Namazzi and Kendrick (2014), CHHs are defined as "*children, typically under the age of 18, living on their own as a result of circumstances such as parental death, illness, addiction, or abandonment*" (p. 724). In most cases, the oldest child assumes parental roles (Phillips-Veeze, 2011), such as being the head of the household, which comes along with adjustment problems, social and emotional distress, unreliable adult care and support, dropping out of school and other forms of exploitation (Kurebwa & Kurebwa, 2014). Many children in CHHs especially girls are exposed to sexual exploitation and early marriages while others are prone to live on the streets and child labour as they escape institutionalization or adoption by relatives with meagre resources (Kyomya, 2002). As these children strive to survive, they are sometimes lucky to find several resources that enable them to cope with the presented adversities and acquire basic needs. This study sought to explore the resources often utilised by children as family heads in Kampala, Uganda. For this study, we defined children as family heads as those specific children who assume parental roles in the household, including looking after themselves, their siblings and other children under their care. In particular, our study attempted to find out what resources are available to children as family heads and how these resources enable them to cope with the adversities they face.

2. Literature review

2.1 Resources available to CHHs
Studies have revealed that children in CHHs rely on several resources both material and non-material to cope with several adversities. An exploratory study carried out in Uganda and Tanzania by Evans (2012) revealed that children inherited material resources such as land, houses and other assets from their deceased parents that facilitated their coping. Also, in a study by Kipp et al. (2010), it was noted that children have land they

acquired through a will or assumed when their parents died. They used such land to get food and also sell surplus crops for income. Children lived and grew crops on such lands while others also owned animals (Kipp et al., 2010). A study carried out in Rwanda by Ward and Eyber (2009), revealed that children who had land cultivated it and sold the yields to buy necessities. Others were innovative enough to make beer from the bananas that they sold, while others sold avocados and bananas. They ably utilised the resources for their benefit. The extent to which such resources are available to children as family heads in Kampala, Uganda, was explored in this study.

A study in Zimbabwe by Kurebwa and Kurebwa (2014) revealed programmes such as food for work that are also paramount in the coping of the most vulnerable categories in the community. These are programmes by government and non-governmental organisations where the poor especially women and children work on community development projects such as "*construction and maintenance of infrastructures such as roads, irrigation structures and dams*" and are in turn paid in the form of handouts and food. The study noted that these have been integral strategies for surviving especially in rural societies. These programmes have further helped in terms of the provision of "*basic nutritional requirements*" and have also helped in access to health and education (Kurebwa & Kurebwa, 2014, pp. 238–239). Such results guided us to consider the exploration of whether any programmes not only for food but for other aspects are available to children as family heads in Kampala, Uganda.

Earlier literature also points to the role of social capital and social networks in facilitating the coping of children in CHHs. van Dijk and van Driel (2009) articulated that children in CHHs receive a range of support from several avenues and this has enabled them to cope with several adversities and challenges. The study further notes that children receive support from different avenues, including grants from the government. However, some adults who apply for such grants to look after these children use the grant for other purposes and little or nothing is used to support such children (van Dijk & van Driel, 2009). Such misappropriation of grants is similar to the study findings by Kipp et al. (2010) in the context of Uganda. Kipp et al. (2010) articulate that with declining family and government support, the available family support is unreliable and often in the guise of benefiting from the child including taking family property. Kipp et al. further note that, however, extended family members also provided children with food, money, and emotional support which left many questions unanswered as to whom they should trust or ask for help with their coping. Kipp et al. (2010) further articulated that children also received support from their friends and neighbours which was vital to their coping. Also, a study by Ward and Eyber (2009) articulated that children's neighbours respected and had sympathising attitudes and in addition, they encouraged them to carry on which facilitated their coping. Some helped with cooking, visiting them and also giving guidance and counselling. The study noted that the relationship with the neighbours and the community was not always positive as they had conflicts regarding land and other wrangles. Ward and Eyber further indicated that organisations also helped these children in the form of providing school fees, school uniforms, food and other material goods

(such as bedding) and were regarded as reliable. Children also depended on social support from extended families and from children who were living in the same situation as them (Ward & Eyber, 2009). A study by Kurebwa and Kurebwa (2014, p. 239) also revealed how households utilise help from organisations that provide services such as *"health, education such as school fees and supplementary feeding and welfare services and in some cases, psychosocial support, shelter and material support"*. The study further articulates that the community is helpful as it provides food, pays school fees and gives social support to the stigmatised, especially those living with HIV/AIDS. Such help is however sometimes characterised by stigma in the community. The same study pointed out that the community's help comes in the form of relatives and friends who offer help to the CHHs but have now been weakened by economic hardships.

A study carried out by Thwala (2018) in Swaziland revealed that children as family heads reported receiving support from siblings, the church and neighbours. This led to their "spiritual healing," and some participants developed liberty and autonomy that enabled them to get an income to sustain the family (p. 154). The study further noted that siblings offered emotional support to their young ones which encouraged them to go through the challenges. The church was reported to be fundamental in instilling courage and resilience among children in CHHs. Thwala further noted that children resorted to praying when faced with challenges and memories such as the death of their parents which gave them relief from the troubles. From the church, children were able to learn morality and other life principles. The church also visited these children and they not only shared with them all their concerns but members also helped such families with gardening (Thwala, 2018). The study by Ward and Eyber (2009) in Rwanda revealed that children in CHHs also got involved in church activities such as choir among others. They were also able to meet with other children at church with whom they interacted. This was vital as it enhanced their confidence and made them happy. Children in CHHs depend on social capital to survive daily but this cannot presuppose that they often get help from relatives and friends (van Dijk, 2008). The extent to which this is true in Uganda is not adequately documented and this study sought to explore whether such patterns can be identified among children who head households.

Children in CHHs offer care to each other a resource that has been reported in earlier research to facilitate their coping. An interpretive qualitative study carried out in Rakai, Uganda, by Kakuru (2018) revealed that elder siblings in CHHs took on the role of looking after their fellow siblings as young as 3 years old. It is noted that such care did not only start when their parents or caregivers died but even when they were ill. This care challenges the view that children are not mature enough and hence depend on adults for survival. Instead, children have the capacity to manage school, look for food, manage household work and also look after their younger siblings. The study noted that children ably managed to engage siblings in tasks such as preparing food (sorting beans), hence becoming teachers to them. Children as family heads are also able to negotiate and utilise the existing community relations in the form of relatives and neighbours such as leaving their young siblings while they are at school. Kakuru further noted that elder siblings

also teach the young ones how to cope without parents such as by playing with neighbours making them an active source of child protection in societies with no strong child protection systems. Children living in CHHs can manage household chores which they share or divide amongst themselves. They can run many tasks at the same time which has enabled them to cope with the limited time (Kakuru, 2018). The context of Rakai is different from the city setting of Kampala hence the extent to which such resources are evident to children as family heads is contested. This study sought to make a contribution by exploring the resources available to children as family heads and how they use them to cope with the adversities they encounter in Kampala, Uganda.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Ecological theory of social work practice
The ecological approach holds that people's problems arise from the interaction of *"psychological, social, economic, political and physical forces"*. There is a reciprocal and transactional relationship between an individual and the environment and systems they interact with such as families, friends, organisations, institutions and communities, as well as political, social, legal, socio-economic and cultural structures (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Pardeck, 1988, p. 134). Therefore, to understand people better, there is a need to focus on the reciprocal relations *"between and among them"* and their significant environments and systems (Gitterman & Germain, 2008, p. 52). According to Pardeck (1996), for social work interventions to work effectively, there is a need to not only work with individuals but also focus on their *"familial, social, and cultural factors that affect their social functioning"* (p. 2). Social work intervention strategies hence shift from an individual perspective to a broader way of looking at the person in the context of their families, communities and other systems and how these transact. Problems that come to an individual are a result of mal-functional transactions between the person and the environment. An individual and their broader environments and systems influence each other in a cyclic manner which calls for social work interventions to focus not only on the individual but also on the systems around the person. Social work interventions, therefore, apply at personal, interpersonal, family, organisational and societal levels (Pardeck, 1988). Social workers working from an ecological perspective focus on assisting people and also making sure that the environment responds to their needs to enable them to function (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). The ecological theory was used to view children as family heads and their interactions with different environments and systems. Children as family heads transact and live reciprocally with systems in their environments that bring about obstacles but also resources that enable them to cope with such adversities. Children were viewed in context and transacted with families, friends, peers, culture, laws and the community at large. Put precisely, children as family heads live in the context of their environments which bring about opportunities and adversities that they must cope with as they transact.

3.2 Resilience theory

According to Ungar (2008, p. 225), resilience refers to "*the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways*". Ungar contends that resilience comes into play when there is adversity, and that resilience in children is shaped by their environment and that how people interact with the "*social ecologies determine the degree of positive outcomes experienced*" (Ungar, 2008, p. 220). This means that resilience emanates from the environment; hence, resilience rhymes with the ecological perspective of social work practice. The study considered resilience to go hand in hand with the notions of the ecological perspective and hence used the theories hand in hand. Ungar connotes that resilience is not only an innate virtue but is also a result of the "*social and political settings*" of the child (p. 220). In other words, the surroundings or environment of the child will determine or influence how resilient they are or will become. Social support is for example, useful for the development of resilience as the support systems offer a form of protection to children against risk and adversity (Brenan, 2008). As the study focused on exploring the resources available to children as family heads within the context of the environment, it was imperative to consider their resilience amidst adversities in the context of their environment. To conclude that a child is resilient certainly depends on the level of resilience in their families and communities. The amount of resources in the family and the community will influence the resilience of the child (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Ungar, 2008). We, therefore, focused on resources in the environment that nurture resilience and how these relate to the resources available to children as family heads and how these enable them to cope with needs and adversities.

Figure 1: Children as family heads and the environments they transact with
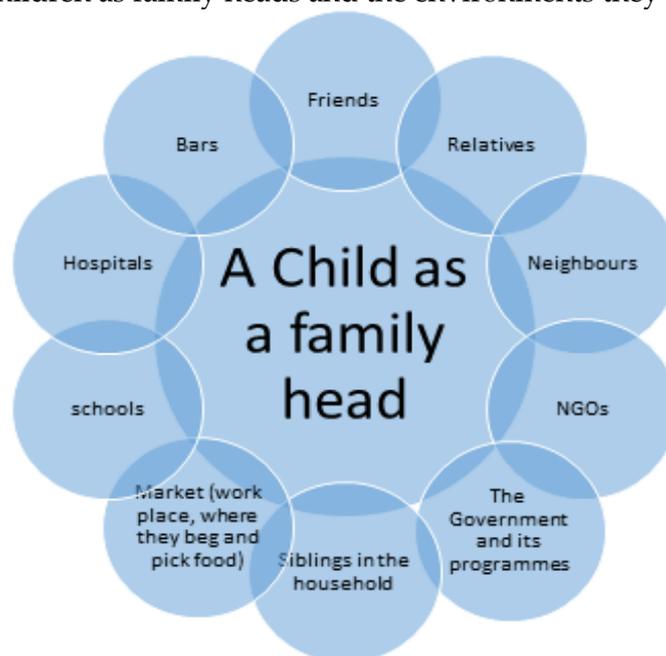
Source: The Researchers

As the strength-based perspective calls for exploration and a focus on the resources, abilities and aspirations of individuals (Healy, 2014; Saleebey, 2006), it was imperative to relate the strength-based focus to this study that focused on the resources available to children as family heads and how these enable them to cope with adversities and needs.

4. Research methods and design

We utilised a qualitative research approach to investigate the resources available to children as family heads in order to understand their coping strategies in the face of adversity. In this study, we subjectively examined children's stories and real-life events. The COVID-19 pandemic's constraints on social and physical contact rendered the qualitative technique the most appropriate choice for examining small samples during the study's execution. We deemed the use of the qualitative technique appropriate since it was flexible in terms of restructuring the research questions, methodology and tools (Bryman, 2012). We used social constructionism and interpretivism worldviews where we focused on the special interpretations of children as family heads and how they make sense of events around them (Bryman, 2012; DeCarlo, 2018). We used an abductive approach to research by utilising existing theories in the interpretation and analysis of field data (Bryman, 2012). We chose a cross-sectional case study design because it was timely, cost-effective and necessitated a thorough investigation (Yin, 2009). We conducted in-depth interactions with six heads of child families by employing qualitative interviews which permitted flexible data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2012). We developed a semi-structured interview guide that included a variety of themes and sample questions. However, the questions were not to be followed in any specific order to allow the natural flow of conversations with the participants (Bryman, 2012). This provided a chance to follow up on the study participants' comments which highlighted new themes and topics that we had not considered in the semi-structured guide. After receiving consent from the participants, interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded. Due to the recording, we gathered sufficient information from the participants and made adequate probes and prompts (Bryman, 2012). We purposely selected six study participants based on their knowledge and experience as child heads and their significance in addressing the research questions. We selected three male and three female participants as described in the figure below:

Figure 2: List of participants

Study participants' characteristics

Note: The names do not reflect the real names of the participants for purposes of confidentiality and anonymity.

John. A 17-year-old male who takes care of three female siblings with the youngest aged 5 who was born with HIV/AIDs. The father died of HIV whereas the mother left home to another district. They are renting in a city slum and the sole responsibility is and has been on John for one and a half years since their mother left. John and the siblings are engaged in street hawking and other odd jobs for survival.

James. A 16-year-old male whose mother divorced and left the home with their last born sibling. James started living with the father and his young brother. The father left for work 10 years ago and has since never returned or made any efforts to look for them. James takes care of his younger sibling in a rented house in a city slum for 9 years now. They both hustle through odd jobs and begging to survive.

Mathew. Male aged 17 whose father and mother died when he had run away from home. After his parents' death, Mathew was left with no option but to look after his four siblings with the youngest aged 6 years. He has never been to school so he could not find any employment and resorted to selling marijuana for survival in a Kampala slum where he stays. He has taken care of his siblings for 5 years now.

Mary. A 16-year-old female whose parents are both departed. She left the village as no one was taking care of her to stay with her elder sister in Kampala city. Her elder sister later died leaving behind 8 children in Mary's care, who has taken care of them for 4 years now. They are currently renting a single room in a city slum where Mary is involved in sex work and doing odd jobs for her survival and family. The children in her care are also involved in looking for survival through begging and picking food disposed off in markets.

Martha. A 17-year-old female whose father died and whose mother abandoned at the age of 2 months. She stayed with her grandmother until she was unable to take care of her and later died as well. She moved to Kampala city to stay with her elder sister who at that time had one child. The sister later got married leaving Martha with that child. Martha later on also got pregnant and the man responsible for her pregnancy disappeared from the vicinity. Martha was left on her own and she has been taking care of her own child and her sister's child in a rented room in a slum area for three years now. She is employed as a market vendor where she is paid seventy thousand a month (approximately $19). She also does other odd jobs such as hawking and washing clothes for income.

Agatha. 17 and a half year-old female whose father died and mother remarried. The mother left two other children at home in the care of Agatha. Agatha's elder brother impregnated a lady and the child was brought home and put into Agatha's care. She also got pregnant and the man responsible for her pregnancy refused to move in with her. She is and has been taking care of her siblings, her two-year-old child and her nephew of four years now. She does odd jobs like washing for other people for pay and also part-times at a friend's restaurant and is given food in return.

The gatekeepers (local and village leaders, members of the Village Health Team [VHT], and the local police) were very instrumental in providing us with permission and access to the study participants. The gatekeepers were familiar with the location of these children's homes and also introduced us to the communities in which these children lived. Due to the uniqueness and subjectivity of the study in terms of time and environment, the results from this study cannot be generalised. The findings we describe in this research are unique to the six study participants. Nevertheless, their perspectives provide crucial information regarding children serving as family heads in Uganda and other developing nations which can inspire more in-depth research on this demographic.

4.1 Data management and analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed in English during and after data collection while considering repetitions, pauses and exclamations. Emerging themes were discovered and explored through this analysis method. Word-for-word transcription was done with similarities and discrepancies highlighted. We used thematic analysis to extract themes and categories from the gathered data. We manually generated themes during and after data collection after becoming familiar with the data. We used different colours that represented codes to highlight insightful observations that corresponded to the study's aims and objectives. We noted the emerging codes and formed their list paying attention and scrutiny to the developing insights. Similar insights that emerged were merged, different ones grouped, and others put into subgroups. We further scrutinised these insights based on research questions and thereafter generated themes and subthemes. This process was repeated for all the interviews to create themes and subthemes.

4.2 Quality of data

To ensure the quality of the data, three experienced researchers were recruited and trained to facilitate the process of data collection and analysis. The study team was trained before data collection to orient them on the methodological issues of the study and to get acquainted with the study objectives. During training, interviewers and data collectors received both practical and theoretical training focusing on the objectives and methodology of the study as well as the skills necessary for the use of the study tools and the implementation of the fieldwork. The training involved role-plays to ensure that data collectors acquired skills (e.g., probing and prompting among others).

4.3 Ethical considerations

We sought informed written consent from all the study participants. The consent statement included detailed information about confidentiality, voluntary participation, voluntary audio recording and the risks and benefits of the study. Every participant who consented signed two consent forms; he or she retained one form and another was returned to the researcher. We translated all consent forms into the local language in order to ensure that the participants understood the contents. Interviews only began after the researcher was convinced that the participants understood the study. All participants were aged 15 and above and were asked to consent on their own as they were deemed mature enough to make informed choices.

The "do no harm" principle was followed in the study where extra care was taken to avoid harm to the study participant. Apart from informing them about the purpose of the study, they were informed to share information they were comfortable with and breaks were given during the interviews. More so, a local agency and a qualified social worker were identified, requested, and made known to the participants to provide any emotional support that could have resulted in harm. Permission to access communities where children lived was sought from gatekeepers such as local leaders, VHTs and the

local police. Study intentions and objectives were explained to them, which legitimised the study.

Interviews were conducted in public places as deemed necessary by the participants such as schools, churches and open spaces far from the hearing distance of others. We ensured that the distance was maintained by researchers and research participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures in place. Sanitising and wearing face masks were also strictly followed and adhered to.

In relation to confidentiality and anonymity, information was kept confidential only for the study team and anonymized to the greatest extent possible. The identities and names of participants were not included in the recordings or in the study. Pseudonyms were used to seal the identities of study participants.

Social work ethics guided the study (IASSW, 2018; IFSW, 2018) in addition to the guidance and approval of an academic supervisor from Gothenburg University, Sweden.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Kinship support

Children as family heads depended heavily on kinship support from household members such as siblings, nieces and nephews and other relatives. The children we interacted with in this study mentioned that other household members "gave a hand" during household chores which left ample time for the heads to fend for the family. Additionally, having dependents gave children as family heads a reason and motivation to work harder and a sense of responsibility. Knowing that they had someone at home waiting for a meal and other needs made the family heads indebted to work harder even amidst challenges. Household members jointly made major decisions regarding needs and cooperated in ventures that facilitated their survival. They also participated in odd jobs like selling foodstuffs and begging which supplemented efforts by the household heads. In an interview with John, he revealed that he gives his siblings fresh foods to hawk and the returns are saved to meet a particular need. The overall support and cooperative hard work of all household members facilitated and eased the responsibilities of the household head.

Children as family heads, however, noted that some of the work done by their siblings was unsafe and too heavy for their age. This heavy work sometimes posed health risks for them. The children as family heads often feared that their younger siblings would learn bad habits and be exposed to exploitation, abuse, or at worst death. They however noted that they had no safer alternatives, as Mathew noted:

> *"You cannot stop them from working, yet you have nothing to eat in the house. You have no starting point since you yourself haven't been able to do anything or even do enough. You just let them go, but pray they do not fall into bad hands or be abused by criminals in the city. Sometimes they are beaten and their property confiscated by adults, but they have nothing to do about it."*

Other relatives outside the household were also portrayed as fundamental for the CHHs' coping with needs and adversities. Such relatives such as grandparents, aunties and uncles offered advice, food, clothes, medical care and money to the children in CHHs. Some children as family heads reported reaching out to relatives when in need and actually receiving help as Mathew for example, noted:

"When things are bad at home, we mostly go to our grandmother. We can also go to other relatives, and sometimes they give us money, food, or clothes if they have any. We cannot go there every time, but sometimes when we are stuck, they help."

Other children reported that some relatives were not in a position to offer help because of their inabilities or individualistic tendencies. John, for example, noted; *"I have an aunt whom I went to for help after they had chased me from the house, but she was not able to help as she said she was also poor"*. Just like John, Agatha noted that *"for the relatives, each one cares for their own children and family"*.

The children noted that kin support significantly contributed to their coping even though it was somewhat unreliable and unsustainable due to the rampant poverty, ill health and homelessness in most parts of Uganda. For example, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS] (2021), 20.3% of Ugandans live below the poverty line, which approximately translates to 8.3 million people. Statistics also show that one in five people in Uganda lives in poverty (UBOS, 2021). Our respondents also noted that most of their relatives harboured selfish intentions and often helped child-headed households only to pave their way into grabbing properties left behind by those children's parents. Some relatives never bothered to help child-headed households due to existing family wrangles.

Reliance on kinship support was also reported in earlier research, for example, by Kakuru (2018) who revealed that kinship support in Uganda was pivotal in the provision of care for child-headed households. Kin support, especially relatives who disguised support in the hope of stealing from child-headed households relates to study findings by Kipp et al. (2010). Their findings articulate that relatives provided unreliable support in the form of food, money, emotional support, shelter and other materials to children in CHHs. However, their study also revealed that this kind of support is often associated with selfish intentions.

5.2 Non-kin support

Children as family heads received support from neighbours, friends and well-wishers whom they sometimes ran to for immediate help. For some children in our study, the neighbours felt like family as they offered help such as child care, food, clothing, accommodation, advice and contributions towards rent payment. Even though some offered unconditional support, others offered help on condition that the children would, in turn, offer certain services for instance, physical labour to fetch water, wash clothes

and clean houses among other tasks. The help from neighbours was nevertheless very instrumental in coping with the needs, as John reported:

"Neighbours help us in many ways when they see us struggling. They offer food and clothes and sometimes accommodate us when we have been chased from the houses we rent. [...] There is a neighbour who helped me when they demanded rent for September and November. We usually call him "Kojja" (elder), and he gave me an entire month's rent of seventy thousand."

Martha also noted that:

"You have to sacrifice and as I told you, sometimes you get food and other times you don't. Sometimes my neighbours give me some food and other times they do not. […] For example, my landlady gives me food when they have it, and when they don't, I starve. They give me food and in return, I have to fetch water for them. Also, when I am going to work at night, I leave them with my baby and they help me babysit until I return. They have been a pillar of my coping and I would indeed struggle without them."

Children who headed households also reported getting help from friends such as peers who are in similar situations (orphans and household heads) and sometimes adults. Peers mostly offered information and connections to job opportunities, social and emotional support and sometimes money. In relation to this, John reported that:

"[...] I have friends I work with, and sometimes they come to wake me up to go to work. The way to our workplace is too insecure to travel alone, so we have to go together. When there is no work, they will help me find something to do for survival. We help each other at all times to the extent that they can freely give me money when I am "broke". They instilled in me a hardworking spirit which has helped me take care of our needs. Sometimes, when I have no hope for anything or feel lonely, my friends will pick me up."

Agatha, who had spent a month sleeping on the streets was also helped to get accommodation by her friend until she saved enough to rent her own room.

"When my brother just left me with his children, it was so difficult. He left them with me when he had not informed me, and the time came when the landlord chased us from the house. We stayed outside for some time […] I had to look for a cheaper house, but I first stayed at my friend's place, but they couldn't stay with us longer since we are three. So, I started washing clothes for people until I got enough money for cheap rent." (Agatha)

Martha also noted that:

"Friends connect you to informal jobs you could never get on your own. When they get an opportunity, they will inform you and with that you are able to get some money to meet some of your needs. We share our problems and also share good times. We rely on each other in many ways. Sometimes when the landlord chases you from the house, your friend can accommodate you for like a week as you look for money to pay rent. Life would be incredibly difficult if we had no friends to give us help."

In the interviews, the children also mentioned getting support from individuals and well-wishers who visited communities and slum areas to offer unconditional support to people in need. The children we interacted with referred to these helpers as "sponsors," who offered them less reliable and less sustainable yet very essential support in the form of clothing, food, money and at times school fees. James, for example, noted:

"Some people, once in a while, come into our communities and give us food, clothes or even money. We call them sponsors, as they request nothing in return. We cannot rely on them, but we are able to meet some of our needs when they arise."

Mary relatedly noted that:

"Sponsors just come to the slums looking for children and families that cannot take care of themselves. Not that they always come, but sometimes they bring food, money or clothes. […] For instance, a sponsor pays school fees for these children. He doesn't give us the money but rather pays directly to the school."

According to the children we interacted with, this informal non-kin support was portrayed as fundamental to their coping with needs and adversities. However, this kind of support was characterised by unreliability and unsustainability, which created a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability in the lives of these children as family heads. Relying on the mercy and generosity of non-kin in certain situations was susceptible to creating risks in dealing with adversities. For instance, in cases where the non-kin abruptly withdrew support or set very high commitments and demands that the children could actually fulfil. Such support from neighbours attests to the findings from the study carried out in Rwanda which revealed neighbours' socio-emotional support for such children in child-headed households and also helped them with chores such as cooking. This kind of support was paramount to the coping and functionality of children in CHHs (Ward & Eyber, 2009). Previous studies such as Kipp et al. (2010), also pointed to the vital role friends play in coping with needs and adversities in CHHs which relates to the findings and narrations from our study.

5.3 Support from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government facilities
From the interviews, children revealed NGOs and government facilities as part of the wider community which is fundamental for their coping. Some children reported having

received or still receiving some kind of help from organisations in the form of school fees, food and clothes. Absurdly, this help was reported by some children as unsustainable since most organisations ceased operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic leaving most children stranded as John commented:

"I had an organisation that was looking after me in the form of paying my school fees. But it reached a point where it couldn't manage us and they started letting us go one by one. Life became so difficult that I had to drop out of school."

Mary also noted that:

"There is an NGO that came to this area, and they were giving food and clothes to orphans. We all became happy thinking that we would finally be able to survive like normal people. However, the organisation ceased operations without even telling us, and that was the end of it."

Children also reported that there is no direct support from the government for CHHs; however, some reported having used a government facility, especially schools and hospitals. Children, however, commented on the poor service delivery and unreliability of such facilities which has consequently resulted in the underutilization of such government facilities. Agatha, for example, narrated her thoughts about a hospital facility:

"It is difficult, as you know, in such hospitals. You make a line for the whole day, and that day is gone as you cannot do anything else productive. The child can be sick, but there are no drugs in government hospitals and drugs are expensive in private clinics and hospitals."

Mathew also noted that;

"The government has not come forward to help us in any way. At least they should know that we children who head households exist and that we need help such as food, medical care and housing. I have never, for example, heard of any program meant for children in our category the way you hear of programs meant to help women and their groups. Even the schools and hospitals they have put up to help the poor are meant to be paid for. They claim they are free of charge but when you go there, they will ask for, for example, school fees or money for gloves and among others."

Findings from this study relate to findings by Ward and Eyber (2009) in Rwanda, where organisations offered help to CHHs in the form of food, school fees, school uniforms, bedding and other material things. In a study by Kurebwa and Kurebwa (2014), it was also revealed that organisations were paramount as they provided for the

children's health, education and welfare needs. Our study findings were in line with findings by Kipp et al. (2010) that pointed to declining support from the government where most children noted that they received no direct support from the government and that the available government facilities were characterised by poor service delivery.

5.4 Involvement in income-generating activities

All the children that participated in the study reported that they engaged in some form of income-generating activity to be able to cope with their needs and adversities. Children reported attaining lower levels of education (of all the participants, the most educated had stopped in senior three, which is a lower secondary school level in Uganda). The children articulated that they could not access formal jobs due to their limited education and skills and, as a result, resorted to informal income-generating activities. This was mainly done by hawking simple goods such as popcorn, onions, tomatoes, green paper and aubergine among others. One female household head (Agatha) reported being skilled in hairdressing from which she occasionally earned money. Most males were involved in washing cars, motorcycles and umbrellas while females were involved in washing clothes for other people in the neighbourhood. Other income-generating activities included fetching water and collecting and selling tyres and other plastics. Most children we interacted with, however, reported encountering grave challenges in such ventures for example, arrests and fines by city authorities for not having trade licences. Security operatives would sometimes arrest the children for hawking past the curfew hours which were instituted as a measure to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Other reported challenges included theft and verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. John narrated how he was arrested for selling items past curfew hours:

> *"I was arrested because of curfew since I had worked from [...] at night, so they arrested me and took me to [...] police. I was there, but I knew that when the time came for my siblings to go to sleep they would not close. They will leave the door open. Yet someone can move in, say a thief or any other person and harm them since they are girls. When I slept there, I had hopes that they would release me but in the morning, they seemed not to mind or care. I reached a point where I needed someone to come and help me, but I did not have anyone. I didn't even have anyone's phone number because I didn't own a phone. I spent four days there, but my thoughts were distant as I did not know what was happening at home. I couldn't imagine what they were up to or what they had eaten. In custody, I did not know anyone who could even give me food so I was also hungry, but what I was thinking of most was home. How is it there? Were they robbed and everything in the house taken away?"*

Income-generating activities also included offering labour in return for food, money, accommodation and clothes. Labour among males was in the form of loading and off-loading trucks in the city and loading sand or soil on trucks. Both males and females engaged in carrying luggage from the market to people's homes and vehicles.

These activities were reported to be dangerous and unsafe for these children:

"I worked for someone who dealt with old car tyres as he sold them to factories. Those are the jobs we did daily. We would go to collect them, and I worked there for like three years. But that job required a lot of energy and was meant for adults. I thought that if I continued doing such a job by the time I reached the age of doing my own work, I would be badly affected." (James)

According to the findings, most income-generating activities were characterised by abuse, arrests and exploitation in terms of low payments and heavy workloads, which were detrimental to the children's proper growth and development. Moreover, these income-generating ventures seemed to be divided along gender lines, with male and female family heads engaging in specific activities. This meant that if females were compelled to do male-dominated activities, they would stand higher risks of physical breakdown, sexual abuse and elevated exploitation. These gendered jobs were therefore mostly favoured by male family heads at the expense of female ones. Despite the hazardous circumstances, the children were resilient and continued to struggle to cope with their needs which relates to the strength-based and resilience perspectives (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Ungar, 2008). Previous studies have also revealed related findings by pointing out several income-generating activities engaged in by children in CHHs as a means of survival which sometimes expose them to risks (Kurebwa & Kurebwa, 2014; Thwala, 2018; van Dijk, 2008; Ward & Eyber, 2009). From this analysis, the children's environment is portrayed as both a resource and a provider of opportunities, but also as a source of adversities that could deprive children of the chance to fully utilise the available resources in their environment (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Pardeck, 1988, 1996).

5.5 Family land
Many participants listed the land as a fundamental resource available to children as family heads in their coping with needs and adversities. Some children revealed that they were lucky that their parents left them some land that they cultivated for food or sometimes sold to meet more pressing needs. Some children who had access to family land reported growing their own food and only buying what they could not produce on their own. On the other hand, children without access to the land mentioned how they wished their parents had left them with land that could have been a great asset and helped them in times of need. In an interview with Mathew, he noted that:

"Regrettably, our relatives have stolen or seized some of the land that our parents left us. The other we use to plant crops that we feed on and when they yield highly, we even sell them and buy anything we want. So, we get the majority of the food from our own gardens and buy a few [...]."

James, on the other hand, noted that *"I wish my parents had left some land for me. I would also plant some food and be assured of a meal, but there is nothing"*.

Children as family heads' reliance on land as a resource concurs with findings derived by Evans (2012) in a study conducted in Uganda and Tanzania where children inherited property such as land from their deceased parents. These findings further relate to studies by Kipp et al. (2010) and Ward and Eyber (2009) that pointed out how children in CHHs used the land acquired from their parents for food production and also sold surplus to meet other needs. Using land as a family resource to cope with needs and adversities relates to ecological theory and the strength-based perspective, where individuals harness the resources within their physical ecology to enhance functioning in the face of adversity (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Healy, 2014). Although the land was mentioned in our study as a fundamental resource for the children as family heads to cope with needs and adversities, this same land also bred conflicts and divisions within the extended families when other relatives wanted to control or even grab it. In Uganda, land conflicts are not uncommon and actually contribute a large percentage to the conflicts within and across families which at times lead to homicides and other fatal acts (Cooper, 2011). Moreover, children have less power and control since they are under the age of 18 and are socially perceived as unable to autonomously oversee valuable property such as land (Cooper, 2011).

5.6 Religiosity

All the children in our interviews mentioned that being religious greatly contributed to their coping with adversities. According to the children, being religious or the concept of religiosity meant belonging to a certain religious denomination and believing in a supernatural being. The children also noted how being religious had strengthened their faith and hope that the bad situations they were in would change. Going to church also taught them the importance of hard work in order for them to change the undesirable situations they were in. The children also noted that they had adopted good morals and behaviours which increased the trust of community members to offer the children more opportunities for casual work. The children we interacted with also mentioned having learned the importance of sacrifice as a fundamental virtue in most religions which enabled them to appreciate people who had sacrificed for them. In return, the children who headed families also adopted the virtue of sacrificing their own comfort for their siblings' welfare even if it meant sleeping hungry and making sure that their siblings ate. For example, James noted:

> *"Sometimes I go to church, so I consider myself a religious person. That is why I cannot go steal and make other people cry because I wonder if they were doing the same to me. I have learned a lot from the church. I learned how to put effort into work and have compassion for others."*

John also noted that:

"We used to go to church with our mother and I can say we learned a lot from there. You see, in church, they teach about caring for others even more than you care for yourself— something I have practised in the home I head to now. You are in need but sometimes someone is in more need than you. Being religious has also taught me patience and hope that things will change one day and indeed, how I was many months ago is not how I am now."

Religion fundamentally influenced the children's abilities to manage challenges as family heads. These children received psychosocial support in the form of consolation, acknowledgement and empathy which allowed their feelings and experiences to be validated. Therefore, religion was defined by aspects of restitution, optimism, perseverance and morality which gave these children the courage and confidence to keep taking care of their families. These study findings concur with those of Thwala (2018), who also noted that the church played a positive role among children in CHHs. Ward and Eyber (2009) conducted a study in Rwanda that aligns with our own findings, highlighting the paramount role of the church in fostering interactions and sharing joyful moments among children through activities like choir participation.

6. Conclusion

Children as family heads were in continuous interaction with their physical, sociocultural and economic environments and processes that constantly presented adversities, needs, roles and responsibilities but also facilitated the children's resilience and coping abilities (Gitterman & Germain, 2008; Pardeck, 1988, 1996; Skovdal et al., 2009). Individuals often rely on the environment around them for resources and opportunities just as the children and family heads in our study did. According to the ecological model, in order to make the environment responsive, it would be necessary to ensure the functionality of the various systems surrounding children as family heads. This would enable them to effectively meet their needs and successfully cope with adversity. The children's environment comprised resources from relatives, friends, NGOs and government facilities. Furthermore, well-wishers, market avenues, churches, land and other resources greatly aided the functioning of the children.

Ungar (2008) noted that resilience is not merely a result of personal attributes or traits but also due to their interactions with the environment. Findings from this study reveal that children as family heads interacted with their social, political and cultural environments which influenced their level of resilience. They managed to sail through the adversities taking advantage of the environment around them to harness the resources to facilitate their functioning and cope with needs and adversities. The ability of the children to persevere through adversity and cope with their needs was dependent on the level of resourcefulness demonstrated by their families and communities. Ungar (2008) makes similar observations as articulated in his connotations of resilience, which include aspects such as adaptability, strength, perseverance and the ability to overcome

challenges. Children getting inspiration from the environment around them further relates to resilience and a strengths-based perspective (Healy, 2014; Rutter, 2006).

The overall results from the study point to the several resources in the environment that children as family heads in our study utilised to cope with adversities and enhance their functioning. Looking at children who head households sail through adversities challenges social work practitioners to employ strength-based perspectives and focus on the resources, resilience and strengths exhibited by children rather than their pathology and vulnerability. For successful and sustainable interventions, it is therefore important for social workers to build on the already existing resources in communities and also empower communities to support children in CHHs. The children's environment ought to be strengthened and equipped with reliable and sustainable resources that they can rely on. In the same way, social workers also need to facilitate these children's discovery and use of the strengths within themselves and their environments to continue functioning even in the face of adversity.

Children as family heads are exposed to unsafe living conditions characterised by lack and abuse that have far-reaching consequences for their development and functioning. It is important that the existing legal reforms in Uganda translate into protective frameworks that especially support children as family heads given their uniqueness and vulnerability. This calls for a well-coordinated approach by stakeholders and targeted interventions geared toward addressing all matters that concern children.

As the study reveals, children have the ability to manage adversities and needs, and this should not be overlooked. They have the innate ability to ably strive through uncertainties and harsh environments for their survival. Social workers involved in child welfare should therefore at all times involve children in avenues and affairs aimed at addressing their unique challenges. Child participation is a children's right that holds the best interest of the child at its centre as articulated in Chapter 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (United Nations Children's Fund, 1989). Involving children in the planning and implementation of interventions targeting them also empowers them to become active participants and not passive recipients which increases ownership, effectiveness and sustainability of social interventions (Healy, 1998; Healy, 2014; Heimer et al., 2018). Moreover, the person-in-environment perspective in social work contends that individuals are influenced by the environment through interactions (Kondrat, 2013), and therefore contextualised perspectives are vital in the design, planning, assessment and implementation of social interventions and programs. Social workers should capitalise on existing community resources and empower communities to support children in child-headed households through the implementation of sustainable interventions. In addition, it is important for legal reforms in Uganda to translate into protective frameworks that specifically support children as family heads. By implementing these recommendations, social workers can effectively support children as family heads facilitating their resilience and coping abilities in the face of adversity. Social interventions, which include adopting a person-in-environment perspective, focusing on contextualised perspectives and engaging key stakeholders

(such as relatives, friends, NGOs, and government facilities), will contribute to the well-being and empowerment of children as family heads.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors

Lambert Buzaare, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Lambert holds the Erasmus Mundus master of social work with families and children from the University of Stavanger in Norway and its consortium partners. His major research interests include; Children, youths and families, community development, international social work, immigrants and refugees. Email: lambertdraker@gmail.com

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7633-5873

Comfort Ankunda, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Comfort has an Erasmus Mundus master of social work with families and children from the University of Stavanger in Norway and its consortium partners. She is currently working as a freelance researcher, especially collaborating with professors from Makerere University, Kampala and the University of Gothenburg. Comfort is interested in migration and integration, mental health, social issues within sports, child protection and community-driven development. Email: comfortankunda2@gmail.com

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0602-8111

Robert Menge, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Robert Menge is a recent graduate with a degree from the Erasmus Mundus master of social work with families and children from the University of Stavanger in Norway and its consortium partners. His research interests include mental health, HIV/AIDs, community development and participation, sexual and reproductive health, children and families, digitalization and international studies. Email: robzrobertmenge@gmail.com

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0636-0122

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