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## POVERTY AND FOOD SECURITY AMONG FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN KENYA: The Case of Nyatike Constituency, Migori County, Western Kenya

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### Abstract

*The increase in female-headed households in Kenya has contributed to increased poverty levels leading to deliberate efforts by the national government as well as other stakeholders to develop strategies to help alleviate poverty. However, in spite of substantial efforts to eradicate poverty, studies have shown an increase in prevalence, especially in female headed households both globally and locally.*

*This paper aims at establishing the causes of poverty among female headed households in Nyatike constituency, Migori County in*

**Key Words:** *Poverty, Food security, Female headed households.*

*Western Kenya. The study sought to assess the poverty and food security situation in Nyatike Constituency using a cross-sectional descriptive research design, which adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study population consisted of female-headed households with the unit of analysis based on individual, female respondents. A sample of 29 female heads of households was purposely selected from the clusters identified by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Moreover, questionnaires and a focus group discussion were the primary data collection tools.*

### 3.1 Introduction

One fundamental right of all human beings is the right to not only food, but adequate food. A situation where one fails to meet the minimum standard of three square meals a day is indeed, a dire situation, which is further, worsened when the head of the household is a woman in a male dominated society as is the case in Kenya. This study sought to assess the poverty and food security situation in Nyatike Constituency, Migori County among female-headed households. The poverty situation in Nyatike is a replica of what is happening across Kenya and as such,

provides a good representation of the food security situation in female-headed households in Kenya and globally (Clark, 1984).

It is estimated that nearly 2.8 billion persons are poor in the world and about 70 per cent of them are women (UNDP, 1995). Consequently, women, especially those in developing countries, bear an unequal share of the burden of poverty (UNDP, 1995). Female-headed households dominate the poverty statistics and over the past four decades, the number of households headed by women has increased

worldwide.<sup>1</sup> According to Nyamboga *et al* (2014), Africa is considered a starving and hopeless continent despite its massive resource endowment. There is a growing perception around the globe that poverty is increasingly feminized because an increasing proportion of the poor in the world are female. Pearce (1978) coined the phrase “*feminization of poverty*” when it was discovered that the fastest growing type of family structure was that of female-headed households.<sup>2</sup>

Poverty and food insecurity are twin factors that are closely related. According to Lynn (2001), poverty is a major cause of food insecurity. Women depend mostly on subsistence farming for survival and their over dependence explains why they are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> According to a study conducted by Chinery (2011), in Kenya, women play a pivotal role in food production because they produce between 60 and 80 percent of the food produced in developing countries and are responsible for half of the food production in the world. Food security is a fundamental right, yet millions of people continue to suffer the ravages of hunger and malnutrition.<sup>4</sup> In Kenya, over 56 per cent of the population live below the poverty line – hence, Article 43 (1)(c) of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) outlines that every person has the right to be free from hunger, and have adequate food of acceptable quality.<sup>5</sup>

Female headed households have become a concern because of the high incidence of poverty and food insecurity in those

households (Ngwenya, 2008). The Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) survey in Kenya revealed that the majority of the poor are women and that poverty is higher among them at 50 percent and 46 percent in rural and urban areas, respectively.<sup>6</sup> While concerted efforts are being made internationally for alleviating poverty, there is a growing realization that poverty is increasingly taking a feminine form, meaning that globally women are bearing a disproportionately higher and growing burden of poverty.<sup>7</sup>

According to Martins (2008), female-headed households can be understood from two perspectives, namely: ‘*de jure*’ and ‘*de facto*’ households. A ‘*de jure*’ female-headed household exists where the head of the household is an unmarried woman, divorced or separated. On the other hand, a ‘*de facto*’ female-headed household is when the head of the household in practice is a female due to the fact that the male head is absent throughout the year or for a longer period.<sup>8</sup> In this case the woman becomes the main decision maker and economic provider of the household.

Food security is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2001). According to Speca (2013), these conditions are underpinned by the “four pillars” of food security, which are: availability, access, utilization, and stability.

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<sup>1</sup>Power (1993) and Clark (1984)

<sup>2</sup>cf. Chant; Kiringai *et al* (2006) and Moghadam (2005)

<sup>3</sup>Mutaviet *et al.* (2013)

<sup>4</sup>World Food Summit (1996)

<sup>5</sup>(Kenya Constitution (2010)

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<sup>6</sup>IEA (2008)

<sup>7</sup>Khalid and Akhtar (2011)

<sup>8</sup>Liddle *et al* (1991:3)

The debate on what causes food insecurity is inconclusive. Both scholars and practitioners have attempted to extensively investigate this phenomenon but without much success. As such, we join the effort to investigate the exact causes of food insecurity. According to Dietz *et al* (2013), urbanization is one cause of poverty, particularly when the able bodied population move into towns in search of employment, thereby leaving behind land which is expected to be the main resource for agricultural production. The FAO (2011) consider land ownership as a leading cause. In many parts of the world, women's rights to land and property are systematically denied. Laws give women fewer or less secure rights than men, and discriminatory attitudes and practices undermine them. This leaves many women almost entirely dependent on the men in their lives for basic economic survival and vulnerable to violence, poverty, and food insecurity. Increasing women's access to land, livestock, education, and rural employment would certainly boost their productivity and generate gains in agricultural output, food security, economic growth and social welfare (FAO, 2011). Secure rights to land are a critical, but often overlooked, factor in achieving household food security and improved nutritional status.

According to Speca (2013), inadequate rainfall complicates the food situation further, in the sense that poor rainfall affects the continuous supply of foodstuffs and ultimately leads to food insecurity. Climatic changes have not helped in resolving food insecurity either. Instead, it has contributed to disrupted weather patterns. A lack of proper education and skills has also been posited as a cause of food insecurity since when people are not

educated, they lack the skills that would have increased agricultural produce or methods of providing other alternatives.<sup>9</sup>

Moghadam (2005) posits that food insecurity results from having negative attitudes and the general lacklustre attitude of citizens towards life and sustainable measures. In addition, food security could be caused by an overreliance on politics and depending on hand-outs from politicians at the expense of developing productive skills. Consequently, women are left at the mercy of those who control the capital and some of them resort to prostitution which results into the spread of diseases. Despite the prevalence of HIV/AIDs in Kenya, Lynn (2001) argues that women are the key to food security. Such chronic diseases, therefore, hinder the involvement of women in contributing to gainful chores, which ultimately leaves the family even more vulnerable, since the affected groups are forced to seek sexual favours from other men to deliver the much needed food for the family.

### **3.2 Methodology and Theoretical Basis**

The study was carried out in Nyatike Constituency, Migori County in Western Kenya. It used a cross-sectional descriptive research design and adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics & ICF Macro (2010), the total Constituency population is 144,625 of which 28 percent of the households are female-headed. This constituted the study population and the unit of analysis was individual female respondents. A

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<sup>9</sup>Kimenyi, Mwabu and Manda (2005)

sample of 29 female heads of households was purposively selected from the clusters identified by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Questionnaires and a focus group discussion were used as the main data collection tools. The use of purposive as a non-probability sampling was as a result of ease of access of the female headed households. This was done purely because of convenience since it was impractical to access all the female headed households in the constituency. The selection of the tools was guided by the nature of data to be collected, time available and the objectives of the study. The focus group consisted of 10 participants purposively selected from among the female-headed household clusters, aged 18 years and above, who belong to a women group. The discussion was carried out using a guide.

The women's empowerment framework posited in Longwe (1991) links inequalities of women, poverty and food insecurity to structural oppressions. This framework argues that if women are to overcome their subordinate positions, they have to rise up, be empowered and overcome challenges such as poverty and food insecurity. The theory advocates for major shifts in patriarchal structures and encourages women to challenge those structures and move away from them as they are regarded oppressive and antidevelopment. Women are encouraged to enter the traditionally male-dominated roles as well as to take active roles in decision making and eradicate retrogressive cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation. The theory advocates for equalities and removal of obstacles and argues that the world would be a better place without inequalities between men and women and that if there is

equality, development objectives will be realized.

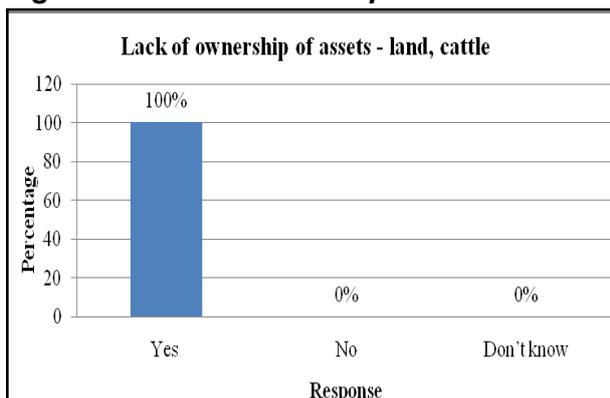
The framework consists of 5 stages that can be used to empower women, namely: (1) welfare; (2) access; (3) 'conscientisation; (4) participation; and (5) control (Longwe1991).The welfare stage pertains to the level of the material welfare of women, relative to men, with respect to food supply, income and medical care, without reference to whether women are themselves the active creators and producers of their material needs. Access, pertains to women's access to factors of production, land, labour, credit, training, marketing facilities, and all publicly available services and benefits on an equal basis with men. Equality of access is obtained by securing equality of opportunity through legal reform to removing discriminatory provisions. Conscientisation is an understanding of the difference between sex roles and gender roles and the belief that gender relations and the gender division of labour should be fair and agreeable to both sides, and not based on the domination of one over the other. Participation refers to women's equal participation in the decision-making process, policy-making, planning and administration. In development projects, it includes involvement in needs assessment, project design, implementation and evaluation. Lastly, the control stage refers to using the participation of women in the decision-making process to achieve balance of control between men and women over the factors of production, without one being in a position of dominance (Longwe, 1991).

### **3.3 Results and Discussion**

In a study carried out by Mwawuda (2013) in Nyatike Constituency, Migori County in

Western Kenya, a number of factors were identified as directly contributing to poverty among female headed households, which ultimately led to food insecurity. On the other hand, food insecurity becomes a major source of poverty, since households without adequate food cannot go about carrying out their daily chores aimed at poverty eradication. These factors are socio-cultural and socio-economic in nature such as food taboos, lack of status and influence by women, absence of training of women in nutrition, widespread illiteracy as well as insecurity are all socio-cultural factors that cause poverty and malnutrition. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of assets ownership in the households.

**Figure 1: Asset Ownership**



Source: Researcher 2013

None of the 29 households interviewed owned any major assets which could possibly be used to generate food or act as security. Such lack of asset ownership was cited as an impediment. This is where 100 percent of the interviewed respondents did not own assets either in the form of land or livestock (see Figure 1). Traditional customs empower men to own title deeds and other assets in both 'de jure' and 'de facto' female headed households. According to Suda, (1991) women are critical links in achieving food security and land is a significant factor in the household food security

equation. Supportive agricultural policies which recognize the critical link between women and food production will definitely influence their ability to contribute to household food security. Nevertheless, certain structural factors in the agricultural sector continue to prevent women from taking advantage of their increased control as managers of small holdings.

Lack of decision making abilities acts as a further impediment. All the respondents interviewed indicated that they lacked the ability to make major decisions within their homesteads (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Decision making**

Lack of decision making	Response	Percentage
Yes	29	100
No	0	0
Don't know	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

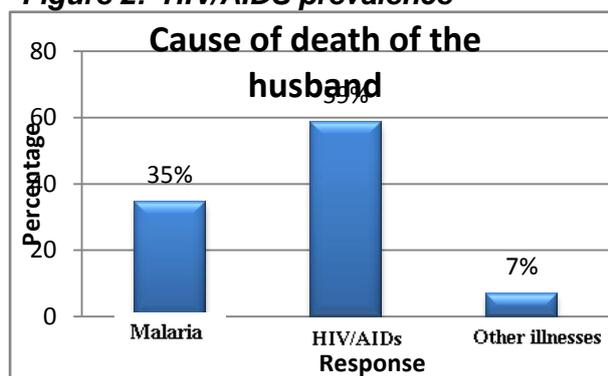
Source: Researcher 2013

Such decisions were made either by the respondents' husbands, or if the husbands were absent, by their fathers-in-law or other male in-laws. This inability of female-headed households to participate and influence critical decisions around household livelihoods negatively influences the ability of women to effectively feed their households, given the traditionally limited roles of women in decision-making processes and laws, which are important for poverty reduction and food security (Daman, 2003).

HIV/AIDS is a major cause of death in this region. This variable was deemed important in understanding the impact of the death of a spouse on poverty and food insecurity in female-headed households. Figure 2 indicates that 59 percent of the heads of households died of HIV/AIDSs, 35 percent died of malaria

and seven percent died of other illnesses such

**Figure 2: HIV/AIDS prevalence**



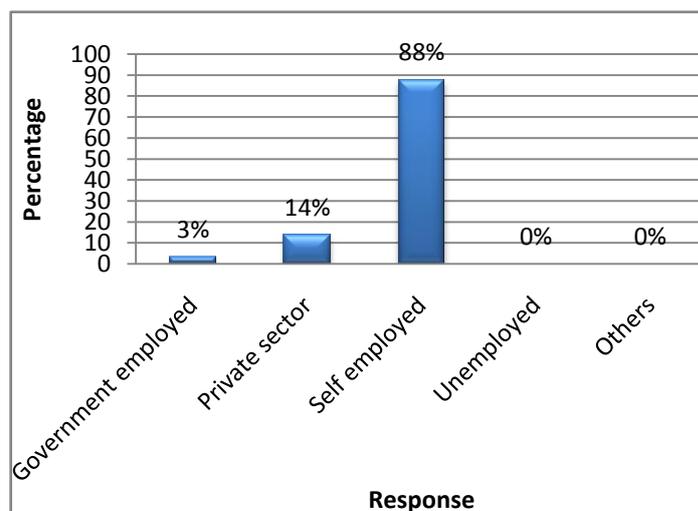
Source: Researcher 2013

The women who were left behind after their husband's death were sickly as they were already infected and thus could not fully support the households. Most of the households had many dependants and orphans as a result of the Aids scourge. In this investigation, this factor was cited as a major cause of food insecurity. The impact of HIV/AIDS has led to the rising dependency ratio currently estimated at more than 1:2. The extended family relations in Africa, which have often provided structures for support and care for orphaned children, are no longer reliable. Worse still, an increase in the number of AIDS widows has led to more and more female-headed households which are vulnerable and poor.<sup>10</sup>

The data reflected in Figure 3 reveals that 88 percent of the respondents were self-employed; 14 percent were employed within the private sector, while three percent are government employees.

as bilharzia and tuberculosis.

**Figure 3: Employment Status**



Source: Researcher 2013

The self-employed had menial jobs such as selling fish and hawking clothes that could not sustain their livelihood. For those who are employed only three percent earned an income above Kenya shillings (Ksh.) 10,000 while 52 percent earned an income of between Ksh. 3,000 and 5,999.

According to the study, food insecurity was high in female-headed households as indicated in the number of meals taken per day as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Meals taken**

Number of meals per day	Response	Percentage
One	28	97
Two	0	0
Three	1	3
Other	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Researcher 2013

Ninety seven percent of the respondents had one meal per day while only three percent had three meals a day. The poverty level was further revealed by the type of housing where 93 percent lived in mud houses with thatched

<sup>10</sup>Migori District Development Plan (2008-2012).

roofs and only seven percent of them lived in semi-permanent houses (Table 3).

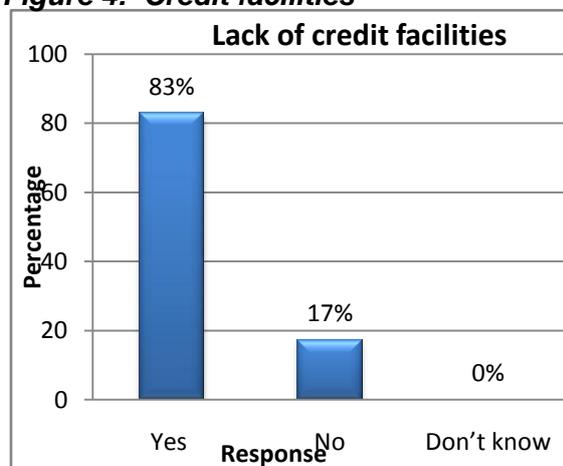
**Table 3: Type of Residence**

Type of residence	Frequency	Percentage
Mud house with thatched roof	27	93
Mud house with tin roof	0	0
Tin house	0	0
Timber house	0	0
Semi-permanent	2	7
Permanent	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Researcher 2013

Lack of credit facilities, as shown in Figure 4, was another factor that contributed to poverty and food insecurity in female-headed households, where 83 percent of the respondents indicated that they could not access credit facilities. Only 17 percent had access to the Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT), which is a leading local micro finance bank for women. This lack of access to credit by women is a serious obstacle to improving their agricultural productivity, because without credit women farmers are unable to buy inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and improved technologies or are unable to hire the implements they may need.

**Figure 4: Credit facilities**



Source: Researcher 2013

The limited autonomy of women implies that they control far fewer marketable assets and, thus, may lack the opportunity to build independent reputations for credit worthiness (Daman, 2003).

Female headed households lack assets and access to resources. These are both important elements in ensuring the survival of the household and determining its ability to improve its situation. Communal law upholds male authority and state law tends to give precedence to communal law. Married women are effectively treated as minors under the law. They are not issued land in their own right and are, therefore, unable to enter into contracts without the authority of their husbands. This means that they lack the right to own property independently. Indeed, the focus group discussants categorically emphasized how deeply rooted patriarchy is in the Migori society. This situation further aggravates poverty and food insecurity due to the inability to control and manage the affairs of the home. Moreover, gender inequality is a product of patriarchal structures which are firmly upheld by the community.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This study has highlighted the serious situation Migori County finds itself in by demonstrating the increased number of households headed by females and the significant role they play in the food chain. If Migori County is to become food secure, efforts must be made to deliberately support initiatives geared towards empowering women. Issues concerning the ownership of land must be addressed conclusively to enable female headed households obtain assets which could be used as security for funding businesses as well as a

collateral. In addition, empowering the girl child must be given prominence so as to attach dignity to women from an early age. The position held in this study is that empowering the girl child not only supports women, but gives a requisite boost to whole villages. The ripple effect of such ventures would spread far beyond the confines of a single household. It is, therefore, necessary that deliberate

measures are put in place to ensure that the support of women is addressed. This will guarantee a prosperous future where food insufficiency does not become a weapon that wages war on Kenyan households as a whole. Finally, as key stakeholders in the food value chain, women must play a deliberate role in food production and distribution.

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