

REFLECTIONS OF ADULT CHILDREN RAISED IN FEMALE-HEADED FAMILIES

**KEYWORDS:** adult children, female headed families, mothers, perseverance, resilience, survival strategies

WK Mabelane ORCID iD is 0000-0002-1543-3349

MDM Makofane ORCID iD is 0000-0002-2382-8471

NP Kgadima ORCID iD is 0000-0002-6385-5378

*Ms Winnie Keatlegile Mabelane, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.*

*Prof. Mankwane Daisy M. Makofane, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.*

*Dr Nathaniel Phuti Kgadima, Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.*

Winnie K. Mabelane, Mankwane DM Makofane, Nathaniel P. Kgadima

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The literature indicates that children growing up in female-headed families are at risk of experiencing social problems, lower academic achievement and delinquent behaviour. A qualitative exploratory-descriptive study was conducted to gain insight into the perspectives of adult children who grew up in female-headed families. Purposive and snowball sampling were utilised to recruit suitable participants. Data from 12 participants aged between 25 and 35 years revealed the strengths of these families, which are often overlooked and downplayed. The findings show that the participants developed independence and self-reliance emanating from their mothers' survival strategies, resilience and perseverance.



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### INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of children are brought up in female-headed families, which have become a major element within society, locally and globally (Statistics South Africa, 2015:10; Lesetedi, 2018:194). In the USA, prior to the 1970s, almost 90% of all children lived with both their biological parents until they reached adulthood, but this number has declined, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of female-headed families (McLanahan & Schwartz, 2002:36; Cancian & Haskins, 2014:35). Approximately 50.4% of children in the USA are now growing up in female-headed families (United States Census Bureau, 2009; Tucker & Lowell, 2016:3). In Sub-Saharan Africa, although family structures differ across race and ethnicity, there has also been a substantial increase in the number of female-headed families. In 2011 46% of families in Botswana were headed by women, with more than 60% of children growing up in these families (Akinsola & Popovich, 2002:762). Subsequently, the number of children growing up in female-headed families increased to an alarming 78% (Malinga & Ntshwarang, 2011:1). South Africa has also witnessed an increase in the number of female-headed families. In 2009 31.2% were recorded, followed by 39.4% in 2011, and 41.36% 2015 (Statistics South Africa, 2009:13; 2011:6, 2015:10). However, these figures do not provide a breakdown of such families resulting from divorce, widowhood or mothers who never married.

There is a plethora of literature on these families and various factors account for their increase. One key reason for the formation of this family type is the escalating rate of divorce and separation in marriage (Kpoor, 2014:1960). Other reasons include cohabitation, desertion, death of a father, and women who by choice decide to be single mothers “in order to gain a sense of independence and efficacy” (Kpoor, 2014:1961).

Most previous research on female-headed families focused on negative consequences, partly because researchers were inclined to proceed from the family-deficit perspective, which views families headed by females as pathological, labelling them as “broken or disrupted” (Uchenna, 2013:112). The literature compares female-headed families with the ideal two-parent families and shows that children from female-headed families struggle on a wide range of indicators such as their economic standing, behaviour, health, academic performance and relationships with significant others (East, Jackson & O’Brien, 2007:14; McLanahan, Tach & Scheider, 2013:340; Amato, Patterson & Beattie, 2015:191).

The wellbeing of children from female-headed families is threatened by extreme levels of poverty and economic hardships inherent in these families (Zeiders, Roosa & Tein, 2011:78). In many instances mothers have limited education and experience, and therefore find themselves working in low-paying jobs which leave them on the verge of poverty (DeFina, 2008:156). Studies report that, compared to children born in two-parent families, children in female-headed families tend to indulge in sexual relations early in their lives, which has serious implications such as unplanned pregnancy and contracting sexually transmitted infections (Simons, Burt & Tambling, 2013:460).

However, other researchers have reported contradictory results on the effects of female-headed families on children. Usakli (2013:262), for instance, conducted a study on children from female-headed families and children from two-parent families to measure their competence and self-esteem. It was evident from the study that children from female-headed families perform as competently as their two-parent peers, and in some instances outperform their counterparts. Although children who are raised in female-headed families are vulnerable, some authors contend that not all children from these households are prone to low educational grades (Hofmeyr, 2018:3). Similarly, Leung and Shek (2018:2535) challenge the hypothesis of the “pathology of patriarchy” in studying the relationship between female-headed families and educational achievement, and hold the view that female-headed families do not have any effect on educational achievement. Additionally, it is recognised and acknowledged that educated mothers are better equipped to offer skills and advice on how to cope with life events and boost their children’s sense of control (Booth, Scott & King, 2010:590). It should be noted that contradictory research results show that children do not necessarily need both parents for psychological wellbeing and positive outcomes (McLanahan *et al.*, 2013:418). Furthermore, children whose parents remained single were less likely to present with behavioural problems as they experienced less parental conflict than children from two-parent families.

The narrative that female-headed families lack social and economic support is rigorously disputed by Schatz, Madhavan and Williams (2011:599) as children often spend periods of time living with other families, usually the maternal grandparents, who provide social and economic support. Grandparents are regarded as the “heroic figures” of the female-headed families as they are instrumental in improving the family’s financial resources with assistance in the upkeep of the family (Sun & Li, 2014:1443). Grandparents also assist in the physical care of children (Sun & Li, 2014:1443). Boys rely on their maternal uncles who are father figures in their lives (Richardson, 2009:1042). Their role represents a valuable strategy in preventing delinquency and violent behaviour among young males.

The study by Golombok and Badger (2009:154) revealed that single mothers often have an intense level of emotional involvement with their children and maintain a stricter role within the home. In addition, single mothers and children negotiate and share close and exclusive relationships, including the maintenance of a clear distinction between parent-child roles (Nixon, Greene & Hogan, 2012:146).

Much attention has been paid to the negative outcomes usually associated with living in female-headed families, but the experience of growing up in a female-headed family from the perspective of the adult child has not been thoroughly explored (Nixon, Greene & Hogan, 2015:1046). Hence, this study was conducted to fill this gap in the literature. Considering the prevalence of female-headed families, it is crucial for social workers to understand the perspectives of adult children from female-headed families in order to provide services and assistance that will improve their psychosocial wellbeing (Walsh, 2012:3).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Social work practice emphasises tapping into the strengths and resources of people and their environment in realising its goal of helping to address the social and economic needs and injustices they face (Guo & Tsui, 2010:234). The strengths perspective discourages the use of a deficit-based approach that assigns disempowering labels to individuals, categorising them in terms of pathology (Saleebey, 2006:197). Therefore, this approach turns the focus from personal defects, deficits and disease to the discovery of strengths and the identification of risk and protective factors. Inherent in the strengths perspective are

various elements that can be applied to families. The family strengths perspective aims to identify factors that contribute to the family's wellbeing across diverse cultural settings (Raffaelli & Wiley, 2012:350). Families are defined as unique, possessing traits, talents and resources that translate into strengths (DeFrain & Asay, 2007:449). The strengths of families render them resilient in periods of adversity; therefore, social workers must cultivate and enhance the strengths of their service users (Smith, 2006:16). Furthermore, the strengths perspective helps social workers learn a new critical language of strengths and positive human qualities that are often unrecognised, unnamed and unacknowledged in the helping process (Guo & Tsui, 2010:235). Therefore, the assessment of female-headed families from a strengths perspective offers family members an opportunity to discover their inner strengths and enhance their potential and abilities to recover from adversity.

The comparison between the traditional two-parent and the female-headed families led some scholars to underestimate the strengths inherent in the latter (Harris, 2013:387). This belief was entrenched by the fact that previous research conducted on female-headed families proceeded from the pathological view. Hence, images of teenage pregnancy, matriarchal households, absent fathers, identity crises and poverty were combined to construct female-headed families as damaged and dysfunctional. It is on this basis that the strengths perspective was adopted as appropriate for the study as it transforms the professional relationship of social workers and service users from an unequal dyad to an equal, collaborative partnership for problem solving.

### RESEARCH QUESTION AND GOAL

The research was guided by the following question: What are the experiences of adult children who grew up in female-headed families? The research goal was to explore and describe the experiences of adult children who grew up in female-headed families.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative explorative-descriptive research facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 12 participants who met the criteria for inclusion. Adults aged between 25 and 35 years who grew up in female-headed families in Pretoria (Gauteng) and were willing to take part in the study were recruited. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed following Tesch's eight steps (outlined in Creswell, 2009:186). The researcher and the independent coder analysed data independently and reached similar conclusions regarding the themes and subthemes that emerged.

### Biographical profiles of the participants

Twelve adults from Pretoria participated in the study. Their profiles are presented in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

P	Gender	Age	Marital status and children	Qualification	Employed
K	Male	34	Married for 11 years, 1 child	BA Degree	Yes
L	Female	34	Divorced for 4 years, 2 children	BA Degree	Yes
M	Female	33	Single	BA Degree	Yes
N	Male	33	Single	Diploma	Yes
O	Female	32	Single, 2 children	BA Degree	Yes
P	Female	32	Single, 1 child	Diploma	Yes
Q	Female	32	Single, 1 child	Certificate	Yes
R	Female	30	Married for 6 years, 2 children	Diploma	No
S	Female	28	Single, 1 child	Grade 10	Yes
T	Female	26	Single	BA Degree	Yes
U	Male	26	Single	Grade 12	No
V	Female	25	Single, 2 children	Grade 12	No

Nine females and three males aged between 25 and 35 years, with an average age of 30 years, participated in the study. Their psychosocial development fits Erik Erickson's sixth stage of intimacy versus isolation in which young adults (18 to 35 years) begin blending their identities with those of friends (Corey, 2014:65). When individuals lack a strong sense of identity at this stage, they are likely to have difficulty in forming and maintaining lasting relationships. Nine participants were single at the time of the interviews, which may be attributable to the delay in marriage in order to advance careers and become financially secure (Hewitt & Baxter, 2011:45). Two participants were married and one was divorced. A total of eight participants had children; five women participants had children outside marriage. This picture seems to validate the notion that women who grew up in female-headed families were also more likely to raise their children without partners (Pougnnet, Serbin, Stack, Ledingham & Schwartzman, 2012:550).

Despite the generally held belief that children in female-headed families perform poorly academically and are likely to drop out of school (Harcourt, Adler-Baeder, Erath & Pettit, 2013:2), this assertion was disproved as five participants had Bachelor's degrees, three had diplomas, one had a college certificate, two were students both in their final year at university, and only one had not passed matric (Grade 12). Of the 12 participants, nine were employed and only one was looking for employment. This finding refutes the view that children from female-headed families have trouble finding and keeping a job due to the lack of a father figure in their lives (McLanahan & Schwartz, 2002:37). Instead, they have proved to be self-reliant.

### **Presentation of themes and subthemes**

Three themes and six subthemes (Table 2) emerged from data analysis on the perceptions and experiences of adult children who grew up in female-headed families.

**TABLE 2**  
**THEMES, SUBTHEMES, AND CATEGORIES**

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: The participants' descriptions of their childhood experiences	
Theme 2: The participants' specific experiences related to being raised in a female-headed family	2.1: Absence of the father in participants' lives 2.2: Resilience of the mother in a female-headed family 2.3: Strengths of growing up in a female-headed family 2.4: Challenges of growing up in a female-headed family
Theme 3: Support system in female-headed families	3.1: Spiritual support 3.2: Extended family support

### **Theme 1: The participants' descriptions of their childhood backgrounds**

The fluidity and diversity that marked the participants' views in their interpretation of a family reveal complex and dynamic experiences of the roles of mothers and other family members. Such perspectives are contrary to those which purport that family life revolves around a mother and a father, who are married to each other, and their biological or legally adopted children. The participants' family backgrounds shed light on their family composition, living arrangements, upbringing, as well as their general wellbeing while growing up.

While eight participants lived predominantly with their mothers in townships, only four lived with their grandmothers in rural areas. Nine participants were living with extended family members. The participants outlined a wide variety of family types when describing their family composition and living arrangements.

Female-headed families have different demographic characteristics and their composition varies significantly from one family to another (Amoateng & Kalule-Sabiti, 2008:98). This is attributable to

the social process affecting the formation of female-headed families. Studies conducted in Iowa (USA) found that many children were living with extended families/relatives and only a few were living in exclusively female-headed families (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman & Cutrona, 2010:469). Often a woman is likely to seek shelter at her parental home until she can practically and emotionally afford to establish her own. Another study shows the vital role played by grandmothers in the upbringing of young African women (Makofane, 2015). This is consistent with the fact that members of female-headed families spend periods of time living with other families, usually the parental home of the mother (Kelch-Oliver, 2011:77). However, urbanisation and industrialisation have led to a reduction in the occurrence of extended families in African rural communities due to the migration of women, and their children who remain with them, to towns and cities where they seek employment.

## **Theme 2: The participants' specific experiences of being raised in female-headed families**

Female-headed families have been, and in some instances still are, associated with a negative impact on children, who by all accounts experience an array of problems on a wide range of indicators such as health, education and economic status. The participants' understanding of their families and how they experienced their world as members of these families are discussed below.

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Absence of the father in the participants' lives***

Five participants who knew their fathers articulated their need to understand the circumstances around their fathers' lack of involvement in their lives. They needed to fully comprehend the reasons and contexts of their absence and had many unanswered questions. Although the participants expressed the need to communicate with their fathers, they did not show an interest in initiating and maintaining a relationship with them.

*"As I grew up I wanted to know and gain an understanding of my father's whereabouts. I was told by my grandmother that he had problems with my mom when she was pregnant with me and he then left her."* (Female, 32 years)

*"I think if I were to meet him, one question that I would ask would be: why did you leave me?"* (Female, 28 years)

*"I am not sure if I still want to go back there and start and maintain a relationship with him. I think just knowing him will be good enough and maybe just to ask him a few questions...why didn't you come back? What happened? What did I do wrong?"* (Female, 26 years)

The findings are consistent with those of Makofane's (2015:34) study in which participants showed no interest in forming relationships with their absent fathers. For instance, one participant considered her father "as dead" by saying: *"I feel that he is such a coward and irresponsible father. So, he is dead and buried to me."* However, this narrative is in contrast to other findings in which adult children hoped to meet their fathers and establish meaningful relationships with them (East *et al.*, 2007:17).

Even though some (five) participants needed an explanation as to the reasons their fathers were not involved in their lives, they accepted explanations from their mothers who had told them the reasons that led to the break-up with their fathers.

*"Mama told us that daddy has moved on with another woman and that we would not see him anymore. I felt shattered and ended up looking down on myself."* (Female, 32 years)

The same sentiments were expressed by a participant in another study who associated her low self-esteem with being abandoned by her father (Makofane, 2015:33). There is a strong view that a father's presence or absence shapes the way daughters think about themselves, their relationships and the world as a whole (Freeks, 2017:93). As a result of the close relationship that is characterised by pure trust, the participants accepted their mothers' explanations and were able to move on with their lives.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Resilience of the mother in a female-headed family***

Resilience denotes the capacity to overcome adversity or to thrive despite challenges (Power, Goodyear, Maybery, Reupert, O'Hanlon, Cuff & Perlesz, 2015:2). It is often associated with factors such as personality characteristics, or access to resources and support. These factors include, among others, positive self-esteem, strong coping skills, optimism, strong social resources, adaptability, perseverance and a high tolerance of uncertainty (Ledesma, 2014:1). There is evidence of the resilience of mothers in female-headed families and their ability to demonstrate positive responses to adverse situations.

Despite many challenges encountered in their journey of growing up in female-headed families, the majority (10) of the participants reported a sense of pride in their mothers for being able to overcome and endure hardship. They acknowledged that they did not grow up in the best of situations, but appreciate their mothers for providing for them and ensuring that they could thrive, even in dire situations.

*“The resilience and persistence that my mother and grandmother were blessed with as well as the strength and discipline that they had always surprised me...there was always a plan. I always say when things are not okay, my grandmother would have worked out a plan right there and there, my mother would have done something...you know...I always draw strength from that even when I feel things are not going the way they are supposed to. I'm like, come on...I've seen my mother, grandmother hustling basically, so that is one thing I always draw strength from and say you know what?...those women were very strong...for me. The way they did things has really benefitted me greatly.”* (Male, 33 years)

*“My mother has a sense of responsibility. I think my mother would have been bitter if she was somebody else, having to raise a child alone when the other parent is alive and healthy. My mom was not bitter at all, she never really complained about her situation. So for me...that is why I am not the kind of guy to whine a lot because I was exposed to that environment where you need to find an alternative where there is none. There were always means of doing something in that house, you know...so I think if I can have half of the courage she had, I will go far in life.”* (Male, 34 years)

The findings show the strengths that young male participants drew from their mothers' and grandmother's upbringing, which will have a lasting impact on their lives. Although some authors stated that many mothers heading families were in low-paying jobs, they were nonetheless able to stretch available resources to make the best of a dire situation (Elliot, Powell & Brenton, 2015:353). Similarly, it was found that mothers heading families were experienced in developing strategies for survival and meeting their families' needs under difficult circumstances (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei & Williamson, 2004:165). The view of mothers fulfilling the roles of both mother and father is a strength that suggests an awareness of the duality of a mother's parenting responsibilities.

Because they were working in low-paying jobs, the mothers of the participants found it difficult to meet the material needs of their children, but that did not deter them from bringing out the best in their children. The following narratives are based on the participants' reflections on how they lacked basic necessities and the lengths their mothers would go to in order to provide for them.

*“We [the participant and her siblings] would wake up in the morning without having breakfast, go to school and have nothing during lunch...We'll just drink water and go back to class. Back home in the afternoon, we would find that mama made a plan to put something on the table for us to eat.”* (Female, 32 years)

*“I remember at some point when my mom was laid off from work, with seven children, it was not easy; we had to live on what she could bring home each day. She made sure that we never went to bed on an empty stomach.”* (Female, 26 years)



These experiences support an African (Sepedi) adage that says, *Mma o tswara thipa ka bogaleng*: “a mother holds the sharpest part (blade) of a knife.” A figurative translation means that mothers will do everything within their power and go to great lengths to protect and provide for their children. These experiences resonate with the finding that single mothers work twice as hard as a two-parent family to put food on the table and to ensure a safe environment for their children (Meier, Musick, Flood & Dunifon, 2016:669). Mothers’ hard work provides financial and emotional security in uncertain economic times, but can nonetheless be satisfying and rewarding.

While it has been widely reported that the mother’s next of kin usually help by taking care of the children (Kpoor, 2014:1967; Sun & Li, 2014:1443), one participant related how her mother single-handedly met the financial needs of the entire extended family.

*“I grew up in a family where my mother was the breadwinner for the whole family. My aunt was not working and my mother was working as a domestic worker.”* (Female, 33 years)

Researchers report that financial deprivation in female-headed families is prevalent and it is a common explanation for children’s poor cognitive development and consequently poor academic achievement in school (Sun & Li, 2014:1441). However, the outcome of this study does not support this view because, despite the lack of resources, participants clearly performed relatively well academically (cf. Table 1). The participants’ experiences are similar to those expressed by women raising their children alone, that their maternal capabilities bring them pride and positively reinforce the sense that they are good mothers (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015:453).

### ***Subtheme 2.3: Strengths of growing up in a female-headed family***

The participants shared the strengths inherent in their families as well as valuable lessons they had learned growing up in female-headed families in the face of adversity. Furthermore, the narratives illustrate how participants capitalised on these lessons and strengths.

A sense of independence and self-reliance was experienced by five participants after seeing their mothers succeed in raising them single-handedly.

*“The realisation that as a woman I am capable of doing anything I want and not to rely on any man, but just as me standing alone...I don’t need to draw anybody in my equation. If I need help I can ask but personally, I am capable of doing anything I want and also the fact that I am the driver of my destiny.”* (Female, 32 years)

*“I think I have become one young lady who is strong emotionally and otherwise. I feel it was a motivation for me to grow up without a father because maybe if I had a father I would be spoilt and would not have taken my education seriously...If I did not get educated, I would be expanding a circle of growing up without a father and that of destitution. So for me, his absence was a motivation for me to really work hard and get out of this circle of destitution.”* (Female, 26 years)

*“What I have realised with me and what I have seen on my horoscope is that I love to be independent. Very independent...but...as I was growing up, I told myself to focus on my career, buy a house and build on my wealth. I did not count on marriage because I wanted to rely on myself. I came alone on this planet and I wanted to have the necessary means to raise my children. You understand...I love to be independent...As I am sitting with you now, I knew that one day I must go and find my own place to stay. So...yeah! I do not want to depend on anyone.”* (Female, 32 years)

*“I have learned to stand up for myself and not wait for somebody to come and do things for me because there are situations in life that require one to stand and do something. Coming from a female-headed family, I just grew up seeing my mom and grandma working so hard to ensure our wellbeing, so I grew up with the same ethic that they had. My situation has taught me to work for myself, though it is not bad for other people to say I can marry a rich man who*

*would do things for me, but for me it has taught me that I don't have to marry a rich man, I can be a rich woman myself and it has taught me to be a hard worker, more than anything else.” (Female, 34 years)*

*“I look at how well my mother has raised all her children, for me the influence on me is that I can make it in life...when you grow up without a dad who would stand up for you any moment when you are bullied, you learn to stand up for yourself the whole time. You know that if you do not stand up for yourself, no one would.” (Male, 34 years)*

The participants drew strength from their challenges as they turned adversity into opportunity, and took advantage of these opportunities to determine their own destiny. The participants' accounts resemble the lived personal stories of single mothers who described how their children negotiated greater independence and self-sufficiency (Clark, Stedmon & Margison, 2008:576). Similarly, the autonomy and self-reliance of the children in female-headed families were found to be useful to get ahead in society, mothers encouraged their children to become independent and self-sufficient (Keller, Borke, Yovsi, Lohaus & Jensen, 2005:34). The participants' accounts differ from the finding in the literature that children in female-headed families are likely to drop out of school, be expelled or suspended, or to repeat a grade (Mudyen & Lee, 2010:445). Instead, the participants in this study viewed their family situation as a source of inspiration to remain focused on achieving their life goals, regardless of any challenges.

Seven participants also shared how the difficulties that they had to contend with turned into opportunities for personal growth and development, as they felt comfort and pride in their mothers' caregiving abilities. Inspiration and motivation also dominated their descriptions of the strong points they acquired throughout this journey.

*“When I look at her [mother], she is a perfect example of a go-getter. She might not have been able to achieve her goals as quickly as she wanted, but she stayed in the game and she would say its fine, this is the goal that I want to achieve, at the end I will get there although it might take time but I will push and succeed. So that is what I have drawn from my situation.” (Female, 32 years)*

*“When you lack certain things in life that serve as an encouragement for you to work hard because you know that if you do not, you might end up having nothing.” (Male, 34 years)*

*“It has just taught me that as women, we have so much strength within us....you know....my grandmother raising us, and she was there for all of us...and I look at my mother as well, providing for all her children. For me the influence that they had on me is that I can make it in life as a woman. Yes, there are many challenges in life but I can succeed.” (Female, 33 years)*

Through their efforts to coach and create supportive family environments, mothers in female-headed families displayed a variety of coping strategies that their children could emulate. The messages that the participants received from their life situations came in the form of concrete examples, as described by a participant in another study who stated that *“she [her mother] showed me what it was to be a strong African-American woman, you know, and not relying on the resources of what the world offers”* (Everet, Marks & Clarke-Mitchell, 2016:344). Furthermore, mothers recognised the importance of teaching their children to be comfortable within themselves, to acknowledge their inner strengths, and to draw from such strengths to persevere and survive.

Family cohesion emerged very strongly from the participants' accounts as they shared how their mothers endeavoured to create loving relationships and interaction among all family members.

*“Although we were struggling financially, we grew up well because our mom taught us to look out for one another as siblings. When I am sick, I know for sure that my sisters and*

*brothers are there for me. So there was that cohesion amongst us, that emotional bond within us...regardless of our circumstances.” (Female, 26 years)*

*“Cohesiveness and unity that was in the family were amazing. My mom would say as she was a religious person, she would tell us that it is not about what you have or can do, it is about the unity that we have. We might not have everything in the family but because of this unity, the neighbours in the community would never point at us and say these people do not have much. But the unity that we had was strong and kept us going.” (Male, 26 years)*

It is reported that mothers in female-headed families engage in routines of spending more time with their children as a family to facilitate an ongoing process of enhancing cohesion and instilling values to foster family growth and evolution (Moriarty & Wagner, 2004:203). In a study by Lashley (2014:3), mothers alluded to the importance of family cohesion by participating in their children’s activities so that they were not disadvantaged in any way. Furthermore, the mothers mentioned that providing time and activities guaranteed their children's connectedness to the family unit.

Resilience emerged as a strong element that enabled the participants to overcome challenges in their lives. Resilience is the capacity to change, adapt and grow in spite of ongoing stress or adversity (Brown, Howcroft & Muthen, 2010:339). It is the ability to successfully cope with stress and recover from difficult situations. In a study by Hong and Welch (2013:54), a mother raising her children alone described resilience figuratively as follows: *“It is better to be like a blade of grass, its roots are strong and although the leaf bends with the wind it does not break.”* Some participants developed a strong character from their experiences which helps them resist external pressure.

*“I am not easily influenced and that is because of the circumstances that I have been through at home. I grew up in a family where our mom was always trying to instil a positive outlook on life and to be content with what we had. We learned to accept our family situation and not try to be like others. So when I have friends I am not easily influenced because I was taught to accept myself and my situation from a young age.” (Female, 32 years)*

*“My circumstances have made me a responsible person, to be firm and to stand up for myself. In 2013 I learned that I am HIV-positive, so when I found out, I did not cry like other people when they find out that they are HIV-positive. I told myself that I know the circumstances where I come from. I am not going to succumb to this status. I grew up struggling and I am not going to let it add to my struggles. I will put HIV aside and live my life the way I want to.” (Female, 25 years)*

The findings showed the participants’ ability to regain a state of equilibrium in the face of adversity in order to sustain and enhance their day-to-day functioning. The resilience in children from female-headed families is attributed to the elasticity of spirit that their mothers have demonstrated in confronting hardships in their lives, and their ability to recover from adverse situations (Nikolova, Small & Mengo, 2015:488). Children from even the most dysfunctional or resource-deprived families manage not only to survive but also forge decent lives for themselves (Goodman, Lloyd, Selwyn, Morgan, Mwongera, Gitari & Keiser, 2015:15). The participant who articulated how she dealt with her HIV-positive status indicates the strong character she has developed through her positive emotions. Thus, resilience within female-headed families can be utilised by social workers to help them realise their strengths and to view difficulties as stepping stones to achieve optimal family functioning.

The participants are committed and dedicated to making a positive impact on their children’s lives.

*“My relationship with my child is very strong because I do not want my child to grow in my absence in whatever way. So my background has really contributed positively and has made me to love and appreciate a family.” (Male, 34 years)*

*“When I had my first child, I started looking at life through a different lens and was more focussed on completing my university qualification so that I could give him a better future.”*  
(Female, 32 years)

The participants’ experiences cultivated a determination to develop a healthy relationship with and to provide the best for their own children. Similarly, participants in another study revealed that they want what is best for their children and would protect them from growing up the way they did (Makofane, 2015:33). The first excerpt challenges the most publicised notion that men who grew up in absent-father homes are unlikely to get involved in the upbringing of their own children (Pougnnet *et al.*, 2012:552).

Upon reflecting on how the family situation has affected their relationships with other people, participants shared that:

*“Coming from that family has taught me to adapt to different situations, so it was easier for me to relate and cope with people of different characters.”* (Female, 26 years)

*“I don’t have issues meeting new people. When I get into a room full of people I don’t shy away and sit alone in a corner or something.”* (Female, 34 years)

These experiences challenge previous findings that children growing up in female-headed families have lower self-esteem and struggle to form and maintain relationships (Harper & McLanahan, 2004:395). On the contrary, the findings show that participants are assertive, confident and ready to confront work-related challenges.

Single mothers teach their children about self-worth and value while growing up (Everet *et al.*, 2016:343).

*“I was raised in a manner that when I don’t like certain things in a relationship, I speak out about them and if there is no change, I simply move on with my life.”* (Female, 33 years)

The independence that some adult children who were raised in female-headed families have enabled them to move away from unfulfilling intimate relationships (Keller *et al.*, 2005:34). This finding resonates with that by Lashley (2014:6), that single mothers impart a sense of pride in their children irrespective of their family background in order to negotiate and maintain fruitful relationships. The independence and self-determination exercised by individuals who grew up in female-headed families is a strength that would enable them to determine and foster healthy, intimate relationships.

#### ***Subtheme 2.4: Challenges of growing up in female-headed families***

The strengths perspective emphasises individuals’ assets rather than their deficits or problems (Peacock, Forbes, Markle-Reid, Hawranik, Morgan, Jansen, Leipert & Henderson, 2010:642). However, negative experiences or challenges are not ignored; they are acknowledged as part of the individual’s personal experiences and are used to focus on the individual’s strengths (Black, 2003:341). The participants’ challenges are highlighted in this section focusing on the current day-to-day challenges as a result of growing up in female-headed families.

Regardless of the successes and opportunities mentioned by the participants, they nonetheless seem to feel deserted by their fathers. Eleven participants expressed pain and discontentment as they are of the view that their fathers deliberately chose not to form part in their lives.

*“My father has caused me a lot of pain because he would have been there for me if he wanted to.”* (Female, 26 years)

*“It is somewhat painful. I am always wondering whether my life would have been different if he was there for me.”* (Female, 28 years)

*“I remember a time when we were still renting a flat with my husband, he did something that I thought was terrible to me and I felt extremely...extremely angry. The first time he*

*disappointed me, I was crashed...I pushed our son over the balcony and he was injured. My son was removed from my care and I was admitted to a psychiatric clinic for about four months, and through counselling I discovered that I had a lot of unresolved issues from my childhood and they were creeping into my adult life and influencing how I handle situations around me.” (Female, 30 years)*

The same was true of participants in another study; their narratives were replete with descriptions of abandonment, hurt, resentment, anger, pain and feelings of being unloved (East *et al.*, 2007:16). Another study also revealed that a father’s absence left some participants emotionally wounded as they felt lost, unloved, rejected and betrayed by their unreliable fathers (Makofane, 2015:31). Such feelings can have adverse effects on the emotional wellbeing of children growing up in the absence of their fathers. McLanahan *et al.* (2013:411) contend that fathers who abandon their children may leave them with emotional wounds that may result in fear of rejection and betrayal. Such fears could, however, develop a strong character that can act as a defence mechanism and a shield against disappointment.

### **THEME 3: SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR FEMALE-HEADED FAMILIES**

This theme outlines the support system from which female-headed families gain strength and courage. The spiritual and social functions are brought about by the social networks in which the family participates (Kebede & Butterfield, 2004:358). Richardson, Johnson and St Vil (2014:493) posit that support systems are effective in diminishing or countering stress, reducing isolation, supporting life changes, and providing role models, information and resources.

#### ***Subtheme 3.1: Spiritual support***

Nine participants found solace and strength in God (Supreme Being), the fundamental teachings of the Bible and role models in church. Their belief in God was a source of meaning and inner peace that brought feelings of comfort and optimism.

*“Look, from my mother’s side it was difficult to get support from her family. She was the first born of five girls, we have no uncles and her mother was the second wife, so it was also tough for our grandmother. The thing that supported me was the church because at the time when I was doing Grade 7, I had started going to church and I feel that it really played an important role in my upbringing. It also relieved her from stress because that meant I spent less time on the streets with friends, and my younger brother also followed me. We completed matric and life started to change for the better.” (Male, 34 years)*

*“Teachings from the Bible, teachings that I got from the church and the relationships I developed with the children of God. When you look at the people who have a close relationship with God and are successful, it motivates you in such a way that you want to be closer to God so that you can be successful as well.” (Female, 30 years)*

*“The church played an important role because as you know within the church there are get-togethers established for women, you see...women of prayer...those were the women who were always supportive to mama through prayers and also with material things like toiletries. They would visit just to check on us. If there were church trips that we could not afford, they would pay for us and even buy us food and make sure that we are not different from the others because we do not have money.” (Female, 26 years)*

It was evident from Lashley’s (2014:5) study that the church was an important part of the lives of participants in that it brought meaning and engendered a sense of belonging in times of need. Similarly, a participant described her reliance on faith and the relief that came with support received from people at the church (Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012:198). This form of support is connected to the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Meiring (2015:8) states that the language of *ubuntu* has a lot in common with the language of the Christian Bible. The Old Testament prophets taught about care for the widow, orphans and the poor, and the whole Bible emphasises the value of generosity. It is argued that both *ubuntu* and

Christianity stress the significance of life together and relationships between people (Nell, 2017:7). The ability for churches to form and retain strong links with family members in female-headed families is important over time and should be seen as a resource and strength for social workers to draw from during practice.

Three participants observed cultural rituals as part of their spiritual practice to find comfort and peace in the midst of challenges. Those who did not know their paternal history and had no contact with their fathers were of the view that they were disadvantaged, considering that certain rituals had to be performed to prevent misfortune and to allow them to prosper in life.

*“When things were not going well at home, we would call upon the ancestors to intervene but there are things that require the attention of your paternal aunt. How would you know your aunt when you don’t even know your father? Through consultation with traditional healers at times you learn that the ancestors want certain rituals to be performed to appease them. Only the paternal aunt can help in such matters, otherwise misfortune blocks your success in life.”*  
(Female, 28 years)

Some Africans practise ancestral worship founded on the belief that the dead live on and are capable of influencing the existence of the living (Bogopa, 2010:1). It is believed that ancestors are capable of either blessing or cursing the living (Munthali, 2006:368). This finding concurs with Makofane’s (2015:33) study in which participants shared that some of their cultures require that a special ritual ceremony should be performed by the paternal family to welcome the birth of a child and introduce him/her to the ancestors. The process of ancestral worship takes place in the form of a lifecycle, from birth to death (Mokgobi, 2014:26). There are certain ritual ceremonies that cannot be performed without a particular relative who should fulfil certain obligations (Bogopa, 2010:2) such as paternal aunts, as indicated by some participants in this study. It is believed that failure to perform certain rituals in honour of the ancestors may bring about health-related problems and general misfortune in life (Berg, 2003:196). This aspect calls for social workers’ understanding, acknowledgement and appreciation of the service users’ cultural needs in order to provide them with culturally congruent services.

### ***Subtheme 3.2: Extended family support***

Extended family support has been characterised by concepts such as proximity, frequency of interactions, closeness and mutual assistance (Weisz, Quinn & Williams, 2015:8). Extended families play a critical role in the context of female-headed families. For instance, mothers in female-headed families use the support of extended families in the maintenance of their children (Taylor *et al.*, 2010:469). Conversely, some extended family members may become a source of stress to these mothers rather than offer support, as the relationship may not be characterised by reciprocity (Taylor, Forsythe-Brown, Lincoln & Chatters, 2017:538).

Ten participants shared their experiences of the support they received from their extended families, and the extent to which the family were involved in helping them to cope successfully with stressors associated with female-headed families.

*“My uncle who passed away cared so much about us, although he could not buy us things such as clothes, he tried his best. When you lacked something at school...he would give you money and also gave advice on relationships and what to look out for in a life partner, things that we could not discuss with our father as he was not there. Many times, we would call him and he would come running to help. We all relied on him.”* (Female, 32 years)

*“When mama was coming home late, my uncle and aunt would come to check whether we have already started preparing supper, when we don’t have money to buy bread, they would give us the money and mama would reimburse them when she came back.”* (Female, 32 years)

*“Generally, the burden is just too much for any mother raising her children alone. In my situation, my mom had the support from her family. She would wake up very early in the morning to go to work, but she didn’t worry about what’s going to happen to me. My uncle would leave a bit later so he would wake me up for school. When I came back from school, there was always someone in the house to look after me, so I think to a certain extent that made her life easier, she had a support system.”* (Male, 33 years)

In Michigan, USA, extended families are regarded as a viable form of support because the female-headed family does not live and function in isolation but in extended family situations (Taylor, Forsythe-Brown, Taylor & Chatters, 2014:148). African female-headed families also enjoy support from extended families in raising children. In African cultures the maternal uncle plays a critical kinship role (Madhavan & Roy, 2012:803). A mother's brother must be consulted in all matters affecting his sister's children (Richardson, 2009:1042). Furthermore, he helps with food and clothing, and acts as mediator when disputes arise within the family. He also has power when children's marriages are arranged.

## **DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to explore the retrospective accounts of adult children who grew up in female-headed families. The participants shed light on the diversity inherent in the structure of female-headed families. The narratives revealed that such families have different demographic characteristics that vary significantly.

All 12 participants grew up in the absence of their fathers as a result of desertion. Some of the participants were angry because their fathers did not show an interest in them and failed to initiate and maintain relationships with their children. They nonetheless articulated the desire to understand their fathers' reasons for not being involved in their lives, although they accepted their mothers' explanations that led to the dissolution of parental relationships. However, others are still harbouring a sense of abandonment and desertion by their fathers well into adulthood.

Despite the many challenges the participants encountered while growing up in female-headed families, they view their family situations positively. Participants were in awe of their mothers' resilience and they were of the view that the lessons they have learned will enable them to overcome life's challenges. Experiencing difficulties culminated in opportunities for personal growth and development for the majority of the participants as they are comfortable and proud of their mothers' caregiving abilities. Female-headed families enjoy substantial support from various systems from which they garner strength and courage. The participants' connection with God also gave them a sense of direction and guidance. For some participants, not knowing their fathers' whereabouts and lack of contact with him were viewed as a cultural disadvantage, because they believed that certain rituals have to be performed by members of the paternal family to prevent misfortune.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

From a strengths perspective, the assessment of female-headed families is important in offering family members an opportunity to discover their inner strengths and enhancing their potential and abilities to recover from adversity.

Social workers should partner with non-government organisations, faith-based organisations and the community, and initiate mentoring programmes such as the buddy system where male children are mentored by social fathers to become responsible men who will take care of their children. However, such interventions should not disregard the importance of female children as they also need to engage with social fathers on certain aspects of their lives, particularly relationships with intimate partners. Social workers should market their services in schools and identify children in need for early intervention. This will help curb the anger and bitterness that children often harbour because of a difficult childhood.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the challenges encountered by children from female-headed families, the multiple strengths that characterise these families have been brought to the fore by the participants. The resilience of single mothers as well as the participants' acquired independence emerged strongly from the findings. While the mothers' resilience has sustained these families, it is important to conduct narrative research to capture the personal accounts of the mothers who are heading families. In addition, extensive qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted to establish how social workers can apply the strengths approach when offering services to female-headed households.

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