

The Magnitude of Poverty among Female Headed Households in Yathui and Central Division, Machakos District, Kenya

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Abstract

This article examines the effects of education on the magnitude of poverty among female-headed households in Yathui and Central Divisions of Machakos District, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive and cross-sectional study design. The study was based on a sample size of 80 female-headed households, five key informants, four focused group discussions, six case studies and secondary data. Stratified and systematic sampling was used to select the units of observation. The analysis of data was done using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed the calculated chi square value is higher than the table value chi square ($\chi^2 = 31.233$, $df=1$ $p < 0.05$), indicating that the two attributes had a relationship. In general these statistics confirmed that there was poverty among female-headed households who had low level of education.

Key Words: Magnitude of poverty, female-headed households, level of education, female of headed households in Yathui and Central Divisions of Machakos District, Kenya.

Introduction

Since Kenya's independence in 1963, one of the problems cited as facing the newly Independent Kenya which needed to be tackled in the post independence era was poverty. However, the problem has persistently recurred in the country and its magnitude has been increasing year after year (Mary, 1999). The UNDP in the year 2005 indicated that poverty stemmed from death of a bread-winner, low literacy level and productivity, unemployment, lack of credit facilities, HIV and AIDS: others included macro causes such as the impact of structural adjustment programs, poorly performing economies, corruption as well as uncontrolled population increase.

In many rural contexts in Kenya, rather than cash savings and earnings, wealth is often reflected in animal holdings, the quality of agricultural implements, housing materials, labor resources, access to land and the ability of a household to produce food (UNDP, 1999). Poverty has transformed itself into various categories within the society and it is recognized as a major threat to the survival of a very significant section of the Kenyan households. The Poverty reduction strategy paper of Kenya 2003 cites that the poor tend to be classified as the landless, handicapped, female headed-households, households headed by people without formal education, pastoralists, AIDS orphans, street children and beggars.

The United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) in the year 2004 demonstrated that poverty has multiple spheres and it can be understood as a complex set of deprivations; it includes low income and deprivations in other aspects, for instance in knowledge, in life expectancy, in standard and quality of life as well as in food security. Different types of deprivations in human lives are interrelated and they reinforce each other, as the case was with lack of education which defines the conditions of poor persons and it is also an obstacle to other important aspects of a person's wellbeing such as employment and income, good health and other basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation (World Bank, 2004). In this frame work, poverty is the deprivation side of human development, the denial of basic needs and opportunities to lead a better life, healthy, creative, free life and to enjoy decent standards of living. The face of poverty changes from place to place and time to time and it has been described in many ways and in most cases is a situation people want to escape (World Bank, 2004).

The Kenya Economic Recovery Strategy Paper of 2003 estimated that 50% of Kenyans lived below poverty line; 80% of them are in the rural areas. The poor households, subsistence farmers and pastoralists accounted for over 50% of poverty-stricken Kenyans. The over dependence on subsistence farming by women explains why they are vulnerable to poverty. From the above, female-headed households are classified as one of the groups of the poor in Kenya hence there is need to understand these category of women in relation to poverty.

Mann (2000) noted that women have relatively low entitlements such as their restricted access to land ownership, inaccessibility to credit facilities and other means of production. In addition, they have limited access to basic education resulting in low literacy levels. Women also face barriers in terms of becoming large- scale farmers or business- women due to inaccessibility to capital and land. Similarly, a situation analysis of Kenyan women and children presents women as a marginalized lot compared to men in the area of decision-making, property ownership and management of agriculture; in essence such deprivations predispose women to poverty (UNICEF 1982). In addition there are millions of marginalized, deprived, starving and malnourished children, including school dropouts and those out of school. In addition there are also children who are in desperate need of medical and healthcare, including street children, orphans, working children and children born to poor mothers (Gakuru, 2000).

Methodology

This was a descriptive and cross-sectional study conducted over a one-year period in 2009 using a locally-design questionnaire. It describes the situation as it is of the female headed-households and cuts across the population. The population in this study consisted of married female household heads living in Yathui and Central divisions in Machakos District, Kenya for the last 10 years who provide for the wellbeing of their families. Stratified sampling was used in selecting the divisions for the study. The divisions were stratified into two, namely the high density (Central) and low (Yathui) ecological zones out of 12 divisions constituting 17% of the study area. Systematic random sampling was used to select the study participants among the selected administrative division from the low and high ecological zones. The selection of the study sites was dictated by findings in the Kenya Census 1999 and the predisposition of the area to perennial famine and poverty. A total of 80 adult female headed households were randomly sampled to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was manually analyzed while quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 16.

Results and Discussion

Education in Kenya is regarded as a vehicle of emancipation from poverty, especially among the poor. In this study, 62% of the participants had attained primary level of education; only 37% had secondary education and a mere 1% had post-secondary education. This was confirmed in an interview with a women group leader from Central division in Machakos district, who stated that the majority of the female household heads had primary level of education.

In the PRSP report of 2001, poverty was found to be highest among people without any schooling (illiterate). The poverty reduction strategic paper (PRSP) of the government of Kenya (GoK) 2001 showed that there was virtually no poverty among households headed by university graduates. It was established that in general, literacy among female-headed households in the rural areas was low due to the fact that majority of the respondents had not gone beyond primary school level. The dominant source of livelihood for the female household heads was farm-work (61%), of which about 31.3% was casual labor, 10.4% of the respondents were involved in small scale businesses and 8.8% depended on their friends and relatives and charitable organizations such as churches. In addition, 91% female heads earned less than one dollar (1\$) per day an indication that the female household heads were characterized by poverty.

Relationship between educational level and poverty experiences

H₀: Female heads with low level of education are not likely to be vulnerable to poverty

H_a: Female heads with education are likely to be vulnerable to poverty

This hypothesis was tested using chi square (X^2). The dependent variable was poverty while the independent variable was education level of the female heads. Information was collected from 80 female heads to determine if there was a relationship between their levels of education and poverty; the results are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Observed and expected frequencies and deviations of the relationships between education and poverty

Observed frequencies	Expected frequencies	Deviations	Deviations squared	X^2
40	28	12	144	144/28=5.142
10	22	-12	144	144/22=6.545
5	17	-12	144	144/17=8.470
25	13	12	144	144/13= <u>11.076</u> 31.233

In the above table, the calculated chi square value is higher than the table value chi square ($x^2 = 31.233$, $df=1$ $p < 0.05$); this shows that the two attributes had a proportional relationship. These statistics confirmed that there was high level poverty among female-headed households with low level of education. Education in Kenya is regarded as a vehicle of emancipation from poverty, especially among the poor. In this study, this was confirmed in a key informant interview with a women group leader from Central division in Machakos district, who stated that the majority of the female household heads had primary level of education. In the PRSP report of 2001, poverty was found to be highest among people without any schooling (illiterate). The poverty reduction strategic paper GoK (PRSP), 2001 showed that there was virtually no poverty among households headed by university graduates. It was established that in general, literacy among female household headed in the rural areas was low due to the fact that majority of the respondents had not gone beyond primary school level. Education and training are fundamental determinants of employment outcomes in any labor market. Generally, higher levels of educational attainment for female headed households contribute to their greater capacity to access higher skilled and more rewarding employment opportunities in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sector. Lower levels of educational attainment among female headed households contribute to their being unable to compete with men for better and more skilled jobs.

It is well established that educating and providing women with opportunities to take part in skilled paid employment provides benefits to their families in the form of decreased child mortality, increased child health and nutrition and improved levels of children education. In light of this, Buvinic (1997) suggests that women may be bearing more than their fair share of poverty in terms of health, nutrition and education in addition poor female headed households invest less in health, nutrition and education. An additional element commonly referred to as an intergenerational transmission of disadvantage is that the deprivation of female household heads is passed on to their children (chant, 1997). Learning for female headed households should incorporate in depth knowledge of self and others. Andragogy theory consists of learning strategies focused on adults. It is the process of engaging adult learning with a structure of learning experience. This learning is needs-based, adaptive, and holistic where personal interpretation; evaluation, decision making, reasoning and strategy are developed to give expertise.

Learning strategies focus on mature learning with a mentor who encourages and enables the mature learner. Female headed-households need to learn skills of how to cope and alleviate poverty in their lives. This could be in the form of motivational entrepreneurship. This is based on their experience of being the heads of their households and it would in the long run enable them alleviate poverty.

Patriarchal ideologies, steeped in traditional customs and culture, underlie the workings of most rural societies. In a patriarchal society the role of the father is central to organization of the family and the father holds authority over women, children and property, female headed households are worst hit by poverty due to cultural systems of organization. In contrast, the feminist theory examines women's social roles and lived experiences and promotes women's rights, interests and issues. The transmission of greater bargaining power to women through more gender equitable inheritance customs contribute to the health and development of their children.

Conclusion

Low level of education among the female household heads compounded their vulnerability to poverty and increased the risk of the female household heads not being able to educate their own children. For female headed households, education can provide the stepping stone out of poverty by providing access to formal sector employment and enhancing productivity in the informal sector. In general, improving the capabilities of the poor will lift them out of poverty thereby reducing overall poverty in Kenya. To mitigate the impact of poverty among female-headed households in Kenya, there is need to increase their access to entrepreneurship through vocational trainings, establishment and extension of social protection schemes to rural areas and the informal economy. Furthermore, support needs to be identified for poor primary school students including those who come from female headed households to be included in the bursary education schemes this will facilitate children from female headed households to attain education. Therefore, female heads with low level of education are likely to be vulnerable to poverty.

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