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Community involvement in the identification of vulnerable child-headed households in Hogsback, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Children from child-headed households are vulnerable, as they experience several challenges; it is therefore imperative to provide them with social support. However, the lingering problem in this endeavour is that it is rather difficult to identify such households. To overcome this difficulty, the community should be involved in the identification of these households. This qualitative study sought to describe the community members' involvement in the identification of vulnerable child-headed households in Hogsback, Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The data were collected through a discussion with one focus group, consisting of ten community members from the Hogsback area. In addition, five social workers from the Department of Social Development in Alice were interviewed individually. The triangulation of the two data sets ensured credibility. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. Two main themes emerged from the discussions. Firstly, community members are aware of, and capable of making observations and reports on children in need. Secondly, community leaders play a key role in identifying vulnerable children. Thus, enhanced community involvement can help social workers to identify vulnerable children from child-headed families with ease. The study recommended educating communities on reporting, identification, and early-intervention procedures to ensure timely and effective responses.

Keywords: children; child-headed households; community members; identification; social support; vulnerable

INTRODUCTION

The identification of children from child-headed households is critical in facilitating the provision of social support services, given that such minors face several challenges such as poverty, all forms of abuse, violence, hunger and starvation, and destitution (Diago, 2020; Goronga & Mampane, 2021). However, the identification process is difficult because of the complex societal norms for determining vulnerability, especially in remote rural areas such as Hogsback, which is situated in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. As such, community involvement in the identification of children from child-headed households provides the necessary link for social support, thereby improving access to interventions that can cater for their overall physical, emotional, mental and developmental needs (Kwatubana & Ebrahim, 2020).

In Africa, child-headed households were first documented in the 1980s in the Rekai district of Uganda (Plan-Uganda, 2005). However, these cases were not sustained over time. The extended family played a critical role in mitigating the emergence of child-headed households (Chademana & van Wyk, 2021). By integrating orphaned children into larger family units, the extended family system reduced instances of family disintegration and preserved traditional social structures. However, the advent of modernisation and westernisation disrupted African traditional norms and cultural practices, thereby weakening the once strong social fabric. This shift contributed to most of the challenges child-headed households are currently facing (Hall & Richter, 2018), as the African traditional support systems are no longer as robust or prevalent as they used to be.

The emergence of child-headed households in African communities is a profound social challenge, which is shaped by significant shifts in traditional family and community structures (Chademana & van Wyk, 2021). Factors such as migration for economic opportunities and the devastating impact of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic have left many children assuming adult responsibilities, often in the absence of parental guidance (United Nations Children Fund [UNICEF], 2010). UNICEF (2019) and Save the Children (2020) observed that the children who are left behind, often because of migration, displacement, or other socioeconomic factors, are vulnerable to significant psychological and emotional challenges. The resilience of these children and the role of communities highlight the importance of solidarity and localised efforts in addressing this growing issue (Chademana & van Wyk, 2021). Therefore, this study sought to describe community involvement in the identification of children from child-headed households in the Hogsback area, Eastern Cape. The next section is the literature review and it is followed by the theoretical framework and outline of the methodology, respectively. The penultimate section presents the findings and discussion of the study, while the last section presents the recommendations and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Child-headed households are broadly defined as households where all members are below the age of 18 (Hall & Sambu, 2019; Mkhatshwa, 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, child-headed households proliferated in the 1990s and became a cause of concern, as a result of the

orphanhood caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Mkhatshwa, 2017). The pandemic further weakened the extended family structures, which ordinarily provided childcare when children became orphaned (Chademana & van Wyk, 2021). Although South Africa has also been affected by the proliferation of child-headed households as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Hall and Mokomane (2018), supported by Hall and Sambu (2019), attribute this social phenomenon to family dynamics as well; for example, when parents migrate to urban areas to seek employment, they leave their rural homes in the care of their children, most of whom are adolescent boys and girls, who are tasked with looking after an average of eight family members. Although child-headed households can occur because of issues such as migration, in South Africa orphanhood also contributes significantly to the phenomenon (Hall & Mokomane, 2018).

Notably, by the end of 2018, South Africa had 471 000 double-orphaned children (Hall & Sambu 2019). Child-headed households are mostly found in rural South Africa and, by end of 2018, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng had the highest number of children who had lost both parents (Hall & Sambu, 2019; Mkhatshwa, 2017). From 2002 to 2018, the number of child-headed households in the country declined and, by the end of 2018 there were at least 0.3 percent children in child-headed households (Hall & Sambu, 2019). The province with the highest number of child-headed households in South Africa is the Eastern Cape, with at least 0.6 percent of all children residing in child-headed households (ibid.).

The Eastern Cape is one of South Africa's provinces that are characterised by a predominance of small communities and expansive rural areas, rather than metropolitan hubs. It covers approximately 65,238 square kilometres, making it one of the largest provinces, geographically. The Eastern Cape has an estimated population of 7 million, which makes it the third most populous province in the country, following Gauteng (13.4 million) and KwaZulu-Natal (11.1 million) (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The province is largely rural. Statistics South Africa (2017) indicates that nearly 4.1 million of Eastern Cape residents live in rural areas. Despite its vast population and size, the province has one of the highest poverty rates, underdeveloped infrastructure and levels of unemployment.

The phenomenon of child-headed families is so complex and multifaceted that it significantly affects both societal structures and the overall wellbeing of children (Agere, 2018). This situation typically arises as a result of the death of parents, abandonment and illness, among many other factors. Consequently, children end up taking on the role of primary caregivers for their siblings. The absence of a traditional family environment deprives children of crucial emotional, financial and social support, thereby making them more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and violence and, ultimately, long-term psychological and developmental challenges. This further perpetuates the cycle of poverty and social exclusion (Agere, 2018; Munodawafa, 2017). However, community involvement plays a pivotal role in mitigating these adverse effects. Support from community members provides essential resources such as emotional guidance, and a sense of belonging, which help in strengthening the resilience of child-headed households (Goronga, 2018).

The vulnerability of child-headed households amplifies poverty levels, lack of attainment of educational goals, and several forms of abuse, which all require social support and protection

(Palmer et al., 2023). This is also confirmed in a study conducted in Alice, in the Eastern Cape province, which found that vulnerable children experienced unfulfilled educational needs, hunger and inadequate support from relatives (Mpayipheli & Kheswa, 2020). The study further noted that most of the challenges experienced by children from child-headed households emanated from poverty and destitution.

A systematic review of 47 studies revealed that one of the issues compounding the difficulties faced by child-headed households was lack of social support (Goldberg & Short, 2016). The forms of social support that such households received were both informal and formal in nature, notably from community members such as teachers and programmes managed by the government and civil society (Kwatubana & Ebrahim, 2020). To access such support, the vulnerable children ought to be identified and given information on the available support services. A study conducted in Ethiopia by Girum et al. (2020) found that children from child-headed households had no access to information, so they were unable to access formal social support services. To counter this, community members can fill the gap by identifying vulnerable households that are in need of social support (Kapesa, 2015).

Community members such as neighbours, church members, community leaders and teachers play a key role in identifying child-headed households by providing evaluative support and linkages to social support (Chizororo, 2008; Nevard et al., 2021). Community members can also offer resources and social connections that can create safe environments that promote the welfare of vulnerable children. Thus, communities can establish supportive networks that promote the children's health, wellbeing, education and personal development, thereby nurturing positive behaviours and values (Haley & Bradbury, 2015). These roles entail making efforts to involve families and caregivers, and inspiring volunteerism and community participation (ibid.).

Despite the significant support that community members offer to vulnerable children, their efforts are often hindered by several challenges, which impact negatively on the quality and sustainability of that support. Some of the key challenges include limited educational opportunities, healthcare accessibility, social exclusion and economic hardships (Borg et al., 2024). Consequently, these challenges can be addressed through collaborative approaches that involve governments, non-governmental organisations and community-based initiatives. The support system for vulnerable child-headed households can be strengthened by investing in education, healthcare, social inclusion programmes and economic empowerment, thereby ensuring the children receive relevant care and opportunities (De Haan, 2017).

According to Brooks-Gunn (2019), the identification of vulnerable children in communities is dependent on several issues, which include the status of the community member who could have identified the vulnerable child, and the social values of each community (Brooks-Gunn, 2019). Kuran et al. (2020) conducted a study on identifying vulnerable groups during crises in four countries. The study noted that the identification of vulnerable elderly and children depended on each community's definition of vulnerability (ibid.). In addition, within each vulnerable group, there is a level of heterogeneity that ought to be acknowledged in order to facilitate access to various social support services (Kuran et al., 2020). Social workers are instrumental in identifying vulnerable children; however, the social care workforce is generally

short-staffed (Shawar & Shiffman, 2023). In addition, while building on the heterogeneity of vulnerable children, especially those from child-headed households, there is need to include their perspectives, along with those of community members who are instrumental in identifying these vulnerabilities (ibid). Moreover, the identification of such children is challenging, as vulnerability is "invisible" and it often intersects with other societal issues, so it cannot be quantified (Nevard et al., 2021).

Although Kuran et al. (2020) and Brooks-Gunn (2019) agree on the variations of how society identifies vulnerability, the process of identifying children in vulnerable circumstances is complicated by the fact that vulnerable children have limited social networks (Nevard et al., 2024). A study conducted by Nevard et al. (2024) in the United Kingdom (UK) concluded that vulnerable people, including children, face limitations in forming and maintaining social networks, which can be useful in the identification of children in difficult circumstances who need social support. Given this background, it is important to describe how vulnerability, particularly in child-headed households, can be identified.

In profiling the state of children in South Africa, Hall and Sambu (2019) acknowledge that the sample of child-headed households was underweighted, as it included only 101 of 25,000 children. As such, the official population of children living in child-headed households nationally ought to be treated with caution (ibid.). Concurring with this veiw, Hall and Mokomane (2018) state that in 2017 the number of child-headed households was put at a paltry 3 214. Given this, there is need to describe how community members are involved in identifying children from child-headed households.

Children from child-headed households often face significant social, emotional and economic challenges that can have a lasting impact on their lives. From a social perspective, children who grow up in child-headed households experience emotional difficulties (Agere et al., 2017), post-traumatic stress disorder (Tsujiuchi et al., 2016), depression (Williams et al., 2016). Given that the children are compelled to assume adult responsibilities (Nxumalo, 2015), they tend to lose out on childhood experiences (Goronga & Mampane, 2021). In addition, child-headed households face food insecurity (Chidziva & Heeralal, 2016), inadequate income (Lwandiso, 2020), and child labour (Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, 2020). Consequently, vulnerable children generally perform poorly in school because of their erratic attendance (Diago, 2020; Pillay, 2016), and most of them eventually drop out (Mulaudzi & Rankakane, 2018).

In this dynamic and ever-changing world social workers play a crucial role in supporting vulnerable children, including those in child-headed households, by addressing their unique needs. The multifaceted responsibilities of social workers encompass various key roles that are essential in fostering the wellbeing and development of these children. Some of the key roles played by social workers include advocacy, counsellor, facilitator, programme developer, case management, organiser, educator and mobiliser (Mabemba, 2017).

In this regard, the systematic failure to address the needs of vulnerable households adequately can be attributed to lack of social workers, resource scarcity and ineffective governance (Diago, 2023). These drawbacks impact negatively on the wellbeing of child-headed households in

South Africa (ibid.). Despite the critical role that social workers play in improving the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable households, the country faces a severe shortage in this sector. While over 9,000 social workers were unemployed in 2022, South Africa needed an estimated 70,000 social workers to meet the demand (Opperman, 2022); this further exacerbates the challenges faced by child-headed households, particularly in rural areas. These households are left without access to essential resources and support as a result of inadequate services (Diago, 2023; Opperman, 2022).

Skhosana (2020) argues that South African child welfare organisations are handicapped by funding and resource shortages which, in turn, impact adversely on the provision of services to child-headed households. Van Niekerk and Matthias (2019) lambast the top-down approach used by the Department of Social Development, which results in poor working relationships with child welfare organisations, thus impacting negatively on the welfare of vulnerable child-headed households in South Africa.

The Department of Social Development (2021) asserts that South Africa is faced with a critical shortage of social workers, which significantly impedes the implementation of policies and programmes that were designed to address pressing social issues. Opperman (2022) and Maqhina (2021) highlight that the Department of Social Development is constrained by insufficient funding, which limits its capacity to recruit and retain additional social workers, thus undermining the provision of essential support services to vulnerable households across the nation. To mitigate these challenges, it is imperative to increase budget allocations, enhance training programmes, and implement retention initiatives to bolster the social workforce.

The following section provides an in-depth exploration of the theoretical foundations that serve as the cornerstone of this study and offers a comprehensive overview of key concepts that guide the article. The section delves into established theory, critically examines the relevant literature, and highlights how the theoretical perspectives contribute to the understanding of the subject.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

The study was guided by social exchange theory, which sociologists developed in the 1960s from the original works of Homans (1958). Social exchange theory assumes that social interactions result in the exchange of goods, behaviours and services of mutual value to people in a community (Cook & Hahn, 2021). In this regard, when community members identify children from child-headed households, it means that vulnerable children are more likely to be safeguarded and ensured of access to social services. The identification process makes it easy for social workers to enrol the children on government social support interventions and, in the long run, this will improve the wellbeing of the larger community as well. The social exchange theory also recognises that social interactions are based on trust, where there is a connection between persons and flexibility within these social interactions (ibid.).

Social exchange theory addresses four central concepts in social interactions, the first of which is cost and rewards, whereby social exchanges are guided by the reciprocal exchange of benefits (ibid.). For example, in this study the whole community derives some direct and indirect benefits from the social services that are rendered to vulnerable children in child-headed households. The second concept is reciprocity, whereby the person giving the benefit

should also receive a benefit. In the context of this study, the community assists social workers by identifying child-headed families. The third concept is social penetration. In this case, as the relationship between the parties evolves, it becomes more meaningful as they continually exchange valuable resources. The last concept is equity, which occurs when individuals balance what they have put in versus the outcomes they receive – to avoid inequity as an outcome.

Social exchange theory was applied because it is a one of the most suitable tools for analysing human relationships and behaviour (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2025). Social exchange theory was used to examine how children who assume the role of household heads navigate their social interactions and decision-making processes to optimise their wellbeing and that of their siblings. Children in child-headed households often engage in different forms of exchange within their communities, as they seek resources, support and information that can aid in their survival and stability. They may assess the potential benefits of forming alliances with community members against the possible costs, such as loss of autonomy or obligations to reciprocate the assistance.

Female adolescents in child-headed households are particularly vulnerable to challenges like early pregnancy, alcohol abuse, dropping out of school and psychological issues (Lobi & Kheswa, 2017). These risks can be understood through the lens of social exchange theory, as adolescent girls might engage in risky behaviour to cope with or escape from their challenging circumstances, given that they may lack the ability to weigh the immediate perceived benefits against long-term costs (ibid.).

Furthermore, the absence of traditional figureheads, such as biological parents, leads to a restructuring of family dynamics in child-headed households. The eldest child often assumes multiple roles, which entails balancing caregiving responsibilities with their own developmental needs. This role shift requires them to engage in different forms of exchange, within the household and externally. In the former scenario, they negotiate the delegation of responsibilities among siblings, while in the latter they seek resources and support from the broader community. It is crucial to understand these dynamics through social exchange theory, because it provides insight into the strategies that vulnerable children employ to maintain their household functions and social relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach and a descriptive design. The qualitative approach was selected as it is suitable for dissecting the subject of community involvement in the identification of children from child-headed households, which is usually poorly understood. The study was conducted in the Eastern Cape province in South Africa, in a small town called Hogsback, which is located 40 kilometres from the town of Alice. Hogsback is deep within a rural area and it falls under the jurisdiction of the Amathole District Municipality (Pamla et al., 2024). The main activities in the town are tourism and farming (Pamla et al., 2024). Xhosa people are the main ethnic group in Hogsback.

The population of the study comprised two sets of people: namely the community members who had interacted with child-headed households, and the social workers who had previously worked with this category of vulnerable children. To select samples from the population

groups, convenience sampling and snowballing were used. The sample sizes for both population groups were predetermined by the researchers. The intention was to interview 20 community members and 8 social workers, but the Department of Social Development in Alice had only 5 social workers at the time of the study. Similarly, only 10 community members agreed to participate in the study, while the other 10 did not consent, as they were expecting to be paid. The participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis, and none were paid. However, they were provided with refreshments during the discussion and the interviews.

The research question that guided the study was: What is the role of community involvement in the identification of vulnerable child-headed households in Hogsback, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa? The aim of the study was: To explore and assess the role of community involvement in identifying vulnerable child-headed households. Three objectives guided the stud, namely: to examine the extent and nature of community participation in identifying child-headed households; to analyse the challenges and limitations faced by communities in identifying and assisting these households; and to recommend ways to strengthen community involvement in the identification and protection of child-headed households.

Data were collected using one focus group discussion with 10 community members including a community chief, a crèche teacher, a primary school teacher, friends, neighbours, a headman, a pastor and a housewife. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 5 social workers. A research assistant, who is fluent in reading and writing isiXhosa, conducted the focus group discussion, which lasted for 90 minutes. The researchers monitored the flow of the focus group discussion, which was conducted at the Hogsback Community Hall. The research assistant transcribed the spoken language from audio into written English. The researchers conducted the interviews with the social worker participants at the Department of Social Development in Alice. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted in English. The researchers used an audio recorder to record all the interviews and the focus group discussion. All the participants gave their consent to be recorded. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct both the focus group discussion and the individual interviews. The interview questions were divided into two sections, with the first seeking to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample, which included level of education and number of years as a social worker. The second section sought responses on the involvement of community members in identifying child-headed households.

The researchers analysed the data, while an independent co-coder helped to ensure and enhance the reliability of the findings. Both the researchers and the co-coder reached similar conclusions, based on the data analysis. The data analysis was conducted in two phases, where the first analysed the two data sets (from the community members and from the social workers) separately. The researchers used the six steps of thematic analysis to analyse the data (Terry et al., 2017).

The first step was to become fully familiar with the data through transcribing the participants' responses, followed by reading through the transcripts and examining the quotations. The second step involved developing the initial codes through selecting key words from the transcripts. These words were selected, as they recurred and formed a particular pattern. The third step entailed generating themes in the form of phrases that represented some parts of the

data whose meanings were aligned to the research objective. The fourth step consisted of reviewing the initial themes that were developed in the third step. In this case, the researchers ensured that the data were organised into themes. In step five the aim was to define the themes generated by assigning phrases and sentences to the themes generated. The purpose of the last step is to present the findings in a narrative format.

After separately analysing the two data sets, the next phase focused on triangulating the findings. In this regard, the data sources were triangulated to enhance the credibility of the findings of the study, as well as deepen the understanding of a particular phenomenon. The triangulation of data sources is used when the same research objective is applied to different sources (Santos et al., 2020). To triangulate the study findings, comparative analysis was conducted to compare the responses of the community members with those of the social workers. The findings of the comparative analysis were then presented in narrative format.

Ethics statement

The study received ethical approval from the University of Fort Hare University Ethics Review Committee (UREC) at the Govan Mbeki Research and Development Centre. Approval to conduct the study was also received from the Department of Social Development in Alice, Eastern Cape. The clearance certificate number is REC-270710-028-RA Level 01 and the certificate reference number is TAN151SMABO1. The participants also gave their individual written consent to participate in the study, after they had been informed of the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participating, the measures to ensure confidentiality and the contact details of the researchers. The community members signed consent forms at Hogsback Community Hall and social workers signed theirs at the Department of Social Development boardroom, in Alice.

Measures to ensure trustworthiness of the study findings

The researchers employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings. The framework uses four criteria namely: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

In this study, the researchers used data sources triangulation and asked the participants to check if the transcribed data reflected their responses. Furthermore, the researchers used a co-coder to ensure the minimum of bias during the data analysis stage. These three steps guaranteed the credibility of the findings of the study.

To ensure the confirmability of the study findings, the researchers used comparative analysis as part of the data source triangulation, which enabled the validation of the findings from the two data sets namely: the community members and the social workers. Confirmability was further guaranteed by providing a full description of the study procedures. To ensure dependability, the researchers also provided a detailed description of the research methods. Finally, to ascertain the transferability of the study findings, the researchers provided a description of the study setting and the characteristics of the participants.

In qualitative studies, the objectivity of study findings is enhanced by the researchers` reflexivity. In this regard, the researchers ought to reflect on their roles throughout the data

collection and analysis processes. Reflexivity helps to safeguard against the encroachment of bias from the researchers' own work roles or previous experiences. In the light of this, the researchers reflected on their roles as student social workers throughout the data collection and analysis.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This section presents the findings of the study. The first sub-section outlines the demographic information of the participants, thereby providing an overview of the key characteristics of the study participants. This is followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged from the study. The sample of community members consisted of 10 participants. About the highest level of education attained, 4 of the participants had matric and 6 had tertiary qualifications. Education level was relevant because it provided an important demographic variable that shaped participants' understanding of the research questions and its interpretation. Researcher noted that participants with higher level of education approached the questions more conceptually, whereas those with lower level of education responded more personally. This context helped to interpret why participants differed in their perceptions, priorities, or judgements in relation to the research question. Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the sampled community members.

Table 1: Sample characteristics of the community member participants

Pseudonyms	Level of education
CM 1	Matric
CM 2	Matric
CM 3	Matric
CM 4	Tertiary qualification (Diploma in Agriculture)
CM 5	Tertiary qualification (bachelor's degree in nursing)
CM 6	Tertiary qualification (certificate in Early Childhood Education)
CM 7	Tertiary qualification (Diploma in Project Management)
CM 8	Tertiary qualification (bachelor's degree in nursing)
CM 9	Tertiary qualification (bachelor's degree in education)
CM 10	Matric

Characteristics of the social worker participants

All the five social workers who participated in the study had completed a Bachelor of Social Work degree, and their work experience ranged from 1 to 5 years. The educational backgrounds and professional experience of the social workers offered contextually grounded insights, thereby reinforcing the content validity of the study. It helped to establish the appropriateness of the sample for the study's aims, support methodological transparency, and enable readers to assess the potential transferability of the findings to similar professional contexts. Table 2 shows the sample characteristics of this group of participants.

Table 2: *Sample characteristics of the social worker participants*

Pseudonyms	Years of experience
SWK 1	5
SWK 2	3
SWK 3	1
SWK 4	2
SWK 5	2

Emerging themes

There are two main themes that emerged from the interviews with the social workers and focus group discussion with the community members. The first theme, which emanated from the discussion with the community members, was *awareness, observations and reporting*. The second main theme, which emanated from the social workers, was *community leaders play a role in identifying children from child-headed households*, while the sub-themes that emerged from it were: *chiefs and headmen are instrumental in identifying vulnerable children in their communities*, and *needy children are identified through public service interventions***.** All the participants were asked the same research questions, from which the two main themes and sub-themes emerged. Regardless of the specific themes that came from the community members' and social workers' responses, the participants shared their experiences spontaneously in arriving at both themes and sub-themes.

Theme 1: Community members are aware of, and capable of making observations and reports on children in need

The first theme focused on the participants' shared experiences of awareness, observations and reporting on children in need. The participants indicated that the community members were generally aware of the presence of vulnerable children in child-headed households in their community and would report their plight to the relevant authorities or offer them support. The theme is summarised by participant CM 9, as shown in the quotation below:

> *Anyone who wants to offer help to child-headed household should consult the community members because they have enough information on what is happening in the community, which household are headed by children.* (CM 9)

Sometimes, community members made reports based on observing children in difficult circumstances. The participants highlighted that they observed the types of houses where children in child-headed households lived in. The appearance of such houses was usually below the standard of other houses in the neighbourhood, which was indicative of lack of adult supervision. In addition, the participants reported that they could identify vulnerable children from child-headed households by their sad demeanour and the state of the clothes that they wore.

> *By just walking around the community one can tell that this household is headed by minors due to the physical appearance and the structures are not up to standard as compared to*

other surrounding. The clothes too of the children reveal that the children do not have an adult who look after them. (CM 10)

As stated by CM6 below, the participants also shared that they were made aware of the presence of vulnerable children in child-headed households during the funerals of their guardians.

When an elder dies in the community, the leaders will say out to the public at the funeral that the family left needs community support. (CM 6)

The social worker participants corroborated that community members were aware of the plight of needy children from child-headed households and that they know the children through community member's identification. In the following quotes, two social workers shared their views on this subtheme:

Community members, neighbours and friends provide various [forms of] assistance to the household. For instance, child-headed household are emotionally vulnerable, neighbours provided emotional support to these children and others play the parental figure to the children. (SWK 1)

For instance, on engagement, we engage child-headed household and community members [in] meetings to promote a good working relationship with them, when we want to collect child-headed household records too. (SWK 3)

As stated by SWK 2 in the comment below, the social workers also shared that some community members had volunteered to observe the children and that they would report with regard to the needs of these minors:

More so, they are community members who have volunteered to look after the children and report to the department if there is urgent solution to the children. (SWK 2)

Based on the comments cited above, it was concluded that the community members were aware of the presence and plight of vulnerable children in their area, and they would observe the children and make reports to the social workers. The integration of the social exchange theory into this theme enhanced the effectiveness of the strategies that were used in identifying and supporting children in need. Social exchange theory, which posits that human relationships are formed through a system of costs and rewards, can be applied to encourage community members to be more aware, observant and proactive in reporting children at risk (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2017). This can be enhanced by raising awareness of the reciprocal benefit. By reporting on children in need, members of the community would be contributing to a system where collective safety and wellbeing are prioritised. Social exchange theory emphasises the mutual benefits of a safer community (Bouchrika, 2025). It also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and encourages participation (ibid.). A reward-based incentive becomes an important aspect as it provides recognition and social appreciation, and motivates community members to be vigilant (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Such incentives could include public acknowledgment, certificates, or small non-monetary rewards that reinforce positive behaviour.

Theme 2: Community leaders play a role in identifying child-headed households

Among the community member participants were people in leadership positions, who were instrumental in identifying vulnerable children from child-headed households. These leaders included a chief, a headman and public servants (teachers). The second theme was supported by two subthemes, the first of which was *chiefs and headmen are instrumental in identifying vulnerable children in their communities*. The second subtheme was *needy children* are *identified through public service interventions*. Public service interventions include programmes that are intended to provide support towards improving the wellbeing and livelihoods of vulnerable children in schools and communities.

Subtheme 2.1: Chiefs and headmen are instrumental in identifying vulnerable children in their communities.

The first subtheme that supported the theme is *chiefs and headmen are instrumental in identifying vulnerable children in their communities*. The study found that traditional leaders such as headmen and chiefs played a key role in listing the children and communicating their vulnerability to social services. The role of traditional leaders also included informing the community to identify children from child-headed households. The quote below buttresses subtheme 2.1:

> *Last year there was a private company that came to help the children, and they were given the list by the headman and when they came back not all the children's names were there and the children were not helped as the resources were just enough for the children's names who were on the list.* (CM 8)

The social workers also acknowledged the role played by traditional leaders in identifying children from child-headed households. In the comment below, SWK 2 observed that:

> *We did not know that the community does have such households that need urgent support. However, when we were having a community meeting that's when the chief announced that some children are staying alone without an adult, and it was so sad when we visited the children.* (SWK 2)

It is noteworthy that the involvement of the community traditional leaders was framed on the basis of the social penetration concept, as outlined in the social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The theory posits that community involvement helps social workers to gain more valuable information and improve the quality of their work. Participant SWK 1 acknowledged that social workers can make their own observations in the community; however, they relied on traditional leaders to identify children from child-headed households that would be in need of social support.

> *Normally we do not go around the communities, but we ask community headman/chief to give us their records regarding household headed by children. It is very convenient since it does not waste time going door to door observing.* (SWK 1)

Social workers faced some impediments that deter them from going into communities to identify children in child-headed households. This was confirmed by Participant SWK 9, who

highlighted the remoteness of Hogsback, a situation that was worsened by the shortage of vehicles at the Department of Social Development. As previously stated, Hogsback is about 40 kilometres from Alice, where the social workers are based.

> *For instance, I do not have company car to use when going to Hogsback area, which makes things worse as sometimes I will not be able to effectively visit those households on time, and those that stay far away from main roads visiting them is very difficult. The area of operation is big for only one person [and] as such the government should employ more social workers in Hogsback area.* (SWK 4)

In summary, the comments above indicate the role played by traditional leaders in identifying children from child-headed households. Traditional leaders were responsible for keeping a register of children in need, which they could share with social workers or other civil society organisations that could assist the children.

Subtheme 2.2: Needy children are identified through public service interventions

The second subtheme was that *needy children are identified through public service interventions*, by social workers, health workers, the police or educators in schools. According to the participants, social workers intervened through community groups, where they educate community members on how to report vulnerable children from child-headed households. This is indicated in the quote below:

> *We did not have enough information regarding the children, and we did not understand the meaning of children-heading household but after we attended a group discussion which was organised by the social worker, the group was only for child-headed household exchanging life experience that's when we understood this type of household and how they need urgent help from the community.* (CM 2)

The social worker participants also acknowledged their reliance on community education programmes, which enlightened community members on how to submit reports. As shown in the following comment, SWK 3 stated that this strategy was mostly used in remote villages:

> *They are some villages that are hard to reach and what we normally do is we educate community members on ways to handle these household and ways of dealing with problems they face without divulging their privacy and confidentiality. It has resulted in positive outcome towards child-headed household.* (SWK 3)

Children from child-headed households may resort to crime for sustenance. Therefore, one other strategy that is used to identify them is through crime reports made to the police or the traditional leader. This is encapsulated in the following comment:

> *Community will report to the chief or village headman and an urgent meeting will be carried out especially in cases of rape, burglary and theft. The perpetrators will be prosecuted traditionally, and the police will be informed for further investigation of the criminal acts towards the children and [the actions of] the perpetrator.* (SWK 4)

Theme Two highlighted the importance of public service officers, social workers and traditional leaders in identifying child-headed households. Regardless of limited resources and

interventions, community leaders utilised local resources to support child-headed households until they could get the required support from social workers or civil society organisations.

Social exchange theory offers a framework to understand how reciprocal relationships can enhance the identification of child-headed households and the subsequent implementation of the relevant support. Social exchange theory posits that human interactions are guided by cost-benefit analyses, where individuals seek to maximise rewards while minimising costs in social relationships (Stafford & Kuiper, 2021). The central components of the theory are: reciprocity, trust and mutual benefit (ibid.). As influential figures, community leaders play a pivotal role in facilitating these exchanges by fostering trust, information sharing and social cohesion (Stafford, 2017). The involvement of community leaders in identifying vulnerable child-headed households builds trust and enhances the flow of information. Community leaders often act as mediators between families and social service organisations. By cultivating trust within their communities, they can encourage families to disclose information about vulnerable households without fear of stigma or discrimination. The reciprocity and volunteerism that were evident among the community leaders emphasises that people can engage in exchanges, when they perceive the potential for mutual benefit. Community leaders can promote volunteerism and reciprocal support within the community by framing assistance to child-headed households as both a moral responsibility and a way of strengthening communal bonds.

DISCUSSION

The study sought to describe community involvement in identifying vulnerable children from child-headed households in the Hogsback area in Eastern Cape. Brooks-Gunn (2019) explains that the identification of such children depends on the status of the community member who has identified the vulnerability.

The study found that community members, traditional leaders and government employees were instrumental in identifying the vulnerable children from child-headed households. However, the status of the identifier would be the key determinant of the nature of the resultant support that would be provided to the children (ibid.). For example, the study found that, in some cases, community members would identify vulnerable children and report to the traditional leaders who would, in turn, keep a register of the vulnerable children in child-headed households. However, one community member noted that, in some cases, the register was not exhaustive, so some children who would have been in need of support were left out. This confirms the finding by Hall and Sambu (2019), which noted the prevalence of underreporting of the numbers of children from child-headed households. Based on this finding, there is a need to create awareness and educate traditional leaders to improve record management of children from child-headed households, in order to promote accurate record keeping and hence enabling the deployment of suitable support.

Commendably, in the Hogsback area, the inadequacies associated with using registers developed by traditional leaders could be supplemented by allowing social workers to facilitate the identification process through group education and observations. The social worker participants confirmed that the Hogsback community had embraced such educational programmes and this practice aligns with the findings in a global study conducted by Shawar

and Shiffman (2023), which found that social workers played a pivotal role in identifying vulnerable children.

Community member involvement, coupled with social worker-facilitated group work, also made it relatively easy to identify vulnerable children in areas that were not easily accessible. One of the social worker participants shared an experience of using group work to facilitate the identification of children in areas that were hard to reach because they were far from the main roads. Such initiatives by the social workers illustrate ingenuity in leveraging community involvement.

In addition, the study found that children from child-headed households could be identified when they were reported to the police for burglary or theft. However, this is concerning and undesirable, as it demonstrates how vulnerable children can be subjected to abuse (Palmer et al., 2023). Moreover, this mode of identification further illustrates the "invisible" nature of vulnerability, which intersects with other issues, as described by Nevard et al. (2021). Consequently, this calls for more rigorous measures to engage community members in identifying and reporting children from child-headed households, as they are prone to perpetrating crimes or falling victim to criminals.

Active community involvement plays a crucial role in identifying child-headed households (Diago, 2023). It also reduces the time taken by social workers to locate and assist these households more efficiently (Kurebwa & Kurebwa, 2014). Furthermore, it enhances social support by providing immediate care and attention, thereby bridging any possible gaps before formal assistance arrives (Diago, 2023). This also minimises pressure on social workers, thereby enabling them to render good-quality interventions to child-headed households. Diago (2020) further postulates that the effectiveness of community involvement is determined by the availability of resources and services, such as the provision of essentials such as food, education and emotional support, which reduce the impact of the stressful events that are encountered by children from child-headed households. Whilst waiting for formal services, the community can provide temporary support to mitigate the vulnerability of the children. Lastly, training community members to recognise signs of vulnerability in children can effectively promote early intervention in child-headed households.

Although the researchers took great care to ensure the objectivity of the findings, the study was limited by lack of diversity in the sample of community members, because it did not include any police officers, whose insights could have provided different perspectives for the study. For future research endeavours, the researchers suggest the inclusion of police officers, as they play an important role in dealing with many issues pertaining to child-headed households. For instance, all forms of child abuse are reported to police for further inquiry at the same time working with social workers and community members in providing sustainable services for child-headed households.

RECOMMENDATION FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The recommendations drawn from this study are based on its findings, which highlight the critical gaps in service delivery to child-headed households in the Hogsback community, in the Eastern Cape province. The study revealed that community involvement was instrumental in

identifying child-headed households, thus, underscoring the shortcomings of both child welfare organisations and the Department of Social Development in fulfilling their obligations to identify, protect and secure resources for this vulnerable group.

The recommendations based on the theme *community members are aware of, observe and make reports on children in need* are outlined below.

The Hogsback community members know that child-headed households exist in their communities, and they submitted reports to request support. These reports were made to traditional leaders, who would then pass them on to social workers, who would then facilitate the provision of resources, opportunities and interventions to mitigate the challenges faced by children in child-headed households.

Based on the findings on this theme the following recommendations are made to enhance social work practice:

- Social workers should conduct awareness campaigns and community workshops to educate community members about the signs of neglect/abuse in children;
- Posters, flyers and social media can be used to spread awareness;
- Partnerships should be established with schools, churches and local organisations to reach isolated communities like Hogsback;
- Neighbourhood watch groups can also be encouraged to look out for children's welfare, while teachers, shopkeepers, and local leaders can be trained as child protection advocates;
- Community members need to be educated on how to use hotlines to report cases related to child-headed families to social services and police departments;
- Reporting options should also be anonymous in order to encourage more community members to speak up and work with authorities, thereby ensuring quick responses and protection for children at risk.

Recommendation based on the theme *community leaders play a role in identifying child-headed households*.

Community leaders like chiefs and headmen are obligated to identify child-headed households when they receive alerts from community members. Public service interventions, such as some dedicated programmes, are used to identify children from child-headed households. Based on the findings under this theme, the following recommendations for social work practice were made:

- Identification and early intervention to conduct community mapping – in this case, community leaders should actively survey and map out households, in order to identify child-headed families;
- Advocacy and awareness can be done through public awareness campaigns to educate the community on the challenges faced by child-headed households. This breaks the stigma as it encourages neighbours and extended families to support child-headed households instead of ostracising them.

Based on the findings of the study, *the Department of Social Development can adopt the following recommendations when addressing the issue of lack of social workers in the rural areas:*

- *Incentivise rural deployment by*
  i) Providing financial incentives such as rural allowances, housing subsidies, and student loan repayments for social workers willing to work in remote areas;
  ii) Offering career growth opportunities, including promotions and scholarships for further studies, to those serving in rural communities;
- *Increase training and recruitment efforts* – this can be done by partnering with universities to offer scholarships and bursaries specifically for students from rural areas who commit to returning to work in their communities;
- *Establish satellite training centres in rural areas* – this makes education more accessible to aspiring social workers;
- *Improve working conditions and support systems* – this ensures that rural social workers have adequate resources, including transportation, technology and office space to perform their duties effectively;
- *Implement mentorship programmes* – this enables rural social workers to connect with experienced professionals for guidance and support;
- *Strengthen community-based support structures* – this entails training and employing community-based social support workers or volunteers who can assist with basic social services under the supervision of qualified social workers;
- *Empower traditional leaders and community organisations* to support social work interventions in areas where professional services are scarce;
- *Enhance technology and remote support* – utilise tele-social work services where professionals in urban areas provide virtual counselling and support to rural clients and on-the-ground workers;
- *Invest in mobile outreach programmes* – in this case teams of social workers visit rural communities on rotational bases.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of community leaders and members in identifying and supporting child-headed households is crucial in ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable children. Community leaders serve as key figures in recognising and addressing the needs of these households by providing guidance and connecting them to essential resources. Meanwhile, active community involvement fosters a culture of vigilance and care, where members observe, report and respond to children in distress. By working together, both leaders and community members can create a supportive environment that enhances protection, stability and opportunities for children in need.

Social workers should continue to foster community involvement in identifying children from child-headed households and educate key people in the community, such as traditional leaders, on keeping accurate records of vulnerable children in child-headed households. Whilst community involvement is beneficial, it requires robust collaboration between local resources

and formal child welfare systems. Limited resources can hinder the community from having a sustainable impact.

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