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The gendered experiences of children in child-headed households in Swaziland

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This study investigated the gender dynamics of living in child-headed households (CHHs) in a rural area in Swaziland that experiences high levels of drought, poverty and HIV and AIDS. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study examined ways in which children in CHHs meet their daily family needs and address their vulnerabilities according to their gender, focusing on the experiences of the children. The study sample consisted of 10 households, with 5 boy and 5 girl-headed households from the chiefdoms within the area. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct interviews in the respondents' own homes. The study focused on the gendered coping strategies used by the children to sustain their household welfare. Three factors were examined: leadership, food provision and education. The findings show that birth order conferred headship or leadership to the eldest sibling irrespective of their gender. Variations in the performance of the three factors, which were influenced by the gender of the household head, were observed. Generally, the children acted in accordance with their socio-cultural norms demanded in fulfilling the role of leadership and food provision. Boy-headed households become disadvantaged because of the boys' reluctance to take tasks which would contravene traditional Swazi notions of masculinity. This was exacerbated by societal expectations of the independence of boys. Hegemonic masculinity puts boys at a disadvantage when societal expectations require them to enact their masculinity through independence, rather than by drawing on the support of their neighbours/family/social networks. However, girls conformed to traditional Swazi norms. Societal compassion with the vulnerability of girls produced sustainable social arrangements and fostered resilience in girl-headed households.

Keywords: children, femininity, gender, masculinity, resilience, vulnerability

Introduction

In Swaziland, HIV and AIDS continues to be a threat with the national prevalence rate of 27% among the adult population aged 15–49 years in 2016 (Ministry of Health, 2017). One of the most tragic effects of this disaster is the growing number of children left orphaned by this epidemic. The country has seen a dramatic increase in the number of children who are either orphaned or vulnerable (OVC). Children classified as OVC increased from 45% in 2010 to 71% in 2014 (CSO & UNICEF, 2016), with Shiselweni region presenting the second highest rates in the country of 73%.

The phenomenon of child-headed households (CHH) emerged in sub-Saharan Africa in the1990s as a result of the HIV and AIDS epidemic which had increased adult mortality, leaving children orphaned and deprived of life with parents (Foster, 2000; Matshalaga, 2002; Ntozi et al., 1999). The loss of parents placed pressure on the surviving family members and communities to care for the orphaned children, which challenged and weakened the traditional safety net to provide for the children (Foster, 2000; Lombe & Ochumbo, 2008). This resulted in the evolution of CHHs (Ansell, 2004) where the children are left on their own to care for their brothers and sisters and themselves (Mturi, Xaba, & Sekokota, 2005).

Initially, there was concern that CHHs would increase with the rising number of adult deaths. However, the prevalence of CHHs remains low as countries such as South Africa were estimating a national prevalence in 2006 of 0.67% of the total national households (Meintjes, Hall, Marara, & Bouelle, 2010). Researchers have argued that the low prevalence of these households should not be a deterrent for discussion as this is a development issue and these households will need state interventions to survive (Lund, 2005; Tsegaye, 2007). They noted that "one child headed household is one too many and a cause for concern" (Lund, 2005, p. 168). To this end, the researchers have attempted to understand the nature of CHHs and have found that these children are not only vulnerable but they are also at extreme risk due to the absence of an adult caregiver (Foster, 2000; Matshalaga, 2002; Ntozi et al., 1999).

In 2009 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Swaziland undertook an assessment of CHHs in Gege *inkhundla*[11], producing insightful statistical information, including the number of children living in CHHs and the daily challenges experienced by these children (UNICEF, 2009). In Swaziland, the national prevalence of CHHs was estimated at 1.63% of the all households in 2007 (CSO, 2010). These were found to be more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, and there was an expectation that

these would increase in number with the unrelenting HIV and AIDS epidemic in the country. Swaziland in general, and the government in particular, recognises that this new living arrangement for children coping with the HIV and AIDS epidemic will require state intervention and, as such, interventions will need to understand the capacity of these households.

Food provision and food shortages are among the major deprivations experienced by CHHs in Swaziland (Earnshaw, Njongwe, English, & Worku, 2009; Fielding-Miller, Dunkle, & Murdock, 2015; UNICEF, 2009). These studies have shown that the children in CHHs are faced with the challenge of accessing food. These children thus do not receive adequate diet and nutrition as a result of lack of income and poverty. Furthermore, food preparation and serving of household meals, generally becomes the responsibility of the girls in a CHH, especially the eldest girl, as a result of prevailing social norms. In Swaziland, as is the case in much of Africa, food provisioning is predominantly an exercise carried out by women (Blackden & Woden, 2006; Urdang, 2006; Whitehead, 1999).

Whitehead (1999) argues that men do not engage in the activities as these are considered women's work and, as a result, they are exclusively undertaken by women. Nonetheless, food provision in CHHs was a key means to examine whether and how gender roles were prescribed and/or ascribed given the diverse compositions of CHH (e.g., all boys; boys and girls; all age ranges) as well as to examine the particular food insecurity vulnerabilities of CHH.

Being orphaned disrupts children's education in both the short and long term (Lombe & Ochumbo, 2008; Mushunje, 2006; Poulsen, 2006; Urdang, 2006). The different studies have shown that generally, this disruption is greater for girls than boys, for when a parent is ill or dies, the girls are often called upon to be caregivers in the home (Foster, 2000; Poulsen, 2006; Urdang, 2006). By not attending school and by becoming a caregiver, the studies have shown, girls are deprived of their childhood in the sense of losing the protective privileges of being in school, as Mushunje, (2006) argued in a Zimbabwean study. Mushunje, (2006) also argued that school attendance for girls was far more beneficial than just obtaining education and providing the prospect of a better quality of life; it also assisted in decreasing their risk of HIV infection.

Children's vulnerability can also negatively affect their commitment to education. Motsa (2016) found that lacking basic supplies such as candles to produce light during evening study accompanied by balancing family responsibilities with study time exacerbated the vulnerability of the children in pursuing their education. She also found that relations between teachers and the vulnerable children could either be positive or negative in maintaining children's commitment to education. Positive attitudes included caring, compassion for the children's needs and emotional support. Part of the negative attitudes included physical abuse in form of corporal punishment meted out by the teachers in the schools.

Our research was informed by social constructivist gender theory (West & Zimmerman 1987, 2009). This theory transforms gender into a verb and a social construct on the grounds that the definition and expression (in social relationships) of gender is a product of societal norms and culture. They claim that all an individual's identities are defined in part by gender and that behaviour is shaped by what prevailing social norms are prescribed as acceptable behaviour for different genders. In their updated article, West and Zimmerman (2009) emphasise the dynamics of an individual's accountability to social arrangements. These authors contend that an individual's gender will always be defined and regulated by the social arrangements of the current cultural norms, hence one's behaviour will display the ascription of the sex category to which they subscribe.

As a contribution to the debates in the field of gender studies, this article highlights how expressions of hegemonic masculinity and its intersection with age (Connell, 1995; Cornwall, 1997) can paradoxically give birth to a vulnerable form of masculinity. The article also shows how strong and secure expressions of femininities intersecting with age can give rise to resilient femininities. In the context of this article, Swazi hegemonic masculinity is defined as male superiority (WLSA, 2001) demonstrated by independence, the ability to provide and be a breadwinner, hence, any men who fall short and fail to conform to this masculinity are ostracised for being lazy (Ndlangamandla, 2010).

Mane and Aggleton (2001) argue that the welfare of the household is influenced by the gender roles which ascribe the level of action undertaken by the children to cope with their situation. For the welfare of these households and the children living in them, there is a need to understand children's individual capabilities which not only enable them to cope with the daily challenges, but also to recognise that their gender roles which are ascribed at the level of children's everyday actions of coping with critical situations. This influences their roles within the household and directly — and indirectly — affects their own welfare and that of the household as a whole.

The relevance of the gender theoretical framework lies in research literature which has demonstrated that gender is a key factor in the establishment and management of these households. Some studies carried out in Zimbabwe (Foster, 2000) and Rwanda (Brown, Thurman, & Snider, 2005) respectively found that the establishment of CHHs is influenced by the presence of an adolescent to care for younger siblings and the presence of an adolescent girl who is the eldest child. These girls become household heads on the basis of being seen as able to take on the role of "mothers", hence de facto parents, to their siblings. Furthermore, such a role is sanctioned by social norms which support the gendered view that women can be primarily responsible for managing the daily routines of household management (Brown et al., 2005; Foster, 2000).

UNICEF (2009) assessed and attempted to understand the daily challenges and deprivations faced by children in CHHs, with the aim of developing strategies that can be used to assist them. The study also outlined the daily experiences and vulnerabilities of these households. The children lacked basic materials such as blankets, clothing and shoes. In addition, food insecurity was prevalent, resulting in nutritional deficiencies; shelter and accommodation were inadequate; and a proportion of the children suffered from behavioural and emotional problems. The study also showed that school attendance rates were high amongst the children, which

was attributed to government assistance. The government assistance came in the form of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Bursary Scheme (OVC Bursary Scheme) for those at high school and Free Primary Education (FPE) for those at primary school level, and one meal provided while in school. The study was novel in Swaziland and provided the first systematic information on the situation of children in CHH.

The current research was developed from the UNICEF study and sought to provide more insights on the life challenges of CHH members. Returning to the same *inkhundla* (Gege) as the UNICEF study, the research in this article employed a qualitative approach and sampled a small number of households to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Assessing the children's understanding and identification to the prevailing social norms and arrangements provided an opportunity to investigate these CHHs, which would guide any state interventions attempting to assist the children. The results would guide any state interventions attempting to assist the children. The study focused on the coping strategies of children in these households from a gendered perspective.

Method

This study used qualitative research methodology to give the perspective from the subjects being studied. Since this study focuses on the experiences of the children living in CHHs, a qualitative type of study was best as it "captures the lived experiences, deeply held beliefs or feelings or worldviews as expressed in the language of participant" (Henning, van Rensburg, & Smit, 2005, p. 34). This argument is further enhanced by Judd, Smith and Kidder (1991) who argued that it has strong reliance on the "words and voices" (p. 300) of those studied to form an opinion. The study aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding from the children, their perceptions of their vulnerabilities and how they have been able to provide and address their family needs.

The study was carried out in a remote rural area in the south-west of the country that is prone to drought, poverty and HIV and AIDS. The HIV prevalence in the region is 25.9% (Ministry of Health, 2017).

A purposive and convenience sample of an equal number of girl and boy CHHs, totalling 10, was selected. The households were also selected on the basis of their accessibility for the researcher.

Ethical approvals for this study were obtained from to the University of Free State Ethics Committee. Permission to conduct the research in Gege *inkhundla* was sought and obtained from the Ministry of Tinkhundla Administration and Development for utilising their community-based data on CHH. The children were requested to sign a child assent form on agreement to participate in the study. The caregivers[2] were also requested to sign informed consent form after agreeing to participate in the study.

Interviews using a semi-structured interview guide were conducted in the respondents' own homes. The interviews captured demographic characteristics of the CHHs, such as information about the child; his or her parents; his or her siblings and parents' siblings; the situation after the parents died as well as the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by the household and the coping strategies of the households. The interviews, which focused on the three areas (leadership, food provision and education), were conducted by the researcher in siSwati.

Two visits were made to the *inkhundla* for this study. The first visit was to meet the *Kagogo* centre managers[33] and to introduce the study and the researcher. The second visit was dedicated to interviews and data collection. In each household, the child was met together with a caretaker or caregiver such as a Rural Health Motivator (RHM) or member of the Child Protection Committee (CPC) responsible for the household. Children other than the household head were also interviewed; information about the informants is presented in Table 1. In each household one child was met with the caregiver for the interview. Generally, interviews were held with the head of household. Only in one case was a younger sibling interviewed in the place of the head of household. Each of the interviews with the children took about 1 hour and were tape-recorded to allow transcription. The recordings were later destroyed as a measure to protect the confidentially of the respondents.

Analysis

The households were first coded following their sequence in data collection as household 1 to 10. Further coding (M for male and F for female) was used to depict the sex of the head of the household. These codes are presented in Table 1 where the last digit in the household number indicates the birth order of the child interviewed.

Table 1: Summary information about the respondents

No.	Household head				Year CHH came into being	No. of children in household (excl. head)	Household identity
	Sex	Age (years)	In school (yes/no)	Current school grade			
1	M	18	Yes	8	2009	5	H1M1
2	F	18	Yes	11	2010	3	H2F1
3	F	17	Yes	11	2008	2	H3F2
4	M	17	No	N/A	2009	1	H4M2
5	M	22	Yes	11	2007	3	H5M1/H5M4
6	M	18	No	N/A	2009	0	H6M1
7	F	17	Yes	5	2005	1	H7F1
8	M	14	Yes	7	2008	2	H8M1
9	F	16	Yes	10	2009	1	H9F1
10	F	18	Yes	12	2010	2	H10F1

Transcripts were coded using the three main topics of interest (leadership, food security and leadership) as initial deductive codes, while also allowing inductive codes to emerge from the data. In each of the transcripts the researcher collected the recorded challenges faced by the household and coping strategies from the households, noting the theoretical consideration of the study. The emerging issues from the respondents formed the sub-categories of analysis. The findings are discussed in this article and supported by verbatim quotations from the respondents.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study contextualised with the theoretical framework. In all the respondent households, the eldest sibling was recognised as the head. Headship of household was recognised by taking responsibility of the household such that even an adult relative who performed this responsibility for the household was recognised as head of household. Responsibility for the household was demonstrated by allocation of tasks and provision for the household. Variations in the performance of these functions were influenced by the gender of the household head. Generally, most of the children were attending school, including several who were over age. This was more common among the boys we interviewed.

Household composition

All households were recognised in their respective communities as CHHs. As such each household was allocated a caregiver by the community authorities and recorded as such in the chiefdom database. In all households, the eldest sibling was recognised as the head of the household irrespective of gender (Table 1). The eldest amongst these was 22 years and the youngest child household head interviewed was 14 years old. The 22-year-old was included in the study as he was still in school.

Leadership

Generally, birth order conferred headship or leadership to the eldest sibling irrespective of their gender. However, this was not the case in all households. In two households, an adult relative was present in the household and in these cases the respondents also recognised them as the head of household. In one case, there was an aunt who lived in a nearby homestead the same community. She provided for the children's food needs and settled disputes amongst the children in their household. In another, a boy reported that his uncles had hired a maid to live with them and he ascribed headship to her.

Household heads had to take responsibility for their siblings' needs, but they also reported feeling challenged by the responsibility. This was common amongst the girls, hence one respondent (H9F1) complained that her authority was being challenged by her younger nephew who was influenced by friends: *"Sometimes his friends tell him that he should not allow me to boss him around because I am young. He shouldn't allow himself to be beaten by me, they advise…".*

In the case of households with an adult relative present, this burden and daily challenges were relieved from the child head by the adult relative. The daily need for food and authority would be the responsibility of the adult relative, who restored some order in the household.

Division of labour: domestic roles

In girl-headed households the duties of cleaning, cooking, and laundry were undertaken by more girl members. Tasks undertaken by younger siblings (irrespective of gender) were fetching water and firewood. In contrast, in all boy-headed households these duties were shared by all the children living in the household.

In other words, generally, in girl-headed households there was a clear division of labour and expectations of the delivery of tasks in line with gender identity of the children. This provided better structure to roles in girl-headed households than in boy-headed households.

The division of domestic duties in boy-headed households was contested on occasion in some households on the basis of socially prescribed gender norms. For example, in one boy-headed household the younger brother complained that he was expected to cook, in turn, yet he was away all day looking after the household cattle while the rest were at school. The boy did not complain about the cattle herding duty that was in line with his gender role, but was opposed to the cooking duty which is considered feminine.

Division of labour: external roles

All children in CHHs did informal work in their communities to obtain food and money for their households. The type of work and rewards reflected their prescribed gender roles.

For example, one girl-headed household respondent (H2F1) alluded said: *"we assist people in their fields with planting and harvesting when they ask us and they give us food".*

Boys, however, reported doing "piece/small jobs" in return for cash to help support their households. The boys reported doing jobs such as weeding people's fields and cutting grass. Furthermore, irrespective of age, boys in all households were expected by their siblings to be "breadwinners" in terms of earning cash incomes from jobs. For example, a girl-headed household respondent (H2F1) reported that to alleviate their suffering as a household: *"the boys try to get piece jobs here and there*".

In this household, the boys were younger than the girls. They accessed and performed the piece jobs to provide income to meet family needs.

Food security and agricultural production

The main concern of the CHHs was to obtain food, and this was the main concern for all household heads. For some, it was a daily challenge. For instance, 8 of the 10 household heads said they sometimes did not have enough food to make supper or they would have maize porridge only to eat for 2 or more days.

As one girl respondent (H3F1) lamented: *"You cannot buy roll on (deodorant) with money that you have, you would rather buy food...we have to ask people for food every day.... we feel bad"*.

Begging for food from neighbouring households and other children and getting ingredients for meals was common practice amongst the CHHs. Again, there was a gendered pattern in the children's actions: girls sought meal

ingredients; boys sought prepared meals. For example, one girl respondent reported that she would beg a neighbour for maize meal and cabbages to feed her siblings for a week and then the following week she would beg another neighbour for ingredients.

In contrast, the boy heads of three households reported that they were currently obtaining all their and their siblings meals from neighbours. In one case, the CHH members (H1M1) ate their meals at a neighbour's home. "*we would go to the neighbour's house every time we were short of food...they (neighbours) eventually told us to join them for meals so it was much better after that*".

In this case, the children had been assimilated into the neighbour's household, such that he (the child household head) had taught his siblings to approach the neighbour for all their needs and not him. This respondent added that in return for meals, he and his siblings did various jobs for their neighbour, including herding cattle and digging pit latrines. The siblings had abandoned their homestead at the time of the study and were living with their neighbour.

All the CHHs owned and had access to land to grow maize. The availability of land is normal in rural Swaziland as each household is expected to plough land to enhance food security. However, in eight of the households, the heads struggled with the agricultural inputs to productively use the fields. All the households largely depended on community members' support to plough their fields. Support for girl-headed households largely depended on community members' support to plough their fields for planting maize. In the case of a girl respondent (H2F1), whose fields had been planted reported that: "… *community people help us and we depend on their pity for us. They put together inputs, borrow us their cows and plough for us"*.

In contrast, a boy-household head (H1M1) reported that they could not work the household's fields in the following terms: "*If we could only get farming implements so we could be able to farm our land...we want so much to plough our fields so that we can be able to take care of ourselves."*

For another boy-household head (H5M1), the challenge was lack of fertiliser: *"when I am not able to fertilise the fields after ploughing...that is really big problem to me".*

In this instance, the boy reported that he had approached adult relatives for assistance but to no avail.

The girl respondents demonstrated their nurturing trait by being involved in the vegetable garden production. A girl respondent reported being involved in a community vegetable gardening programme that enabled her to get vegetables for her family.

Education and school attendance

The children in the CHHs were in school through government assistance. Only two heads of households had dropped out of school. The children reported regularly receiving food offered as school meals. The children suffered similar material deprivations and vulnerabilities in their school needs. However, the common indicator of the children's struggles to attend school was that many, in particularly boys, were older than they should be for the school grade there were in.

One extreme case was that of a boy household head who was 22 years old in Form 4, a class for 16-year-olds. He was 6 years older than his classmates. He was in class with a girl who was 18 years old, which is generally appropriate considering that she had previously repeated a class and thus only 1 or 2 years older than her classmates. Another boy who was 18 years old was in Form 1 (a class for 13-year-olds) in contrast with a girl who was the same age and in Form 5 (a class for 17-year-olds). A 14-year-old boy was in Grade 7 (a class for 12-year olds) in contrast with a girl who was the same age but doing Form 2.

In one household (H5M4) where the head was male, the younger brother had dropped out of school and was herding the household cattle. The reason, according to the caregiver: *"he kept failing at school, he wasn't doing well at all…. It's also because he was now going to class with children that are much younger than him. .he didn't like it...he was seventeen (17) years old now he should be in high school..."*

When questioned about the discrepancy, the boy would reason that they were enrolled late for school, that is, he was already old for his grade when he enrolled at school. Generally, like many children who are old for the grade they are in, the boys would not admit that the reason was they had in one or more years failed to pass exams to proceed to the next grade and had to repeat the grade, as reported by the caregiver.

Respondents cited a range of challenges that led them to repeat grades, or attend school. One male respondent (H6M1) who was 18 years of age reported that he had left school because of the lack of food and school uniforms was too much of a challenge for him. He further explained that the teachers were not supportive as they believed he could work and provide for his needs because he was a boy. He explained that at one time there was a donation of school shoes and his teachers excluded him. On the day the donations were being distributed he went to site but the teachers told him to leave and make way for the younger children who could not work and provide for themselves. When asked if he missed school he said: *"school is something I will always miss and wish to pursue, but the only thing is, it would not help as the things that made me leave would still be absent"* (respondent H6M1).

As a result, he concluded: "*school is for children with parents and not orphans"*.

A girl respondent (H7F1) who was 17 years of age and in Grade 5 (a class for 10-year olds) reported her challenges in the following terms: *"I have one torn uniform that I wear every day, I have no panty and often risk incidents during my menstrual cycles"*.

Nonetheless, when asked what drives her to continue going to school, she replied that it was the encouragement received from her teachers. She reported that since the teachers in her school knew about her situation, she had developed cordial relationships with them, and they provided her with emotional support.

The challenges suffered by girl and boy children were similar, but the assistance offered by the teachers varied with their understanding of the gender roles These accounts from the children indicate that teachers are important in supporting them so that they remain at school, as much as they may catalyse their submission to failure and their subsequent drop out. These factors operating in the school environment exacerbate boys' vulnerability and lead to their dropping out.

Discussion

Leadership

In the reviewed literature, heading the household was found to be gendered based on the traditional social norms. Boys were leaders and girls provided for the household to survive. However, this study clearly found that headship follows ranking in birth order irrespective of gender, and responsibility for the household is a consequence of this new role. Respondents attributed the role of the head of households to the eldest because they recognised this role to take responsibility for the daily needs of the household and siblings. As such, some attributed this role to adult relatives who provided oversight to the households, by providing food and restoring order. However, one girl household head reported that her authority was challenged by a younger male nephew. This confirmed that assumption of leadership was not easy for girls because of the observance to the traditional social norms which call into question her leadership and compromising her ability to achieve respect from her siblings.

Leadership, as expressed in division of labour, revealed general adherence to gendered social norms of household organisation. Notably, these norms generated contests mainly in all boy households over the undertaking of feminine tasks such as cooking. The findings from this study demonstrate a performance towards the children's understanding of the gender role. Performing "feminine roles" challenged boys' understanding of prescribed gender roles. Rather, the boys were motivated to continue to align themselves with masculine behaviour, even to the detriment of household welfare.

Further, leadership as expressed in the provision for the household also observed a fulfilment towards gender social norms for household management. Both girl and boy heads fulfilled their responsibility as leaders of their households in ways consistent with their prescribed gender roles. Girls were rewarded with food, whilst boys were remunerated financially. The role of the community in supporting the provision roles of the child heads also favoured the identified gender roles. Thus, the forms of social support available to CHHs in Swaziland reinforce traditional gender roles.

Food provision

The children interviewed indicated that food security was their most pressing concern. The provision of food, food processing, cooking, and cleaning are essential tasks for the household's daily survival and are viewed as feminine tasks (Whitehead, 1999). Retention of gender norms was very evident in fulfilling this daily challenge of obtaining food. Gender roles, according to Whitehead (1999), abdicate boys from carrying out these duties denying them the essential life skills required to sustain their households. The boys in this study resisted cooking in their households to the extent that when receiving food assistance in the community, they indicated preference for cooked meals. This was an unsustainable strategy. In some cases, the boys joined neighbouring households where they undertook male tasks, in exchange for food. This undermined the survival of their households. In contrast, by receiving ingredients that could be used in their households to prepare several meals and extending it to vegetable production, the girl-headed households in this study were less vulnerable to the food challenges.

Education and school attendance

Most of the children in this study were attending school regularly, and the challenges in obtaining education were the same for both the girl and boy children. However, there were differences in commitments to staying in school which were influenced by the gender vulnerabilities of the children.

There were contrasting gendered expectations from the orphaned girls and boys. Hence, the commitment of boys to school was threatened by their failure to perform, which left them in classes with children more than 6 years younger than them. Their failing grades resulted in repeating grades, leading to frustration and eventually dropping out of school. The boys' vulnerability was exacerbated in the school environment where teachers did not recognise the vulnerability but expected male students to "man up".

The expectation by teachers for a boy to act male by being a provider, independent, and self-sufficient had a further negative impact on his vulnerability. These expectations operating in the school environment confirm Ndlangamandla's (2010) assertion that a man who fails to conform to Swazi hegemonic masculinity is ostracised for being lazy which is considered unacceptable behaviour.

However, the expectation of vulnerablity and dependence for the girl resulted in the presentation of opportunities that form a protective environment for her, building resilience and improving her situation. Teachers sustained the retention of girls in the school system, and took in some for protection. The accounts from the children indicate that teachers are important in supporting them so that they remain at school, as much as they may catalyse their submission to failure and their subsequent drop out.

Reviewed literature on educational performance recorded a positive path as both boys and girls were in school. Staying in school is important as it is a proven strategy to break the cycle of poverty (Mushunje, 2006). However, this study revealed gendered vulnerabilities in this area. Boys were disadvantaged and struggling in the school environment, failing and repeating grades. They end up, on average, being older than the girls who were generally within the appropriate age for the grades they were in. Leaving school reduces the boys' likelihood of breaking out of poverty and exacerbates the vulnerability of their households.

Using the gender lens, this study has illustrated how the various factors and actors operating within the school system shape, and as result conflict with the masculine expectations of boys, leading to them dropping out. When a gender perspective is thrown into the situation, one finds that the masculine toughness and ability to negotiate difficult situations (Connell, 1995) that is often associated with male children, does not necessarily apply to all OVCs. Evidence from the life experiences of the household head boy children indicates that some boys are victims of these societal expectations and arrangements.

Conclusion and recommendations

Child headed households are a recent phenomenon in Africa and in Swaziland, specifically. There is consensus

that the children living in these arrangements are faced with numerous challenges and deprivations. Thus, there was a need to understand the various vulnerabilities and coping strategies used by children in CHHs, especially from a gender perspective. Interviewing 10 heads of households (5 boy and 5 girl heads) together with their caregivers the study found that leadership position was assumed by the eldest child or an adult relative who would provide oversight and restore social order in the household. Thus, it is important to conceive interventions that may revive the traditional extended family that ensured that orphans were reunited with adult relatives in the community who would provide the oversight role. This study found that gender influenced the performance of the leadership function. Leadership, as expressed in division of labour and in the provision for the households, followed a gender identity of the head of household. To this end, state interventions to CHHs need to provide life skills for boy-headed households to enable them to understand their capacities to strengthen them to organise and manage their households. Further, state interventions for the CHH should provide the children with agricultural skills and training in food preparation which will be an effective method to alleviate food insecurity in, and ensure long-term survival of the household.

Society, and by extension teachers, relatives and neighbours, are an important agent for the development of a gender identity. Teacher support to girls and their expectations of their (girls') dependence keep the girls at school. Boys were held up to perform as they were expected to be independent and provide for themselves, even though they were orphaned and vulnerable. Neighbours gave financial rewards to boys but gave food rewards to girls amidst the same vulnerabilities of the children. This provided resilience amongst the girl households and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of boys.

Cornwall (1997) highlighted that not all men are beneficiaries of power/patriarchy. Evidence from the life experiences of the household head boy children indicates that some boys are victims of patriarchy. Expectations of masculine independence exacerbate the boys' vulnerability: they adopt unsustainable strategies for food security; and they fail and repeat grades, then consequently drop out of school more frequently than the girls. Girls, however, were able to perform the tasks as they received support from their teachers which kept them at school, and communities supported-girl headed households by cultivating their fields. This support helped girls develop some form of resilience. In this context, there is evidence for intervention strategies that focus on and are sensitive to the dynamic needs and vulnerabilities of boy children and boy-headed households. The current practices and expectations of masculine independence exacerbate the vulnerability of boy children and boy households head.

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Notes

1. *Inkhundla* is a political and administrative district in Swaziland. It is made up of numerous chiefdoms. *Tinkhundla* is the plural of *inkhundla*.
2. Community caregivers are appointed by chiefs to supervise CHH and vulnerable children. Two cadres of caregivers, mostly women, called the RHMs and CPC provide care and support for the children in their households (NERCHA, 2008, p. 56).
3. *Kagogo* centre managers are officer in a chief's homestead, hired by the Ministry of Tinkhundla, Administration and Development. They maintain a database of all OVCs and services offered to the children in the community. The centre managers were used as an entry point to identify the households used in the study.

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