

SINGLE MOTHERS OF NAIROBI: RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY RELATIONS IN KENYA

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Abstract: The paper delineates the changes in gender roles and family relations brought about by rural-urban migration in Kenya by discussing the findings of empirical qualitative research carried out in Kenya in September 2011 on the single mothers of Nairobi, an emerging family form in Kenyan society, widespread yet unspoken and still in search for recognition. The theoretical framework makes reference to the relational sociology and takes into account how the family stakeholders relate to one another and how changes in reciprocal relations (i.e., inter-gender relations) may produce further changes in the whole family. The idea is to show how the emergence of this new form of family is: i) strongly linked to the migration from the countryside to the city of Nairobi and the cultural and social transition that this brings about (a transition from tradition to modernity); and to cast light on ii) the characteristics of the new role played by women within their families and the communities; iii) elements of novelty and discontinuity compared to the tradition; iv) challenges and resources of the single mothers. Various tools of investigation were used (participant observation, structured data sheets, in-depth interviews, semi-structured individual interviews, group interviews, individual structured questionnaires) on a number of Nairobi single mothers and key informants.

Keywords: *migration; single parenthood; African family; African women; Kenya*

Town-ward migration and family transformation in Kenya: an introduction

Projections based on Kenya's 1989 population and housing census indicate profound changes in rural to urban migration: the concentration of rural population has reduced from a level of 82% in 1990 to 77% in 2000. It is projected that the level will be 64% by the year 2020. The rate of urbanization was projected to grow at an approximate annual rate of 3.5% resulting in the proportion of urban to rural population of 21% in 1990, 27% in 2000 and 42% in 2020.

As is the case in many other African countries, income from labour migration contributes critically to the livelihoods of many households in rural Kenya (see Black et al. 2006 and Gould 1995 for an overview). Evidence shows that rural-urban migration is a key source of economic growth in Kenya, having accounted for 4.6 percentage points of per capita income growth over a period of 10 years between 1970/72 and 1980/82 compared to 4% experienced in the case of technical change over the same period.

Recent estimates suggest that about a third of all Kenyan households divide their members between urban and rural homes (Agesa 2004).

The rural-urban migration is often framed as a powerful process of change, able to impact on a society's structure, culture and relationships. When people in the rural areas move into cities it is not simply "human mobility" or "social mobility" (as they move in search of jobs and opportunities to improve their lives and create a better future for their children). What is at stake is a deeper social change, whose meaning and repercussions are not merely structural, physical, spatial, geographical, and environmental. Town-ward mobility in fact brings about crucial changes also at a symbolic, cultural, and relational level, thus impacting primarily on the basic social unit, e.g., the family and the relationships between their components – gender and generations.

The movement from the countryside into the cities is highly connected with the development of societies. Historians link together the three processes of modernization, urbanization and industrialisation: as Kendall (2007: 11) notes, "urbanization accompanied modernization and the rapid process of industrialization". Yet in sociological critical theory, modernization is also linked to an overarching process of rationalisation. When modernization increases within a society, the individual becomes that much more important, eventually replacing the family or community as the fundamental unit of society (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/387301/modernization>). Another

way of looking at modernization is the increase in reflexivity (see Donati and Archer 2010).

In this paper, I shall delineate the changes in terms of gender roles and family relations brought about by rural-urban migration in Kenya and I'll do that by analysing the single mothers of Nairobi, an emerging family form in Kenyan society, widespread yet unspoken and still in search for a recognition.

Families in transition: conceptualising the family-migration link

Starting from the late '80s and early '90s (Boyd 1989), the link between migration and family gained momentum in the scientific debate thanks to approaches framing migration in a pluralist, hybrid, and non-deterministic way (De Haas 2008). Classical approaches – analysing either macro or micro aspects, i.e., either migrations or migrants – were overcome by a meso perspective (Faist 1997) focused on the social ties and networks. A specific viewpoint is expressed by the relational theory elaborated by Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati (2011). This specific meso approach conceptualises migration flows in terms of relationships (e.g., between migrants and non-migrants; migrants and host population; among migrants themselves; and so on) and combines the viewpoints by relating such relationships. The relational approach to migration focuses on the ties before/after/during the migration. In this way the analysis is not merely carried out on the structural aspects of the social networks, but both structural and cultural elements are taken into consideration and put in relation: the outcome of such process is the valorisation of the unpredictable emerging effect called relational exceeding. This gives rise to a generative semantic (Donati 2006) that accounts for morphogenetic a/o morphostatic elements of the social relation (Archer 1997). In addition, the time variable is taken into consideration in such a relational approach.

The relational perspective includes the new economics of labour migration (see Stark and Bloom 1985) and the analysis of migration as a livelihood strategy (see Mc Dowell and De Haan 1997). Research from the pluralist perspective, blended with network analysis and relational approaches, conceives migration as the outcome of a household decision and as a strategy to diversify resources and minimize risk (Bigsten 1996). It also focuses on the short and long-term consequences of migration on the households and domestic relationships both in the place of origin (e.g. the family left behind) and in the host society (Meda 2012).

As for the African context, Agesa (2004), for example, focuses on rural–urban linkages sustained through multi-locality of households and analyses the determinants of split households (those that permanently maintain homes in both urban and rural areas). High cost of living in urban areas and low educational status of the migrants appear to be the determinants of this type of migration in Kenya.

When applying the relational approach to the family-migration link, one can talk about families in transition from a dual perspective. On the one hand, families are in transition in the sense that family members spatially move from one place to another; on the other hand they are in transition in the sense that migration produces family and social change, e.g., profound effect on family formation in Africa. Thus the rural to urban migration in Africa, which is now documented in many ways and by many agencies (ILO, UN, etc.) and which is part of the larger phenomenon of urbanisation, represents a metaphoric passage from traditional to modern differentiated societies and becomes an interesting subject of study as it takes place on a continent where the notion of modernity is still blurred and in search for an identity.

Inter-gender, intergenerational relations and family life in Kenya: traditional patterns

As in many other parts of the world (Beier et al. 2010; OECD 2009), in the recent past, family life in the capital city of Kenya, Nairobi, has undergone some major transformations as a result of the changes in the wider socio-cultural-economic system (CAFS 2002). Urban Kenyan families are in transition from the traditional structures that tended to favour large families living together to the modern trend towards smaller nuclear family units.

Traditionally, marriage and family life in Africa were held in high esteem. It was in the family that life was passed on and people (members of the family) worked together to provide the necessary conditions and material goods needed for a good life. According to the East African tradition, family was intended as the broader extended family comprising children, parents, grandparents and great grandparents.

Traditionally, female marriage was universal and ensured through the widespread institution of polygyny. In case of widowhood, pressure was exerted on widows of reproductive age to remarry soon (and immediate conception was hugely emphasized). The cultural practice of levirate was common in a few tribes of central and western Kenya whereby a widow, upon her husband's death, was

expected to agree to be married to another man -usually a relative of her husband or someone selected by her in-laws – in order for her to be able to remain on the piece of land and house left behind by her husband. Refusal to do this means the widow would lose her customary rights to retain her property and home. Today, many women seek refuge in the city as a way to run away from wife inheritance in the rural areas (COHRE 2008).

In Kenya, family is considered as the basic social unit (Suda 2002) and in the past it used to be relatively stable with a wide network of relatives to support the raising of children. Procreation was the marriage's main aim, intending with this not only the responsibility of bearing children but also that of rearing them in order to extend the family kin. For this reason, in some African communities a marriage was sealed only upon the birth of the first child. Such was the importance of childbearing that in case of infertility a marriage could even be invalidated. In other cases, people would go for second or third wives.

A religious approach to the African marriage and family life explained procreation as co-creation, in other words, as fostering God's work of creation in the world. In this perspective, in traditional Africa, those unable to procreate were not at peace with the creator.

Family life in Africa was basically a social thing rather than a private business. Marriage, even though a union of two persons in companionship, did not confine the couple in a world of their own. In fact, the spouses were in company of each other only at night, while during the day they were in company of other members of society. This element is explained also on the basis of the kinship ties where entire groups were related to each other in some way or the other: since the person was married to all those who were related to the partner, it was necessary to be in relationship with all these people. On this ground, therefore, while the two formed an intimate basic unit of society, they were conscious of needing the other members of society and of being needed by the society as well. The union of a man and a woman was thus not only an affair of the two but more likely a community (extended family) affair. Since it was a (extended) family affair, the family wished that the wife or the husband should be from a family understood as good in order to create friendship between the two families.

In some communities, courtship between boys and girls was allowed (when they felt ready for marriage) after informing their parents who would carry out the negotiations. The family, however, could reject the choice of a daughter or a son if they didn't like the family they were marrying into/from. Traditionally, the marriage contract between the two families was sealed upon dowry payment.

To reinforce the idea that the marriage was a strong bond between two families, traditionally the newly-weds would be considered daughters/sons to their in-laws. Conflicts arising in the nuclear family were then solved at the level of the extended family and issues of individual family members were a concern of the entire family (e.g., marriage of a daughter). Rights and responsibilities of each member were clearly spelt out but also the responsibility to give aid to those in need. Finally, kinship was traditionally associated with inheritance of land or other material goods or even with succession of roles.

Families, and specifically parents, have traditionally played a key role in socialising the youth. However, as the family structure changes in sub-Saharan Africa, this appears to be shifting towards a more powerful role being played by other agents, especially the peers, formal education institutions and the media (Nyanjui 1994). Atekyereza (2001) notes that, in the traditional African family, socialisation meant definition, allocation and reproduction of social responsibilities, which ultimately reproduced society. At the social and cultural level, the extended family was the first institution for socialisation of new members into society. It was a moulding and punishing institutional framework with collective responsibility that made parents become parents to all children (and vice versa) in the interest of family stability and security. Socialisation, which was usually done by older family members, introduced children early and gradually to the physical, economic, social and religious lives of their families – both traditional cultural norms and artefacts right from childhood. Education was informal. Girls were prepared to be future mothers by their parents and relatives, particularly by paternal aunts (Kilbride and Kilbride 1990).

The rural-urban migration in Kenya: repercussions on family relations and forms

Like the rest of Africa, Kenya is still predominantly rural but it is rapidly urbanizing. Today, almost 30% of Kenyans live in cities. From now on, most of Kenya's population growth will be urban. While total population will double by 2045, the urban population will more than quadruple. By 2033 the country will reach a "spatial tipping point", when half of Kenya will be residing in the urban areas (<http://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/why-do-kenyans-want-to-live-in-cities>).

The creation and rapid growth of towns has been the most easily perceived expression of 20th century social change in East Africa, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa. Certainly, trading centres on the coast and royal capitals inland had

existed before, but the opening up of the country by commerce, the activities of missions, and the imposition of colonial administration led either to the complete transformation of existing centres or to their being soon overshadowed by new towns. Already before the Second World War Kenya was the most urbanized of the three countries of East Africa (Tanzania and Uganda). In 1962, 6.9% of its population lived in urban centres of 10,000 inhabitants and over, as against about 3.8% for Tanzania in 1967 and 3.0% for Uganda in 1959. Not surprisingly then we find East Africa's biggest town Nairobi in Kenya (Gugler 1968).

In Kenya, the fast process of urbanization is mainly due to the poverty and underdevelopment characterizing rural areas in the absence of adequate policies and agricultural development, which led to massive movements from rural to urban areas (Kopoka 2002; Lugalla, Kibassa 2003).

The relocation of the economy from rural to urban areas has resulted, since the colonial period, in direct and deeply felt influences on the local population, originally predominantly rural. From the colonial times, land becomes scarce as a result of foreign encroachments, and this triggers massive migration flows to the towns.

This migration trend was triggered voluntarily at the beginning of the 20th century: colonial policies in fact depended largely on the massive use of the local workforce to build new cities and railways. New taxes were introduced to facilitate the flow of migrants, including Hut Tax that led men to move into urban areas in search of work to raise money to pay the tax. At the end of the Second World War, the increasing acceleration in population growth has led to a worsening of the economic situation. The growing scarcity of arable land, (even as a direct result of the excessive power of the multinationals on plantations and agricultural crops) has further contributed to damage the small local farmers. This migration process has had drastic effects on rural and social life, particularly on the economic structure and traditional family.

Kayera (1980) illustrates the influence of male migration on the social role of women in traditional rural Kenya. The study outlines the profile of those who leave the countryside to seek employment in cities such as Nairobi and Mombasa in the early eighties of the 20th century: "Migrants are typically young adult males with a minimum level of education, on the contrary those who are left behind are mostly women, children and the elderly with almost no formal education or skills. Therefore it is estimated that one-third of rural households are headed by women in Kenya". The study also shows that in the rural areas the prevailing idea is that women should first play the role of daughters, wives and mothers,

and only under special conditions such as the absence of their husbands, may directly take care of the land, which however remains the property of men (the husbands or their families).

The process of urbanization, which has affected Nairobi from as early as the colonial period, involving large masses of outcasts, refugees and work migrants soon joined by their family members, has taken the name of de-tribalization and has long been considered a threat to the social order by the colonial authorities. This fear has continued after the independence (in 1963), with Kenyatta's government trying to control the migration from rural areas to the city by building new residential areas on the outskirts of Nairobi. In subsequent years, the Moi regime (1978–2002) preferred to ignore the city's explosive growth until 1990, when, in the Rift Valley, it was decided to play the card of tribalism (Ranger 1993: 95), by pitting the so-called native tribes (Masais and Kalenjins) against internal migrants (Kikuyus and Luos). Expropriated of their land and forced to flee following the ethnic clashes, these communities have found refuge in Nairobi, swelling the ranks of the homeless vagrants. Urban de-tribalization is therefore the paradoxical result of political tribalism.

In the '80s, massive migration from the countryside and subsequent rapid urbanization (Kilbride et al. 2000) were also favoured by the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). They led to big spending cuts in education and health, the introduction of cost-sharing measures and the implementation of user fee initiatives (Mutuku – Mutiso 1994; Stephens 2004) that have had disastrous consequences for the most vulnerable categories, especially women: "If the burden of survival [on families] is huge, it is even greater on women" (Kalpagam 1985: 18). In face of the decrease in the possibility of formal employment for men and cuts in public spending (education, health and social services) determined by SAPs, women have had to work harder both at home and outside (Chant 2004); at the same time, their opportunities to access education and health have declined. The SAPs and the resulting processes of deindustrialization, as well as the decimation in male employment in the formal sector, were followed by a massive migration of men and drove women to improvise new sources of survival such as selling illicit brews, doing petty trades on the streets, working as beauticians and hair-saloonists, street cleaners, cleaning ladies, rags, nurses and prostitutes (Davis 2006: 143–144). "In principle, the revenue generated by these small scale businesses, which are run mostly by women, usually fail to provide even a minimum level of income and involve little capital investment, virtually no specialized training and only limited prospects for expansion in cost- functional

activity” (Rogerson 1997: 347). Women increasingly have to separate from their children and send them upcountry, while tens of thousands of older children were forced to leave school to go to work or pick up garbage, with little hope of ever being able to resume studies. Under the weight of endless pressure, family solidarity collapsed (Davis 2006: 146). According to a group of scholars, the family that “once might have been a unit that served as support and push for its members now has become an entity in which members compete for survival” (Rwezaura et al. 2003: 416–417). The social capital of families and communities ended up eroded and the networks of mutual aid and solidarity essential to the survival of the poorest were soon dissolved: the burden that has fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of women reduces their capacity to take action, and there are no more untapped reserves to fall back (Chant 2004: 212–214).

It is now widely accepted that urbanization is as much a social process as it is an economic and territorial process. It transforms societal organizations, the role of the family, demographic structures, the nature of work, and the way we choose to live and with whom. It also modifies domestic roles and relations within the family, and redefines concepts of individual and social responsibility (cf. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1732/Urbanization-Social-Impacts-Urbanization.html#ixzz2RZxjGb2g>).

First of all, urbanization tends to reduce the birth rate and, as a result, families become smaller relatively quickly, not only because parents have fewer children on average, but also because the extended family typical of rural settings is much less common in urban areas. In urban settlements, children are no longer seen as useful units of labour and producers, and are more expensive to house and feed.

The evolution to an urban society goes frequently hand in hand with a decline in the status of the family and with a proliferation of non-traditional family forms and new types of households. By non-traditional we mean those families without two parents and/or without children. This trend partly reflects an increasing diversity in “choices of living arrangements” following from marriage or from any other association of individuals within the housing system whether relatedness is by marriage or blood, or non-existing. In the past few years, Nairobi has witnessed an explosion in rates of household formation and a sharp increase in the diversity of household and family types, including single-parent household types, where “one parent lives with his / her children but without any partner (the household can however include other adults living in the same dwelling – i.e., the parents of a sole mother)” (OECD 2009: 1).

The increase in single-parent households is due to an increase in marital instability caused by the impact of social change – as it has been demonstrated, for instance, within the Luo community of Kenya (Suda 1991). Socio-economic factors can impact power structures and religion, both of which further affect change within the family. According to Suda (2002), non-traditional marriages, especially in economically successful areas (as the city), tend to be less stable than more traditional marriages and this is likely to foster single parent households (see also Hakansson 1994).

Marital instability is also fostered by alcoholism, polygamy and poverty. In the countryside, these very same factors often result in family breakups and force the youth to migrate to urban areas (Ssengendo n.d.).

In sub-Saharan Africa, urbanisation has often occurred along with westernisation, as cities have in many ways emulated cities of the developed world, especially those of the former colonial powers, and become hubs for the spread of Western culture and ways of living, including increasing individualisation. Western influence (together with Christian missionary education) has had repercussions on the African family formation (Sorobebe 1993). For instance, Nabudere-Magomu (1991) notes that contact with Western culture has weakened Ugandan traditional values and norms related to marriage and increased cases of single mothers, cohabitation, divorce and separation.

Urbanisation, Western culture's influence and modernisation introduce several changes within the structure of marriage and the stability of the family. Many factors contribute to determining age at first marriage for a woman, including education, employment, place of residence, and pressure from family. In rural and underdeveloped areas, the extended family plays a critical role (Lupilya 1992). However, nowadays children and adolescents no longer receive sufficient care and support from their parents. Due to economic pressures, the role parents and the extended family play in socializing the youth has changed and traditional means of transferring sexual education are disappearing (Iga – Basalirwa 1992). Marriage decisions for the youth have become largely personal (Sendagi 1997), thus exposing them to the risk of early parenthood, multiple partnering and frequent breakups. Without adequate supervision and sexual education, teenage girls are likely to incur into early pregnancies and, as their partners do not take responsibility over it, they tend to drop off from school and rear their children alone.

Ntozi and Nakanaabi (2001) attribute, albeit in part, the increase in separation and divorce to HIV/AIDS which spreads also through practices such as widow inheritance and multiple marriages (Adeokun – Nalwodda 1997). According to

some, HIV/AIDS are among the main reasons as to why in East Africa many new forms of families emerge, particularly single-headed families. They may be headed by a grandparent, a single-parent, or in the absence of an adult, by a child. Without adequate resources, many of these families live in despair and may turn to violence (Mugisha 1995).

Many female headed households in rural areas of Kenya are *de facto* units whose male “heads” have migrated to urban areas or overseas in search of employment and business opportunities.

According to Sylvia Chant (1998), “female-headed household that owe their origins to male migration (de facto female headed households) may be in a very different situation to de jure female headed households i.e., those whose routes into female household headship have occurred through widowhood, conjugal separation or non-marriage. Although male out-migration can enhance the economic situation of households left behind, it can also lead to greater impoverishment, especially where remittances are small and variable. [...] At the other end of the spectrum, de jure female-headed households [...] may be in a stronger position to make their own choices over migration insofar as they do not have to make reference to a male partner. At the same time, the dominance of male household headship in ideological and, in practical, terms means that many women [...] may have little choice but to migrate to urban areas if they seek to maintain economic and residential independence” (Chant 1998: 14).

The decline in family wealth and economic collaboration has meant that people only help where they can and not necessarily out of kinship obligation. Additionally, as a result of AIDS, the number of non-productive members of society is outnumbering the productive ones. Unemployment continues to escalate and has negative effects (emotional, financial and economic) on family breadwinners (UCRNN 1998). This affects accessibility to valued resources for survival. There is need for mobilisation of adequate resources to particularly support the extended family networks (Hunter 1990; Gilborn et al. 2001).

Discussions of resources within the family often focus on gender relations and bias. This bias may originate from a variety of factors. Marriage patterns and practices can impact resource allocation by way of polygamy, with resources distributed according to the rank of the wife as well as through widow inheritance (Ssenyonga 1997). From a historical perspective, unequal gender relations often originated from patrilineal societies, with increased burden placed on women under colonial rule (Nasimiyu 1997). The traditional division of labour tends to overburden women, who also suffer a skewed distribution of resources such as

land and credit that favours men (Ayako – Musambayi n.d.). As these trends are carried on to the present, the lack of acknowledgement of, information about, and monetary value placed on the products and services of women lead to the neglect of women in thinking about national development (Aderanti 1994). Gendered division of labour tends to favour men and overburden and exploit women. For example, among the Maasai, men are dominant in economic, social and political spheres. While education could potentially aid in breaking down the skewed division of labour that women experience, the demands of herding preclude education. Additionally, educating girls is considered a poor investment because they will leave home when they are married (Maghimbi – Manda 1997).

Land accessibility and ownership is directly related to marriage and family structures. These tend to be heavily dominated by men (Nalwanga Sebina-Zziwa 1998).

The compounding situations produced by all these factors that influence accessibility to resources have strong implications for family health, nutrition, income, etc. Involvement of women in work outside the home has made them access resources and improve family welfare, although this sometimes exposes them to new forms of oppression and exploitation hence further undermining familial relations that they are trying to support. AIDS has also aggravated resource accessibility. Due to changes in the society that have improved women's education, skills and social positioning, some women have decision-making powers, and the gap between them and men is reducing. However, even where women have acquired this emancipation or power, such gains have been perceived as disrupting stable family life especially from men's point of view.

In general, widows experience unequal rights within the family¹. For instance, it is common in Uganda for widows, whose husbands die as a result of HIV/AIDS, to lose property to their husbands' families and other members of the extended family (UNAIDS 2000). ISIS-WICCE (1999) report shows that widows lack access to land and are denied their property rights. In traditional African society, widows were absorbed into their husband's family through inheritance. However, the current shift is towards individuality, monogamy and remaining single after losing one's spouse. Therefore, widows may not receive the familial

¹ Mhando (1994) explored the historical development of gender relations in Tanzania, particularly among the Wachaga, and found that the position of the woman at the household level and in society was and remains very poor. Women tend to be stuck in low-paying and unskilled jobs. Women are not addressed by programmes in which their expertise could be utilised, even in areas in which they play key roles, such as in management of biodiversity (Kaiza-Boshe 1994).

support they once did. It is important to note the role of policies as well as families in shaping the status of women and their subsequent control over sexuality and fertility, equality in production, establishing a political voice, and achieving equity in the household (Royal Netherlands Embassy, Nairobi, 1994).

Suda (2002) observes that single-parent households, as a new family structure, are weak and much less capable of child support. Female-headed families are extremely vulnerable with highly negative potential repercussions: they make women more vulnerable and isolated, and give rise to an entire generation of boys and girls exposed to statelessness, poverty and marginalization, including the risk of ending up in the street as street children. Moreover, being children of a single mother may increase their risk of becoming in turn a single parent. In relation to this, Olumu and Chege (1994) found that the marital status of a youth's parents might impact rates of pregnancy as well as abortion among adolescent girls. Furthermore, the weakening of family ties also weakens local communities and society in general, which end up more insecure, violent, eroded in their social capitals made of trust and collaborative relationships.

Literature review thus outlines a substantial transformation of family structures in East Africa, towards a progressive nuclearization of the families, individualisation of society, and weakening of community ties. In the same vein, single motherhood poses a challenge to relationships and resources (i.e., land), especially in what concerns their rural homes. In a society based on the collective identification on the "nyumba" (home) because of its genealogical construction in terms of blood, terms, and descent (Roosens 1994) a large number of single mothers becomes a threat as it restructures the relationships between wealth and identity which has shaped rural societies across time and space.

The fieldwork: rationale of the research and methods

Through an empirical qualitative research carried out in Nairobi in September 2011, it is meant to cast light on the single-mother family as a specific family form that emerges from the rural-urban migration and evidences the transformation of gender roles and family relations in contemporary Kenya. The approach is relational (Donati 2011) and takes into account how the family stakeholders relate to one another and how changes in reciprocal relations (i.e., inter-gender relations) may produce further changes on the whole family.

This basically means that the situation of women and their changing roles within the family are investigated in the light of the transformations that other

family members (intended as relations, i.e., husbands/fathers and children) are experiencing within a society which is also in transition. In this way, we intend to go beyond an individualistic perspective (which would focus mainly on women) and a structural standpoint (which would in turn frame changes in terms of repercussions of macro events). The relational perspective poses itself at a meso level of analysis and interpretation and is particularly adequate to investigate African societies, which are so much based on family (clan) and community relationships.

To be truly compliant with such a relational perspective, the research design should have taken into consideration all the family stakeholders' viewpoints (mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, other significant key informants). However, since the research project is still in progress, only single mothers, children of single mothers and key informants have been so far interviewed. Here only the single mothers' and key informants' narratives analysis will be presented. Interviews with fathers and grandparents will be hopefully done in the near future. The single mothers scrutinized are of different ages, ethnicities (though mainly Kikuyus), socio-economic and educational statuses, yet they all live in Nairobi or surroundings with their offspring (without a husband or partner).

The idea is to show how the emergence of this new form of family is: i) strongly linked to the migration from the countryside to the city of Nairobi and the cultural and social transition that this brings about (a transition from tradition to modernity). Other crucial aspects tackled by the field research are: ii) characteristics of the new role played by women within their families and the communities; iii) elements of novelty and discontinuity compared to the tradition; iv) challenges and resources of the single mothers.

Various tools of investigation were used: in particular, information was gathered through:

- participant observation and structured data sheets administration in No.10 different projects for women in different areas of Nairobi and surroundings;
- semi-structured individual interviews with No.8 key informants (mainly project managers of NGOs in support of women and single mothers);
- No.5 group interviews and No.14 individual in-depth interviews with single mothers of different ages, ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, coming from different parts of Nairobi and enrolled in the above mentioned projects;
- individual structured questionnaires administered to No. 32 single mothers from the slum of Kawangware (west Nairobi).

All interviews were written *verbatim* and underwent inferential interpretation. Texts were analysed with a technique meant to enhance the relevance of each interviewee's narrative account by highlighting the major themes and comparing facts and opinions. This comparison was made in order to cast light on the meanings attributed to the condition of a single mother and highlight possible discrepancies or consistencies between different individuals and groups.

Access to the fieldwork was gained through the help of a field assistant appointed by a local university, that is Tangaza College – Catholic university of Eastern Africa in Nairobi. Field visits were accurately prepared and appointments were made in advance in order to meet the people in charge of every project surveyed and their beneficiaries (i.e., single mothers). The field assistant also operated as a cultural and linguistic mediator when it was necessary to interpret local languages and cultural settings.

Single mothers of Nairobi: findings from the fieldwork

i) Single mothers: elements of novelty and discontinuity compared to the tradition

The empirical research has shown that single mothers emanate from various circumstances and situations in life: they are of different social and economic statuses, ethnic communities, and degree of literacy and education. In particular, single parenthood does not concern solely a) the younger generations and b) women from deprived, poor backgrounds. On the contrary, it includes women of different ages and diversified backgrounds.

Considering the traditional family where every woman was provided with a husband – even widows were customarily inherited by their dead husbands' male relatives – one may think that single parenthood is a recent phenomenon, mainly widespread amongst the young generation. On the contrary, in the course of the study, the researcher met a number of women in their advanced age living with their children (and often their grandchildren, too) as single mothers.

“I was born in 1960. I've come a long way.” (single mother No. 1 from the project “Mama Margareth”, run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco in Dagoretti Market, Nairobi)

These are either urbanised widows who refused the practice of levirate or women (from poor urban neighbourhoods) who were abandoned by their

husbands/partners and opted for remaining single. This suggests that urbanisation acts as a catalyst for changes that loosen up the traditional culture as well as family ties and loyalties (Meda 2011).

The literature reports a mode of being a single mother connected with labor migration, i.e., the wives 'left-behind'. These are *de facto* single mothers inasmuch their migrant husbands are absent for extended periods. The best-supported wives left behind are those whose migrant husbands send back remittances on a steady basis. But for many mother and children, the benefits of male migration are illusory: men may initially leave home to earn wages for the family's benefit but their commitment sometimes fades and they tend to loosen their loyalty to the family left behind. Migrant husbands often constitute new families in the place where they migrate without formally breaking the ties with their first families.

"I'm married but single. My husband went abroad and married there. He left me with three children." (single mother no. 2 from the project "Mama Margareth", run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco in Dagoretti Market, Nairobi)

Also, thinking of single motherhood as common only among women from socially, economically, and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds is incorrect. There are also single mothers among urban women from the middle and upper classes.

"I would have wanted you to meet other single parents who are from affluent backgrounds... Ladies who by circumstances became single parents [...] they form their own solidarity group." (Project Manager, Jesuit Refugees Service, Eistleigh)

ii) Macro Factors contributing to the emergence of the single-mother family

Poverty, the migration flows from the rural areas to the city, as well as the rapid urbanisation – not supported by real development – constitute the *main macro factors* that at a *structural level* increase the number of lone-parent households. In particular, poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas cause many people to migrate to the city.

"There are those [women] who came from village to town and they ended up by neither being married or they were married as they came visit their husband here, their husband disappeared." (Project Manager, Jesuit Refugees Service, Eistleigh, Nairobi)

“The rural-urban migration has contributed particularly to young girls who had to drop out of school and come to the city centre for prostitution or domestic works or for whatever reasons and then they become single parents.” (Project Manager, Jesuit Refugees Service, Eistleigh, Nairobi)

Among the interviewed single mothers roughly 70% are aged between 35 and 50 and have had at least one experience of migration in their lives. The rest are younger (mean age 26 years) and were born in Nairobi.

“When my mother left my dad, she was 7 months pregnant and so after two months my brother was born. After my brother was born, we all stayed at my grandparent for 1 year and 7 months. Then my mother left us there and went to look for a job.” (single mother no. 3 from the project “Mama Margareth”, run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco in Dagoretti Market, Nairobi)

“My husband passed away, leaving me with three children and then I was chased away from my home in Kakamega by the brothers to my husband together with other people because there, when your husband dies, you are chased away... It’s not like these days you are able to stay because you are included in your husband’s will. [...] In the ’70s I had a lot of problems with the children; sometimes I would sleep hungry and I earned as low as 15 Ksh in a month. So I came to Nairobi by train with my children and here I earned 30 Ksh per month for the rent and the little I would get is what I would buy food with.” (single mother, working in the Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery project, Karen-Nairobi)

“I am a tailor by profession. I decided to do my work and brought up my children. So I also came here to Nairobi.” (single mother No. 2, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

At a *symbolic level*, the process of modernisation – in the shape of “westernisation” – leads to a progressive individualisation and introduces phenomena previously unknown to the African societies, such as divorce and separation (at a *micro level*), as well as a generic loosening of community ties and loyalties (at a *meso level*).

“A single parent as a girl who finds herself stranded with a child [...] that is relatively new. It was there before and there were mechanisms within the culture on how to cope with it. Of course the penalties were very stiff but now [...] the dynamic has

changed where our cultural way of life has been influenced by a bit of Western culture and cultures from other regions... Education is taking more prominence, you know, getting a job, those things were not of great emphasis before. They were not important to us before.” (Key Informant, Tangaza College, Nairobi)

Poverty also entails an erosion of social capital at a meso and micro level, thus challenging the family in Africa, as in any other part of the world.

“My parents also are struggling with their life. They can’t help out. And also you can’t expect assistance from other women because they also have their problems they are dealing with.” (single mother No. 4 from the project “Mama Margareth”, run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco, Nairobi)

“My husband ran away with everything... I don’t have anything... I just stay there and then I called my brother and then he came and gave me a little money and brought a mattress and a bed and told me to start my life again. So I started taking them to school. He was paying for me school fees and rent.” (single mother No. 3, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

The process of modernization that is sweeping the African continent – together with some positive trends such as the emergence of the middle class and technological development – brings the depletion of relational resource and the risk of increasing social isolation. Moreover, modernisation introduces a new element in the daily life of the people: the possibility to choose by oneself, reducing any reference to the clan, the family, and the community in general. This is why today some widows can refuse to practice the levirate and end up living as single mothers with their children, and young girls are exposed to pre-marital sex (courtship and partnering are no longer a family business!) thus risking early, unplanned, out-of-wedlock pregnancies. With modernization the degrees of individual freedom grow while the control exerted by the parents and the clan over the lifestyles and choices diminishes, thus decreasing the level of social protection and leaving the individual increasingly alone. This process becomes even more problematic in a communitarian context – such as the African, where the idea of ‘individual’ is somehow alien to the local culture and social organisation, and – consequently – there are not yet adequate conceptual tools to master the transition to ‘Western-like’ modernisation.

iii) Micro and Meso Factors contributing to the emergence of the single-mother family

All these factors at the macro level have repercussions *at micro and meso levels*. Poverty and migration – as macro-structural factors – challenge people in their contexts of ordinary life, make them prone to stress (uncertainty about the future) and lead to violent and dysfunctional practices within intimate relationships. Domestic violence and mistreatments contribute to family breakups and thus increase the number of single mothers in Nairobi.

“I got pregnant... again I got a baby girl. The first one I got was a baby boy. The second one is a baby girl. So when this girl was nine months he started drinking a lot, coming home when he was very drunk. He started beating me... life goes bad like that...” (single mother No. 3, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

“When I was a child my father started treating me very badly. He would physically abuse me. He would beat me up without any reason whatsoever. So my mum couldn’t take it anymore, so she walked out of the marriage and took me along with her.” (single mother no. 5 from the project “Mama Margareth”, run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco, Nairobi)

At the meso level, illiteracy and lack of sexual education also make girls prone to become single mothers.

iv) Being a single mother: meaning making and attitudes toward singlehood and motherhood

The interviewed women show opposite attitudes towards their being single but they never question their maternity, which is valued as a priority, even when they are unable to care or provide financially for their children. Some women (especially victims of violence) do not want a stable partner as – in their views – it is a ‘stress’; while some others want to (re)marry to improve their physical and economic security. In fact, despite dysfunctional inter-gender relationships, the presence of a man in the house is highly desirable.

“And at the same time, in African culture, men are the security of the home. Men are the security. Whether the man works and provides the house with food, clothing,

he does or does not, that house has a man. That house is fully secured. It will be respected." (single mother No. 1 from the for-profit project "Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery", Karen, Nairobi)

"Even if the man is a cripple and doesn't do anything and so long as that house has a man it will be respected. But for single ladies and single mothers we are in danger, always in danger." (single mother No. 2 from the for-profit project "Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery", Karen, Nairobi)

Mothers of girls are more likely to (re)marry as girls are not entitled to inherit the step-father's assets; while mothers of boys are often compelled by the new partner to chase their boy children away. This is why many boy children end up on the streets as street children.

v) *Inter-gender relationships: fading partners and absent fathers*

The social desirability linked to the presence of a man in the house often leads women to welcome any new partners in their homes in the hope that they will be better than the previous ones. This "serial partnering" often proves to be a problem rather than a solution: as soon as the woman gets pregnant, the man disappears leaving her again in the position of being a single mother.

"You see all this time since my son was born he never looked for us, he never got in touch." (single mother from the support group organised at the Don Bosco Parish in Upper Hill, Nairobi – affluent neighbourhood)

The problem seems therefore to reside in the crisis of the male, at a crossroad in what concerns his identity and role in the family and in society, at least as much as in the crisis of women. African men – as much as African women and perhaps more – are at a crossroads: they are strained by poverty, migration from the countryside to the cities, rapid urbanization, modernity, subversion of traditional values and culture. Perhaps more than women they are struggling to find a new dimension and their identity. They cling to traditional practices (polygamy), now stripped of the original values (the survival of the group) and make use of "macho" ways (physical strength) to find their place in a rapidly changing society, but the only thing they are able to put in practice is dysfunctional and destructive behaviours.

“You know [...] men are very weak, a man to abandon the family it takes a day, but a woman will think twice.” (Project Manager, Jesuit Refugees Service, Eistleigh, Nairobi)

“They [men] want to spread family everywhere. They don’t take responsibility.” (single mother from the slum of Korogocho)

“For me the past generation men were good because they were polygamy but nowadays they don’t want polygamy, they are skipping everywhere. They don’t want to belong in one place but today I will be with this person next day he will maybe found maybe in industrial area... maybe upcountry but in the past they were in polygamy of which I can say they were good they were accepting nowadays they don’t accept.” (single mother from the slum of Korogocho)

“Men nowadays don’t want to wear the button trousers. Men now they want to be with women without supporting them. Just to use them and that will make them to continue to have children or be infected.” (single mother No. 2, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

vi) Major challenges and resources

The single mothers met during the research have different experiences of life and lone parenting. Despite the variety in individual biographies and backgrounds, there are some common features that make the single mother condition rather homogeneous – without diminishing the significance of their personal stories. In particular, these common elements are risk and vulnerability. One major aspect of vulnerability – in the absence of father figures – is that the single mothers face alone the challenge to raise and socialize the new generations.

“Like me, I am a father and a mother in one person.” (single mother No. 2, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

“I use to try to teach them [my children] according to what I observe fathers doing with their children so I use to try talk to them and inform them accordingly.” (single mother No. 1 from the for-profit project “Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery”, Karen, Nairobi)

“It is very hard to raise a child on your own because kids have so many needs (school fees, clothes, etc.) plus things like rent, food and you have to struggle for all that on your own.” (single mother no. 1 from the project “Mama Margareth”, run by the Salesian Sisters of St John Bosco, Nairobi)

From the symbolic point of view, the absence of the father – in particular at the Kikuyu community – is a serious loss: Kikuyus believe that each new generation replaces their grandparents, who are then free to become ancestors. The grandparents’ replacement occurs through child naming: the first born son is always given the same name as his paternal grandfather and, in the same vein, the first daughter is given the name of her paternal grandmother, the second son is named after his maternal grandfather and the second daughter after her maternal grandmother. The need to replace four grandparents is an important reason for having a minimum of four children, and more children gives honour to the parents’ siblings. If the mother of the child comes from a single parent home, this may represent a problem but she may name him after her own grandfather. However, this does not solve the problem: children of a single mother are denied access to their paternal lineage both in cultural and practical terms, and this leads to a state of distress with the belief and not being at peace with the ancestors.

From a different point of view, most children of single mothers undergo abusive situations (stigma) that lead them to run to the streets and become *street* children. Similarly, the daughters of single mothers are likely to become single mothers themselves at an early stage of their lives.

In terms of human and civil rights, the most striking consequence of being a single mother, however, lies in the risk of statelessness: the majority of single mothers in the slums of Nairobi have no identity documents and it is difficult for them to get their ID cards. They and their children are thus condemned to perpetual exclusion from any form of rights and participation in the political life of the country (unhcr.org/4f58aee79.html).

The uncertain and unsecure life in the slums and the status of newcomers often result in a poor/absent social capital to count on in case of need. This makes the lives of the Nairobi single mothers even more complex and challenged, depriving them of an adequate network of material and relational resources.

“Whenever a husband dies, single mothers are not considered like people and there is no way in society that they can stand up and say they can be heard like the couples

can be heard.” (single mother No. 1 from the for-profit project “Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery”, Karen, Nairobi)

“When your husband dies, the community will start to think that now you are a prostitute, a wife who will not care for her family. So long as you know what she wants to be and the children know what they want to be... she decided to be alone so that she becomes a good example for her children.” (single mother from the slum of Korogocho, Nairobi)

“Being a single mother is very challenging, very difficult and vulnerable. The people in the community are always scrutinizing you. They are always on the lookout at for you. Therefore you find many people will want to provoke you or try you. So that you become a friend to them hence putting your life at risk or you are lost forever. This is because if you join them you will get into a lifestyle of drugs and alcohol, prostitution and many bad things and your life is destroyed.” (single mother No. 1 from the for-profit project “Kazuri 2000 Beads and Pottery”, Karen, Nairobi)

“Myself I see when I talk to this man, the wife doesn’t feel well so I say... when I say ‘morning’ it is enough... not adding anything else ‘Are you going to job?’ or ‘Are you coming from job?’ ... no... maybe that one I can ask the wife. They are good, just sitting together but not with their husbands. As a single, people talk a lot about you.” (single mother No. 3, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

“Even when your brother comes into the house they [the neighbours] think it is your boyfriend... Even when you talk to your neighbour’s husband it is bad... you must keep quiet. You can’t greet your neighbour. You just ignore him because the wife will make noise at you. So you just seat lonely. So we make friends from outside. So they come to visit you but here it is difficult. When you talk to someone... it is their husband.” (single mother No. 3, self-managed non-profit project for single mothers at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, next to Kibera slum, Nairobi)

The living conditions of single mothers from affluent backgrounds (included their capability to provide for the children in terms of basic needs – food, school fees, etc.) and their resources (i.e., resilience and received support) are more significant compared to those of the women from the slums. Yet they experience the very same difficulties in nurturing their children alone, being stigmatized by the community and so on. So distinctions in status and generation do not make a big difference. Yet an elder widow with adult children (who can support her)

is less vulnerable than a teen single mother with a dependent baby, as the latter is more prone to stigmatization and less likely to receive aid. Moreover, an aged woman will be mature enough to accept her single mother status and cope with stressful events in her life. Similarly, an urban, educated, single mother from an affluent background will have more relational and material tools to cope with her possible vulnerability.

The women of the slums met in the course of the research are poorly aware of their rights and often unable to fight against gender inequality, especially when it comes to the land inheritance issue. Land accessibility and ownership is directly related to marriage and family structures and these tend to be heavily dominated by men.

The majority of the services meant to support these women operate for their economic empowerment (merry-go-round, microcredit, vocational training, etc.) or to create networks of solidarity (support groups) but there is no effective, integrated policy to tackle the issue from a family perspective (i.e., involving men or elder single mothers as mentors for the youths).

Single mothers: lost in transition?

The research has tested most of the issues found in the literature: Kenyan families are in transition in a plurality of ways. Families are in transition in the sense that they move from the countryside to the city and are in the sense that they are facing a radical change in their forms, roles and identities – as a result of this mobility. The study of the single mothers of Nairobi is an emblematic case of this transition.

In accordance with the literature, in Nairobi I have met different types of single mothers: widows, separated / divorced mothers, unmarried mothers, teen moms, and wives “left behind”; while single mothers by choice were not found on the field.

I have discovered multiple factors that contribute to the emerging of female-headed families: macro structural and symbolic factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels. Townward migration and rapid urbanisation are the main causes for cultural change and redefinition of gender roles and family relationships. Other connected factors, such as alcoholism, “serial partnering”, unfaithfulness, family disputes and deaths from HIV/AIDS, along with the continuation of practices such as widow inheritance, have led to multiple unions and the further spread of HIV infection, thus determining an increase in the number of single parent-headed households.

Fathers and husbands who left or died leave their families deprived of both intergenerational and gender relations and prone to financial hardship. This emergent family configuration compels to reorganizing family roles, such as that of the breadwinner: women get casual, low-paid jobs such as washerwomen, vegetables sellers, beauticians, or even prostitutes. In the interviewees' accounts, topics concerning lack of material and relational resources often occur together, thus converging in the area of risk. However, there emerges the potentially counterbalancing factor of creativity, in terms of both the structural and the relational strategies implemented in order to survive. The interviewees, in fact, show a clear tendency to work out coping strategies: some examples are their occupation in the informal sector to counterbalance the lack of formal employment or a stable income, and the reorganisation of kinship ties by resorting to the multigenerational extended family, heavily unbalanced on the female gender axis (grandmothers), to make up for the absence of men.

Female-headed families hardly fulfill their care-giving tasks, along vertical intergenerational ties as well as horizontal inter-gender relations. The great number of (dependent) family members (especially children) does not match their ability for mutual support in hardships, as family ties are too heavily challenged by personal loss (especially the disappearance of male figures) and by poverty. So a huge family network turns into a burden where challenges accumulate, offering no protection to the most vulnerable members, i.e., children. Single mothers in fact are often hardly able to provide for their children and look after them. Even working mothers are hardly able to pay their children's school fees and carry out educational and care-giving tasks. In this way, their unsupervised offspring tend to run to the streets, where they can find alternative means to survive poverty and be socialised: they are prone to become "street children".

The older generation of single mothers is mainly made up of widows, most of whom choose not to re-marry (and reject levirate), while the younger generation is basically composed of girls who get their offspring from occasional partners in circumstances of poverty and distance from the family of origin (which was traditionally in charge of the youth's marriage choices and sexual education), what remains as a common trait is the distance – symbolic or physical – from the family of origin and its traditional culture. This often translates into lack of family support, which goes together with the absence of governmental policies and services for single mothers, and puts these mothers at risk of social isolation.

Single mothers, in fact, not only are prone to physical and psychological abuse and exploitation, both within their households and outside – including

beatings, prostitution, illicit brewing, overwork, etc. – they are also highly stigmatised by other community members. Women from the upper class are less likely to incur in such forms of physical mistreatments, yet they are as stigmatized as the women from poor backgrounds for the simple fact that they do not have a stable partner, which is simply unthinkable in traditional Africa.

My study shows that the transition from rural to urban areas, from traditional to individualised setups implies a loss for the cultural patrimony of the Kenyan society but also a loss in terms of social cohesion and integration. In the course of this transition, marriage decisions for the youth – which once were a family practice – have become largely personal, thus leaving the youth exposed to the risk of multiple breakups and single parenthood. Also, the traditional role played by the extended families in socialising the youth and determining age at first marriage for a woman is fading in favour of a more powerful role being played by other agents, especially the peers, formal education institutions and the media. Traditional means of transferring sexual education are also disappearing, thus linking poverty and urbanisation to marital instability.

In this transition, which comes very close to the Western ways of life (individual freedom, agency, individualism, social segmentation, loss of solidarity and social capital), women, men and children in Kenya are subjected to great stress. They are right now in a phase of great confusion in what concerns their roles, identities and practices. The old is no longer good, but the new does not yet exist. Perhaps this transition can be transformed into an enrichment and not a loss if Kenyan men and women together, supported by civil society organizations, will be more reflexive about the transitions they are experiencing. And this will surely be facilitated when the lack of justice and poverty will no longer be the main problem they face every day.

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