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**FAMILY DIVERSITY AND EMERGING TRENDS IN FAMILY STRUCTURE
IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF KENYA**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of Goethe-Institut Kenya regional family affairs project investigating the different types and structures of families on the African continent. The purpose of this study was to examine the diverse and evolving family structures and composition in contemporary Kenya. In terms of methodology, the convenience sampling method was used to select five household heads representing diverse family forms. Data were gathered by means of open-ended interviews conducted with each study participant. The interviews were then transcribed and coded qualitatively, then clustered and analysed thematically. Due to methodological limitations, the sampling was not representative of the Kenyan population and therefore, generalizations of results can only be deduced with caution. Contemporary family structures range from the diminishing extended family system comprised of multi-generational families to the dual-parent nuclear families living in a single-residence, the hybrid matri-centric nuclear family living in dual-residence, separated and divorced family, the one-parent family, the street family, the refugee-family and the chosen family which is also known as the intentional family system. It was concluded that Kenyan family structures are diverse and have continued to evolve from the traditional extended family system from time immemorial to include other family structures and composition in the third millennium.

Keywords: *Family Structure, Extended Family, Nuclear Family, One-Parent Family, Separated and Divorced family, Street Family, Refugee Family, Chosen Family.*

INTRODUCTION

The institution of the family is universal, but there is no universal definition of the concept of family among social scientists (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/>). There is a diversity of the meaning and composition of the institution of family across different cultures. According to the United Nations, 1994 (<https://www.un.org/>), families take up diverse forms and functions from one country to another, and within each national society. These trends express the diversity of individual preferences and societal conditions. The United Nations recognizes the central role of the family as the smallest democracy in society and proclaimed 1994 as the International Year of the Family through the United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/82 of 9 December 1989. Consequently, the International Year of the Family which is marked on the 15th May of each year encompasses and addresses the needs of all families. This paper was guided by the inclusive definition of family by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) which states that “*the family is each individual’s interpretation of who their kin are*” as demonstrated by the diversity of family forms and patterns in this study. From the sample that participated in this research, family composition consisted of diverse individuals related to the household head either by blood, marriage, adoption or foster care, as well as non-relatives such as international refugees, homeless persons living together on the street, cohabiting intimate partners and several individuals who have chosen to share a common residence constituted heterogeneous family structures in Kenya.

The traditional family structures in Sub-Sahara Africa were founded predominantly on the polygynous marriage system composed of one man with multiple wives and as many children as nature would permit (Wilson & Ngige, 2006). Due to the interplay of complex factors such as industrialization, urbanization, globalization, local and international migration,

westernization, information communication technology, mass media, modern education and religious influences, the indigenous African extended family system evolved over time to a predominantly monogamous marriage of one man, one woman and their children that form the nuclear family system. According to Ngige (2003), family nucleation has diminished the extended family network that provided socio-economic support to the vulnerable members of society in Africa such as orphans and vulnerable children, the elderly and persons living with disability or chronic illness. There is a diversity of non-traditional family structures in form of the one-parent family, cohabiting family, blended family, adolescent family, homeless family, displaced, migrant and refugee family, adoptive family, child-free family, consensual family and the single-person family patterns are emerging trends. In the third millennium, the rate of polygynous family systems in Kenya began to decline and a diversity of other family structures have evolved over time. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and ICF Macro (2014), Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 13.7% of married women were in a polygynous marriage and extended family structure compared to 8.7% of their male counterparts, while 86.3% of married women were in a monogamous marriage and nuclear family structure compared to 91.3% of their male counterparts. The purpose of this study was to describe the diversity and evolving types of family structure in contemporary Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a case study research design in order to describe family structure in contemporary Kenya. The convenience sampling method was used to select five household heads in Nairobi, Kenya representing diverse family structures and composition. Data were gathered by means of open-ended interviews conducted with each respondent. The interviews were then transcribed and coded qualitatively, the codes were then clustered and analysed thematically using the qualitative approach by Bryant and Charmaz (2019). Due to

methodological limitations, the sampling was not representative of the Kenyan population and therefore, generalizations of results can only be deduced with caution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results revealed that there were five different types of family structures ranging from the dual-parent, nuclear family living in dual-residences the one-parent family following legal separation and divorce, the street-family, the refugee-family and the chosen-family which is also known as the family-of-choice or intentional family system. The characteristics of each of these family structures are described first and then analysed and discussed in the section that follows.

1. The Dual-Parent, Nuclear Family Structure

Description of Case Study 1

Phillip is a 44 year old husband of one wife and the father of four children and a professed Christian by religious affiliation. He is an entrepreneur who has held different jobs but he currently works as a motorcycle taxi operator which is popularly known as *bodaboda* in Nairobi, Kenya. He was born in a family of four and when his mother died, the siblings were separated with two of his sisters relocating to live with an aunt and one sister and himself relocating to live with his grandmother who had suffered a disability after a road traffic accident. In his early life, Phillip's family may be described as an extended family. He described his early life as difficult and he decided to migrate to the capital city, Nairobi in 1997 in search of a better life. He met his wife in Nairobi and cohabited with her for five years and they had one child. Later on, he formalized his marriage in 2001 and had three more children. The couple lived together for five years as a nuclear family in the city and then the wife and children relocated to their rural home in Kakamega county approximately 400 kilometers away from Nairobi in 2006. The reason for his wife's relocation to the rural

areas was to supervise the construction of a permanent home in the ancestral land, and in preparation for the retirement of Phillip and the eventual urban-rural migration in old age and burial in his permanent homeland. Phillip visits his family every fortnight and has maintained his marriage and family life in this way for the last 14 years. He sends monthly financial support for his wife and children. He maintains frequent communication with his family through telephone calls and visits.

Discussion of the Dual-Parent, Nuclear Family Structure

Phillip's family may be described as a *matri-centric nuclear family structure*, characterized by a working husband living in an urban setting who commutes regularly to visit his wife and children who live in a separate residence in a rural setting far away from the husband's urban residence by mutual agreement. This trend has given rise to the *commuting husband syndrome* consisting of a married man who migrates to the urban areas in search of economic opportunities, but who also wants to establish a stable nuclear family with ties to the extended family in his permanent rural residence. Phillip maintains that he has strong ties with his nuclear family despite the physical distance between them through the use of information communication technology available in Kenya. Almost every household has a mobile telephone which is used for a variety of communication such as voice messaging, short message service (SMS), WhatsApp messages, and mobile money transfer such as MPESA or AIRTEL Money among others. Phillip sends monthly remittances to support his wife and children in their rural home and has to constantly balance between earning a livelihood and being away from his family for long durations due to work obligations. Phillip's nuclear family structure demonstrates the duality of the paternal labour force in the urban areas and a dependent maternal-headed family living in the rural areas.

This family structure is not unique to Phillip: it is a common phenomenon throughout the African continent. This is an example of the mobility of young men who migrate to urban areas in search of better livelihoods and when they establish their own nuclear families in the urban areas, social and cultural factors force their wives and children to e-migrate back to the rural areas which is considered as the permanent family residence. This is also common with military families where servicemen and women are sent on a mission abroad and are therefore separated from their families for a period of time. According to the 2009 Kenya population and housing census, the nuclear family is the most typical family structure accounting for 45.9 percent of all family forms in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2012b).

2. The Separated and Divorced Family Structure

Description of Case Study 2

Zainabu is a 39 year old year mother of three school- going children aged between 8 and 14 years. She was brought up in a small industrial town in an extended family system. She described her family of origin as a conglomeration of multi-generational homesteads comprising of her grandparents, parents, children, aunties, uncles and cousins. She visits her relatives regularly and they hold extended family gatherings for bonding and keeping ties with new family members through marriage and births. She described her early life as gratifying and she decided to migrate to the capital city, Nairobi in 1999 for her college education. She is a professed Muslim and started working as a hotelier in 1999 and later started her own small business which has faced challenges during the Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic, and is therefore currently unemployed and a fulltime homemaker in Nairobi, Kenya. She cohabited with her male partner for seven years before formalizing their marriage which lasted for six years. Her husband professes the Christian faith and they enjoyed their interreligious marriage while it lasted for six years. The couple belongs to the

same ethnic community and share similar cultural values. However in 2014 she and her spouse separated due to domestic violence, alcoholism and negligence of the family by her husband. This is her sixth year of raising her children as a single parent after seeking a divorce from her partner of 13 years. She has been battling in court to retain the custody of her children and is presently waiting for the court determination of the divorce proceedings. She has lived with her family in rented housing in urban areas and has moved house at least six times due to the inability to pay rent and twice she shared a residence with her cousin. During difficult times, she receives support from her mother and other close relatives to meet basic needs for her family.

Discussion of Separated and Divorced Family Structure

Zainabu's family may be described as a *one-parent family structure*, characterized by either a separated or divorced couple with the children living with a *resident parent* and having visitation rights with the *non-resident parent*. A close examination of Zainabu's family history demonstrates the diversity and evolution of family structure throughout an individual's life course. As a young girl, Zainabu was raised in a *multi-generational extended family system* as her family of origin. As a young woman, she experienced multiple facets in the establishment of her family of procreation by first *cohabiting* with her male partner for seven years, then she entered in to a *monogamous union* with her husband for six years, gave birth to three children over a period of six years as a *dual-parent nuclear family*, and finally ended up as a *one-parent (matri-centric) nuclear family* after *separation* with her husband pending dissolution of marriage through *divorce*.

A couple that goes through legal separation and eventually divorce demonstrates the duality of the non-permanent nature of the marriage institution on the one hand, and the permanent

nature of the family institution on the other. This is consistent with the Constitution of Kenya 2010, Article 45 (3) which states that “parties to a marriage are entitled to equal rights at the time of the marriage, during the marriage and at the time of dissolution of the marriage.” (Republic of Kenya, 2010, pp. 38) This implies that a husband and wife may be divorced as a married couple, but as far as responsibility for their children is concerned, both parents are responsible even after the divorce has been granted. This is supported by the Constitution of Kenya, Article 53 (1e), which states that “every child has the right to parental care and protection, which includes equal responsibility of the mother and father to provide for the child, whether the parents are married to each other or not,” (Republic of Kenya, 2010, pp. 38). The one-parent nuclear family structure is not unique to Zainabu’s family: it is a common phenomenon in Kenya. As demonstrated in the 2009 Kenya population and housing census, the one-parent family comprising of divorced and separated couples accounted for 2.97 percent of all family forms in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2012b).

3. The Chosen Family Structure (LGBTIQ community)

Description of Case Study 3

Arya is a transgender woman in her mid-30s and is the household-head of a *family of choice* of 6 queer persons including, one transgender man, one transgender woman, two lesbians, a gender non-conforming individual and a cisgender heterosexual woman. The six persons met each other in LGBTIQ protest parades in Nairobi, Kenya in 2018 and discovered that some of the members lived in the same neighborhood. They discussed the idea of a shared living arrangement for a while, but the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated their plans of co-residence. They have lived together for approximately 6 months and created an intentional family as a matter of choice and by mutual agreement. The members aged between 24-29 years refer to each other as brothers and sisters and consider Arya, a transgender female as their “mother”

and she refers to them as her children. She is also recognized as the household head in this chosen family whose members are all working adults sharing a common residence. Two of the most memorable events reported by Arya were the recognition by her children as their “mother” on the International Mothers’ Day and the introduction of the two lesbian-daughters to their family of origin as same-sex intimate partners.

Discussion of the Chosen Family Structure

The *chosen family* is one of the most marginalized and excluded family structures from mainstream society in Africa in general and in Kenya in particular. This family structure comprises of lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) individuals or groups of individuals. Arya’s LGBTIQ family has been a victim of human rights violations based on the sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual characteristics of the family members. They reported experiencing stigma and discrimination after self-disclosure as members of the LGBTIQ community by displaying their identifiers such as the rainbow flag and stickers at their residence. Some of the discrimination they experienced included forced eviction from an apartment, denial of access to rental housing, in Nairobi and hostility by some of the parents towards members of her queer family. Studies have established that in many African countries, homosexuality is classified as sexual offences and there are strict laws against same-sex relationships (The Law Library of Congress, 2014). In Kenya, cultural and religious ideologies have shaped the institution of marriage and of the family throughout history. These ideologies are consistent with the Constitution of Kenya (2010), Article 45 (2) which states that “every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex, based on the free consent of the parties,” (Republic of Kenya, 2010: pp. 33). This concurs with the Laws of Kenya, CAP. 63, in which homosexuality and gay marriages are considered as criminal offences (Republic of Kenya, 2012a).

However, there have been recent milestones towards the protection of LGBTIQ communities globally. On the global scene, the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder on 17th May 1990. According to the *IDAHO Committee* (2013), the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) was established on 17th May 2004 and it is celebrated on May 17th of each year (<https://www.dayagainsthomophobia.org>). This day is marked to raise awareness of human rights violations, discrimination and repression of LGBTIQ communities globally (<https://www.un.org>). At the regional level, Kenya has taken the lead in Africa by amending the Kenyan law to have a third gender, namely intersex recognised alongside the typical male and female sexes. According to the 2019 Kenya population and housing census, there were 1,524 intersex persons documented in Kenya (Republic of Kenya, 2020). This is a notable milestone towards recognising intersex persons in official documents that require identification by sex. These include birth certificates, examination certificates, the national identity cards and passports in Kenya. To the same extent that society has undergone social transformation from the traditional African ideology of marriage and of the family institution, so will the diversity of family structure and composition evolve as it has been demonstrated by the LGBTIQ community in Kenya.

4. The Street Family Structure

Description of Case Study 4

Mary is 23 years of age and a single mother of a two months' old daughter living on the streets of Nairobi, Kenya. She was born of a single mother with five siblings comprised of one brother and four sisters in Nakuru town. Mary moved to Nairobi in March 2020 in search of a better livelihood due to poverty in her home. At the time of leaving her home town, Mary was five months' pregnant with her first child who was born in Nairobi under very difficult

circumstances. At the time of the interview (September 2020), Mary considered her fellow street persons as her family. She described the older female street person as her mother and the younger members of the street family as her siblings. She begs for support from well-wishers on the street in order to feed herself and raise her daughter. She reported that the extended street family, often support each other during the most difficult situations such as when one is facing a health crisis or starvation by pooling their resources together.

Discussion of the Street Family Structure

Homeless people are a common phenomenon all over the world. Street families are composed of homeless persons who are deprived of their human dignity across all ages from new born babies to the elderly population. According to the 2019 Kenya population and housing census, there were 20,095 homeless persons in Kenya comprised of 88.3 percent males and 11.7 percent females (Republic of Kenya, 2020). The census data established that homeless persons are found in both urban and rural areas accounting for 72.6 percent and 27.4 percent respectively. The street families are characterized by extreme poverty, lack of basic needs such as food, clean water and sanitation, basic health care, physical, sexual and gender based violence as well as lack of decent housing and dignified means of earning a livelihood (Ngige, Ondigi & Wilson, 2008, Njue, Rombo & Ngige, 2007). Street families often collect leftover food from garbage dumpsites, use contaminated water from filthy rivers where industrial effluents are spewed, and inhale polluted air from heavy traffic flows in the urban areas on daily basis. The homeless sleep on the street sidewalks and endure the ravages of nature by day with the scorching sun and cold temperatures by night. The street girls and women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence by fellow street persons and others, thereby exposing them to sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS. They lack basic health care because they cannot afford to pay monthly insurance

premium of Kenya Shillings 500 (equivalent of USD 5.00) to the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF). However, there has been concerted effort by the public, private and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to formulate interventions towards rehabilitation and reintegration of street families back in to the community. In 2003, the Government of Kenya established a Street Family Rehabilitation Trust Fund whose vision is “a country free of street families” and whose mission is to coordinate and develop capacity, mobilize resources to facilitate and monitor rehabilitative, re-integrative and preventive programmes for street families (<https://www.socialprotection.go.ke/>). Mary’s family is an example of the many homeless persons who have endured destitution and survived on the urban streets across Kenya as they await rehabilitation and re-integration back in to the community.

5. The Refugee Family Structure

Description of Case Study 5

Lucy is a South Sudanese refugee who is 47 years of age, a widow and a foster-mother of 5 refugee children, four from South Sudan and one from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Lucy is self-employed in the clothing industry, stitching women’s and children’s clothing and upholstery. One of the children has completed college and four are in school. We traced Lucy’s family of origin and established that she was born in a family of six and her father died when she was only two years of age. She was raised by her widowed mother and grandparents in an extended family setting. Lucy married her late husband at the age of 20 years in 1993 and one year later she and her husband were forced to flee to Nairobi, Kenya as refugees from Sudan due to the long civil war that had ravaged her homeland for over 50 years. Her marriage lasted for 13 years until her husband died in 2006 and the couple was childless during their marriage. After her husband’s death, Lucy decided to establish her own family by sharing her life with five foster refugee children from South Sudan and the

Democratic Republic of Congo. Lucy visited her relatives in South Sudan for a family reunion after 26 years of living in Nairobi, but communicates regularly with her family of origin by telephone.

Discussion of the Refugee Family Structure

South Sudan has suffered the ravages of political instability and civil conflict from 1956 to 2004 resulting in over 2 million civilian deaths, 4.5 million internally displaced persons and over one million refugees (Ngige, 2004). One of the outcomes of civil war is refugees who flee from their war torn home countries in search of peace, safety and security in other countries. According to UNHCR (2020), there are 486,150 refugees in Kenya distributed in Kakuma and Daadab Camps as well as in urban areas such as Nairobi. UNHCR provides humanitarian assistance and international protection for refugees and asylum seekers.

The lived experience by Lucy demonstrates how civil conflict and political instability can negatively impact family stability and resilience. Some of her family members were recruited into the armed conflict, other suffered injuries, permanent disability or fatalities. Lucy's family faced threats of death to her husband which forced them to migrate to Nairobi, Kenya in 1994. Unfortunately, in 2016 her husband was killed in South Sudan as a result of the civil war. The consequences of forced migration from her home country of Sudan to a host country disrupted her family of origin where some of her relatives migrated to Uganda as refugees, others to Kenya and still others who were elderly remained in South Sudan. The stress of the armed conflict in South Sudan has taken its toll on Lucy's social-emotional and economic wellbeing. From this historical experience, Lucy resolved to establish a new family structure comprising of refugees from different countries who met in Nairobi in search of peace. She has assumed the role of a guardian, a parent-figure and a foster mother of five

refugee children. One of her children reported that she considers the other children as her siblings regardless of the family background or country of origin. This refugee family is a model of family survival and resilience living under extremely difficult circumstances.

CONCLUSION

This study has established that contemporary family structures in Kenya range from the diminishing extended family system comprised of multi-generational families living together to the dual-parent nuclear families sharing one residence, the hybrid nuclear families living in dual-residences often matri-centric in nature, the one-parent families, separated and divorced families, widowed families, the homeless-street families, the refugee-displaced families and the chosen family which is also known as the intentional family system. It was concluded that the African family structures are diverse and have continued to evolve from the traditional extended family system to include other family forms and structures in the third millennium.

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