

CHALLENGES FACING NUCLEAR FAMILIES WITH ABSENT FATHERS IN GATUNDU NORTH DISTRICT, CENTRAL KENYA

by

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Abstract

Nuclear families in Africa are culturally perceived as comprising of a father, mother and children. Fathers are assumed to be in charge of family guidance, protection, provision of material and welfare needs of the family. They are also a source of inspiration to the children. However, many families have absent fathers. Reasons for this state of affairs range from socio-economic to alcoholism. The perception that absence of fathers results to some challenges in family survival formed the problem of this study. The study was guided by structural functionalism theory, which assumes that a family is like an organism that is made up of several structures, each of which is expected to perform so as to maintain its stability and continuity. The theory further postulates that the structure can hardly hold if the center is malfunctioning. Father's role in a nuclear family is central to its harmonious existence and survival as a unit. The study purposively sampled 100 households with absent fathers and 20 with both fathers and mothers in Gatundu North district, Kenya. Diversity in socio-economic status was taken into consideration when coming up with the study target groups. Interview schedule and observation checklists were used to generate data. Data was thematically analyzed. Findings indicated that families with absent fathers suffered identity and provision crisis. In addition, the women bore extra burden of added reproductive and productive roles. The study concluded that families with absent fathers were likely to continue with the socioeconomic crises as well as leadership vacuum unless stringent measures are put in place to reverse the trend. The study recommended a policy shift in economic empowerment, other forms of investment and wealth generation in rural areas. In addition, the study calls for a multifaceted approach as a strategy of minimizing the vice.

Key Words: Nuclear, Family, Absent, Fathers

Introduction

Background to the Study

The fundamental unit of all societies is the family. The family is usually the major source of the basic necessities of life and health, love and tenderness, adequate food, clean water, a place and time for rest, clothing and sanitation, which is made possible by the prevailing socio-economic, environmental and sometimes political conditions. The family is thus responsible for the care and upbringing of all its members. It's a cohesive unit which ideally provides economic, social and psychological security to all its members. It defines social and moral norms and safeguards both material and spiritual customs and traditions as well as providing role models preparing the way for adulthood (Degbey, 1980). Therefore, a family is like an ecological system: what affects one member affects the other members and the whole system. In the context of this study, absent fathers are defined as those who do not interact with nuclear family members on a regular basis and consequently do not play a significant role in family affairs and survival. Divorce, death, abandonment and alcoholism are all forms of absence, which nevertheless affect children development differently. The age at which children lose their father is significant since it influences their perception of males and females, the world as well as their emotional, social and academic advancement (Krohn and Bogan, 2001).

In the mid-nineteenth century, fathers increasingly moved out of home for economic reasons. Men came to spend less and less time in a parental role as they came to be seen primarily as economic providers for the family (Griswold, 1993). A major consequence of this shift is a change in role from being active and present dominant influence in the family to being physically absent and intermittent dominant influence. Fathers lost the regular opportunity to parent, while children suffered the loss of their fathers. For growth and development of a child's personality, it is desirable for both parents to be around. Children emulate the behaviour of the parent they identify with, usually of similar gender (Gohm et al. 1998). Thus, role learning for a son will be more difficult if the father is absent from home. More so, daughters also have different learning experiences with absent fathers because cross-gender parent experiences are absent or limited.

According to National Centre on Fathers and Families (2000), the objective of paternal authority is to promote the welfare of the family in the best interests of children. The cultural image of the father is that of highly visible and esteemed member of the society and the acknowledged head and focal authority of the family. A father's success accords status and success to his wife and children as he serves as the representation of the values of spatial and social realms outside the kitchen (Fieldman-Savelsberg, 1994). Fathers' absence from the home creates tensions, family break-ups, disciplinary and motivation problems, which affect children's emotional, social, academic and psychological progress. Evidence abounds regarding the woes of single parent families in Africa as well as other parts of the world as discussed below.

Globally, one-quarter to one-third of all families are headed by single mothers, calling into question the normativeness of couple headed families (Krohn et al. 2001). Developed countries, in particular, are experiencing an increase in single-parent families as divorce becomes more common. In developing countries, divorce is not as common, but desertion, death, and imprisonment produce single-parent families, primarily headed by women (Kinneer 1999). Rates vary from country to country, with for example less than 5 percent in

Kuwait and over 40 percent in Botswana and Barbados. In countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Tobago more than 25 percent of households are headed by women (<http://family.jrank.org>).

The nuclear family remains the preferred cultural pattern in the United States of America. The United States Census Bureau shows that 70% of children in the United States of America in the 1970 have lived in traditional two-parent families, with 60% living with biological parents. U survey done in 2004 revealed that nuclear families with original biological parents constitute roughly 24.1% of households, compared to 40.3% in 1973. Roughly, 75% of all children in the United States of America will spend at least sometime in single parent household (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). The same survey noted that there was a dramatic increase in single-parent families in the United States in the last three decades of the twentieth century while only 13 percent of families were headed by single parents in 1970. Over one-fourth of children in the United States lived with a single parent in 1996, double the proportion in 1970. Approximately 84 percent of these families are headed by women. Of all single-parent families, the most common are those headed by divorced or separated mothers (58%) followed by never-married mothers (24%). Other family heads include widows (7%), divorced and separated fathers (8.4%), never-married fathers (1.5%), and widowers (0.9%). The factors most commonly related to the contemporary U.S. single-parent family are changing social and cultural trends, increased rates of divorce and non-marital childbearing, increased employment opportunities for women, decreased employment opportunities for men (especially African-American men), and the availability of welfare benefits that enable women to set up their own households (Rodgers 1996). It has been estimated that 50 percent of children born in recent cohorts will spend some part of their childhood with a single parent as a result of separation, divorce, or out-of-marriage births (<http://www.nytimes.com>).

In the traditional African rural societies the extended family system includes several generations of cousins, uncles and aunts living in a compound or close to one another. Within this structure, children occupy a central place and are raised in a close family group. Thus, the responsibility for the social development of the child is shared by the members of the family. However, rapid demographic and socio-economic changes due mainly to urbanization and modernization have altered the composition and structure of families in modern societies. In the modern era, the concept of the family in an African setting has shrunk to become a nuclear family consisting solely of father, mother and children, thus denying many parents the assistance they once received from extended family support networks. As Degby (1980) observes, the nuclear family is a matter of the individuals' life, his house, his possessions and not the traditional usage of our farm, our home, sharing all happiness and woes and successes as in an extended family. As a result, many parents find it difficult to carry out their work as well as family responsibilities. Urbanization and modernization have placed heavy burdens on families by causing influx of people especially men into the cities in search for jobs. As a result, many nuclear families in Africa are having absent fathers who go out in search for better livelihood. Others are caught up in alcoholism, while others engage in extra marital affairs abandoning their families.

The breakdown of the nuclear family has resulted in an increase in woman-headed households, which correlates with absent fathers (Dobson, 2002:142-144). Barker and Ricardo (2005) observe that boys with absent fathers in Sub-Saharan Africa participate in conflict and violence as a means to gain power and in order to find camaraderie, male role models. This means that they lack a sense of power and masculinity and are searching for it in conflict and violence. A study carried out in South Africa to explore and describe the

experience of boys with absent fathers showed that boys who have absent fathers tend to have relational difficulties in social situations. The research looked at the boys in areas of physical, cognitive, personality, social and moral development and established that 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes; 90% of all homeless and run-away children are from fatherless homes; 85% of all children that exhibit behavioural disorders come from fatherless homes; 80% of rapist motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes; 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes; 75% of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centres come from fatherless homes; 70% of juveniles in state operated institutions come from fatherless homes; and 85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home.

Marriage is no longer seen in the same light as years gone by (Gillis, 2002:232). It has become purely contractual as opposed to covenantal, and is becoming a disregarded social institution, thus divorce is cited as one of the contributing factors to absence of fathers. In looking at family patterns, Coleman and Glaros, (1983) asserts that the most common cause of a disrupted family is desertion by the father. This desertion leaves remaining family members with feelings of rejection in addition to financial and other problems. If the family is unable to reorganize effectively, the children are likely to suffer in their development. Many of the reasons fathers are absent from the lives of their sons are direct consequences of society's impact on the family. For example, Mott (1994) cites both historical and contemporary economic conditions that force men to work out of the home for long hours in habitually dehumanizing environments which results to alienation in both directions- the father from the family and the family from the father.

In Kenya a family is a great source of pride. However, family and marriage relations in Kenya are gradually changing in response to the changing social and economic environment. In this regard indigenously favoured family systems are eroding, either through complete abandonment or evolution into more viable forms that are conventional. In modern times a number of educated women are choosing to avoid their traditional role as wives as some have children but prefer life as a single parent. On the other hand, husbands are absent from their families as they migrate to urban areas to look for jobs, leaving the women to take care of the family. As a result, many children are growing up without a father figure who is a disciplinarian and this has led to young children venturing into dangerous activities like drug abuse, robbery, while others roam in the streets trying to make a living (<http://family.jrank.org>).

With time, marriage has ceased to represent ties between social groups; rather it's an alliance between individuals. The non extended family system is now widespread in Kenya, with the most common form being the monogamous nuclear family found in both urban and rural areas. There are also single parent families consisting of one parent and children, which is common in urban areas. Most single parent families consist of the woman as the parent, a trend increasingly emerging among urban and professional women. Autonomy is first on the agenda as many single mothers choose to have children with married or younger men who will not have absolute influence or authority. More so, increase in single parent families in Kenya is attributed to high incidences of teenage pregnancy and premarital and extramarital sex, which has resulted to many children being brought up without a father (<http://family.jrank.org>).

This study was grounded on the perception that when a father spends much time away from home, the role of child-rearing is left to the mother, who has to be engaged in triple

roles of productive, reproductive as well as community demands. Further, children who do not receive love, affection and masculine role modeling from a father figure are deprived emotionally, socially and economically. A father's role in a nuclear family is therefore central to its well-being and survival. Hence, there is need for reformulation of the role of the father in the family in terms of authority, social, economic and emotional involvement. The study thus sought to unearth the challenges facing nuclear families with absent father figures. The study locale was a rural setting; which was Gatundu North District, in Central Province-Kenya.

Statement of the Study Problem

In the African traditional set ups, a nuclear family was born out of marriage which was perceived as irrevocable; and also as a significant social bounding in matrimony. Similarly, in the modern society, this bound is nurtured through the expected relations and partnership between a mother and a father in a family arrangement. However, despite these expectations, some father figures tend to relinquish their family headship obligations. Relinquishing of family obligations may take many forms such as working away from their nuclear families, alcoholism and death. The challenges caused by such a phenomenon to the family as a unit and to individual members have been voiced by scholars and researchers as well as several organizations that cherish family unity. It was therefore imperative to seek for an understanding of the phenomenon of absent father figures in the nuclear families, a mandate that this study undertook.

Purpose of the Study

Concern has been raised that despite awareness campaigns on the dangers of absent fathers in families, there was an increase of men indulging in the vice. It is not clear why this should be so. The study aimed at coming up with specific data on the challenges that face nuclear families with absent fathers' figures. Based on these findings, it was envisaged that appropriate strategies of solving the problem would be suggested for implementation.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were:

- a) To investigate on the perception families had on absent fathers in the nuclear families
- b) To examine factors which necessitated the absence of fathers from their families
- c) To identify the challenges that face nuclear families with absent father figures
- d) To provide intervention strategies that would help alleviate the problem of absent fathers among the families in Kenya

Theoretical Framework

This study was based on Emile Durkheim's structural functionalism theory. The argument that is advanced in this theory is that a system consists of various components or sub systems, which must function together for the entire system to work. At any point when a subsystem or an element within the system fails, the whole system is in jeopardy and will cease to work. Accordingly, a family is like an organism, which is made up of structures. Each of the structures is expected to perform so as to sustain the family unit. (See Figure 1)

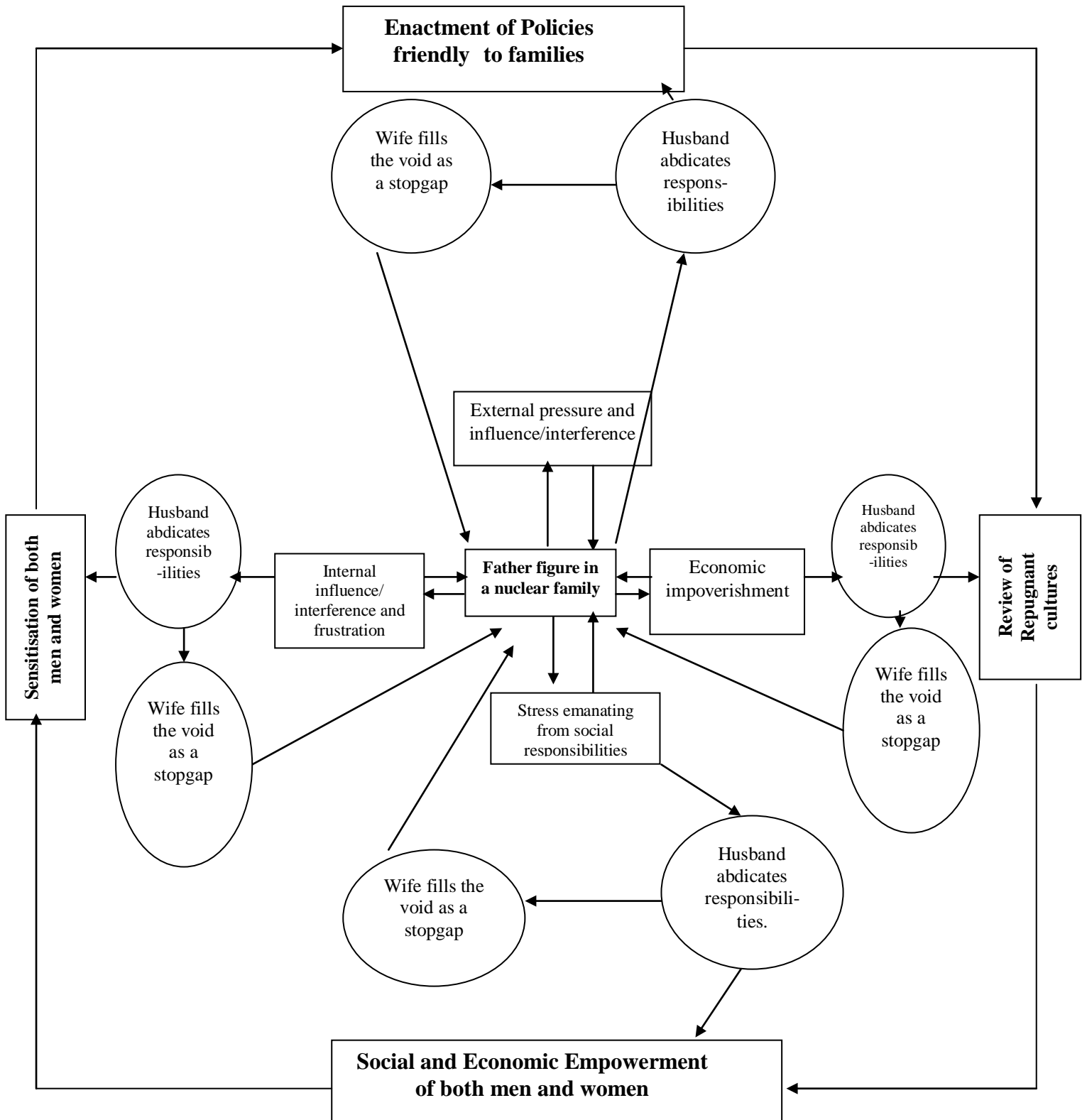


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Multifaceted Approach to Minimize Incidences of Absent Fathers in Nuclear Families

The theory further postulates that the structures are coordinated from a central authority so as to enhance and maintain harmony and stability. Each structure is interrelated and interlinked. A malfunctioning of one structure is bound to have ripple effects on the whole unit. This study examined the central and critical role played by a father figure in a family. His position enables him to play central as well as multiple roles. Such roles include co-ordination of all family activities; delegation of duties and, socialization of the young ones. Therefore, his role as a head in a nuclear family is central to its harmonious execution of activities and survival of that unit. However, in the event of an absent father the “normal” function as well as the survival of the family is in jeopardy. Intervention measures are necessary if family units are to be saved from disintegration. The measures should aim at restoring the father to his rightful role as a figurehead for social and economic empowerment of the entire family. On the other hand, for this to happen several initiatives need to be put in place, for example enactment of policies friendly to family survival, sensitization of both men and women, social and economic empowerment and review of repugnant cultures, as illustrated in the conceptual framework.

Method

The study was descriptive and adopted qualitative research methodology. Purposive sampling was used to select Gatundu, North district in Central Province of Kenya. The district is in a rural setting, about 40 kilometres from Nairobi City. A sample of twenty five households with absent father figures from each of the four locations was purposely selected for the study, giving a total of 100 families. A special consideration was taken to ensure that selected families included diverse social-economic status as well as reasons for the absence of the father figures, as table 1 shows.

Table 1: Reasons for the absent fathers in the sampled households

Reasons for father's absence	No. of families	% of selected sample
Working away from home	50	50
Divorce/separation	16	16
Substance and drug abuse	20	20
Disappearance from home	10	10
Death	4	4
TOTAL	100	100

In the selected households, women, youth and children were interviewed, using separate interview schedules. Additionally, 5 households with both mothers and fathers in each of the four locations were purposively selected, giving a total of 20 families, where both parents were interviewed, using an interview schedule. Additional data was collected using an observation checklist during home visits. Collected data were analysed on the bases of the study objectives, as presented and discussed below.

Research Findings and Discussions

This section presents collected data and related discussions.

Understanding of the Concept of Absence of Father Figures in a Nuclear Family

Analysis revealed that 70% of the children interviewed perceived an absent father as one who worked far from home or that one who came home late. The same was true with 100% of youth. While 30% of children indicated that they did not know, 100% of women and

men interviewed viewed absent fathers as those who abdicated their family responsibilities to their wives. Thus, the results of the study showed that the majority of the respondents were aware of what was meant by the “term absent fathers”

Reasons for Fathers’ Absence

Respondents gave various reasons for fathers’ absence from nuclear families, with working away from home as the most common while the least was cited as death. Figure 2 presents the actual responses.

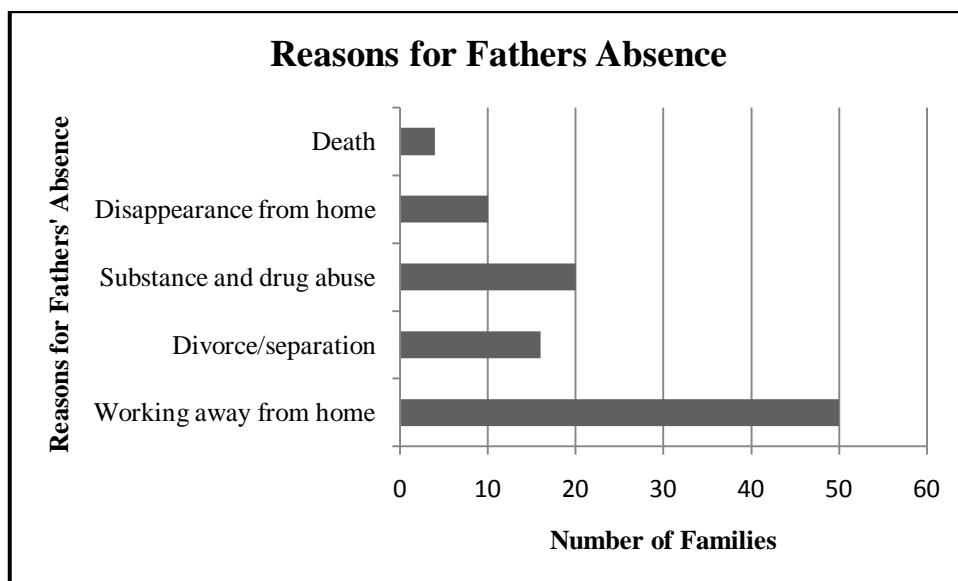


Figure 2: Reasons for fathers’ absence

Whether or not Absent Father Figures was a Problem to the Well being of the Family

As indicated in Figure 3, 90% of women and men respondents indicated that absent fathers contributed to family disintegration, while 10% indicated that fathers’ absence made no difference.

On the other hand, 81% of women and 64% of men pointed out that absence of fathers had serious implications on the children’s discipline and contributed to poverty. Further, 50% of the women whose husbands had disappeared as a result of alcoholism and other drugs abuse cited serious deprivation and embarrassment to the community as a major problem. As for the youth and children in

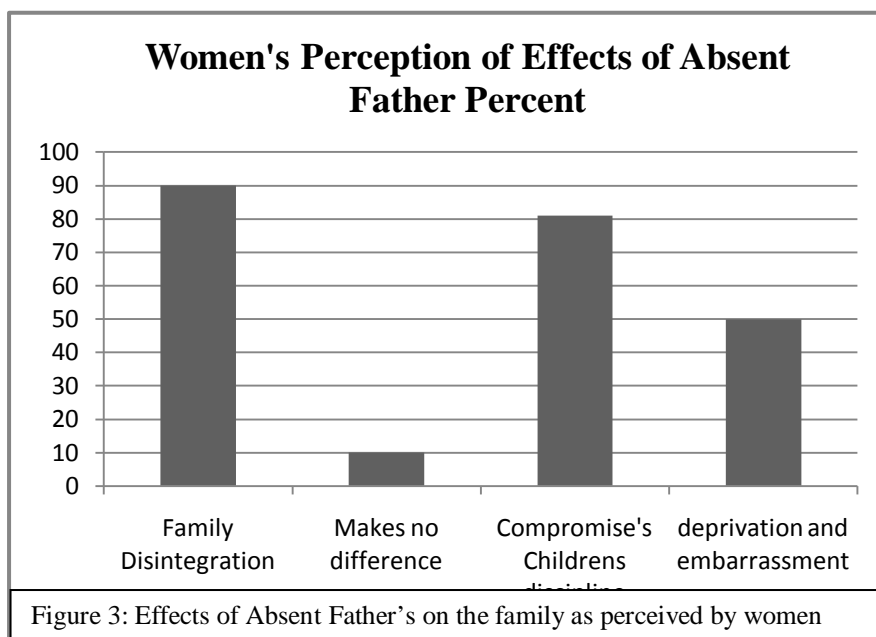


Figure 3: Effects of Absent Father’s on the family as perceived by women

homes with absent fathers cited problems of insecurity, stress, drugs/substance abuse, early marriages, especially for girls, school dropout and family disintegration.

In addition, 30% of the study respondents cited the challenge of the absence of fathers who take excessive alcohol as particularly being of concern in that they became weak, unable to sire children, neglected matrimonial duties and unfortunately die young.

According to the children and youth respondents, children from such homes felt insecure and suffered from stress, more specifically most of those students never concentrated on studies due to uncertainty, a phenomenon which led to poor performance. Other problems cited by the youth were lack of enough financial support, children falling into negative peer pressure, early marriages and pregnancies for girls. Thus, the phenomenon of absent fathers was viewed as a problem and that Kenya government lacked a strict policy to regulate the behaviour of fathers.

Perception of an Absent father who has Absconded his Family Responsibilities

Respondents were asked to indicate their individual perception of an absent father in terms of physical appearance and character. 70% of the youth in the study gave physical identification to include having red eyes, untidy, withdrawn and poor health. 75% of women respondents identified such a father with violence, unpredictable behaviour, rude, lying and loner. 80% of the men respondents identified fathers who abscond their family obligations with alcoholism, violence and arrogance.

Other findings from the study indicated that families with absent fathers were either viewed with a lot of suspicion or condemned (women 93%, Youth 87% and men 97%). However, it also became clear that the society did not want to seek for explanation on the circumstances under which men ran away from their families. In this regard, the society is usually left to form a preconceived idea on what may have affected the head of the family. In most cases, such families are not held with high regard.

Factors Contributing to the Phenomenon of Absent Fathers

Findings indicated that various factors explained the phenomenon of absent fathers. According to Figure 4, 98% of women and 86% of men felt that the society did not prepare men on how to hold their responsibilities in marriage. Other factors cited were poverty (52%), internal frustrations from homes (48%), alcoholism and other drugs abuse (35%), lack of employment in rural areas (32%), irresponsibility in the family obligations (5%). Death was cited by 25% of respondents as an inevitable cause, with an emphasis of HIV/AIDS, as the main cause, while 37% of women respondents indicated that some husbands were forced out of their homes by their wives especially when they failed to be recognized as family heads, being nagged or made to feel inadequate.

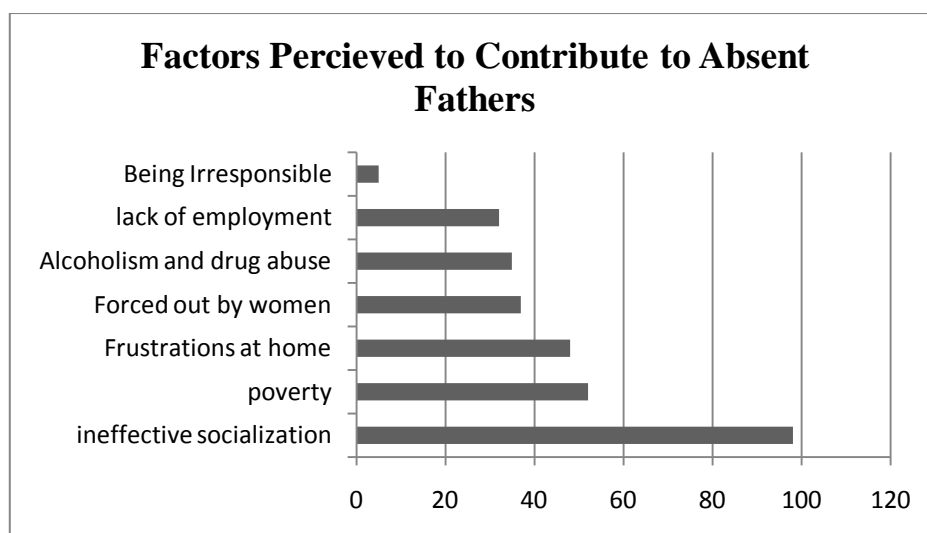


Figure 4: Factors contributing to Absentee Father Phenomenon.

The researchers probed further on the frustrations, which faced men in their families. It became vividly clear that frustration emanated from family misunderstanding, failure to provide basic needs, nagging and assertive wives who never respected their husbands' excessive demands from the family members and finally unemployment. Women on their own part were also asked to give reasons why they thought men left their matrimonial homes. 80% of them felt that men acquired an escapist attitude on failing to fend for their families. They felt that men used to escape from families as a cover up for hiding their inadequacies to provide and care for the families, while at the same time looking for excuses to abdicate their family responsibilities.

However, 37% of the women felt that their women folk were to blame for they were unnecessary unreasonable and hard on their husbands. Such women made their husbands feel insecure as family heads. That category of respondents argued that men were not given room to make decisions even on minor issues. In addition, 45% of women felt that men were irresponsible particularly on matters of finance. It was further argued that men disappeared from their families on spending their money on non-essential/priority areas.

On the other hand men felt that the major cause for fathers to abscond their family duties was as a result of drugs and substance abuse and frustrations for lack of money due to increasing poverty and unemployment. Both men (87%) and women (78%) felt that culture was to blame in that it had empowered men to be domineering figures in their families. In this regard, if a man felt his domineering position was not tenable then he would leave to places where he would reclaim his status. Respondents from women (98%) and men (86%) felt that some men were not fully socialized to handle all the intricacies of wife. It is in this regard that they ran away from their families on realising that they were deficient in many areas. Thus, the study established that men were to blame for this phenomenon of absent fathers. Death was also cited as an inevitable factor, especially in this error of HIV/AIDS.

Challenges Faced by Women with Absent Male Partners

In the absence of the male heads, women in a nuclear family suffered from indecisiveness on matters that affected their families. This was according to results from the women (83%), Men (78%) and youth (63%), as shown in Figure 5.

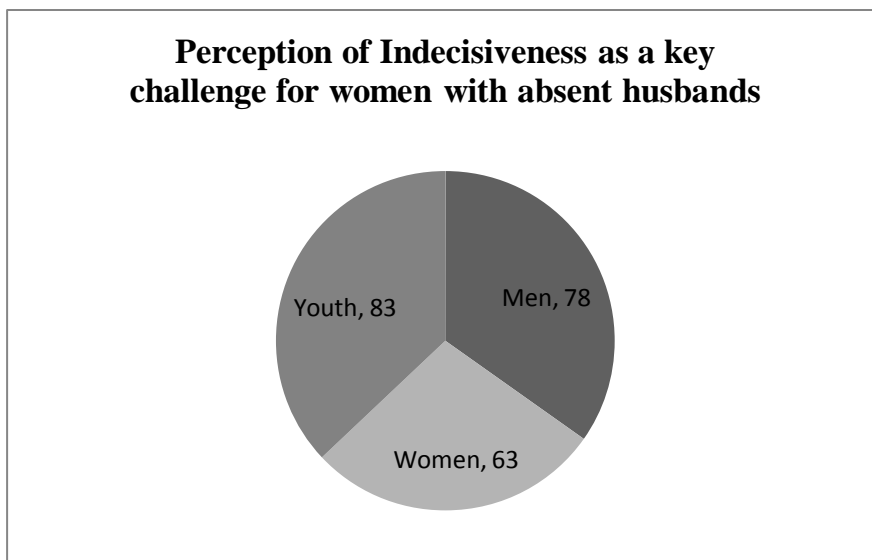


Figure 5: Perception of Indecisiveness as a Key Challenge faced by women with absent husbands.

Indecisiveness was said to be costly as it slowed down decisions on important family matters. Women were said to have been overworked as they had to undertake all the family responsibilities in the productive, family maintenance and community work, like attending meetings, funerals, weddings and extended family matters. Another challenge which emerged from the findings was that sexually active women became promiscuous, a trend that was likely to lead to higher rates of HIV infection in the nuclear families. Additionally, Children rearing in terms of the provision of materials, emotional, spiritual and transmission of family values was cited by male and female respondents as a major challenge.

Challenges faced by children with absent fathers

Study respondents indicated that both daughters and sons were affected in the situation of an absent father, especially when family's provision is inadequate or when mothers are too stressed to give them adequate attention. Many dropped out of school. Boys were said to be mostly affected for lack of a role model to identify with. 60% of the respondents indicated that boys tended to become more rebellious, while girls got pregnant and married early. This was based on the fact that boys wanted to identify more with their fathers as they grew up and therefore felt more frustrated with their absence.

Challenges Facing Nuclear Families

According to the findings of the study, nuclear families faced several challenges as a result of the absence of the father figure. Additionally, as shown in Figure 6, findings from the youth (68%) women (98%) and men 83% showed that wives bore the greatest brunt of raising children and meeting all the associated demands/responsibilities. This forced the wives to struggle to rise up to the challenge in order to fill the void. On the other hand, 52% of the respondents felt that there was also psychological torture in the sense that such a family could be socially isolated.

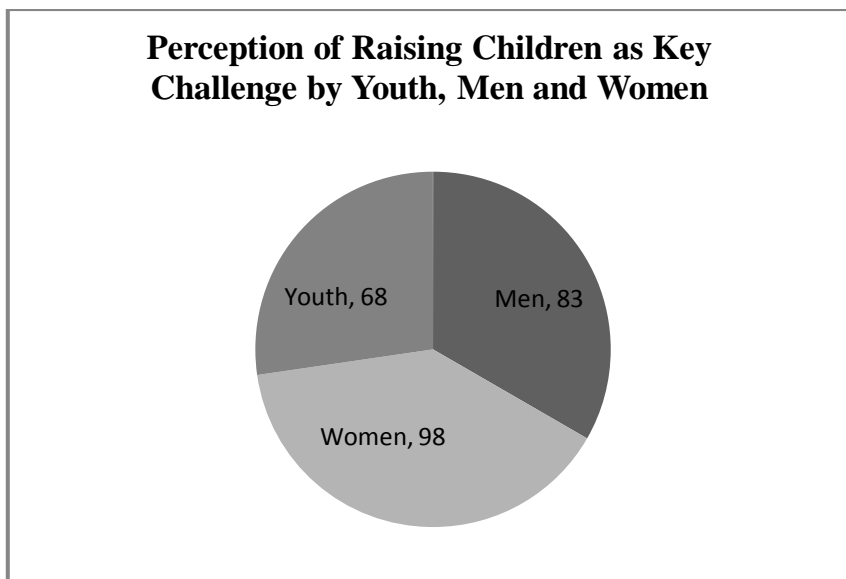


Figure 6: Perception of raising up children as a key challenge facing nuclear families with absentee father/husband.

Another challenge was that children grew up without a male figure to identify with. This was seen as a reason why youth with absent fathers had discipline problems and performed poorly academically. According to women and men respondents, girls and boys were affected.

Economic aspects of paying school fees, clothing and feeding children were cited as serious challenges facing married women with absent husbands. All study respondents cited that such women were further challenged with having to fulfil their role as mothers and also fill the gap of their missing husbands. They therefore had to exert themselves in the triple role in the productive, reproductive and community expectations. All these notwithstanding, women without male partners were also denied access and control of family assets and resources, especially family land and other properties. There were also cited cases of disadvantages especially in accessing financial credits from banks for lack of collateral facilities.

Another major challenge was in the socialisation of the growing children and youth in the family. Respondents raised a particular concern in regard to raising and disciplining adolescent girls and boys. In the traditional Kenyan family, both fathers and mothers were charged with the responsibility of socializing their children in ways of life. In cases where either member was absent, then the remaining one would try to fill the void. It is in this regard that the respondents were asked to indicate how socialization was done in the absence of fathers. The results from the study indicated that children grew being deficient in areas which were to be done by their fathers. This was as per the findings from the youth (92%), women (98%) and men (97%), as shown in Figure 7.

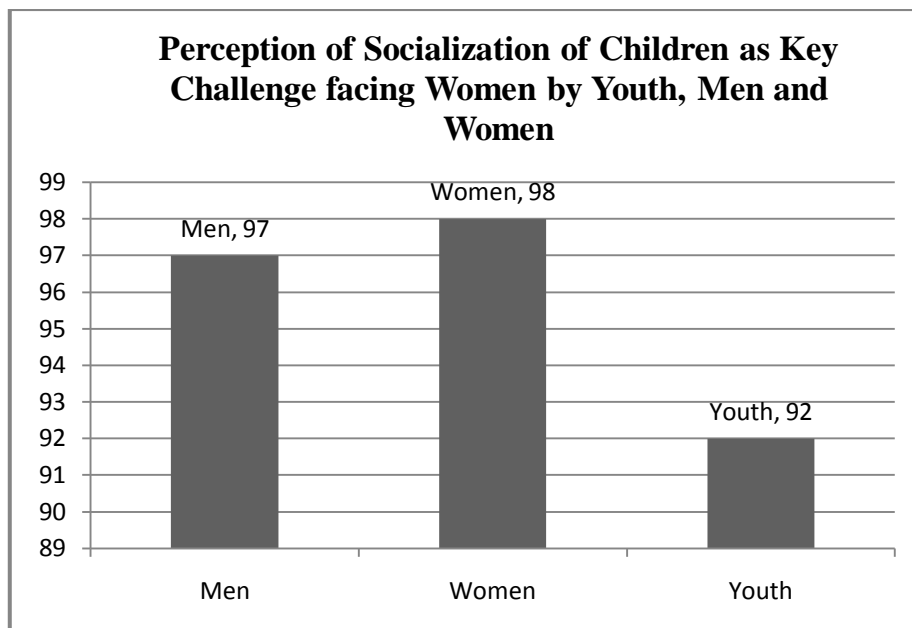


Figure 7: Perception of socialization of Children as a Key challenge facing women as reported by youth, men and women.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study corroborated those of others studies in that it confirmed that absent fathers among the families in the area of study was a serious phenomenon. It was evident from the study findings that economic and social responsibilities fell on wives in the absence of their husbands. Children suffered immensely on missing their fathers as their socializing agents; children who could have been disciplined and supported and encouraged by their fathers to advance in their studies ended up being truant and performing poorly in their academics. While women were forced by circumstances to fill the void left behind by their absent husbands, the part of fathers was not satisfactorily being substituted or filled.

While factors which precipitated the phenomenon were many and varied from social-economic to the drugs and substance abuse, concerted efforts should be made by all members of society in the creation of zero tolerance for absent fathers in order to stop the vice from spreading. The solution to the identified problem calls for a multifaceted approach. The government should play its rightful role in sensitizing its citizens on the dangers of men absconding their responsibilities to their wives. Others who can also sensitize the society on the vice are teachers and religious leaders. In view of the fact that sensitization campaigns play an important role in discouraging fathers from leaving their families, the campaigns should be well-planned, more aggressive, consumer friendly and properly targeted. Further, effective sensitization campaigns can be enhanced through clear identification of specific factors that aggravate the problem. Emphasis must be put on individual men's responsibility in fighting the urge to abscond their families. The men must be made to realize through guidance by the church, peers and community that leaving families is a serious problem that affects all the members. Grass root organizations, Community and Faith Based organizations need to make it their agenda to support the men by arming them with skills, knowledge and confidence to resist pressures to leave their families.

Strategies for rural development should be encouraged. The Government should encourage investors to invest in the rural areas. Such a move would create jobs and other multiplier effects in rural areas to discourage rural-urban migration by men in search of jobs. Families should be given loans by the government and NGOs as a way of empowering them. Such a move would make men productive at family level.

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