

*Overview of conflict occurring in Youth-Headed Households (YHHs) of siblings in  
Rwanda*

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## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Youth-Headed Households (YHHs) of Siblings**

Rwanda considers a double orphan is a child who has lost both parents (MIGEPROF 2008). Rwanda has a large number of orphans resulting from the combined effects of the 1994 genocide and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The genocide of 1994 has left Rwanda with a significant number of children who have no relatives (Boris and al. 2006, UNICEF 2007). Twenty per cent of the Rwandan population under 21 are orphans. At the Rwanda national level, double orphans are 2.7% (NISR 2012).

With the decline in the traditional foster care system, a new phenomenon emerged whereby young people are heading households as a “family” without parents. The oldest sibling becomes the head of the household and fulfils the responsibility of caring for the younger siblings (UNICEF 2001; Schaal & Elbert 2006). Siblings living in Households headed by youth (YHHs) are common in Rwanda. These siblings in YHHs form a “family” that provides support and continuity (McAdam-Crisp (2006). They deal with the adult responsibilities of supporting themselves at an age when the care and the protection of an adult are normally needed (Schaal & Elbert 2006). They assume an anthropological and psychosocial position for which they were never prepared (Boris & al. 2006). YHHs are a new phenomenon of alternative family as a symbol of a social safety that is breaking down (Roalkvan 2005) shown by the increasing of double orphans without relative in Sub-Sahara Africa (UNICEF 2006; Barnet 2005). Young person are those considered as such by the society (African Union 2006). In Rwanda, the “youth” is made up of persons aged between 14 and 35 years old (NISR 2010/2011). However, this study looks at people who are in Household sibling-headed in Rwanda. Rwanda has 2.7% of double orphans within the twenty per cent of the Rwandan population under 21 years old who are orphans (NISR 2012).

### **1.2 Conflict between siblings and YHHs**

Conflict does not occur only between husband and wife. It may also occur between siblings (Malek 2010). Conflicts between siblings living with parents have been studied. Some studies investigate conflicts between siblings in terms of conflict frequency and conflict management strategies (Howe et al. 2002; Furman & Buhrmester 1985). There are studies of the situation of orphaned siblings and YHHs in Sub-Sahara, Eastern and central in general and in Rwanda in particular (e.g. Foster & Williamson 2000; Ntaganira et al. 2013; Ntaganira et al. 2012; Thurman et al. 2006; Boris et al. 2006; Uwera & Brackelaire, 2012/2 ; Schaal & Elbert 2006; Smart 2003; UNICEF 2007 ; UNICEF 2001; UNICEF 2000 etc.). However, none of these studies focused on the issues of conflict/dissension in YHHs.

Little known about how young people manage the sibling caring responsibilities after the death of their parents (Evans 2010). The functioning of YHHs is not well known (Uwera & Brackelaire 2012/2). Also little is known about conflict/dissension among siblings living in YHHs and there are important differences between YHHs and other family forms. (1) Siblings' life in YHHs is different from life in traditional families because when there is conflict between siblings lives in traditional families, parents

can intervene as adults. (2) YHHs are obliged to live together and to continue the life started by their parents, without their personal agreement at the time of their family foundation. (3) Spouses in traditional families choose freely to get married and live together, while the YHH does not involve choice by all parties. (4) The head of YHH lacks the moral authority and public support of the parental role. ‘You should obey your father’, but no-one says you should obey your brother or your sister.

The present research intend to investigate on what happen in terms of conflict/dissension between siblings living on their own in YYHs as a new kind of “alternative families” (Bartoszuk & Pittman 2010). It is attempting to answer the following questions: (1) is there conflict/dissension in YHHs in Rwanda? (2) What are the causes; (3) what are the consequences; (4) how do YHHs feel when conflict/dissension occurs? (5) What strategies do YHHs use to face conflict/dissension; (6) what can be done to help the families headed by young people for a healthy life in YHHs?

## 2 Methods

A qualitative approach was selected because (a) little is known (Grenier 2005) about conflict/dissension in YHHs; and (b) it allows an overall holistic interpretation which permits the social significance of the data to emerge (Deslauries & Mayer 2000).

### 2.1 Field, population of the study and selection of participants

This research was done in Huye District, in its four administrative Sectors: Ngoma, Mbazi, Gishamvu and Rwaniro. Huye is one of the Districts of the Southern Province in Rwanda. In Huye District, like other Districts of Rwanda, the population is young (NISR, 2012). Huye District has 3% of double orphans among the population aged 0-20. We conducted seven Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs), composed of double orphans who were heading households of siblings and who agree freely and voluntary to give information about conflict/dissention in their homes. Selection and recruitment of participants was facilitated by the local administration in collaboration with two NGOs called respectively “Association Modest et Innocent (AMI)” and “Igiti cy’Ubugingo Centre (IUC)”. These two NGOs work with, double orphans living in YHHs in the four administrative sectors. These four administrative sectors are in rural area. The data collection was done between December 2012 and January 2012. Participants were separated into FGDs by gender, and numbers in the groups ranged from 4-12. Table 1 shows the FGDs’ Composition.

*Table1. Structure and characteristics of FGDs and other socio-demographic characteristics*

Ide ntifi cati on of the FG D	Gen der of the mem bers of FGD	Age of the partici pant (Head of the HH) in FGD	Num ber of the FGD mem bers	Rang e of the FGD’ Mem bers	Numb er of sibling memb ers of the YHHs in	Range of age of the YHH’ Memb ers	Period headed HH/liv ed in YHHs (years)	Rang e of mont hly inco me estim ations (Frw)

					addition to the Head of the HH			USD 1 = c. Frw. 650
11	Male	19	6	17-26	1	17	12	< 10,000
		20			3	16;12;6	4	< 10,000
		21			2	19;4	8	< 10,000
		24			4	17;14;7	4	< 10,000
		26			2	22;20	3	< 10,000
		17			2	14;12	4	< 10,000
21	Female	28	7	17-31	7	26;24;22;20;18;16;14	18	< 10,000
		31			6	25;18;14;10;8	17	< 10,000
		22			4	19;16;12;9	2	< 10,000
		23			3	21;17;14	2	< 10,000
		17			5	16;13;11;10;3	2	< 10,000
		23			1	21	4	< 10,000
		21			2	17;11	5	< 10,000
31	Female	Missing information for one FGD's member						Rang

		24	6	21-29	1	20	2	e 10,00 0- 30,00 0
		21			2	19;17	5	< 10,00 0
		21			1	19	4	< 10,00 0
		29			3	22;19; 4	4	< 10,00 0
		24			1	20	3	< 10,00 0
41	Male	17	4	17-21	1	16	3	Rang e 10,00 0- 30,00 0
		20			1	18	4	Rang e 10,00 0- 30,00 0
		21			1	19	1	Rang e 10,00 0- 30,00 0
		21			2	20;11	17	Rang e 10,00 0- 30,00 0
51	Fem ale	24	6	17-24	3	22;20; 16	2	< 10,00 0
		20			4	18;16; 14;12	9	< 10,00 0
		20			1	17	9	<

								10,000
		17			2	14;12	1	< 10,000
		23			3	20;11;9	6	< 10,000
		17			2	15;12	1	< 10,000
61	Female	19		18-30	1	16	1	Range 10,000-30,000
		30			3	28;22;20	17	Range 10,000-30,000
		20			2	18; 16	9	< 10,000
		20			3	13;12;7	3	< 10,000
		21			6	19;18;15;13;11;9	4	Range 10,000-30,000
		18			2	14;12	4	< 10,000
71	Male	25	6	22-28	2	20;18	17	< 10,000
		28			1	18	15	< 10,000
		24			4	20;18;18;16	13	< 10,000
		22			4	17;15;7;5	4	< 10,000

						0	
		22		1	20	17	< 10,00 0
		27		2	21;16	6	< 10,00 0

Many of them were less than 18 when their parents died and thus started to head household (Thurman et al. 2006; Ward & Eyber 2009). The size of the YHHs ranged from 2 to 8 including the participant in the FGD. The age of the other YHHs members apart from the head ranged from 3 to 28. The time of life without parents ranged from 1 year to 18. Participants aged 21 constitute the majority (7/41) followed by those who are aged of 20 (6) and by those who are aged of 24 and 17 (5/41) respectively. The majority of participant said they have an income of less than 10,000 Rwandan francs per month (less than about fifteen US dollars). However, there are difficulties with the concept of income in predominantly agricultural countries and those living on subsistence agriculture may not be good at computing the value of their produce.

## 2.2 Research approach

Two moderators including the main investigator and two assistants were recruited. They underwent two days of training on how to conduct FGDs and on ethics in research with human being as participants. A guiding Agenda related to research questions in Kinyarwanda the national local language was the tool used for FGDs. An informed consent was signed by each participant. Authorization to start and to record the discussion was obtained in the whole FGDs (Barnett 2002). Parallel sessions were conducted at each selected place – one for each gender, separately. Each session had a moderator and an assistant. To promote a relaxed environment during the FGDs sessions participants were given a soft drink as refreshment. At the end of each FGD session, participants were financially compensated by receiving 1500 RFWS (about two US dollars) for the day spent in travelling to the place of discussion and the time spent in the FGDs.

## 2.3 Data analysis

The method of data analysis was inspired by content analysis (L'Écuyer 1989). All seven tapes from seven FGDs transcribed which gave a corpus of 94 pages, and were translated from Kinyarwanda into English. The Kinyarwanda and English versions have been read many times by the main investigator; to 'absorb the content' (Baribeau 2009). The coding was done using nVIVO software (Duchesne & Haegel 2005). Following the research questions as guides, every line, paragraph, and/or section of text was given a specific code. The data analysis moved in a circle between the data and the analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967; L'Écuyer 1989; Paillé 1994; Baribeau 2009). The process continued until no new code emerged.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Existence and signs of conflict/dissension in YHHs

Conflict/dissension does exist in YHHs. Its main signs are

- the absence of positive interaction between household members and poor communication;



- the misbehaviour and lack of respect between siblings in the household;
- property management and sharing resources and responsibilities;
- the lack of sufficient land and hunger;
- lack of obedience to the head of the household

The unwanted pregnancy of ten girls who had left home but came back intensified the existing conflict in the sibling YHHs.

The lack of agreement on issues related to property left by the parents, such as the lands, the cows; the disagreement in sharing out of property that was held in common in the YHH—when one of the members gets married is also cited to be the cause of conflict/dissension. Siblings members of YHHs are victims of poverty and of hunger that stop them from getting on well in an easy way. YHHs are not able to satisfy the basic needs of their members. In terms of responsibility sharing, it is not only the head (who has to play the parental role) who is responsible for getting household needs met; each sibling member of the YHH who is able to do so needs to make a contribution. In the YHHs as well as in other kind of families, the failure to take responsibilities is a source of conflict/dissension.

### **3.2 Consequences which rise from conflict/dissension in YHHs**

Consequences of conflict/dissension in YHHs, as in other families, include the leaving home and the break-up of the family, health problems, and poverty.

In case of conflict/dissension, some sibling members of YHHs do not try to deal with it but leave the home. Leaving home may be aimed at searching for better living conditions, but this may end in failure. This failure can be translated, for a girl, into getting an unwanted pregnancy.

The consequence of conflict/dissension in YHHs may be mental suffering and drug abuse. Drug abuse as a refuge may lead to or itself constitute health problems expressed in mental suffering and in physical illness. In situation of conflict/dissension in YHHs, if members are not fully capable of work this leads to poverty.

### **3.3 Feelings of heads of household when conflict/dissension is present in YHHs**

A variety of feelings and emotions were reported by the heads of household participating in this research. They are related to psychological distress, to social isolation from neighbours and from the support of the authorities' support, to neighbours who made the conflict between siblings worse, to lack of motivation, and to suicidal thoughts and negative sentiments about them as heads of household.

YHHs living in conflict/dissension make their heads feel stressed, discouraged and abandoned by a society that does not care about them. Some felt like abnormal people. Other people do not worry about their lives and they feel the lack of someone, neighbours or authorities, to approach for comfort. They reported that when they need to talk to authority, they feel afraid to approach it. They feel abandoned, socially isolated. In turn, because of the feeling of the social isolation, they prefer to keep quiet and do not tell anyone about their conflict-related problems. Participants reported that in case of conflict/dissension in their family, the neighbours do not help to solve conflict, but instead say things to the elder or younger brother of the head that



are intended to worsen the situation. This is consistent with the assertion that some neighbours can act spitefully toward the young heads of households. They feel the lack of motivation to deal with their responsibilities. They have no motivation to work and may fall into depression in evaluating their previous actions are not effective.

Sometimes sibling members of YHHs living in conflict/dissension have thoughts of committing suicide. This is due to conflict but also this may be linked to the situation of social isolation, negative emotionality and depressive symptoms. Some YHHs members decide to go far away from their siblings in case of conflict/dissension in their families. The unhealthy situation of conflict/dissension can lead the heads of YHHs to feel regret at being the eldest of the family, as they feel fear to approach the authorities to speak about their problems.

### **3.4 Means or strategies used by YHHs to face conflicts/dissensions**

In order to face conflict/dissension, participants reported sharing with peers and people of the same age and the same experience, their own friends or a parent's friends. YHHs call upon specified categories of people to help them with conflict/dissension. They mainly prefer to talk to people with the same experience of conflict/dissension and other young people, their peers, for sharing experience and mutual help in finding solutions, rather than having recourse to elder people. When heads of sibling households enter into conflict/dissension, they can go to their own friends or the friends of their dead parents and ask them to intervene with their advice. In conflict/dissension situations, they would be willing to search for help in the extended family - an aunt or uncle but in general such family members no longer exist.

### **3.5 Needs in relation to conflict/ dissension between siblings in the YHHs**

YHHs expressed themselves on what they think can be done in order to help sibling-headed families so that they no longer live in serious conflict/ dissension. What they need are economic assistance, and psychosocial support. Participants need economic assistance to be helped to come out of poverty. They need to be approached by counsellors and advisers and they need advocacy. Heads of household said that they needed advice, counselling, advocacy and adult guidance. They need to be approached regularly by leaders, neighbours and friends. This can help them, especially to those who are very young yet, to overcome the lack of role models, as they put it. It would also help to deal with the feeling of be marginalized within community structures.

### **3.6 Actions to be taken**

There is an urgent need for siblings in YHHs to be specifically approached by counsellors and advisers and an urgent need for advocacy. Mentoring intervention is relatively low cost, and it has been shown to be effective in varying settings (Dubois et al.2002). Successful mentoring programs may also help to renew social interconnectedness in Rwanda (Boris et al. 2006).

Specific structures may need to be put in place to deal with all YHHs issues in their daily life and regulation. Judging from this research, it seems to be very important to set up laws recognizing the existence of YHHs, legislating their rights and duties in the same was as the laws covering other kinds of family and dealing with YHH

property. In a country that has a high number of YHHs (UNICEF 2009; Lee 2012) that will probably go on increasing because traditional foster care is declining.

This research suggests that it could be important to set up a national and specific structure that may deal with all YHHs issues in their daily life. The specific structure should go with setting up a special channel of effective advocacy for YHHs. There is no specific institution for YHHs; YHHs do not have anywhere where they can find specific advocacy (Clinique Juridique 2003); to put it in place would help support YHHs in solving their daily difficulties, including those related to conflict/dissension, and their consequences for the healthy life.

These YHHs constitute a new kind of alternative family with a new and specific structure, and members are special in terms of social and demographical characteristics, that need official recognition and the rights associated with that recognition. The specific structure and special channel to deal with YHHs issues would need a specific regulation giving to the same rights enjoyed by normal or traditional family. These will enable siblings in YHH families to have the same entitlement to socio-economic support -e.g. V2020 *Umurenge* program (this is one of the strategies programs to fight against the poverty in Rwanda) - as 'normal' families, and thus to come out of the poverty that is one of the causes of conflict/dissension.

YHHs should have training in family responsibilities. As there are roles that are played in the YHHs as alternative families, it would be good to offer special education about parenthood and about family management in general, especially to the heads of the YHHs.

The main aspects - signs, causes, and consequences - of conflict/dissension are present even in traditional families and in other types of alternative families. The YHHs in general and those living in conflict/dissension are different, however, in that no adult member of any other family will say that he/she needs "adult support" to solve their problems related to conflict/dissension. This means that they are aware of their weaknesses as young people. On the other hand, they have demonstrated their capacity to cope with life events and, through that, their resilience in the face of unfavourable situations such as being orphan, and not only an orphan, but an orphan without adult presence in their family life.

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