

AN EXPLORATION OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL EXPERIENCES  
OF WOMEN WHO HEAD HOUSEHOLDS.

Generose Nomusa Mkhize

(211559721)

Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Munro

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University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg,

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## Declaration

I, Generose Nomusa Mkhize, declare that

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to  
my children:

Bongumusa, Ntandoyethu and Sphelele;

May they do even greater exploits.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I would like to thank God through whom this was possible.

I also want to thank my husband 'GE' for his support through this stressful journey. I owe much gratitude to my sons, Bongs, Nta and Sphe, for being incredible, and understanding that mom had to cross night in order to pursue this degree.

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Thanks is conveyed to the six participants in this study.

## **Abstract**

This study explored the psychosocial experiences of a sample of six females heading households in Imbali Township in the City of Pietermaritzburg (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa). The term psychosocial is based on the idea that interconnected and interdependent factors which may include biological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, social, mental and material aspects are responsible for a person's well-being, and impacts on their functional ability ("IASC Guidelines", 2007). This study has sought to find out from women that head households what their psychosocial experiences are, and the effect this role has on their well-being. Exploration of the nature of the interpersonal relationships within the family environment, the nature of behavioural patterns within their families, the interaction with the family ecological environment and how they cope with stressful life events encountered during the execution of their roles were studied. In this exploratory qualitative study, participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule and data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggest that women heading households encourage their children to persist in education in order to secure a bright future for themselves. Women heading households were also found to enforce discipline in their households; discipline to which their children respond. Moreover, women heading households were also found to have adopted strategies that help them cope with their challenges, and those coping measures include having conversations with significant others and possessing what they referred to as a supernatural power. The women in the study were also found to be resilient in the execution of their role as heads of households and they remain resilient despite the challenges they encounter. Findings further suggest that women heading households experience discrimination from their extended families and society. These findings could mean that when research on women heading households is conducted, contextual factors should be taken into consideration.

*Key words:* Psychosocial, experiences, households, headship, women-headed households

Declaration.....	i
Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Overview of the chapter.....	1
1.2 Prevalence of female-headed households .....	1
1.3 Overview of dissertation .....	3
1.4 Conclusion .....	3
CHAPTER TWO .....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
2.1 Overview of the chapter.....	4
2.2 Introduction to literature review .....	5
2.3 Theoretical framework.....	7
2.3.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory .....	7
2.4 Debate on the definition of headship .....	9
2.5 Characteristics of <i>de facto</i> women-headed households .....	11
2.6 Characteristics of <i>de jure</i> women-headed households .....	13
2.7 Children in women-headed households.....	14
2.7.1 Behaviour of children in female-headed households.....	15
2.8 Effects of heading households on women.....	17
2.8.1 Psychological effects.....	19
2.8.2 Health effects .....	20
2.8.3 Emotional effects .....	20
2.8.4 Social effects .....	22

2.9 Support system in women-headed households .....	23
2.10 Economic status in female-headed households.....	26
2.10.1 Assets in female-headed households.....	28
2.11 Coping strategies among women who head households.....	29
2.12 Summation .....	30
CHAPTER THREE.....	31
AIMS AND RATIONALE.....	31
3.1 Objectives of the study.....	31
3.2 Research questions.....	32
CHAPTER FOUR.....	33
METHODOLOGY .....	33
4.1 Overview of the chapter.....	33
4.2 Research design .....	33
4.3 Sampling and participant selection .....	34
4.3.1 Sampling method.....	34
4.3.2 Recruitment.....	35
4.3.3 The Sample.....	36
4.4 Data collection .....	37
4.4.1 Data collection instruments.....	37
4.4.2 Data collection processes .....	38
4.5 Data analysis .....	41
4.5.1 Credibility .....	42
4.5.2 Dependability .....	43
4.5.3 Transferability .....	44
4.6 Summation .....	45
CHAPTER FIVE .....	46
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	46

5.1 Overview of the chapter.....	46
5.2 Demographics of the sample.....	47
5.3 Introduction to themes .....	48
5.4 Encouraging persistence in education.....	49
5.5 Discipline enforcement in female-headed households.....	51
5.6 Conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures .....	54
5.7 Resilience.....	58
5.8 Discrimination.....	60
5.8.1 Isolation.....	66
5.8.2 Barriers to ritual practices .....	68
5.8.3 Lack of family support.....	71
5.9 Findings in relation to ecological systems theory .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b> 73
5.10 Summation .....	74
CHAPTER SIX.....	75
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	75
6.1 Overview of the chapter.....	75
6.2 Concluding comments .....	75
6.3 Strengths and limitations.....	76
6.4 Recommendations.....	77
REFERENCE LIST .....	78
APPENDICES	
Appendix one: Interview schedule	
Appendix two: Permission for access to psychological services	
Appendix three: Ethical clearance	
Appendix four: Permission to conduct research	
Appendix five: Gatekeeper’s letter	
Appendix six: Consent form	



Appendix seven: Information sheet

Appendix eight: Consent for audio recording

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants .....	46
Table 2: Themes and sub-themes .....	47

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Overview of the chapter**

Female-headed households have become a widely studied phenomenon as women are increasingly becoming heads of households due to different reasons. Most studies that have researched this phenomenon have largely focused on the economic aspect of female-headed households. This chapter will provide an introduction to the study, as well as the context from which the researcher has approached the study. Prevalence of women household heads in South Africa will be discussed. This will be funnelled from international researchers who have investigated the phenomenon of women-headed households to local South African studies. Thereafter the approach in which the dissertation will be structured will be provided.

### **1.2 Prevalence of female-headed households**

Statistics in South Africa show that more women in urban as well as in rural areas are heading households because of various reasons which include, amongst others, desertion, abandonment, divorce, widowhood and single parenthood (Habib, 2010). Schatz, Madhavan and Williams (2011) estimated that almost half of all households in South Africa are headed by women. A census conducted in 2011 indicates that 7.5% of households in South Africa are female headed, while in KwaZulu-Natal this percentage rises to 8.4 (StatsSA, 2012). The Msunduzi Municipality (in the city of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal), where the study was conducted, has a population of 618 536 with 163 993 households and 45.2% of those have been reported to be female-headed households (StatsSA, 2012). According to Rogan (2014) there has been an evident steady increase in households that are headed by women in South Africa. Studies conducted in the Msunduzi Municipality have focused on housing and gender mainstreaming, and health and well-being of females heading households (Goebel & Dodson, 2011; Goebel, Dodson & Hill, 2010).

This study focused on exploring the psychosocial experiences of females that head households. Research on female-headed households has typically focused on the socio-economic well-being of these households and the psychosocial effect such families have on children. More specifically, many researchers that have conducted studies on female-headed

households have focused on these households' relation to poverty, the reasons why women became heads of families, or the behavioural presentations of the children in their care (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Buvinić, Yousef & Von Elm, 1978; Snyder, McLaughlin & Findeis, 2006). A further study conducted in South Africa by Rogan (2014) also considered female-headed households in relation to poverty and found that these households remain significantly poorer when compared to their male counterparts, and are also more likely to live with a larger number of dependants, especially children.

However, studies do not seem to have a strong emphasis on how these women experience and perceive their roles as female heads. Sidloyi (2010) concurs with the latter assertion when she records that in spite of the recorded increase in elderly women who are heading households, there has been less focus on their experiences as heads of households. Few studies have looked at the stressful factors associated with their role and their survival strategies; this is the gap that this study has attempted to fill. This study has sought to find out from women that head households what their psychosocial experiences are, how they perceive their roles and the effect this role has on their well-being. In breaking down the psychosocial experiences, this study explored the nature of the interpersonal relationships within the family environment, the nature of behavioural patterns within their families (e.g. communication, administering discipline, and responses thereto), and how women handle these behavioural patterns. Secondly, in understanding their psychosocial experiences, this study focused on the interaction of these female heads with the family ecological environment as this would have a likely impact on their psychosocial functioning. Lastly, this study intended to establish how these women cope with stressful life events encountered during the execution of their roles.

It has been found that there is scarcity of research in this field of study in the South African context. Sources of search included Ebscohost, Google scholar and Library site from Cecil Renaud Library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus. However, most articles found were of less relevance to the current study. Given the notable lack of information on psychosocial experiences of women/ female headed households, the parameters used were women and families, psychological functioning and women, emotional effects and women heading households, coping and women/female heading households.

Since the statistics referred to above indicate that there is a large number of females in South Africa that head households (and especially in Pietermaritzburg), it was deemed necessary to

conduct a study that focuses on aspects which would provide a global view of these women in terms of their mental health and psychosocial experiences.

### **1.3 Overview of dissertation**

The first chapter has introduced the phenomenon under study where the contextual factors were discussed. The literature relating to the phenomenon under study will be discussed in Chapter 2. The aims and rationale of the study, which will give the reader the perspective from which the researcher has approached the study, will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, the methodology where the methodological approach and a coherent research design will be discussed in Chapter 4. In the same fourth chapter, data collection which was effected through the medium of interviews and analysed through coding of themes will also be explored. The results will subsequently be presented in the findings section in Chapter 5, and this will be integrated with the discussion of the findings in relation to the reviewed literature. Ultimately, the dissertation will conclude with Chapter 6 which will consist of conclusion and recommendations.

### **1.4 Summation**

This chapter has provided a brief overview of female-headed households, which is the phenomenon under study, its prevalence and the overview of the whole dissertation. The next chapter will be Chapter 2 where literature relating to the phenomenon under study will be reviewed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Overview of the chapter

Many international and South African studies have been conducted on female-headed households. In this chapter, the researcher will define the relevant terms in this study. The theoretical framework and different subtopics relating to the study will also be explained. Effects of heading households on women will be discussed, and how children in female households behave will also be described. The economic status in female-headed households, which is a topic that has been widely covered by researchers, will be looked at briefly. Lastly, the coping strategies used by females heading households will be discussed. As these topics are covered, descriptions, comparisons and combining different studies in a single argument will also be addressed. Critical remarks on the value of the literature will also be included. Before introducing the literature review, it is ideal to understand what “psychosocial” means as it forms the basis for this study.

The term psychosocial is based on the idea that a combination of factors is responsible for a person’s well-being. This combination of factors includes biological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, social, mental and material aspects of experience, and they are interconnected and interdependent, and thus cannot necessarily be separated from one another (“IASC Guidelines”, 2007). In other words, the term psychosocial can be used to emphasise the existing and close connection between psychological aspects of the human experience and the wider social experience, and how these may influence the physical and mental well-being of an individual, and thus impact on their functional ability. Psychological effects are often distinguished into different levels of functioning including cognitive (perception and memory as a basis for thoughts), affective (emotions), and behavioural and health, while social effects concern relationships, family and community networks, cultural traditions and economic status, including life tasks such as school or work (“IASC Guidelines”, 2007). Psychosocial functioning is the central concept for this study and thus women heading households shall be understood in relation to their family and ecological environment.

## 2.2 Introduction to literature review

There seems to be a radical change in the world where women have been seen as actively heading households and South Africa is no exception. As far back as 1994, Muthwa who conducted research in South African townships found that female-headed households were increasing at an alarming rate, while Rogan (2014), whose study was also in South Africa recently asserted that there is an ongoing increase in female-headed households in South Africa. Fuwa (2000) conducted a review of 68 studies on female-headed households in developing countries and maintains that the heterogeneity of these households has to be considered when studying them. This means that researchers have to be cognisant of the reasons that led to female household headship as these may determine their experiences. Those reasons include amongst others desertion, neglect, abandonment, divorce, widowhood, single parenthood, consensual relationships or houses (Barros, Fox & Mendonca, 1997; Brandwein, Brown & Fox, 1974; Buvinić, Yousef & Von Elm, 1978; Drexter, 2005; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007; Snyder, McLaughlin & Findeis, 2006). In some societies, patriarchy still exists where the male is seen and acknowledged as the head of household. Rogan (2014) and Sidloyi (2016) whose study was conducted in a rural township, in South Africa, partly affirm this when they state that female heads are vulnerable to discrimination as the focus is still largely on patriarchal societal relations. Scholars that have studied the theory of discrimination posit that women are a disadvantaged group and are more likely to experience gender discrimination in a variety of contexts, due to relative positions within the social structure (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz & Owen, 2002). Contexts where women are treated differently may include, amongst others, the labour market, and society and culture. Furthermore, scholars assert that women are stigmatised, and able to perceive this discrimination which is reflective of systematic devaluation; feeling devalued may harm self-esteem, and may also be harmful to their psychological well-being (Schmitt et al., 2002). A stable family has always been assumed and described as a family where both male and female are present as parents, and the male is seen as the head of the household by virtue of his gender. This patriarchal understanding of family has disadvantaged women as they are repeatedly compared to men and thus their role as heads is belittled and diminished in the process (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997).

Studies previously conducted on female-headed households have focused on the socio-economic well-being of the family and the psychosocial effect such families have on the children (Fuwa, 2000). Buvinić and Gupta (1997) also conducted a review of studies on female-headed households in developing countries, and 38 studies found that these households are vulnerable to poverty. A review conducted by Rogan (2014) also reveals that female-headed households are vulnerable to poverty and are significantly worse off. This indicates that many researchers who have conducted studies on female-headed households have focused on their relation to poverty, reasons why they became heads of families or the behavioural characteristics of the children in their care (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Buvinić, Yousef & Von Elm, 1978; Snyder, McLaughlin & Findeis, 2006).

A few studies conducted in South Africa seem to have focused on how these women experience their roles as female-heads and their survival strategies. According to Sidloyi (2016), South African black women are expected to adhere to gendered societal roles, deviation from which results in critical perceptions of these women household heads. The socio-economic positioning and the societal perceptions also shape the lived experiences of the household heads (Sidloyi, 2016). Further to this, as a result of gendered societal roles and socio-economic positioning, these household heads find their agency being challenged which in turn impacts on their health and wellness (Sidloyi, 2016). Stressful factors associated with their role and their survival strategies have been minimally studied and this is the gap that this study intends to fill. This study seeks to find out from women that head households what their psychosocial experiences are, their perceptions of their roles and the effect this role has on their well-being. Scholars that have studied female-headed households, have also looked, amongst other aspects, at the behaviour of children in these households, their educational attainment, their economic status, and their health status. This study has also focused on the wider psychosocial experiences of these female heads. It was therefore appropriate to approach this study from an ecosystemic perspective since the assumption was that, women's psychosocial experiences would emanate from the interaction of the systems. The next section is critical in understanding the theoretical framework from which this study was approached.



## **2.3 Theoretical framework**

This study was conceptualised using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theory adopts a holistic stance of viewing individuals. The holism is based on the fact that individuals do not exist in isolation but are part of complex systems in interaction. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), people should be studied in their ecological context, in other words, real life settings are essential in understanding real life implications. Ecological systems theory looks at the wider space and considers the interaction of factors in the individual's environment (Corcoran, Franklin & Bennett, 2000). Female heads are heading families that are part of a wider system, and an elaboration on why Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is suitable for this study will be provided below (see section 2.3.1). The interactions of the female household heads with other systems can be conceptualised from an ecosystemic perspective and hence Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory will aid the researcher in the conceptualisation.

### **2.3.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory**

According to Corcoran et al. (2000), Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can be used to organise different perspectives and factors which do not have frameworks of their own but which exist in relation to each other. The ecological model is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other, hence the different levels in the model ((Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This theory is characterised by different levels, and the levels have open systems so that there is constant interaction and interdependence between them (Corcoran et al., 2000). There is an interaction between the physical environment and human behaviour, and the proximal processes that exist in the environment may influence development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The natural openness of the systems allows them to actively influence each other (Cnaan, Blankertz, Messinger & Gardner, 1989). These systems are classified into the microsystem, the mesosystem and the macrosystem. Each system is shaped by the demands and the availability of resources in the immediate environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1967). This means that the environment will determine how that system contributes towards the growth and development of an individual (Cnaan et al., 1989). The microsystem is the innermost environment layer of Bronfenbrenner's environmental layer which is the person's immediate surroundings in which interactions and activities take place

(Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Characteristics of the microsystem may include parents, relatives, spouse or others who participate in the life of a developing person on a regular basis and over extended periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The latter further state that the extent into which an individual is influenced in the microsystem is also dependent on their characteristics as a person and environmental context. In this study the microsystem will focus on the women's individual experiences, specifically on their psychological functioning, the family structure and its functioning (Corcoran et al., 2000).

The mesosystem consists of the settings within which the individual interacts (Corcoran et al., 2000), and is comprised of the relationship between the microsystems, including homes (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Support systems which are situated in the mesosystem are friends, neighbours, which are necessary in understanding the psychosocial experiences of individuals. The macrosystem is the outermost environmental layer where cultural factors, which potentially contribute towards prejudice and stigmatisation of women heading households, lie (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Societal barriers, such as poverty as well as economic barriers which women heading households experience, can be understood in relation to this layer. Corcoran et al., (2000) concur with the latter by stating that the macro system includes socio-economic factors, occupations, and cultural factors affecting individuals. As previously mentioned, female-headed households are associated with poverty (Fuwa, 2000; Posel, 2001; Rogan, 2014) and this affects the psychosocial functioning of women heading households. However, there are contradictory findings pertaining to the economic vulnerability of these households as some previous studies have disputed this finding (Drexler, 2005; Popenoe, 1996; Villarreal & Shin, 2008).

The exosystem is the social system that individuals generally do not experience directly. Women heading households also do not experience this system directly. These could include policies and programmes that address women's issues. This study did not focus on this level but it may be necessary to address this in further research to increase understanding of the psychosocial experiences of women heading households.

In summary, the psychosocial experiences of women who head households have been understood in terms of the micro, meso and macro levels in the Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Scholars that have studied female-headed households, have also looked at the concept of headship as it is critical in understanding the approach from which one studies female household heads. The next section will review the headship concept.

## **2.4 Debate on the definition of headship**

Different definitions of headship have been given by researchers, and Budlender (1997) whose study was conducted in South Africa argues, for example, that the term household head covers different concepts which would include chief economic provider, decision-maker, or rather a person viewed by the majority of household members as the head. However, local scholars maintain that headship is not distinctly defined (Posel, 2001; Rogan, 2014). Before attempting to review the debate on headship, it is appropriate to expound on what a household is. For consistency with the South African context, the 1998 South Africa Demographic and Health Survey defined a household as a person or group of persons who live together, eat together and share resources (Hosegood, Benzler & Solarsh, 2005).

In addition to the above, Budlender (1997) states that the conceptualisation of headship is dependent on the circumstances of different countries. Habib (2010), who conducted a study in Bangladesh found that women heading households are still trapped under existing discriminatory socio-cultural norms and practices in patriarchal societies. This is largely true because in South Africa, headship is still presumed to be patriarchal (Rogan, 2016). This means that there is still a stereotypical belief that a man is always a person in authority and the breadwinner in the family. Buvinić and Gupta (1997) found that women-headed households are increasing but are not recognised because of the very existence of cultural prescriptions that still identify a man as head, breadwinner and household authority. They further argue that it should be referred to as ‘woman maintained’ if the woman is the supporter or chief earner, because in some societies it is a norm that families should have a male head (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Furthermore, researchers Barros et al. (1997) concur with the previous researchers stating that in many societies headship has come to imply authority and income earning responsibility. The argument of ‘woman maintained’ may also be due to the fact that the concept of a woman as a household head is still not recognised in some societies. Posel (2001) asserts that headship is cultural and contextual, and the head is most probably the oldest person. Rogan (2016) concurs with the said cultural prescriptions

when he asserts that cultural biases have a large influence in terms of the description of household head and these inconsistencies have resulted in underreporting of female headship. However, studies conducted in South Africa recently, suggest that female-headed households are now recognised, but they are still vulnerable to societal discriminatory views which focus on patriarchal societal relations (Rogan, 2014; Sidloyi, 2016). Self-reported households still place minimal recognition on females as household heads (Rogan, 2016). The different definitions of the concept provided by researchers have often left room for subjective interpretation, as argued by Budlender (1997) and Hosegood and Timaeus (2003).

In reviewing studies on headship, South African scholars of female-headed households argue that there are three salient features that are not accounted for in the definition. These features firstly include non-residents who are considered to be members of the household, and secondly, members who belong to more than one households (e.g., grandparents). Thirdly, some household members may live in a household which they do not technically belong to, but these members do not function separately from these households (e.g., a live in domestic worker or a boy who herds cattle) (Hosegood & Timaeus, 2003). Scholars who have analysed the concept of headship argue that the definition would present an incomplete representation of household if some of its members are not considered (Budlender, 1997; Hosegood & Timaeus, 2003). This is supported by Budlender (1997) when he says that a simple single nuclear family is very far from being a South African norm, and this is still likely to be the case currently because Sidloyi (2016) maintains that households still depend on support from extended families. As previously stated, self-reporting from nuclear and/or extended families often fails to declare a female-headed household, whether it is a nuclear or extended family (Rogan, 2016). However, to account for the limitations named above, some researchers have used terms such as *de facto* and *de jure* female-headed households (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Habib, 2010). *De facto* female-headed households are those households which are run by women in the absence of a male figure because of migration (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Habib, 2010). In simpler terms, *de facto* female-headed households are headed by women who are legally married but not living with their partner (Posel, 2001). While *de jure* female-headed households are characterised by legal headship by women due to factors such as desertion, divorce, separation, widowhood, abandonment and single women supporting themselves and their dependants (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Habib, 2010). The latter are households where there is no male partner due to the aforementioned reasons (Posel, 2001). In addition to these

households, there are also co-resident households which are households headed by a female living with her male partner (Posel, 2001).

The conduct of this study took into consideration the characteristics of the *de facto* and *de jure* female-headed households. In understanding headship descriptions and characteristics, it was necessary for this study to make a differentiation of the *de facto* and *de jure* female-headed households as women heading households might have the characteristics of either households. Therefore, further descriptive information will be provided below on these households.

## **2.5 Characteristics of *de facto* women-headed households**

Households that are headed by *de facto* female heads were increasing at a rate that is alarming in South African society, especially in African townships, and this was more than 20 years ago (Muthwa, 1994). Ten years after Muthwa's finding, a study conducted in South Africa by Zulu and Sibanda in 2005, which aimed at determining the prominent reasons for the increase in female-headed households, contradicts the finding by Muthwa by submitting that widows and unmarried mothers are the ones who account significantly for the high rate of female headship (Dungumaro, 2008). The latter refers to *de jure* households. Rogan (2013) agrees with the previous researcher when he says that in 2006, at least a third of the South African population resided in *de jure* households. This will be elaborated upon in section 2.6 below.

Muthwa (1994) asserts that less attention has been given to the nature of living within these households, and debates are centred on definitions of these households instead of their well-being. As previously stated in section 1.2, Sidloyi (2010) argues that the experiences of female heads has not been well researched in the social sciences. Women in these households are laden with the responsibility of managing households in the absence of an eligible male within the family system, and this is more prevalent in Sub Saharan African rural areas (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Habib, 2010). The absence of males in households is largely due to the increase in industrialisation, urbanisation and socio-economic changes (Habib, 2010). Barros et al. (1997) refers to this as male labour migration in the economy. Given the socio-

political history and the mining industry in South Africa which relied on migrant workers, there was noticeable increase in female-headed households (Dungumaro, 2008). Sidloyi (2016) postulates that, because of the migrant labour system, the sustenance and raising of families becomes the responsibility of women, with men staying away from home for long periods. However, there are negative effects associated with the migration and urbanisation of the male figure in *de facto* households. While migration and urbanisation may be necessary for the survival of the family, lack of proximity most often leads to disruption of family relationships and increase in breakdown of the family system (Habib, 2010). This disruption of traditional systems of patriarchal governance, where fathers used to hold authority over women and children, often undermines and weakens the transfer of income from the fathers to mothers and children left behind (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Women left behind will find themselves in a position where they provide most effort on behalf of the absent father while simultaneously having to be committed to the household (Barros et al., 1997). In other words, there is overcompensation in the execution of the role so that the household members do not feel the absence of the male figure. This may have a negative effect on the functioning of women in these households, and furthermore they may have to deal with challenges of children who may tend to misbehave. Consequently, in the absence of a support structure, women might adjust maladaptively.

According to Drexter (2005), men frequently leave their wives and children in anticipation especially in times of crisis through psychological withdrawal or by outright deserting them, and Popenoe (1996) maintains that it is safer for women not to be dependent on a man. Sidloyi (2016) postulates that women who are heading households have resigned themselves to the fact it is their duty to head their households and have thus adopted strategies that are pertinent to their survival. Women are then expected to perform a dual role of reproduction and production while employing survival strategies which may be haphazard or well worked out for them to adapt to internal and external household pressures (Muthwa, 1994). Sidloyi (2016) corroborates the assertion that women who are household heads still have to perform the dual role of production and reproduction. Some of these women heading families will have their male figures returning to them for economic support, while some may be left to provide for themselves without depending on anyone. This then leads to the deterioration of the well-being of the family. *De jure* female-headed households will now be discussed.

## 2.6 Characteristics of *de jure* women-headed households

This section will describe the factors that different researchers have focused on in the identification of *de jure* women-headed households.

*De jure* women-headed households are characterised by women who are legally heading households due to desertion, abandonment, widowhood, unmarried mothers, divorce or because they are single women (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Buvinić, Yousef & Von Elm, 1978; Drexter, 2005; Dungumaro, 2005; Habib, 2010; Popenoe, 1996; Sheets, 2014). Scholars found that female-headed households are associated with low status, brokenness, vulnerability, crisis, poverty, disintegration and disorganisation, therefore these households are not recognised as a viable alternative family form (Brandwein et al., 1974). This is evident even in the present era as these families are often associated with negative circumstances (Habib, 2010). In addition, when children who are growing under the authority of women exhibit abnormal behaviour, the behaviour is attributed to the type of family rather than the environment (Brandwein et al., 1974; Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Brandwein et al. (1974) found that a household with two parents, male and female, was associated with normality and healthy habits whilst a household where there is only one parent, a woman, was referred to as a deviant family with deviant gender roles. In some societies it is a norm that families should have a male head (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). The latter is no longer applicable in the South African context, because, according to Nduna (2014), single mother parented households are a norm in Sub Saharan Africa. This meant that in order to adhere to these societal norms, societies found it necessary to stigmatise these households. This is no longer the case because nearly half of households in South Africa are headed by females (Rogan, 2013). Popenoe (1996) states that single mothers and their children have been unfairly stigmatised over generations and this has been unfair to the mothers as well as the children. This may have negative effects on the mother's functioning which might be transferred to the children. Consistent with this attestation, studies have found that these traditions seem to undermine the role of women in their families and within society; and women may be stigmatised, disadvantaged and labelled due to such traditions (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Rogan (2014) found that because of the societal roles placed on women, they are still overburdened. As previously stated, Rogan (2016) and Sidloyi (2016) have also recently found that female-headed households still suffer stigmatisation from their societies.

Sidloyi (2016) further reveals that women who head households are still subjected to negative perceptions by society as they fail to adhere to gendered societal norms. Buvinić and Gupta (1997) found that despite experiencing the burdens of poverty, being disadvantaged and gender discriminated as females, they receive no support as heads of households.

Understanding women in interaction with significant others will give an idea of the family dynamics within these households. It would be appropriate to explore literature on significant others in women head's lives for a better understanding of their psychosocial experiences.

Hence the next section will look at children within these households as the female heads are in constant interaction with them.

## **2.7 Children in women-headed households**

The family structure is interlinked with dimensions of parent-child relationships like parental values, control and support for children. Family structure plays a role in inter-generational transmission of values and status as well (Biblarz, Raftery & Bucur, 1997). More children are being raised in non-traditional nuclear families involving single mothers, divorced mothers, widows, stepparents or grandparents (Drexler, 2005). Literature suggests different views on the manner in which children growing up in female-headed households are affected by this shift. Children that are born in female-headed households have been reported to be more likely to die in childhood, or work as children, and are less likely to attend school (Barros et al., 1997). According to Buvinić and Gupta (1997) children are forced into becoming independent when they are detached from their father's earnings, which could explain the previous scholar's assertion that children in female-headed households are more likely to work as children. A study conducted in urban Brazil records that because of the independence forced upon them, the welfare of children in female-headed households may be compromised as they are faced with the dilemma of resolving conflicts between studying and working towards earning an income, so that they can assist their mothers in taking care of the household (Barros et al., 1997). This could imply that mothers may be expected to encourage their children to pursue their future goals, for example, education, rather than encouraging children to assist them towards maintaining the household. As findings from one study suggest, the indecisiveness from their mothers may not be a motivating factor for children growing in these households towards achievement (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). However,



some scholars disagree with the latter and they claim that women prioritise their children and they prefer investing in their children's education (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). This is consistent with Sidloyi's (2016) research findings which affirm that while some women live under conditions where children drop out of school, and are affected by teenage pregnancy and substance abuse, others resiliently try to provide for their children, including ensuring that they get a good education. Women in the previous study were also found not to have a stable source of income as some of them reportedly have to engage in domestic work, are cleaners and have to do washing in order to sustain their families' livelihoods. According to Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker (2000), an individual is deemed resilient when they experience some form of hardship or difficulty but are able to positively adapt in the presence of that adversity. Furthermore, Luthar et al. (2000) posit that resilience is related to how well an individual copes with transition in the context of significant adversity. It may seem that women heading households, in accordance with Sidloyi's (2016) findings, have been able to adapt to the ongoing significant stressors in their lives. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient education increases the chances of limited opportunities which may ultimately lead to inter-generational transfer of poverty (Barros et al., 1997). Fuwa (2000) found that female heads in urban areas attain higher educational levels and thus model a positive role for their children. The socio-economic status of female-headed households has been reported to have an effect on the educational attainment of children in these households. Goebel, Dodson and Hill (2010) found that female heads in the local Msunduzi municipality had lower educational attainment which may have been the reason for infrequent or poor school attendance by their children. This could mean that these researchers may have evaluated the value placed on education based on the heads' levels of education. This may concur with the findings that lower educational achievement, less frequent school attendance, fewer years of schooling and higher incidence of high school dropout are associated with female-headed households (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003), this is according to a study conducted in America. But, as previously stated, the latter finding is not consistent with Sidloyi's (2016) finding, as she maintains that women heading households are able to prioritise the education of the children.

#### 2.7.1 Behaviour of children in female-headed households

It is virtually impractical to explore the psychosocial experiences of females who head households without considering different elements that form part of their daily living. Several

issues concerning children growing up in female-headed households dominate literature. Historically, serious problems were flagged as arising from a family environment characterised by an absent father; problems such as apathy, homosexuality, sex role confusion, delinquency, mental disorders were largely attributed to the absence of a father figure (Parker & Kleiner, 1966), this is in accordance with a study conducted in America. Consistent with the latter, is the study that argues that statistics show a disproportionately high representation of risk behaviours and delinquency among youth, which is also attributed to father absence, socio-economic disadvantage and compromised parenting behaviours in single parent families (Gonzales, Jones & Parent, 2014). Children in female-headed households are characteristically associated with crime, delinquency, premature sexuality, out-of-wedlock teen births, deteriorating educational achievements, depression, substance abuse and alienation from other teenagers (Popenoe, 1996). In researching single parenthood, most women reported child care responsibility to be difficult as their children were out of control and not responding positively to discipline (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). This is consistent with findings from the study where women reported that their children are vulnerable to teenage pregnancy, and substance use (Sidloyi, 2016). This may generally be pointing to the deterioration in the well-being of children who grow up in the absence of the father. The joint enrichment project by Community Agency for Social Enquiry in South Africa reported that many African youth have their fathers either absent or as distant figures (Budlender, 1997). The latter is still the case because scholars have found that, specifically in African black families, absence of fathers is still significantly high. This may be due to different reasons including labour migration, or paternity that has been undisclosed or denied responsibility by fathers (Padi, Nduna, Khunou & Kholopane, 2014). However, other research has shown that children growing up in the absence of a father figure are capable of well-mannered behaviour (Drexter 2005; Popenoe, 1996).

Absence of a father is likely to compromise a single mother's parenting practices as parental supervision may be minimal. Furthermore, disciplinary practices, family warmth and cohesion may be challenged since the woman may have no support in parenting; and Gonzales et al. (2014) claim that this may exacerbate the vulnerability, aggression and rule-breaking behaviour among children. In addition, negative socio-economic outcomes are also attached to children who grow up in single parent families (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). The latter agree that many, but not all, children in female-headed households are vulnerable. As previously stated in (section 2.8), lower educational achievement where there are lower test

scores, less frequent school attendance, fewer years of schooling and higher incidence of high school dropout may be associated with female-headed households (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). This may be suggesting that children in female-headed households are likely to be subjected to some level of vulnerability.

Mothers in female-headed households have been found to be disappointed in their own situation and they are more likely to use children to fulfil their own wishes while expecting either high or low goal striving from them (Parker & Kleiner, 1966). This perception may influence the behaviour of children in female-headed households. Findings 30 years later from Popenoe's (1996) study, indicate that a majority of women are capable of raising children by themselves. However, Gonzales et al. (2014) found that single mothers may suffer from depression, anger and hostile behaviour which may subsequently lead to development of aggression and conduct behaviour in children. This could infer that children's behaviour is a response to their mother's psychological and emotional challenges. Drexter (2005) maintains that single mothers are able to cherish their children and are capable of providing a family support system for them. Despite having a support system, a recent study suggests that children in female-headed households may tend to misbehave by infrequently attending school, engaging in cohabitation, drinking alcohol and using drugs. This could mean that the behaviour of some children in households headed by women is still a contentious issue. Despite all this, these female household heads still actively engage in their roles as heads in fulfilling their roles (Sidloyi, 2016). Children's behaviour may also affect female household heads in different manners. This will be discussed further in the next section on effects of heading households.

## **2.8 Effects of heading households on women**

In review of literature on effects of heading a household, again the heterogeneity or the diversity of households will be considered since studies would have researched both heterogeneous and diverse types of households. Section 2.8 focuses on reviewing literature that has considered the effects that the role of heading households has had on women who are household heads. Some studies have looked at psychological effects, health effects while others have looked at emotional effects and social effects. These effects will be discussed further below.

Women have a lot of responsibilities and these may influence their well-being differently (Casale & Posel, 2010). In other words, the nature of responsibilities that women face will always determine the nature of their psychosocial experiences. A study conducted in the Southern African region revealed that female-headed households are the most vulnerable (Budlender, 1997). The South African researcher Dungumaro (2008) found that practical challenges and problems experienced by female-headed households are predominantly social and psychological in nature and may thus be perceived differently by women heads. A study that investigated the problems faced specifically by single mothers heading households found that women that head households also experience social, emotional and economic challenges (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Women in Kotwal and Prabhakar's (2009) study were also found to be struggling with the responsibility of child care and experienced hardships in maintaining their children's discipline. This is the reason why this study was interested in looking at the interpersonal relationships and the nature of behavioural patterns within the households, because these have been found to have an impact on their psychosocial functioning. Women in the abovementioned study also reported role overload as they were burdened with an additional role as parents while trying to compensate for the father's absence. It would be appropriate to find out if the overwhelming role compromises their position as heads brought about through diminished parenting behaviour. In addition to this, it seemed as if most of the single women were undecided about their children's future and education as they found themselves having no one with whom to share decisions (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). This is reiterated by Bookwala and Fekete (2009) who researched the role of psychological resources in the affective well-being of adults who had never married (both men and women) in developing countries, in America. They found that unmarried adults have lower social resources, are less likely to have confidantes, both of which have a negative effect on their well-being (Bookwala & Fekete, 2009). This might have negative repercussions on other members of the household especially the children. As previously stated, the psychological, emotional, health and social effects of heading households will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

### 2.8.1 Psychological effects

Mothers in female-headed households reportedly experience role overload and increased psychological distress (Angel & Worobey, 1988; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Women in families living without a male figure in the home were found to have poorer psychological adjustment, manifested psychiatric difficulties and less involvement for self, and displayed lower goal striving for themselves (Parker & Kleiner, 1966). This could still be a challenge for some women heading households since a study conducted by Sidloyi and Bomela (2015) maintain that women heading households, specifically the elderly, may lose self-dignity because of inability to attain basic essentials. Furthermore, in terms of the psychological adjustment, Bookwala and Fekete's (2009) study, which measured personal mastery, agency and self-sufficiency on unmarried adults, found that they scored low on affective well-being. The latter would be more applicable to those women characterised as *de jure* household heads. As noted by scholars such as Sidloyi (2016), it has been of concern that as women household heads negotiate their way through different challenges, their agency is also challenged. This implies that they might not be able to control events in their lives and this affects the way in which they perceive and react to events. In terms of agency, single parents reportedly have a tendency to neglect themselves, and thus they may exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychoneurosis. A study conducted by Dave (2000) found that single mothers have a high rate of depression. The latter claims that single mothers are more susceptible to depression since they encounter increased life stresses and decreased social support. This is consistent with the findings that women heading households presented with depressive symptoms due to economic hardships and worries regarding their children's future (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009).

However, researchers that have researched the psychological functioning or wellness of single or unmarried women have different views on their functioning. Roszell (1999, in Bookwala & Fekete, 2009) argues that most of the single women in her study scored higher on personal mastery, and therefore are not overwhelmed by events in their lives. Overall the literature indicated that unmarried adults have a greater risk of compromised mental well-being (Angel & Worobey, 1988; Bookwala & Fekete, 2009; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009; Parker & Kleiner, 1966). Previous studies seem to agree that the incidence of psychological challenges that women heads might face is far greater when compared to those in male-headed households, who have been found to experience better well-being. This is in

consideration of the fact these women have to deal with an absent male figure and hence no confidante with whom they can share their experiences in order to gain moral support. They may be experiencing external validation because they are overwhelmed by their role, and the fact that they might be overburdened with a dual role of reproduction and production. These psychological challenges may have an influence on their health status as well. This will be discussed further in the next section on health effects.

### 2.8.2 Health effects

Heading households has been found to have affected the health of some women. A study conducted in South Africa which looked at female-headed households in the Msunduzi Municipality found that women's health was affected by environmental conditions and neighbourhood effects, and most women were more likely to be HIV positive (Goebel, Dodson & Hill, 2010). This is consistent with a South African study conducted by Shisana, Rice, Zungu and Zuma (2010) who found that female heads are more likely to be infected with HIV. The HIV/AIDS epidemic and the change in adult head and family structure has increased concurrently and this has an impact on the psychosocial functioning of women heading households (Shisana et al., 2010). The study among women heads in the Msunduzi Municipality (in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal) was conducted in an urban area but women in rural areas are also likely to describe their health status as fair or poor (Casale & Posel, 2010). Women experience different stressors and they reported illnesses for themselves. Several researchers found that women who are heads experience more chronic and episodic strains in life than those in intact families (Angel & Worobey, 1988; McLanahan, 1988). Overall, Sidloyi (2016) states that there are health limitations that women who head households have to contend with as well during the execution of their roles.

### 2.8.3 Emotional effects

*De facto* and *de jure* household heads suffer a certain degree of emotional deprivation in the performance of their roles. Women are emotionally affected as their self-esteem is being challenged through stigmatisation. The emotional problems that women who are single parents reported included loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, lack of identity and lower self-confidence (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Women who had husbands before becoming

heads of households, most prominently the *de jure* heads (those that are divorced, widowed or separated), were found to be suffering from purposelessness, having no basis for stability which was often marked by lack of identity (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). This could mean that lack of what they once had (which is support from the husband), may have evoked negative emotions from those women, as they more than likely lived their lives identifying with their partners. The latter suggests that *de jure* and *de facto* female heads might not have the same experiences in heading households. Feelings of guilt, resentment, anger, shame and anxiety about the future were also reported by female heads in Kotwal and Prabhakar's (2009) study; and the latter further argue that these feelings may dominate women's lives and may likely result in personality changes. Lack of a partner may deprive mothers heading household not only of informational support, but also of emotional support to deal with stress (Angel & Worobey, 1988). Most women from the previous study also reported that they perceived their role as tedious and monotonous, and they sometimes felt irritable and short tempered.

Lack of a confidante and helper has been found to possibly lead to increased emotional strain and may influence how issues are perceived (Angel & Worobey, 1988, Bookwala & Fekete, 2009). Not having a confidante may also hinder a woman's ability or capacity to deal with life's stresses and is likely to instil doubt in their ability to face life's challenges (Brown & Harris, 1978; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Discrepancy was found between the mother's actual and ideal self when their self-esteem was measured, while personal and financial problems involved in raising children were also considered to be the main stressor (Angel & Worobey, 1988; Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). The majority of women heading households in South Africa are most likely to have inadequate means of providing for their children, and are constrained to work several odd jobs, which are low paying jobs such as domestic workers, cleaners or child minders, in order to sustain their livelihoods (Sidloyi, 2016). Historically, single mothers were portrayed as being disappointed in their situation and seen as using their children to fulfil their own wishes. Moreover, on the one hand single mothers possibly expected and induced high goal striving for their children, but on the other hand, perhaps displayed tendencies of being overly protective thus inhibiting achievement behaviour (Parker & Kleiner, 1966). Drexler (2005) criticised the perception that single mothers tend to be over-protective thereby stunting the growth of their children. She postulates that female heads seem to be labelled as generally failing in the rearing of children in the absence of a

father, and maintains that this negative label attached to female heads challenges their emotional status as they are induced to feel like failures in raising their children.

They are over-protective when they worry about their children, negligent if they do not worry, smothering if they engage in children's lives, selfish and icy if they give children space to find themselves, overly self-involved if they pursue a career or hold down a job (Dexter, 2005, p.7).

This basically means that women apparently cannot get it right as they are faulted by society in the execution of their roles as heads. This may have a negative effect on their self-esteem and emotions as the consistent judgement by society comes into their awareness.

#### 2.8.4 Social effects

Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009) argue that women heading households have a tendency of isolating themselves from social gatherings. Further to this, single women who experience an economic handicap may experience socialisation problems since they find themselves unable to participate in community organisations due to low self-esteem (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). This is contrary to the findings of the study conducted on unmarried adults which found that single women seldom participate in social gatherings because of lower social resources, and Bookwala and Fekete (2009) maintain that the lower the social resource, the more prone they are to lower social interactions and social integration which relates to the perceived inability to interact with the world. Due to lower social integration, women heads may be given less attention by friends and family members which could further affect their functioning and well-being (Bookwala & Fekete, 2009). A study conducted in 2011 in South Africa confirms this finding as it maintains that widows (which characterise *de jure* female household heads), are often disconnected from social ties and may tend to experience strained relationships (Schatz, Madhavan & Williams, 2011). However, this would depend on the context because Sidloyi and Bomela (2015) maintain that women have social networks which they use in order to mitigate their experiences and they even form friendship-based ties as a means to survive.



In concluding this section on effects of heading households on women, when single and unmarried mothers do not get advice or get to share their feelings with other people, this may have an effect on their significant others as well. The mental well-being of the whole family system may thus become compromised. Women heading households appear to be vulnerable to negative effects, due to the psychological, health, emotional and social effects of heading households.

## **2.9 Support system in women-headed households**

Social institutions with whom the household co-exists may have an impact upon the psychosocial functioning of female-headed households. Several researchers of the concept of female-headed household have always assumed the latter to be institutions where children's needs are not met and their rights eroded (Drexter, 2005). Kinship networks and social institutions with whom these households co-exist could be an important resource of welfare and support for female-headed households. Villarreal and Shin (2008) conducted a study in Mexico and they posit that family support networks may be kinship support by co-resident extended family members, who may also support the family financially (Villarreal & Shin, 2008). In other words, mothers do not have to endure economically and emotionally challenging periods when raising children on their own; support from kin can ease the burden. The latter further argue that co-residents may also assist with child care and they can make a significant contribution to household income. In order for female heads to have free time at their disposal, extended family members may aid with domestic chores and also necessary help in times of crisis (Villarreal & Shin, 2008).

In terms of support, Drexter (2005) submits that extended families may also come together to share parenting responsibilities, pleasures and heartaches in order to support and bring up the children. Findings of a study that was conducted by Hossain and Huda (1995) suggest that women who head households are unlikely to be left entirely on their own, but a support system is always in place. The previous scholars further claim that due to the existence of support systems, with the loss of their husbands, women would have the option of either returning to their home of origin, be taken in by in-laws or be helped by relatives in the community. This would have posed a challenge 30 years ago, because researcher Clark (1984) found that in Kenya, the traditional absorption into extended families was gradually

diminishing due to lack of resources, and such assistance was being provided by fewer families. In those days, women heading households could, in the absence of extended families, use close kin, neighbours, extended kin, workmates and religiosity networks as support structures, and most significantly neighbourhood networks. This, however, is contrary to a study which found that widows enjoyed support from close family members and neighbours; and there was generally social acceptability and protection of female-headed household in society (Hossain & Huda, 1995; Sidloyi & Bomela, 2015).

Some studies found that extended family systems have been eroded, and traditional support networks have been eroded as well, leaving single women and widows on their own (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Muthwa, 1994). Popenoe (1996) reiterates these findings when he states that recently extended family households have diminished to the point of extinction. However, a study conducted in South Africa found that women who head households tend to be isolated from extended families because of power dynamics involved, and sometimes kinship networks may either support or undermine the women's coping capacity (Schatz et al., 2011). Sidloyi (2016) maintains that some of female household heads might still enjoy support from their extended families. The difference in findings could be attributed to context as one study is conducted in a township while the other explores the same issue in a rural area in South Africa. The focus on risky behaviour on children in female-headed households ignores the strength of African-American communities which is shaped by the involvement and protecting impact of extended family members in child rearing (Gonzales et al., 2014). However, it can be argued that extended households have not diminished; they may have proliferated since families are always expanding and family networks growing. What may have diminished though, may be the extent to which extended families can offer support to their members and also provide assistance with regard to child rearing.

The family still plays a role in inter-generational transmission of values and status as well (Biblarz et al., 1997). Drexler (2005) asserts that in the absence of extended families, there are "collected families". She describes "collected families" as those that grow organically and naturally through situation and circumstances; are built on affinity, affection and do not depend on marriage ties. She further states that the meaning of the word family has changed as family now comprises of neighbours, friends and community who offer support (Drexler, 2005). In other words, having a support network is dependent on an individual's attitude, and the attitude could enable them to have self-made extended families. This is confirmed by

Sidloyi and Bomela (2015) when they attest that women heading households may sometimes form friendship-based ties and there are benefits derived from these ties. This means that they may get support from people who are not necessarily blood relatives. Drexter (2005) expatiates on the latter when she maintains that a child can find love and comfort, sometimes even accept discipline, from a community member or a neighbour (Drexter, 2005). This means that people from the community may be able to offer the necessary support in terms of child rearing. If there are no traditional families, women heading households may need to have a self-made family because connectedness to other people is vital (Drexter, 2005). As previously mentioned, this basically echoes the belief that family might not only be those with whom one has blood relations, but people who have the basic interest and the welfare of other people at heart. These collected families, friendship-based ties and self-made relatives may be able to expand the support networks for female heads. Grandparents play an important role in supporting women that head households and they have become a safety net for families trying to deal with the challenges of modern life. In the absence of grandparents and kin, women still get assistance from the society. As it has been said over the years that “it does take a village to raise a child” (Drexter, 2005, p. 203). This is consistent with the notion of Ubuntu in the African context, where Mbiti (1977, in Masango, 2006, p. 10) states that “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” which is directly translated as, “a person is a person because of others”. People do not exist alone but corporately, which supports the principle of collectivism in the African culture.

According to Hrdy (1997), the evolutionary theory assumes that infant survival depends on the mother being assisted by others in the group. Researchers found that it is not the absence of the father but rather the isolation of the mother that predisposes children to difficulties in social adaptation (Drexter, 2005). The community plays a vital role in the support of families where fathers are absent and where there are children. In conclusion, in the African community it is not only the mother’s responsibility but also a responsibility of adults in the community to shape and teach children how to behave and live with others.

## 2.10 Economic status in female-headed households

In addressing the issue of female-headed households, scholars have looked at their economic behaviour which further allows for exploration of their psychosocial experiences. In most countries, women are disadvantaged in the labour market, hence the low income levels. Women are lower earners and they choose to work for a few hours as they are faced with a dual task of reproduction in the domestic sphere as well as production in the labour market (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Dungumaro, 2008; Sidloyi, 2010). The woman's lower earning power is a gender-related economic gap (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; McLanahan, 1988). Over and above the woman's lower earning power as per the previous researchers' findings, women may be faced with a higher dependency burden as a result of being single earners with no support (Dungumaro, 2008). Different forms of headship have differing experiences in terms of economic factors; and the economic status of the household will determine the psychosocial functioning of its members. The combination of these factors which prejudice women in the labour market, i.e. them earning lower wages and having no support despite their lower earnings, could result in them being unable to provide satisfactorily for their families.

Female-headed households are believed to have surged high worldwide in either developed or developing countries and a high proportion is associated with high poverty rate (Barros et al., 1997; Casale & Posel, 2010; Dungumaro, 2008; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007; Villarreal & Shin, 2008; Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). Rogan (2014) also reports an increase in a number of women who head households in South Africa and states that they are significantly poor. The prevailing perceptions about the poor status of female-headed households is a debated issue among researchers. Contrary to this assertion, other researchers claim that not all female-headed households are poor as some are *de facto* female-headed households (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). As previously mentioned, the husbands are absent because of labour migration and this does not necessarily translate into poverty or deprivation but the family may be associated with high-level remittances (Horrell & Krishnan, 2007). In this instance, according to a Zimbabwean study, migration may produce better chances for households to live within the normal range as the male figure is responsible for the economic well-being of the family (Horrell & Krishnan, 2007).

According to Dungumaro (2008), literature ascertains that most female-headed households thrive on limited resources, are disadvantaged and are predisposed to poverty. Some female-headed households in the Msunduzi Municipality have economic challenges, depend on grants, lack social resources, all of which affect their well-being (Goebel, Dodson & Hill, 2010). Sidloyi (2016) confirms this in her study as well when she states that these households are economically deprived. Contextual factors such as household size, nuclear or extended family, rural or urban, developed or developing country have to be considered in order for researchers to make this allegation. Differences were observed in the economic status of female-headed households when researchers controlled for household size and Fuwa (2000) found that the larger the family size the poorer it is and the smaller the family size, the better their economic status.

Studies conducted in South Africa respectively, found that women in rural areas are mostly disadvantaged than those in urban areas (Casale & Posel, 2010; Dungumaro, 2008). In rural areas there still exists a tradition of leaving responsibilities such as the provision of support to extended family members, to women, and thus they have to care for a larger household size (Dungumaro, 2008). In agreement with the latter, Rogan (2014) also found that women often have a larger household composition and this could account for the reported poverty when compared to male household heads. Barros et al. (1997) also posit that households in urban areas are more likely to have minor children and are often poor as women are over-represented at the lower end of income distribution. Contrary to these findings, studies indicate that female-headed households in urban areas are well off and this challenges the perception that these households are associated with poverty (Dungumaro, 2008). It is imperative to understand that some of these households have headship of single parents and there are no circumstances that have forced them to head households but it is a choice (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Drexter, 2005; Dungumaro, 2008). Single women who choose to head households often have economic means and a high percentage of them are college educated and are economically better compared to men (Popenoe, 1996; Villarreal & Shin, 2008). A study conducted by Gear et al. in Mpumalanga, South Africa, found that younger women are more in favour of singleness as it is indicative of success and the husband will not drain them of household income (as cited in Budlender, 1997). This might present different economic conditions of female-headed households and hence the heterogeneity of households has to be considered.

### 2.10.1 Assets in female-headed households

In addressing the economic behaviour of female-headed households, attention has to be paid to the presence of assets within the households. Horrell and Krishnan (2007) claim that some households may be income poor but not asset poor. Assets may range from owning land, to livestock and property. Assets are an important feature in terms of assuring the household's survival and determining its ability to improve its situation (Horrell & Krishnan, 2007).

Further to this are findings that indicate that assets bring security in times of hardship and economic stress such as unemployment, illness or family break-up (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). Despite the fact that assets increase power and control, they are also assumed to bring household stability, greater focus, increased personal efficacy, increased social influence, increased political participation, greater future orientation and enhanced welfare of offspring, (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). In other words, when the household is in possession of tangible assets, the assets assert a positive influence on its livelihood and cushion the household against negative and unforeseen effects it might encounter. One researcher affirms the latter when she states that females heading households have been found to use their assets towards providing for their families, for example, they rent out back rooms and collect rent from tenants which assist towards provision for their families (Sidloyi, 2016). Zhan and Sherraden (2003) claim that parents with assets have a perception of a brighter future for their children than those with no assets. This is consistent with the socialisation perspectives which suggest that low economic resources reduce one's ability to be a good parent as negative attitudes and behaviours are transferred to children. Children living in households where the mother owns the property have possibly better educational outcomes. Asset possession or lack thereof has an impact on the psychosocial functioning of females who head households.

In conclusion, several studies problematise the perceived homogeneity of female poverty situations but, in essence, they are not denying association with poverty, but rather stressing the importance of consideration of various aspects and factors under which the household survives. Attanasso (2005) who did his research in rural Benin, Africa, submits that because of how poverty has been feminised, it is important that, when looking at the socio-economic status of female-headed households, contextual factors be considered. The previous scholar further argues that the number of people living in the household should be considered since a greater number of individuals and dependants are supported by women, moreover they have the burden to single-handedly assume responsibilities in their families (Attanasso, 2005).

However, many researchers are concerned about the transfer of inter-generational poverty should this issue not be given attention (Barros et al., 1997; Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; McLanahan, 1988). This means that if the children grow up in households where there is poverty, they might live in poverty later in life. This is based on the assumption that the low socio-economic factors of female-headed households may have a ripple effect.

### **2.11 Coping strategies among women who head households**

The survival strategies reported by women heading households involved spending more time with children, focusing on household chores, reading, watching TV, listening to music, meditation, talking to a friend and/or relative (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Some women reported that crying would help them release the pent-up anger associated with performing their role (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). Sheets (2014) conducted research in America, on single mothers and religiosity; she found that single women often use religious beliefs and practices for coping. Through spirituality, women are able to get relational support from other people. This not only helps them cope with stresses associated with being single parents, but their religiousness is advantageous to the children as it instils morality and children may tend to behave better. Females heading households also form social networks and friendship-based ties which help them cope with the challenges encountered during the execution of their roles (Sidloyi, 2016).

### **2.12 Summation**

This chapter has reviewed literature on female-headed households. Focus has been on the debate around the definition of headship since various researchers presented different views on the concept of headship. Debates on headship have led scholars to use distinct terms when discussing households headed by women. Therefore, *de jure* and *de facto* female-headed households and what characterises each of those households has also been discussed. The theoretical framework from which this study was conceptualised was also covered. Effects of heading households on female heads, which included psychological, health, emotional, and social effects was also discussed. Heads of female households have been studied by various researchers and there seems to be agreement as well as disagreement on their views, more prominently on the socio-economic status and kinship networks of women heading

households. Economic status and support system of women heading households have therefore been discussed. Children form part of the microsystem with whom female heads interact, as a result, behaviour of children in these households was explored. Coping strategies employed by female heads to deal with the psychosocial stressors they encounter were also discussed. The next chapter will look at the aims and rationale of this study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### AIMS AND RATIONALE

#### **3.1 Objectives of the study**

This study sought to explore the psychosocial experiences of women who head households and the perceptions of their roles. The study was conducted in the KwaZulu-Natal province, and specifically targeted women residing in Imbali Township, a semi-urban area under the Msunduzi Municipality which governs the city of Pietermaritzburg. This study has focused specifically on the psychosocial experiences of women heading households since it is an area that has received less attention from researchers of the phenomenon under study. The study is perceived to be critical in the understanding of the broader functioning of households headed by women. As previously stated in the literature review, women heading households do not exist in isolation but are part of inter-connected and inter-dependent systems, therefore, it would be difficult to understand how they function without understanding their psychosocial experiences. This study asked questions that would aid in understanding the interpersonal relationships between family members, behavioural and communication patterns between family members, and how female heads interact with the ecological environment (which includes education and economic factors). The investigation has focused on asking questions relating to understanding the aforementioned factors as they influence the quality of experiences that women are subjected to as household heads.

The main aim of the study was to explore the psychosocial experiences of women who head households. Exploring the psychosocial experiences had to be understood in relation to the individual's environment and the interpersonal relationships in which these women heads function. This research sought to study the existing interpersonal relationships and how the women in question view and perceive their roles. In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives were set.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To explore the psychosocial experiences of women heading households.
2. To describe the interpersonal relations within households headed by women.

3. To study the views or perceptions of women who head households in relation to their roles (specifically in terms of the expectations of the family and society).
4. To explore the nature of challenges experienced by women heading households.
5. To explore the nature of coping strategies used by women heading households in the performance of their roles.
6. To explore the nature of the behavioural patterns (communication patterns, discipline handling and response thereto, and conflict handling) within households headed by women.

### **3.2 Research questions**

The broad question that this research sought to answer was:

- What are the psychosocial experiences of women who head households?

The critical questions correlating with the aforementioned objectives in section 3.1, which assisted the researcher towards answering the main research question, were:

1. What is the nature of the interpersonal relationships in existence within female-headed household families and how are they experienced?
2. What is the nature of behavioural patterns in existence within and among the members of households headed by females in terms of communication patterns, discipline rendering and response thereto, and conflict handling?
3. What are the views and perceptions that the women who head households have of their roles as they interact with family members and society?
4. What challenges do female household heads encounter within the household and from society, and how do they cope with them?

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGY

#### **4.1 Overview of the chapter**

In this chapter the methodology that was used in this study will be discussed. The research design that was chosen to address the research question will be described, followed by a description of the population from which the sample was selected. The data collection procedures will be described followed by how the data was analysed. After the data analysis, there will be summation of the chapter.

#### **4.2 Research design**

According to Durrheim (2006), the research design of a project should be such that it provides a specific plan of how the research question should be answered. The type of research design that was applied to the study is the exploratory design. This type of research design allows the researcher to conduct investigations into unfamiliar ground and it often allows for flexibility in the process of addressing the research question (Durrheim, 2006). Exploratory research is flexible because of its unstructured nature; it helps generate new ideas and hypotheses about the phenomenon under study (Durrheim, 2006). The researcher was looking at the psychosocial experiences of women that head households, which is an aspect that has been previously researched. The specific issues that the researcher wanted to investigate have been inadequately researched in the current body of literature, and findings will inform the decision-making process. Consistent with the type of research design for this study, the researcher chose to apply an interpretive paradigm. According to Maxwell (2013), paradigms tend to focus on philosophical beliefs and assumptions of different methodologies and they also form foundations of research practices and strategies. An interpretive paradigm allows the researcher to interpret the experiences from the perspective of the participant (Starks & Trinidad, 2006). The researcher attempted to understand how the participants make sense of their experiences while maintaining a subjective state (Giorgi, 1985). The researcher adopted an emic approach which is an attempt to interpret the data from the perspective of the population under study. It is rather difficult to describe the experience objectively as the researcher's bias could affect the interpretation, and for this reason the researcher had to keep

a memo where notes were made throughout the whole research process. The data presented provides the accounts of the participants; in this study the researcher coded and themed the data while providing excerpts so that the perspectives of participants could be understood. In order to address subjectivity, the researcher has indicated how she has self-reflected based on the study process and interpretation of findings.

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen to address the research question in this project, which approach is consistent with an exploratory research design. According to Silverman (2000), qualitative research is concerned with discovering the meaning of experiences, and considers the real life context or the natural settings of the participants. Qualitative data allows people to express their feelings and experiences (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Kelly, 2006). Terre Blanche et al. (2006) claim that qualitative research is an iterative process and it is flexible and non-sequential. This is in accordance with the design coherence of this study because, as previously mentioned, an exploratory research design also permits flexibility. Qualitative research methodology enables the researcher to get a detailed view of issues, allows for in-depth understanding and more openness in research, while giving a richer description of the data (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Qualitative data is collected using words (written or spoken) and observations which are recorded in language rather than using numbers (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The researcher then uses his/her own interpretation of what was observed from the research. In the current study, data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule which included open-ended questions. Open-ended interviews provided the participants with an opportunity to give a detailed account of their experiences, perceptions and opinions. As the researcher's attention was drawn to the fact that new themes were emerging during data collection, the researcher was able to ask new questions that were not originally in the interview schedule.

### **4.3 Sampling and participant selection**

#### **4.3.1 Sampling method**

The study used a snowball or chain sampling method which is when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants (Noy, 2008). There are two reasons for the use of the snowball sampling technique. The first reason is referrals. This sampling technique relies on referrals where one participant recruits others

which helps the researcher capitalise on informal networks that might not be easy to access (Flick, 2006). The second reason is identification of participants who meet the specifications of the study. This non-probability sampling technique had participants assisting the researcher in identifying additional participants to be included in the sample (Henry, 1990). In addition to this, a purposive sample was selected.

A purposive sampling procedure is often used in qualitative research, where only the sub-group of interest is approached for recruitment into the study. Maxwell (2013) suggests that in purposive sampling, the settings, persons or activities are deliberately selected so as to provide the relevant information that will answer the research question and is often employed in qualitative research. In this study, women heading households were selected as participants.

#### 4.3.2 Recruitment

Permission had been requested from the gatekeeper (see Appendix 4: Permission to conduct research) and the gatekeeper's letter from the local ward councillor was obtained on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2015 (see Appendix 5: Gatekeepers Letter). In the process of negotiating entry into Ward 17 at Imbali Township, the researcher had a meeting with the ward councillor. Amongst the topics that were discussed was that of the heterogeneity of the community that was to be researched. It was also mentioned that the ward comprised of families that range from being categorised as poor, middle class and more privileged and she presumed that they would have different psychosocial experiences. The ward councillor had informed the researcher that there are three types of housing structures at Imbali Township, being four-roomed houses, reconstruction and development programme (RDP) houses which have three rooms, and "mansions" (four-roomed houses extended with additional rooms) (P. Sithole, personal communication, March 05, 2015). Four-roomed houses were those which were built in the apartheid era and they catered for the people who had migrated to the urban areas for employment purposes. According to Greyling (2010) the RDP programme was introduced as means to provide low-cost houses to the poor. The mansions are those houses which were initially four-roomed houses and the owners were privileged enough to extend into bigger houses. The ward councillor offered to help the researcher locate the target women for this study, but in order to avoid bias, the researcher had to refuse the offer.

A door-to-door recruitment process was followed as each participant referred the researcher to other households headed by women. The researcher had to rely on referrals by other participants since they knew other women heading households in ward 17, as per the snowballing sampling. Six women who head households agreed to participate in this study and the researcher interviewed them in their homes as they were the group of interest.

#### 4.3.3 The Sample

The sample consisted of six participants, all black and living at Imbali Township. This is a small sample, but data from a few individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and who can provide a detailed account of their experiences might suffice to uncover its core element (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The reason for conducting the study at Imbali Township is that it is easily accessible to the researcher as it is approximately 15 kilometres from the university.

Women heading households who are residents in Ward 17, Imbali Township were approached in their homes after being referred by other participants and asked to participate in the study. From the six women who participated, two were divorced, two were widows and two were single women. At least five women refused to participate in the study and mentioned that they needed incentives for their participation. The study plan did not include incentives for participation, and therefore some prospective participants were unwilling to participate. The participants' ages ranged between 33 to 67 years of age, with the ages equally distributed for those between the ages of 33 and 45 and those between the ages of 45 and 67. Participants' years of experience in heading households ranged from five years to 30 years. All the participants were black and Zulu speaking and were able to converse only in isiZulu, except for one participant who could speak English; however, she also preferred isiZulu. A table is provided below (see Table 1) for a clear description of the sample. The researcher interviewed women from all three housing types for variety. Two women were living in four-roomed houses, two were living in the three-roomed RDP houses, and two women were living in mansions.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of participants**

PSEUDONYM	AGE	HOUSEHOLD HEAD DURATION	TYPE OF HOUSE	FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES
Masesi	43	8	Four-roomed house	Widow
Thembani	67	25	‘Mansion’ or extended house	Single
Kagiso	33	8	RDP house	Widow
Sisi	56	9	Four-roomed house	Widow
Nomali	44	10	“Mansion” or extended house	Divorced
Siziwe	53	24	Four-roomed house. In process of extension	Single

#### **4.4 Data collection**

##### **4.4.1 Data collection instruments**

Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions based on the research question. Open-ended questions were used to help define topics under investigation and provided opportunities to discuss some topics in detail (Neuman, 2000). The open-ended questions permitted participants to uniquely formulate their answers and give their general feelings on the subject under investigation. Participants were also able to provide reasons for their opinions. In seeking to find out the psychosocial experiences of women, the researcher structured questions that attempted to enable an exploration of women’s experiences in all domains or levels within which they function (see Appendix 1: Interview Schedule). The questions had emerged from the literature that had been reviewed.

Participants were invited to describe their experiences and the interviewer probed for clarity and detail (Silverman, 2000). As the researcher realised that new information was emerging, new questions based on those identified themes were developed. In some questions, participants only provided brief responses. Cues and prompts were then used to encourage the participants to consider the question further. Some flexibility was allowed in data collection because the researcher was probing further than the original questions in pursuit of new information that was arising. This is consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative research. The semi-structured nature of the interview also allowed the researcher to encourage participants to elaborate on an original response and to follow up on any lines of enquiry that were introduced by the participant. The researcher had written prompts to ensure that the necessary preliminary ground was covered. However, some participants could not provide further information on their responses as it evoked emotional distress. As the data collection process ensued, I found that there were many emotional issues experienced by the participants and some even broke down and began crying. The researcher found herself faced with a dilemma as she had to contain the interviewees but at the same time be cognisant of the fact that it was not a therapeutic space but a research space. A sense of trust was noted as a majority of participants were free to share even their personal life experiences, which would not have been covered by the questions on the interview schedule.

In such instances, as per the proposal, the participants were then referred to the Child and Family Centre for psychotherapy (see Appendix 2: Permission for access to psychological services). A follow up was made on all the participants. None of the participants approached the Child and Family Centre. Participants reported that they have always been able to cope with challenges and would rather focus on the coping strategies familiar to them. Most of the participants preferred talking to people they are familiar with and relied on their faith as means for coping. These appeared to be adaptive coping mechanisms. As previously mentioned, the interviews were approached with topics that would cover the objectives of the study.

#### 4.4.2 Data collection processes

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 2015, ethical approval was received from the Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at UKZN but it had the wrong title. It was sent back to the committee for rectification. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, ethical approval to conduct research among



women heading households in Ward 17, Imbali Township in the city of Pietermaritzburg, which is in KwaZulu-Natal, was received. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal – approval number HSS/0701/015M (see Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance). On the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2015, the researcher went into the field to recruit participants and one participant was willing to be interviewed the same day. Data was collected between the 6<sup>th</sup> of August and the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, with six participants being interviewed over 22 days. The researcher encountered some challenges during data collection. For participants who had agreed to participate, the researcher had to make appointments. Some appointments were late in the evening as some participants are employed and have to work during the day. Some appointments were not kept and the researcher had to travel to the township and back without conducting any interviews. At least five participants that were approached refused to participate in the study stating that they required incentives. The researcher had to approach other participants who were willing to participate without incentives.

Participants were interviewed after having consented (see Appendix 6: Consent Form). The researcher explained the purpose of the research and the consent procedures to each participant, as well as the voluntary nature of their participation. The information sheet was discussed in detail to make sure that participants understood it and they were also allowed to ask questions after reading it (see Appendix 7: Information Sheet). Participants were informed that their participation in the research was voluntary and that should they choose to participate in the research, this would not affect their well-being as the study was considered to be of low risk. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage of the process.

The issue of the consent form was also prioritised as the researcher had to ensure that consent was given before the interview began. However, in the consent form there was a section where participants had to write down their names. Some participants were sceptical about providing their names as they were prepared to divulge sensitive information to the interviewer, and they wanted to be assured that the information they gave would be kept confidential, and they would remain anonymous during the write-up of the study. On the first day of data collection, the researcher felt uncomfortable approaching individual participants who were not even aware that someone would be interviewing them. She felt like an outsider intruding on people's privacy. Even though there was an information sheet, the researcher

found that participants wanted to know more about the aim of the research and whether the researcher had any close relations with the ward councillor and senior management of the municipality. Participants were asked why they were interested in knowing such information, and their response was that they were hoping that the researcher would put in a good word for them so as to obtain favour from the municipality. The researcher could not be absolutely sure that the information elicited during the interviews was credible, considering that the researcher did not seem to be of any benefit to the participants, since she had informed some of them that she would not call for any favour on their behalf from the municipal officials. There were those who were less concerned about confidentiality and even mentioned that they did not mind if their names were provided to the ward councillor. Some participants that were approached refused to participate and mentioned that they wanted to be paid for participating. The concern of the researcher was that they sounded desperate and might have provided information that they thought the researcher needed to hear instead of providing the truth about their psychosocial experiences. However, there were participants who did not want the other family members to listen to their responses. For those participants, we had to sit in the car and in other instances halt the conversation when a family member came into the interview space. There were disruptions during the process and some interviews were longer than initially contracted. It is evident that the venue for the interviews was not comfortable for some participants and, on reflection, perhaps a more neutral venue should have been organised.

Participants were informed that data will be coded and will also be delinked from the participants' identifying details, and no identifying details will be used in the write-up of the project. After they were assured of confidentiality by the researcher, they gave their names on the consent form and they also provided consent for audio recording (see Appendix 8: Consent for audio recording). The participants were mostly concerned about confidentiality and wanted to be assured that the information they gave would be kept between the participant and the interviewer. The researcher explained that they could contact the ethics committee if they had had any concerns relating to the study (see Appendix 7: Information Sheet). Participants were then recruited for the study. Participants were assured that they would not be disadvantaged personally or in any way if they chose not to participate in the study. They were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that they did not have to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. Participants had the privacy of their homes for the interview as the interviews were scheduled in the absence of other family members. The researcher had set appointments with

participants so that they could arrange to be alone in order to have a safe space for them to talk about their experiences. However, there were interruptions from family members during the interview process and there would be pauses to ensure that their privacy was maintained. Participants were also assured that their identities would not be linked to their responses and their individual responses would not be fed back to the ward councillor. However, participants were informed that a report on the broad findings of the study would be provided to the ward councillor on request. Permission to record the interviews was granted and the consent form was signed. Once the recordings of the interviews were transcribed, the audio recordings were deleted. The interview transcripts will be stored for five years electronically on the researcher's hard drive and are password protected. The hard copies of the transcript and the consent forms will be securely kept in a locked cabinet once the research is over and they will be kept for a five-year period after which they will be destroyed. Eventually, six participants agreed to be interviewed. The data that was collected from those participants was considered sufficient for the purposes of this study because, by the time the sixth participant was interviewed, there was data saturation in the sense that the same themes were noted as the information was being gathered.

Participants were interviewed in their homes except for one participant who offered to be interviewed in the car as she felt that there was no privacy in the house. For the participants that were interviewed in their homes, there was a barrier between the participant and the researcher in the form of a material object, like a table. The researcher kept notes, observations and impressions about each interview. Details and impressions about the process were documented in the notebook after the interview had taken place. The interviews were conducted in isiZulu so as to use the language in which the participants would be able to freely express themselves. Audio recordings were transcribed and since interviews were conducted in isiZulu, they were translated into English for data analysis.

#### **4.5 Data analysis**

Data was transcribed so as to allow for an interpretive analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews had to be translated into English and analysed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis focuses on identification, analysis,

and reporting themes within data. A thematic analysis of the data is done throughout the coding process and as themes were developed, they were grouped into categories that are distinguishable from each other for mutual exclusivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the researcher familiarised herself with the data, codes were generated of the elements in the data that appeared interesting to her (Creswell, 1998). As the coding process unfolded on the whole data set, the researcher searched across data for repeated patterns of meaning in the data (Boyatzis, 1998). This form of thematic analysis is largely controlled and determined by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the data is qualitative, the researcher should have been aware that the same themes might surface from different contexts and different individuals (Boyatzis, 1998).

In this study, the researcher began by rigorously reading through the data for familiarisation with the data. During this in-depth reading process of the data, notes for codes were generated as patterns were observed in the data. There were specific patterns that seemed to be recurring. The researcher searched through the codes and then identified themes from the codes. In order to ensure that themes were mutually exclusive, the researcher categorised them and, in the process, sub-themes were identified as well. The researcher paid attention to coherence in themes through repeatedly reviewing themes across the whole data set. Themes were named and those that were found to be identical were merged, named and given a specific definition for each and how they relate to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For a qualitative study to be valid and reliable, there has to be an accurate presentation of experiences without any predictions. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001) a qualitative study has to be credible, dependable and transferable, hence the next discussion is of relevance in this chapter.

#### 4.5.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, the concern is not on acquiring true fixes on reality but it is dependent on how the researcher convinces the audience that findings are genuinely based on a critical investigation of all the data (Silverman, 2000). Credibility of the study could be achieved through the process of triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2013; Silverman, 2000). To

ensure credibility of findings, the researcher utilised interviews as sources of data. The researcher's notes and observations were used to inform the process of interpretation of data. In order to ensure trustworthiness of the study, evidence from the interviews was used to support the main points and all the data was equally examined and analysed (Silverman, 2000). In this study, evidence from the excerpts has been used in the presentation of results and data analysis to ensure trustworthiness. Constant evaluation of the study is necessary for credibility of the study (Van der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). There were meetings with the supervisor in order to ensure that there was no deviation from the rationale of the study and that the research question was being answered. The process and methods applied throughout the study were documented.

According to Silverman and Marvasti (2008), a constant comparative method means that a qualitative researcher should always attempt to find a case in order to test out a provisional hypothesis. Through data analysis, there was a constant comparison and inspection of all data fragments that had emerged as codes and then as themes, the aim for the latter was to check if the themes were coherent and related to each other. This was to ensure that generated and selected themes were not of interest to the researcher but rather those identified from data across interviews. The thematic analysis process was documented (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the emerging themes were cross-checked against the existing theories and literature in order to ensure credibility of the findings. The use of thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify several themes, initially emerging as codes and later into main themes because of relevance and consistency with other themes. The researcher was also involved in all the steps of analysis as required by thematic analysis; researcher immersed herself in data and developed understanding of data set. This data analysis process helped with rigour in the analysis which is essential for credibility of findings.

#### 4.5.2 Dependability

In this study the alternative term for reliability, that is dependability, was applied because of its applicability to qualitative research (Van der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). In order to address the process of dependability in the study, a detailed report of all processes within the study should be provided (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the whole research project, there was constant interaction with the supervisor for external checking of the research, which can be likened to interrater reliability in quantitative research (Creswell, 1998). Silverman (2000)

suggests that interpretation of transcribed data may be less reliable than other forms of data because researchers might omit to transcribe crucial information, such as pauses and overlaps. To avoid this, the researcher had the interviews transcribed by a person skilled in transcription who paid close attention to every detail of the conversation to reveal subtle features of the interview for dependability. The researcher rechecked the transcription against the original interviews and this accounts for transcription reliability. During individual interviewing, audio recording was also done. The latter process accounts for dependability across interviews. Notes for qualitative observation of the process was also kept. As previously mentioned, the sample comprised of black participants, the researcher is also black, has understanding of the local culture, is of same race, understands participants' language and is of same gender as participants. This may have allowed for participants to be comfortable and the rapport that was required was also achieved. This process allows for dependability in the study. Qualitative data analysis techniques, which are in line with the interpretive paradigm, were applied, ensuring consistency in research design (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

#### 4.5.3 Transferability

A limitation of this study was not so much the sample size but the fact that the sample consisted of only black females even though the local Msunduzi Municipality is a multiracial municipality. Representativeness of the population is therefore likely to have been compromised. This limitation on generalizability has been counteracted by referring to transferability, which has been achieved through the production of detailed and rich thick descriptions of contexts (Van der Riet & Durrheim, 2006). Creswell (1998) claims that the detailed description of the participants' experiences by the researcher may enable the reader to transfer the information to other settings with a similar context. The sampling technique used (snowballing and purposive sampling); and means of data collection was such that it enabled the researcher to collect data from a willing sample most of whom had interest in participating. The use of thematic analysis allowed for non-prejudicial selection of data used for analysis and all collected data was accounted for. Data collected was therefore a reflection of participants' experiences and could be transferred to similar females heading households in similar settings.

This chapter has provided a step-by-step process of how the study was undertaken. Findings will be discussed in the next chapter, which will contain an elaboration on some issues upon which the researcher has reflected.

#### **4.6 Summation**

In this chapter, the research design that justifies the paradigm chosen for this study was discussed, and the sampling procedures were described. The data collection instruments that were used were discussed as well as the data analysis techniques. This was followed by a discussion on validity and reliability of the study. The findings from the study will be presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### **5.1 Overview of the chapter**

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings from the study, and to discuss these concurrently in relation to the literature and theoretical framework identified in Chapter 2. Findings presented below are based on the data that was collected and a deductive process was used in reporting on these. In this section, findings have been analysed and merged with the discussion. Literature reviewed has been incorporated into the findings for facilitation of clarity in the discussion and interpretation thereof. In order to identify themes, various codes in the data formed patterns that were relevant to the main research question which was: “What are the psychosocial experiences of women who head households and the perceptions of their roles?” Furthermore, the identified themes respond to the specific objectives of the study which were to:

1. explore the psychosocial experiences of women heading households;
2. describe the interpersonal relations within households headed by women;
3. study the views or perceptions of women who head households in relation to their roles (specifically in terms of the expectations of the family and society);
4. explore the nature of challenges experienced by women heading households;
5. explore the nature of coping strategies used by women heading households in the performance of their roles; and lastly,
6. explore the nature of the behavioural patterns (communication patterns, discipline handling and response thereto, and conflict handling) within households headed by women.

The identified themes have sub-themes which emanated from the participants’ responses. As Braun and Clark (2006) state, thematic analysis focuses on identification, analysis, and reporting themes within data. In order to support themes and aid with extensive detail, extracts have also been used.



## 5.2 Demographics of the sample

The sample was composed of six women that are heading households. The sample includes a balance between three types of women heading households; those heading households as a choice, those that are divorced or separated, and those that are widows. In other words, the sample comprised of *de jure* female households, which are those that are characterised by legal headship by women due to factors such as desertion, divorce, separation, widowhood, abandonment and single women supporting themselves and dependants (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Habib, 2010). The sample found supports Rogan's (2013) finding that in 2006, at least a third of the South African population resided in *de jure* female households.

The ages of the participants differed, and ranged between 33 and 67. The length of time spent as the head of a household by participants ranges from eight years to 25 years. Of the six participants, four had been heading households for a period of eight to ten years and two for periods of 24 to 25 years. All participants in this study were black. The reason for this was that the sampling technique was purposive and the study had targeted a specific area. It happened as such because all occupants of houses within the Imbali Township, in the city of Pietermaritzburg, in KwaZulu-Natal, are owned by blacks. This could raise the potential issue of equity and imbalance in the study. This may have affected results in terms of obtaining perspective which could be attributed to a large population of females heading households. As such, the sample may be considered unrepresentative of other race groups but findings could be transferred to other race groups within the target group. All participants had children or grandchildren who are attending school or tertiary institutions. With regard to employment, three women are involved in doing "odd jobs", two are civil servants in permanent employment, and one is an old age pensioner. All participants affiliate themselves to religious organisations but their level of commitment varies from being fully committed to being less committed, which was determined by the frequency of church attendance.

### 5.3 Introduction to themes

The interviews yielded data which when analysed was organised into five themes. These five themes include; encouraging persistence in education, discipline enforcement in female-headed households, conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures, resilience, and discrimination. The theme of discrimination is supported by three dominant psychosocial experiences, and these included isolation, barriers to ritual practices, and lack of family support.

Themes will be introduced from a general perspective of the experience of participants relating to the theme and then proceed to specifics. Extracts from relevant interview transcripts are integrated into the presentation of themes, in order to more fully convey the women's psychosocial experiences and substantiate the themes. In some of the themes, the majority of participants reported the same experience, whereas in other themes, at least half of participants reported the same experiences. Furthermore, in some themes, only one participant reported the experience, but the experience was assessed as significant enough to include as a theme since it provided some perspective into the female households heads relation with significant others. Table 2 (see below) includes a summary of the themes and sub-themes that were identified in the data.

**Table 2: Themes and sub-themes**

MAIN THEME	SUB-THEME
Encouraging persistence in education	None
Discipline enforcement in female-headed households	None
Conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures	None
Resilience	None
Discrimination	-Isolation -Barriers to ritual practices -Lack of family support

## 5.4 Encouraging persistence in education

Some participants in the study have relatively low levels of education, which are Grade 7 and Grade 4 respectively. They reported that they place a high value on education and they constantly encourage their children to progress with their own education. This theme also addresses what the participants feel is *required* of them as heads of households. In order to address those requirements, children are mentioned as the children are playing a specific role. Participants reported that their children attend school while some attend tertiary institutions. Some of the participants are unemployed but engage in several odd jobs in order to ensure that they have the funds to support their children obtain an education. This particular finding (i.e., the participants taking steps to encourage and facilitate their children's persistence in education) is consistent with previous findings that women prioritise their children and prefer investing in their children's education (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Encouraging persistence in education is also in accordance with Sidloyi's (2016) research findings which affirm that some women resiliently try to provide for their children, which includes ensuring that they get a good education. Participants reported that sometimes it is not easy to provide for their children, but they make sacrifices so that they will be able to pay for their children's education, for the children to have a bright future.

Masesi, a 44 year old widow who resides in a four roomed house, mentioned how much she had to sacrifice for her children to get a better education, and reported that even when her late husband was alive she did not get any support from him. She mentioned how her husband's family were well-off and esteemed Christians, but they made a mockery of her and were not supportive after her husband's death. Masesi reported that she wanted her children to have the best education and the situation at home did not discourage her from pursuing her goals. She said the following:

*I took my children to a school in town because I have always told my children that they should commit themselves to schooling so that they could be on their own. He [her husband] didn't want to help me with anything, he told me why did you take the kids to town, and so I took them to town because I was sure that my marriage was over and if anything happens I know my kids are in that school and they have a better education. My eldest daughter is at the University of Zululand doing third year in PR. (Masesi)*

Siziwe a 53 year old single mother residing in a four roomed house, mentioned that she is working as a civil servant and does not earn much. Her children have to travel to schools in town every day and her salary is not sufficient to cover all the monthly expenses. She mentioned that she has to wake up as early as 04h00 on weekdays to cook fish and fat cakes. She sells the latter at work to supplement her income so that she can cover the family's travelling expenses.

*I told my children that they must get education because it is their inheritance, because if I die no one will take care of them, they must study while I am alive and learn to be on their own while I'm still here, my mother told me that, she said that I must learn to be on my own while she was still alive because no one will take care of me, as such, I also tell them that if they do not get education they will suffer, if they depend on me, they will also suffer if something happens to me ... The older one studied at FET and he has to complete N6, he has done in service training. (Siziwe)*

The above extract confirms the findings from a study which suggested that inadequate education increases the chances of limited opportunities which may ultimately lead to inter-generational transfer of poverty (Barros et al., 1997).

Kagiso, a 33 year old widow who resides in an RDP house, reported that she does several odd jobs, which include cleaning, washing, and domestic work. She reported that she lives from hand to mouth, and has to work hard to make her money last throughout the month. This finding is confirmed by Sidloyi (2016), who also found that the majority of women heading households in South Africa do not have adequate means of provision for their children and have to work several odd low paying jobs (such as domestic worker, cleaner or child minder) in order to sustain their livelihoods. Kagiso reported that despite having no support from her extended family, she encourages her son to get an education so that he can secure a better future.

*I make sure he eats and he goes to school ... what satisfies me is eating what I have and taking my child to school until he completes grade 12. (Kagiso)*

Sisi, a 56 year old widow residing in a four roomed house, obtained a Grade 7 education. She was aware that her children are studying at tertiary institutions but was unsure of what they are studying. During the interview, Sisi presented the correspondence from her children's respective institutions so that the researcher could try to establish what they are studying. She mentioned that she believes that education will provide opportunities for her children that she never had. However, Sisi's particular attempts to encourage her children to persist in their education contradicts the study by Goebel et al. (2010) which found that the female heads in the local Msunduzi Municipality had lower educational attainment which accounts for infrequent school attendance by their children. The finding from this study (i.e., that children in female-headed households pursue education) also does not concur with the findings that lower educational achievement, less frequent school attendance, fewer years of schooling and higher incidence of high school dropout are associated with female-headed households (Zhan & Sherraden, 2003). Instead, my findings (2017) confirm Sidloyi's (2016) findings that women heading households prioritise the education of their children. This particular finding was mostly narrated with a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

*They have completed matric, the boy is studying electricity in Durban and the girl is doing office accounting at DUT. (Sisi)*

All the above-named participants narrated their stories about their children's education with pride and satisfaction. They all seemed to hold education in high regard and they believed that education was a requirement for their children to live a life that is free from hindrances. In other words, these participants viewed education as a source of freedom for their children and they viewed the provision of education as part of their role.

## **5.5 Discipline enforcement in female-headed households**

Given that children's behaviour in a household is likely to affect a parent's psychosocial functioning, it was imperative to explore how women in this study managed their children's discipline. As literature suggests, single mothers may suffer from depression, anger and hostile behaviours which may subsequently lead to development of aggression and conduct behaviours in children (Gonzales et al., 2014). The researcher in this study was interested in looking at the nature of reported behavioural patterns of children within the female-headed

households. These reported behavioural patterns were likely to encompass communication patterns, discipline measures applied, and the children's responses to such. Overall, it was found that the participants enforced discipline in their children, and the children responded to such discipline. The manner in which discipline is enforced may be suggestive of how the female household heads reportedly did not allow themselves to be manipulated by their children, and that they did everything in their power to keep their families together. Discipline enforcement may be suggestive of how they embraced their role as female heads and did everything in their power to carry out the head function the best way they knew how. Four decades ago, female-headed households were associated with disintegration and disorganisation and, therefore, not recognised as a viable alternative family form (Brandwein et al., 1974). But this finding (i.e., that women heading households are able to enforce discipline in their households) is not congruent with that of the study conducted decades ago, because more children are now growing up in female-headed households and tend to be well behaved (Drexler, 2005).

This finding suggests that women have encountered challenges in terms of children displaying disruptive behaviour, and have also responded in a similar manner in terms of disciplining the children. Participants expressed how they could not tolerate being disrespected by their own children, and hence the discipline that was instilled. Three participants mentioned that their children were involved in substance abuse and the participants had to expel them from their homes; two were sent to live with their paternal families as a form of discipline, the other was chased away from her home. This could concur with findings; when single parenthood was researched, most women reported child care responsibility to be difficult as their children were out of control and not responding positively to discipline (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). The involvement of the participants' children in substance abuse is consistent with findings from a study where women reported that their children were vulnerable to teenage pregnancy and substance abuse (Sidloyi, 2016). Findings from this study (i.e., this dissertation) suggest that female household heads enforce harsh and strict disciplinary measures on their children. Two of the children were sent to live with extended families, these are the same extended family members with whom the majority of participants had reported not having close relationships with. The latter will be discussed in section 5.8.3. It was also reported that children started to behave in a more acceptable manner after being expelled from their homes. It may seem that at least two of the children responded positively to discipline, which is contrary to findings by Kotwal and Prabhakar

(2009) that children raised by single parents do not respond positively to discipline. The children apparently changed their behaviour and pursued their education. The change in behaviour could concur with findings that children growing in the absence of a father figure are capable of well-mannered behaviour (Drexter 2005; Popenoe, 1996).

The reported reason for the sudden change in attitude was that the children were unable to tolerate the treatment that was meted out on them by their paternal families. Thembani, a 67 year old single mother, reported that she had chased her daughter from her house because of her disrespectful attitude, and during the time of the interview she (i.e., the participant's daughter) had not yet returned to her home.

*I chased the third born away from my house to go and live where she wants because her heart wants to be there and not here. The last time I heard of her she was in Johannesburg, I don't want anyone to drink alcohol in my house, her older brothers respected me. (Thembani)*

As a follow-up, Thembani was asked when last she spoke with her daughter and she said:

*I can't remember, she will come back when she wants to respect me, those who don't respect their elders must stay wherever they want to stay. (Thembani)*

Masesi's daughter reportedly had to drop out of university because she was abusing alcohol. The daughter reportedly had support from her nuclear family, but she displayed deviant behaviour. A recent study suggests that children in female-headed households may, among other things, tend to misbehave by infrequently attending school, engaging in cohabitation, drinking alcohol and using drugs (Sidloyi, 2016). She was reportedly sent to live with her grandparents as punishment, the same grandparents that reportedly never supported her family and with whom she had no relationship.

*One time the child that is at university was drinking alcohol like crazy, she dropped out of school and I decided to delete her from my life after her father died, I sent her to live with her father's family and they took her back to school, but she did not want to stay there, she stopped drinking alcohol and I took her back, I don't have time for nonsense. (Masesi)*

Siziwe's boyfriend with whom she had a son had passed away. Her son's late father had made provision for a trust fund. Siziwe's son was studying at a Further Education and Training College. He used to bunk classes and used the trust fund money towards his substance abuse. Eventually Siziwe's son exhausted his trust fund and fabricated the fact that he was still attending school. When Siziwe found out about the lie, she did not condone the behaviour but she sent her son to stay at his paternal grandparents' house, and they were also not supportive of him. Siziwe had reported that she had no relationship with her son's paternal family. It may seem that women heading households use their children's paternal families to intensify discipline. One can therefore assume that being sent to the paternal family was a form of intense punishment. After being sent to live at his paternal family, Siziwe's son then begged his mother to come back home because he reportedly could not tolerate the treatment from his father's family.

*He started this thing in grade 11, I did not see it but this person was always smelling dagga and I would ask why, he would say he is often in the company of the people who smoke, until the father of the two said, eyi, this one is taking a pill ... As time went by he slowed down but he was very rude then beyond control and then I chased him away and he went to his father's family and when he came back he was no longer taking the pill ... (Siziwe)*

These above excerpts show how women heading households can handle discipline of their children in the strictest manner. Children stopped drinking and using drugs respectively. This could suggest that indeed, children growing up in female-headed households are capable of behaving well.

## **5.6 Conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures**

The women who participated in this study reported different ways of coping with challenges that they experience as female household heads. However, the findings suggest that the most prominent strategy used for coping was through discussing the matter with either their children, church members, work colleagues, neighbours, or God. In terms of having conversations with church members as a coping measure, participants did not share the same sentiments, as some reported that they do not get support from church members, but instead



felt discriminated against by them. This contradictory finding will be discussed later in section 5.8. The female household heads have reportedly identified people in the community of a specific age group with whom they can talk, and most mutually agreed upon are the elderly. Some participants engaged in conversations with their children, and these children then tended to assume the role of counsellor to the participants. The majority of participants appeared to depend on their children for comfort. This is consistent with Clark's (1984) findings that women heading households may often use close kin, neighbours, extended kin, workmates and religiosity networks as support structures, with neighbourhood networks being the most significant. Sidloyi (2016) also concurs with this finding when she states that women may form friendship-based ties for support. In addition, Sheets (2014) also agrees with this finding when she states that single mothers often use religious beliefs and practices for coping with stresses associated with their role. The reliance on children could suggest that the relationship between the female household heads and their children may go beyond the mother-child relationship, and this will be elaborated upon in section 5.8.1 under the sub-theme, isolation.

Them bani stated that her children are deceased except for one who deserted her home. This participant also mentioned that she is no longer attending church because of the gossip among brethren. Furthermore, Them bani indicated that she has a poor relationship with her extended family. She reported that there are times when things are not going well in her life and needs to talk about whatever is troubling her, and further stated that she is appreciative of the fact that her stays with her. Them bani also stated that she does not become too overwhelmed because her grandson is always there to keep her company and listen to her. She said the following about her grandson:

*We sit down and talk and talk.* (Them bani)

Siziwe mentioned that when she faces challenges, she prefers talking to elderly people. An elderly neighbour always takes the time to listen to her. Siziwe also mentioned that even at work, she has identified someone that she trusts, and to whom she talks about her challenges. She further reported that she talks to her children as well and may feel better after the conversation.

*Ohh! there is granny Mju, whenever I have a problem, I'm this kind of a person who is open and I usually go to her and talk to her even at work there was this lady who is now retired, when I get to work, I would sort out the post as fast as I can and then say, hey aunt, this and this has happened and she will listen and help me in solving whatever issue ... It becomes better when I have talked about it, it's much better now because even my children are now older, the last two can talk, the one you saw when you came in, I talk to them it's much better. (Siziwe)*

Kagiso and Sisi both mentioned that they talk to their children but they also prefer talking to elderly people as well when faced with challenges. These two participants even specifically expressed how talking to their children and the elderly helps them deal with issues affecting them.

The participants described prayer as “having a conversation with God”, and this was reported as one of the ways that the participants use when they are undergoing some challenges. Even though three of the participants do not regard the church as an institution where they can obtain support, they do believe in prayer and God. They placed a high value on prayer and God, mentioning that prayer has helped them cope with challenges. The participants reported that they believe that prayer changes things and also makes things possible.

Nomali mentioned that she attends church regularly and does not want to miss church services. She said that she has brethren who understand her dilemma and seem to be keen to help her cope with challenges. She mentioned how difficult it was for her when she was going through a divorce and how the support from the brethren helped her cope. She even stated that she is raising her daughter to be a God-fearing woman and this is keeping her from succumbing to peer pressure. Even when her daughter was sick, she summoned for help from the church members and they prayed with her for her daughter's recovery.

*The church people and people at work helped me with prayers, which gave me some strength. (Nomali)*

Them bani reportedly stopped going to church and stated that it was because of the gossip from the brethren. She however seemed to indicate that when she is faced with challenges, she places her belief in the supernatural. When asked how she copes with challenges

encountered in her role as household head, she mentioned that she is dependent on the supernatural power, and that makes things possible in her life.

*It is now difficult since I am on my own with this little boy, but with God everything is possible because we still have food and we are not in lack of anything. (Them bani)*

The following participant, Kagiso, is an active church goer and believes in God. She reported that although she has been alienated from the neighbours, she has become a consistent church attendant, since she believes that her survival depends on her relationship with God.

*I believe that I have nothing else other than God, then when I come back I am happy because I took all my struggles to the Lord and I praise and open a verse that blesses me and quote what it says and which part I like and it gives me healing and I feel full of faith and I feel strengthened to live because nobody gives a life to a person except for God. (Kagiso)*

Sisi, expressed that she has experienced challenges, especially from her late husband's family. Despite all the challenges, she reported that when things get difficult and she feels like giving up, she finds solace in God.

*I just pray and ask God to give me courage ... I hide in God. (Sisi)*

This theme highlights how the female household heads talk with their children, colleagues, neighbours, and use prayer and their belief in God as a way of coping with their challenges. It is further highlighted in this theme that even though some of the participants do not attend church, as they have a negative perception of the church because of the manner in which they have been treated by fellow church members, they believe in help that comes from a supernatural being. Despite the negative perception of the church resulting from some hurtful experiences, all the female household heads still believe in the supernatural power of God as working for their own good and capable of bringing healing, hence the prayers.

## 5.7 Resilience

The participants seem to have experienced several stressful encounters, however, they have been able to sustain and provide for their families during these encounters. As Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker (2000) state, resilience can only be realised when individuals experience some form of hardship, but are still able to positively adapt in the presence of that adversity. Tusale and Dyer (2004) confirm that resilience is related to how well an individual copes with transition in the context of significant adversity. In this study, (i.e., this dissertation), some of the participants are unemployed, but they appear seem to be surviving as heads of households. A theme of resilience was developed based on the participants' narrations of how they perceive their roles as the heads of households. Findings suggest how they are able to provide for their families despite the fact that some of them are working in non-stable and insecure jobs. Some participants have been insulted by their in-laws and suspected of involvement in the deaths of their husbands. Some participants have poor relationships with their parents, and some participants' children have been involved in substance abuse. In spite of all these challenges, these participants are still able to function as female heads. This is consistent with Sidloyi's (2016) research findings which affirm that women heading households display resilience despite the odds against them. Resilience can only occur in the presence of adversity. Findings suggest that participants have had their fair share of hardships as women heads, but they still execute their roles. Some participants indicated the challenges that they face in their roles but claimed not to "live on handouts" (Kagiso). They also emphasised the importance of prioritising in the execution of their roles (Siziwe). The participants that are employed as civil servants also indicated the satisfaction that they derive from caring for their families, and also the fact that at least two of them live in "mansions". Two of the participants are having their homes renovated, which is suggestive of their capabilities to take on big projects on their own, which in turn is evidence of their resilience. Three of the participants have children who are studying at tertiary institutions.

Nomali is a 44 year old divorcee and she related how she has been able to extend her house, finish paying off the car, and bought a new car in spite of being a household head. She mentioned how she was never aware that she could provide for herself, until her ex-husband left her for another woman, necessitating that she indeed does provide for herself.

*It was not easy, I don't want to lie and console myself, there is something like people thinking, there is something wrong with me, people were talking, I lost a lot of weight, people were talking, maybe there is something wrong with you, your dignity, I started building my house ... I needed something to free my heart and immediately I started building and that was in a short space of time because he had left, other than that I was summoned to go to court, I didn't even know where the divorce court was, I only heard of it then. (Nomali)*

The above extract suggest that in spite of the hardship that Nomali endured, she was still able to extend the house without assistance and cope with divorce, which suggests that she was able to adapt to the adversity. When probed further about other achievements and resilience, Nomali stated:

*Renovating my house, changing my car, I had bought the first one myself, settling the bond, I was happy, I used to look at my title book, I finished paying for the first car and obtained a logbook, I paid off my second car so I have achieved a lot even though they are small things, but they make me happy, I am debt free, for real and the ability to handle my own finances, I am happy. (Nomali)*

Siziwe has never been married, has three children and has been living in a house she inherited from her parents. She recently built a two-roomed outbuilding and is currently building two more rooms to extend her four-roomed house. She mentioned that she does not view herself as the type of person who depends on another person, and especially not men. Therefore, she reported that she would rather fend for herself; thus demonstrating some form of resilience in the way in which she copes and lives. She reported the following:

*You can see my sister, I won't lie to you, it's difficult to be in charge of a household, be it you're a woman or a man, it's the same, if you're the only one responsible and there is no one to help you on the side, I can't enjoy my money because I want my children to have a bright future, ya ... It's a big achievement to build a house for your children. (Siziwe)*

The participants seem to be able to provide for their families and engage in projects that are generally assumed to be male related, like the extension of houses. Being a divorcee and a

single parent respectively, did not deter these participants from achieving their goals. Further to the resilience that female household heads possess, they also attach high importance to education and thus strive towards the provision of such for their children. Participants have been able to provide shelter for their children, to ensure that they do not fail in their roles as women heads. This finding is consistent with Horrell and Krishnan's (2007) finding that assets are an important feature in terms of assuring a household's survival and in determining its ability to improve its situation. Further to this, Zhan and Sherraden (2003) claim that parents with assets have a perception of a brighter future for their children than those with no assets. The socio-economic determinants of these participants do not seem to discourage them from facilitating that goal for their children, which is why the theme of encouraging persistence in education has been discussed in section 5.4.

## **5.8 Discrimination**

The participants cited different reasons that led to the researcher developing and refining the theme of discrimination. In the context of this study, discrimination is understood as being disadvantaged, stigmatised and treated differently. Schmitt et al. (2002) posit that women are a disadvantaged group and are more likely to experience gender discrimination in a variety of contexts, and being treated differently may be harmful to their psychological well-being. The participants stated that they noticed being treated differently, and have sometimes been made to have pity on themselves because of the absence of a male figure in their lives. They reported that they felt that this is a form of discrimination that emanates from different settings.

Three participants have experienced discrimination from the church and therefore do not place much value in attending church meetings. Two encountered discrimination from society, especially their neighbours. Consequently, these female household heads reported that because of the discriminatory attitudes of certain society members, church people and neighbours, they have been coerced into isolating themselves from other people. Under this theme, the psychosocial experiences that were highlighted by the participants predominantly pertained to isolation, which is one of the dominant psychosocial experiences of the participants of this study. Isolation has been identified as sub-theme and consequence of the main theme of discrimination (see section 5.8.1). Participants who felt strongly about being

discriminated against placed an emphasis on how this has affected their mental health. They underscored that sometimes they feel isolated from other community members due to their status of being female heads, and so when they keep to themselves they are simply responding to the attitudes of community members. The majority of participants mentioned that they do not have friends as they feel that their self-esteem and confidence is being challenged all the time. The latter is congruent to findings from the study which reported that discrimination could be reflective of systematic devaluation and therefore, when women feel devalued, this may harm their self-esteem and psychological well-being (Schmitt et al., 2002). In addition, barriers encountered towards the practice of rituals was also viewed as part of discrimination since it was reported to disadvantage them as women practising rituals required by their families. Furthermore, participants also reported that the traditional beliefs which promote patriarchy have also discriminated against them as they have had to depend on male counterparts to perform rituals to maintain the well-being of their families. They further reported that they sometimes find themselves in situations where they have to request male relatives to assist with rituals that are needed by their families because they have been made to believe that females are limited in terms of practising and executing some rituals. Because of the aforementioned reasons, barriers to ritual practices have been set as a sub-theme of discrimination (see section 5.8.2 below). Lastly, lack of family support was reported as emanating from discrimination by virtue of being women heading households. Lack of family support has also been identified as a sub-theme of discrimination (see section 5.8.3 below).

Thembanani and Masesi reported that they feel discriminated against in church. These participants mentioned that some church members make a mockery of them when, among other things, they suggest that they should find men for themselves. However, some participants reported information which was contradictory to this when they stated that they get support from church members. This was previously discussed in section 5.6 above, where it identified that some participants are able to cope with challenges that they encounter through support received from church members. In summary, findings suggested that the women are subjected to various forms of discrimination from their extended families, society and the church. This came up when women participants were asked to talk about their families and their religious affiliation. Findings also suggest that different participants have distinct and unique experiences of discrimination.

Thembani has three children, two of whom are deceased. She was never married and she currently resides in a six-roomed house with her grandchild. She also does not have a close relationship with the deceased children's paternal family and neither does she have a close relationship with her maternal family. She had been living with her son who died in 2015 and she is currently residing with her grandchild. She does not get any support from her extended family. When asked about her psychosocial experiences as a household head, she was evasive and eventually began talking about the extended family. When she opened up she said the following:

*I am complete like this, I have no one. The only person who has been helping me is the one who was a close friend to my son, he is the person I consider as family. There is nothing that I can say about those, you know families, so I'm just on my own and all my children have died except for the one whom I chased away from my house. (Thembani)*

This may be indicative of discrimination from her extended family. Thembani is a single mother and studies indicate that single mothers and their children have been unfairly stigmatised over generations (Popenoe, 1996). Thembani stated that she is complete on her own and does not feel like she has or needs a family. Her evasiveness when asked about her family may be an indication of a poor relationship with them. This is despite the fact that she does not have any other family to lean on for support. Buvinić and Gupta (1997) agree with this finding when they state that despite experiencing the burdens of poverty, being disadvantaged and gender discriminated as females, they receive no support as heads of households. As previously stated, Thembani reported that she does not get support from her extended family.

Kagiso is a widow and she mentioned that she specifically experiences discrimination from her in-laws. She was married and has a son from her marriage, but when her husband passed away, she was accused of causing his death. The in-laws reportedly ill-treat her and disregard her since they believe that she was responsible for the death of their son, and they assume that she may have bewitched him. She is doing several odd jobs and is currently living from hand to mouth. Kagiso reported that she does not get support from her maternal family and she attributes this lack of support to the fact that she was born out of wedlock, and her biological mother favours her children born in wedlock. Kagiso's in-laws have apparently never



enquired about their grandson's progress and they do not even know whether he attends school or not. She also reported that she does not have relationships with her neighbours because they sometimes gossip about her. For this participant, discrimination is twofold; from the extended family members and also from her neighbours. She mentioned that she prefers to stay in the house, and does not have friends as she is unable to make friends because they keep rejecting her. Kagiso reported that her female neighbours assume that because she is a widow, she will seek to attract their husbands' attention with the intention to have affairs with them. She mentioned that sometimes the neighbours gossip about her in their yards unaware that she is in the house and can overhear their conversation. The following extract suggests discrimination from the extended family and community for this participant:

*Living with a family and being married there and they just carry on as if you do not exist; so it really hurts because I try by all means to reach out to them but nobody is willing. So, I have chosen to live my life with my child and it is fine if they are doing this, let me just stay with my child for my life, because lately if you keep allowing people to see you as somebody who they can easily walk over, then you end up inflicting pain and subsequently sickness on self. (Kagiso)*

The discrimination experienced by Kagiso seems to have gone to the extent of compromising her self-esteem and self-confidence. This is in accordance with the study by Kotwal and Prabhakar (2009) which found that women are emotionally affected as their self-esteem is being challenged through stigmatisation. The above participant further mentioned that:

*There is word going around that I am poor and what does she think she has because she has nothing, so I am a person who is undermined and ignored no matter how much I struggle nobody cares about me. (Kagiso)*

The above extract is consistent with the findings that the role of women is being undermined in their families and society (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997). Rogan (2016) and Sidloyi (2016) also confirm this finding when they state that female-headed households still suffer stigmatisation from society and their communities.

Sisi is a widow and her husband passed away after he had deserted his family for 12 years. Sisi's husband came back home when he was sickly and died shortly after his return. Sisi was

mistreated by the in-laws and they even threatened to evict her from the house as they suspected her of bewitching her late husband. When they failed in their attempt to evict her, they then demanded to stay with her in her husband's house. The participant reported the matter to court and she was then able to keep the house for herself and the children. This is how this participant experienced discrimination:

*It was bad, I was mistreated when their son passed away but now it is better. I was mistreated even when I was sleeping and they were not treating me well until I went to court. (Sisi)*

The ill-treatment from the extended family when they demanded to stay in the house after her husband's death could speak to the extent to which women heading households are undermined by their families, as has been previously stated by Buvinić and Gupta (1997), who maintain that women heading households have their roles undermined by their families.

In addition to the theme of discrimination, household heads had contrasting views of the church. While some view the church as a coping resource, others reported experiencing it as a discriminatory institution. Two participants mentioned how the church served as a discriminating institution against them as household heads. They both mentioned that they used to attend church gatherings, because it is usually socially constructed as a place where they could be nurtured, understood and supported. However, they reported experiencing rejection from other church members. It was reported that sometimes other female church members felt that the participants' status of being single and household heads, was a threat to the other church members' marriages. The reason being the female household heads reported that they are perceived to have the strength to survive, and they are reportedly envied by the women who are assumed to be dependent on their husbands. These women heads reported that they have since stopped attending church as they no longer experience the church as an institution where they can obtain support. They reported that the apparent gossiping that goes on in church has affected them emotionally and psychologically. This is contrary to Clark's (1984) findings that religiosity networks serve as support structures for women heading households. The findings from this study are also in contrast to Sheets' (2014) finding that single women often use religious beliefs and practices for coping. It may seem that, in this study, some participants are deprived of such a coping source, while others are able to make use of the church as a coping source.

*I haven't been going to church for now. I used to go to the Lutheran church then I stopped and went to other churches and then just stopped going to church. What's the use? All they do is gossip, you can't even tell them your problems. (Thembani)*

Masesi mentioned how she has been ill-treated at her local church by other women who feel that because of her marital status (i.e., single and a household head), she is a threat to them. The discrimination reportedly grows to a level of the household heads being insulted and their dignity being challenged. For this participant, discrimination was reported to be experienced from all sectors, because even the neighbours and the extended family have been reportedly discriminatory towards her:

*I also used to go to church but you know you have a problem in church, women who don't have men and husbands are not treated well because women think they want their men, the married women do not want to always help, when you want help they say don't make a fuss, so that's why I don't always go to church because I don't always get help from church. You know I last went to church during the Passover. Church can be half supportive, when you tell your story, the married women will be sceptical of helping the single and widowed women because people think they want their husbands, for single its better, but for widows, they do not accept us, they tell you to get yourself a man, sometimes even pastors say the same thing. It's not practical, sometimes even neighbours think you want their husbands when you have a conversation with them, eish, it's difficult. They sometimes insult me and say I killed my husband, but I forgive them because they do not know the whole story. (Masesi)*

Nomali has been divorced and she reported that she was treated with high regard when she was still married. She reported that she experienced a traumatic event when burglars broke into her house and she assumes that it was because she now lives alone with her child. She perceived this incident as related to the fact that she no longer has a husband and a man in her house. She reported that she also views this as discrimination because she is a female household head and is being undermined through the invasion of her personal space. The burglary has had a negative impact on her emotional well-being and she also said that she is

now living in fear. Because of the divorce she appeared to have lost her self-confidence and questions her womanhood.

*It was not easy, I don't want to lie and console myself, there is something, like people thinking, there is something wrong with me, people talking since he left, I lost a lot of weight, people were talking, maybe there is something wrong with you, your dignity.* (Nomali)

This could be consistent with the study conducted by Dave (2000) who found that single mothers have a higher risk of depression since they encounter increased life stresses and decreased social support.

As mentioned in section 5.3 (Introduction to themes), the theme of discrimination was identified as being comprised of several sub-themes. These sub-themes will now be discussed below.

#### 5.8.1 Isolation

The sub-theme of isolation is one of the psychosocial experiences that participants reported, and it falls under the over-arching theme of discrimination. As previously stated, the female heads reported that they tend to isolate themselves from other people. They also reported to be isolated from their neighbours, extended families and sometimes even friends. In reaction to this isolation, findings suggest that the common predicament among the women is that they tend to isolate themselves from other people “in order to retain the soundness of mind” (Kagiso); as they are unable to deal with the judgment that they receive from significant others. Kotwal and Prabhakar’s (2009) study affirms this finding as they state that women heading households have a tendency to isolate themselves from social gatherings. Further to this, scholars found that women may perceive less attention from friends and family members which could affect their functioning and well-being (Bookwala & Fekete, 2009). A study conducted in 2011 in South Africa confirms this finding; these scholars maintain that widows (which characterise *de jure* female household heads) are often disconnected from social ties and may tend to experience strained relationships (Schatz et al., 2011). The finding that women are isolated is contrary to Sidloyi and Bomela’s (2015) finding where they maintain

that women have social networks that they use in order to mitigate their experiences and they even form friendship-based ties as a means to survive. In other words, while they keep to themselves, they find their solace within their household. They also reported that they predominantly relate to their children at a friendship level as they sometimes seek consolation from them.

When Nomali described her role as a parent, she mentioned that she enjoys it and finds it fulfilling. She mentioned how she frequently transports her child to school and how much she enjoys playing the chauffeuring role since it allows her to spend time with her daughter. This would be consistent with Sheets' (2014) study where she found that women heading households, especially single mothers, were involved in spending more time with children. Nomali further stated that her daughter is currently in Grade 12 and will soon be going on to tertiary education. Nomali's daughter has requested to go and study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood campus in Durban, but Nomali has not acceded to the request. She reported that she does not have friends and will be lonely if her daughter goes to study at Edgewood campus in Durban.

*I think I had a baby at the right time, at 27 years, it was the right time, and she wishes to go and study at Edgewood, I don't want that, I enjoy going to fetch her, waiting for her outside the school for 2–3 hours. I wait for her, because I don't have friends and I don't go out a lot, I don't mind waiting for her, even if there is a hailstorm and I am parked under the tree, to me it's worth it. (Nomali)*

This seems to suggest that this is more than a mother-daughter relationship since the participant is not keen for her daughter to leave home to study at a campus of her choice. The latter could be based on the fact that Nomali reported that she does not want to be left alone, and wants to avoid being lonely. This could be at the expense of her daughter's pursuit of future goals and subsequently her happiness. What appears to be reported as a sacrifice is emanating from the fact that Nomali reported that she does not have friends and regards her daughter as her friend. This could result in parentification of her child. Parentifying children could have adverse effects as some studies suggest that the child's future functioning could be disrupted and the child's ability to form healthy relationships affected, as the child has to suppress his/her own needs in order to meet the parent's needs (Hooper, 2007). However, this is not the focus of this study.

Kagiso is unemployed and she alluded to the fact that she does not have friends but relies on church acquaintances to inform her if there is a job advert. Kagiso is the same participant who reported that neighbours gossip about her and undermine her because they assume that she is poor. Neighbours also reportedly mistreat her as they do not want to see her having conversations with their husbands as she is widowed. She is mistrusted by her community and she related how hurtful and isolating this is. Because of the above-mentioned reports, she mentioned that she spends most of her time at home and would rather talk with her son than with the neighbours, because of their discriminatory attitude.

*They are just people I know from church ... I am not a person who has lots of friends because friend (pause), I avoid getting different advices, so I don't like many friends, even in my house I just want to sit with my son and talk. (Kagiso)*

Thembanani reported that she does not need people who will complicate her life, because people can be untrustworthy. She reported that she has always been able to keep to herself, had stopped attending church, and had no friend whom she can visit. She appeared to be living in an isolated manner and may seem to have reached a level where she has accepted her fate. The participant tends to keep to herself and away from other people.

*I am complete like this, I have no one ... I am not even a person who likes going places, I stay here most of the time and only leave the house when I am going to town. (Thembanani)*

#### 5.8.2 Barriers to ritual practices

The second psychosocial experience that also points towards the discrimination of female heads was identified as barriers to ritual practices. These practices pertain to traditional ritual practices that are sometimes practised within households, depending on their beliefs. The women reported that they are sometimes faced with situations which compel them to perform some traditional rituals as per their culture. Due to the fact that they are women, they sometimes find themselves faced with challenges in the execution of those rituals. Traditional rituals that were mentioned included specifically the burning of incense, traditionally called

impepho (which is an indigenous African plant used for communication with ancestors). Burning incense is viewed as a male function in most black communities, specifically the Zulu culture, and Ntuli (2010) maintains that women have no right at all to burn impepho to communicate with ancestors. Findings suggest that women have to rely on the assistance from males in their extended families to perform certain rituals. As previously stated, female household heads reportedly seem to have no support from their extended family members as they are either suspected of killing their husbands or being evicted from their houses. The challenge is that they still have to rely on those extended family members to perform the rituals for them. The ritual that was commonly spoken about was the burning of incense in order to appease the ancestors as per the African culture (Mkhize, 2009).

Nomali, who is 44 years old, reported that her daughter was sick and medical doctors could not find an organic cause. She reported that they alleged that the sickness may have been due to bewitchment. She further stated that she believed that she had to appease ancestors so that they could protect her sick daughter. The participant stated that she believed that because of her age and gender she could not perform the ritual. This finding is consistent with George's (2005) claim that women are only allowed the right to burn impepho when they have reached menopause. Nomali is divorced but she reported that she was compelled to consult her ex-husband so that he could burn impepho to appease the ancestors for her daughter to be healed.

*It [her daughter's illness] was treated as a psychiatric illness, she turned and called me her father's girlfriend, I called her father and he likes Zulu things, at home we grew up with them, he tried the incense and it would be better for a while. (Nomali)*

Sisi is 56 years old, and she reported that she does not have a close relationship with her in-laws. She stated that she had to perform a ritual and had to solicit help from her in-laws because she was unable to perform it herself. She believed that because of her age and gender she could not perform the ritual.

*They only come when I have called them just like I have called them to come on Friday so they are coming, they only come when I have called them, I am doing*

*something, only then will they come, but they haven't come ever since my husband died and I'm living like this. (Sisi)*

Siziwe reported that she is old enough to burn incense but there are times when she cannot perform this ritual as it depends on the reason for the burning of incense. Siziwe mentioned that it depends on the motive for the ritual and she usually hates it when she has to beg extended family members to come to her house for certain rituals. She mentioned that it is one of the difficulties she experiences as a female household head:

*I'm not married to anyone and I'm now old, so I burn incense because I can't wait for someone to come here and burn it for me. But if it's a big function, I have to wait for my brother, I ask him to burn incense for me. (Siziwe)*

The above findings suggest that even though these women are heading their households, they still have to depend on other extended family members in order to appease their ancestors. This can be perceived as a form of gender discrimination, and is indicative of the fact that there are certain functions that women are culturally perceived as unqualified to perform despite being the head of a household. This is what George (2005) refers to as part of the various discourses and practices that allow men to set limits and terms for women due to patriarchal influences.



### 5.8.3 Lack of family support

In exploration of the female household heads' psychosocial experiences, it emerged that participants shared a common experience of not having support from their own biological families or their in-laws. Findings suggest that these participants feel discriminated against by their own family members, which could suggest that the presence of extended families has not diminished as suggested by Popenoe's (1996) study, which claims that extended family households have diminished to the point of extinction. Findings from this study suggest that extended families have not diminished, but are still in existence. The extended families are reportedly not supportive. This is consistent with findings that kinship networks are not supporting women heads but are undermining their coping capacity (Schatz et al., 2011). Sidloyi (2016) found that some of the female household heads may enjoy support from their extended families, and this study's finding contradicts Sidloyi's finding. Instead, the finding from this study suggests that these participants do not appear to enjoy support from their extended families. Nomali reported that she does not have a relationship with her father, while Kagiso reported that her mother treats her differently from other children, and, moreover, she does not get support from her mother.

Participants reported that they usually find themselves being dependent on neighbours or church brethren for support. Researcher Clark (1984) found that the traditional absorption into extended families is gradually diminishing due to lack of resources, and such assistance is being provided by fewer families, but women heading households may often use close kin, neighbours, extended kin, workmates and religiosity networks as support structures, with neighbourhood networks being the most significant. As previously stated, findings from this study are consistent with Clark's findings. Studies conducted by Hossain and Huda (1995) found that widows enjoyed support from close family members and neighbours; and there was generally social acceptability and protection of female-headed households in society, which partly confirms the finding that participants find themselves depending on neighbours and church members for support. Further to this, the same finding that participants are dependent on neighbours or church brethren for support, is consistent with Sidloyi and Bomela's (2015) findings that women have social networks that they use in order to mitigate their experiences and they even form friendship-based ties as a means to survive. As previously mentioned in section 5.6 above, not all participants experienced discrimination

from church members, and some appreciated the support they get from the church. Lack of parental guidance and love may seem to be an aspect of their lives that has challenged their mental health and emotional well-being. At least half of the participants expressed how they have grown up in households where love from either of their parents was lacking. Some participants reported that they have been treated differently from the other siblings and lacked relationships with their parents. This seems to suggest that these participants are discriminated against by their families. They then indicated that they would not want their children to experience the same hurtful treatment from them.

Nomali laughed about her experience with her father and stated that he was irresponsible. She maintained that she does not hold any grudges against her father. Despite further probing, she did not want to talk about him and insisted that the researcher should focus on her, and not on her relationship with her father:

*We are water and paraffin, not that I hate him, I don't care about him, he did nothing for me; they were teenagers when they had me (laughing). (Nomali)*

Kagiso reported that her relationship with her mother can be categorised as poor. She reported that she is usually treated differently by her family members, and that discrimination emanates from her mother and sisters. She reported that each time she pays her maternal family a visit, before she leaves, her mother usually tells her siblings to search her bag to check whether she has stolen any items from them. She became very emotional when she related this experience. Kagiso indicated that there is lack of love between her mother and herself. She mentioned that she does not understand how her mother fails to give the same amount of love to her children. She also reported that her mother has failed her from a young age, because she failed to pay for her school fees while she could pay for the other siblings:

*Because I was born out of wedlock she takes all her love and gives it to these other children and she has just put me aside, no matter what trouble I face, I am the child that she thinks of last (crying). Even if Kagiso has a problem, nobody comes close, I just have that problem and that really does hurt because I often ask myself because as far as I know when you are a mother you need to give your children the same proportion of love, even when you treat them, you treat them equally and they feel like a family so that even in the future, because you don't*

*know what the future holds, just in case you die you should leave the children united because you taught them from the start, but if there are those that you love more than others and some you don't care about, she wasn't supposed to give me that picture but the way she is doing that because even in my house they do not come no matter what problem I have, they do not come. (Kagiso)*

Masesi reported experiencing challenges with her husband who had allegedly raped her siblings and had also allegedly infected her with HIV. This is consistent with findings that female heads are more likely to be infected with HIV (Shisana et al., 2010). Despite all these challenges, she reported that her mother did not support her. She narrated her bad experiences and explained that she often disagreed on a lot of issues with her mother. She reported:

*So I lived a life of not being able to find comfort at home, I left home at a young age, at 20 years I got married, so I was young, so when I met all these problems, I needed comfort from my mother, but I didn't find it, and I would ask my dad if she is really my mother and he would say, 'yes, she is your mother'. (Masesi)*

## **5.9 Findings in relation to ecological systems theory**

The majority of participants do not only seem to be experiencing challenges pertaining to being household heads from their community, but their immediate families seem to be adding to their challenges. They do not appear to be lacking support only from their families of marriage, i.e. their in-laws, but also from their biological families, which lack of support seems to be causing a strain for them because, according to the ecological systems theory, parents should form part of their subsystem. According to ecological systems theory, family forms part of the microsystem and, as stated by Von Bertalanffy (1967), each system is in principle responsible for growth and development of an individual. Malfunction in the system can hinder that growth and development.

Ecological systems theory states that support structures within the microsystem include family (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Even though women seem to function within their nuclear families, they are disadvantaged because they lack support from their extended families. Therefore, the support system within the microsystem does not appear to be intact, and this dysfunction might have negative psychosocial effects on women heading households.

Furthermore, according to the ecological systems theory, support systems which are situated in the mesosystem also include, among others, the church, neighbours and society (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007), and these could be conceptualised as secondary support structures for women heading households. As previously stated, some women participants seem to be discriminated in this secondary support structure, but some participants reported that they get support from the church. Women reported being discriminated against by some church members, neighbours and society. This could pose a challenge to women heading households if they are deprived of their secondary support structure. Even though women may function within their nuclear families, the dysfunction in other systems will negatively affect them because as Cnaan et al. (1989) state, the natural openness of the systems allows them to actively influence each other. Dysfunction in one system may cause dysfunction in another system. The macrosystem is where there are cultural barriers which contribute towards stigmatisation of women heads (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007). Specifically in this study, findings suggest that women encounter barriers towards practising of rituals, such as burning of incense. Findings of this study confirm the stigmatisation against women in the macrosystem.

## **5.10 Summation**

Themes that were discussed in this chapter included encouraging persistence in education, discipline enforcement in female-headed households, conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures, resilience, and discrimination. Participants seem to place a high value on education and encourage their children to be persistent in education. The other theme, which is discipline enforcement in female-headed households, suggests that women heading households are able to enforce discipline in their households and their children respond to discipline. The theme conversation with significant others and a supernatural power as coping measures, suggests that women hold conversations with their children, neighbours, church members, colleagues or God as means of coping with any psychosocial stressors they may encounter. The theme of resilience has indicated how women heading households are able to adapt to adversity. The last theme of discrimination suggests that women heading households are discriminated against in society and also by their extended families, but are nevertheless still able to function in the midst of discriminatory responses and actions from their extended families and society. The next chapter will provide a conclusion of the study and recommendations for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **6.1 Overview of the chapter**

In this chapter the researcher will address the conclusion of the study, the strengths and limitations of the study and then make recommendations.

#### **6.2 Concluding comments**

Much research has been conducted on female-headed households, internationally and locally. As previously mentioned, the focus of those studies has largely been on the socio-economic status of women heading households. A large number of studies have focused on the children growing up in female-headed households. However, there has been a paucity of research conducted on the psychosocial experiences of women heading households and how they perceive their roles.

The research reported in this dissertation took into consideration the psychosocial experiences of females heading households and how they perceive their roles. This study used a sample of six black females heading households in Imbali Township, in the city of Pietermaritzburg, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

A qualitative methodological approach, which adopted an interpretive phenomenological paradigm with an exploratory design for coherence, was applied. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews. Findings were analysed using thematic analysis. The theoretical framework guiding the researcher in terms of structuring the questions was the Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which aided the researcher in documenting the psychosocial experiences of females by looking at microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem levels holistically.

Findings suggest that women heading households encourage their children to be persistent in education in order to secure a better future. Furthermore, women heading households were also found to enforce discipline in their households to which the children respond. Women

heading households were also found to have adopted strategies that help them cope with their challenges, those coping measures include having conversations with significant others and what they referred to as a supernatural power. The women were also found to be resilient in the execution of their role as heads of households and they remain resilient despite the challenges they encounter. Findings also suggest that women heading households experience discrimination from their extended families and society. These findings could mean that when studying women who head households, contextual factors should be taken into consideration, specifically in South Africa, due to its cultural diversity. The next section will discuss the strengths and limitations of this study.

### **6.3 Strengths and limitations**

This study was comprised of a small sample of black females heading households in Imbali Township, which is in the city of Pietermaritzburg, in KwaZulu-Natal. The sample may have not been representative of all women that head households, however, it is adequate for reporting findings at township level. The township was the context of this study and the findings are transferable to black females heading households in similar contexts.

Recruitment of participants using the snowball sampling technique was a convenient strategy and no participants could say that they were coerced into partaking in the study.

There was also an adequate level of participation even though there were no incentives provided. Participants were willing, and some were even eager, to take longer than what was initially contracted to discuss their experiences.

In order to ensure dependability of analysis in this study, the researcher conducted individual interviews and also audio taped those. This was to ensure that the researcher would be able to listen repetitively to the audio recording so as not to make any assumption but be able to accurately report what the participants had said. A notebook was also kept where the researcher recorded the process during the whole study so as to be able to differentiate between her thoughts or assumptions and the information that was provided by the participants. This was necessary towards ensuring dependability of the study.

A limitation of this study was not so much the sample size but the fact that the sample consisted of only black females even though the Msunduzi Municipality is a multiracial municipality. This could raise the issue of equity and imbalance in the study, which is a methodological issue. This may have affected results in terms of obtaining perspective which could be attributed to a large population of females heading households, and may have also limited researcher's engagement and analysis. A researcher from a different background may have contributed a different perspective in the interpretation of participants' experiences and data.

## **6.4 Recommendations**

Further studies on the topic of females heading households could be pursued for a variety of reasons. Those studies could further explore the psychosocial experiences of women heading households; and also explore the exosystem, which is the system where policies are drafted with regard to women. The exosystem is the social system that individuals generally do not experience directly, and exploration of this system would involve an analysis of policies and programmes that address women's issues. This study has not focused on this level but it would be necessary in further research for the understanding of the psychosocial experiences of women heading households.

Further studies could also research the parentification of children in female-headed households, since findings indicate that women heading households engage their children in conversation as a means of coping with psychosocial stressors. According to Hooper (2007) parentified children may be constantly subjected to suppress their own needs in order to meet their parent's needs. Furthermore, some of the potential adverse effects of being a parentified child include disrupted future functioning and inability to form healthy relationships later in life (Hooper, 2007), and this would be a worthwhile issue to research further. In contrast, parentified children have also been found to display feelings of accomplishment as they make a contribution towards lessening stress in the household (Hooper, 2007), and it may be useful to explore the development of these strengths in relation to female-headed households.

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## APPENDIX 1

(English and Zulu version)



### ENGLISH VERSION

#### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

##### Demographics

1. Age
2. Marital Status
3. Level of Education
4. Length as head
5. Occupation
6. Number of Children
7. Number of dependent children
8. Religious Affiliation
9. Hobbies
10. Extended family members dependent on participant

##### Questions:

1. Tell me about your family.

- Prompts: Please describe the kind of relationship that exists within the family.
- Please give a description of the manner in which members of the family behave towards each other.
- How do members communicate with each other?
- How do the family members respond to discipline?
- How do family members handle conflicts?
- How do you provide for your family?



2. How would you describe your role as woman head?

- Prompt: What does it mean to you to be head in your family?

3. Tell me about your parenting role?

4. What are your experiences as the head of the family?

- Prompts: What are your achievements as the woman head?
- What are the failures that you experienced as the head?
- Would you say it is fulfilling, if yes, in what way?
- How satisfied are you with your life, please explain.
- What are things that make your life difficult?

5. What challenges do you encounter within the family?

6. How would you describe the relationship with the neighbours?

7. What challenges, if any, do you encounter from the society?

8. How do you cope with challenges?

9. What is your support system?

10. Please give a description of your support system.

11. Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed in your role?

12. If you were given an opportunity, what would you change about your role?

## ZULU VERSION

### UHLU LWEMIBUZO

#### Imininingwane

1. Iminyaka yobudala
2. Isimo ngokomshado
3. Izinga lemfundo
4. Ubuningi beminyaka uyinhloko
5. Uhlobo lomsebenzi
6. Inani labantwana abondliwayo
7. Uhlelo lwenkolo
8. Izihlobo ezondliwayo

#### Imibuzo

1. Xoxa kabanzi ngomndeni wakho.
2. Chaza ubudlelwano obukhona phakathi kwamalunga omndeni.
3. Ukuqonda hlobo luni ukuba yinhloko yomndeni, kusho ukluthini kuwe.
4. Ngixoxele kabanzi neqhaza olibambayo ekhaya njengomzali.
5. Ungalanada uthini ngesipiliyoni sakho njengenhloko yekhaya.
6. Yiziphi izingqinamba obhekana nazo phakathi kwekhaya kanye nomphakathi enakhelene nawo.
7. Yiziphi izindlela enizisebenzisayo ukubhekana nezingqinamba.
8. Bakhona yini abantu abakukhalisayo uma ubhekene nezingqinamba.
9. Uma kuthiwa unikwa ithuba lokuguqula isimo sempilo yakho, yikuphi ongakuguqula na.

## APPENDIX 2



6<sup>th</sup> March 2015

### To whom it may concern

This letter serves to provide the assurance that should any participant require psychological assistance as a result of any distress arising from the research project titled: *“An exploration of the psychosocial experiences of the women who head households or families and their perceptions of their roles”* conducted by Nomusa Mkhize who is a registered psychology Masters student from the University of KwaZulu-Natal; it will be provided by psychologists and intern psychologists at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus Child and Family Centre – phone 033-2605166.

Yours sincerely,

Prof D R Wassenaar

Academic Leader: SAHS (Psychology Pmb)

---

### School of Applied Human Sciences:

Child and Family Centre  
P/Bag X01 Scottsville  
PIETERMARITZBURG, 3209  
South Africa  
Phone: +27 33 2605166;  
Fax: +27 33 2605809  
Buthelezin@ukzn.ac.za



### Founding Campuses:

-  Edgewood
-  Howard College
-  Medical School
-  Pietermaritzburg
-  Westville

## APPENDIX 3



## APPENDIX 3

13 July 2015

Mrs Genrose N Mkhize 211559721  
School of Applied Human Sciences  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Mrs Mkhize

Protocol reference number: HSS/0701/015M

Project title: An Exploration of the psychosocial experience of women who head households and the prescription of their roles

**Full Approval – Expedited Application**

In response to your application received on 11 June 2015, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol have been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

.....  
Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)  
Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

/pm

Cc Supervisor: Lebo Thwala  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr J Steyn  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Nozipho Ndlovu

---

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Dr Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4609 Email: [ximban@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximban@ukzn.ac.za) / [snymanm@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:snymanm@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunp@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



100 YEARS OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

## APPENDIX 4



04. 03. 2015.

### **RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study**

Dear Sir/ Madam

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at your community. I am currently enrolled in the College of Humanities within the school of Psychology as a Masters student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and I am in the process of writing a research project. The study is titled: An exploration of the psychosocial experiences of women who head households and the perception of their roles.

The aim of the study is to Explore the lived experiences of women who head households in relation to their psychosocial functioning.

I hope that you will allow me to recruit eight (8) participants in Ward 17. All participants will be made aware that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. All participants will be required to complete an informed consent form which will provide all the details regarding the study. No participant will be interviewed before they read and sign this form. My supervisors contact details are also provided below should you have any more further questions.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Generose Nomusa Mkhize

Masters Student ( 211 559 721)

Mrs Lebohang Thwala (Supervisor)

Email: [Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za)

Tel: 033 260 6180

## APPENDIX 5

**CLLR P. Sthole**  
**WARD 17 COUNCILLOR**



DATE: 05.03. 2015

REF: 211559721

Dear Student

University of KwaZulu Natal  
Pietermaritzburg  
3201

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research interviews in Ward 17, provided ethical clearance has been obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee. We note the title of your project is: An exploration of the psychosocial experiences of women who head households and the perceptions of their roles.

Yours sincerely

  
0123485852  
Councillor  
(Ward Councillor)

Sithole Phitsiwe  
Commissioner of Oath (Ex Officio)  
Ward 17 Councillor, Msunduzi Municipality  
City Hall, Chief Albert Luthuli Street,  
Pietermaritzburg

## APPENDIX 6



### CONSENT FORM

I..... (Full names of the participant) have been informed about the study:  
*An exploration of the psychosocial experiences of women who head households*  
by..... (Provide name of researcher).

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any treatment or care that I would usually be entitled to. I understand that my responses will, as far as possible, be kept confidential. I am aware that I may be contacted by the researcher, Nomusa Mkhize, following my interview, to cross-check the accuracy of my responses as recorded on the interview script.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher, Nomusa Mkhize, by telephone (078- 066-1715) or email (nmsmkhize@gmail.com).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact the supervisor or research ethics committee officer.

---

**Signature of participant** **Date**

## **APPENDIX 7**

**(English and Zulu version)**



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### **ENGLISH VERSION**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

##### **WHO AM I**

Good day, my name is Nomusa Mkhize, a Masters student from the department of Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in Pietermaritzburg campus. I am conducting research that is exploring the psychosocial experiences of women who head households.

##### **YOUR PARTICIPATION**

You are invited to consider participating in a study that involves interviews towards exploration of the psychosocial experiences of women who head households at Imbali Township. This study will enrol eight participants who will be selected based on their roles as women who head households. The study will entail a face to face interview with you, which will take approximately an hour. Please note that your participation will be voluntary. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, you can withdraw at any point and it will not disadvantage you in anyway, either personally or professionally. If you agree to participate, your participation will be appreciated.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All the information that you give will be kept confidential. To ensure that confidentiality is maintained, your name will not be linked to the data, a pseudonym will be used and an identifying code will be allocated to your transcripts.

##### **RISK**

This study is considered to be of low risk to you. No harmful consequences are expected but if you feel any discomfort as you recount your experiences and would like to speak to a mental health professional, arrangements have been made with the Child and Family Centre (CFC) for psychological support. The contact number at CFC is 033 260 5166.



## BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits in the form of remuneration to you for participating in this study. Your participation will be helpful in completion of the Masters project.

## RECORDING THE DISCUSSION

The researcher will request for your permission to audio record the interview in order to ensure that details of the interview are recorded and important information is not missed.

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Information will be transcribed into written form and your name will not be linked to the data. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts will be stored electronically and protected by password

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Human Sciences research Ethics committee (approval number-----)

My contact details are as follows: (tel: 078-066-1715, email: [nmsmkhize@gmail.com](mailto:nmsmkhize@gmail.com)).

If you want to report any concerns, the details of my supervisor and the Human Sciences Research ethics officer are provided below.

Name of supervisor: Lebo Thwala

Tel: 033 260 6180

Email: [Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za))

Contact details for the Human Social Science Ethics Committee at UKZN:

Name: Phumelele Ximba

Email: [XIMBAp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:XIMBAp@ukzn.ac.za)

Tel: 031 260 3587

## ZULU VERSION

### UKWAZISANA NGOCWANINGO KANYE NOKUTHOLA IMVUME YOKUHLANGANYELA KULO

Sawubona, igama lami ngingu Nomusa Mkhize umfundi eNyunivesi yaKwaZulu-Natal. Ngenza iziqu ezingeni eliphakameyo isigaba iPsychology.

Uyamenywa ukuba uzibandakanye kucwaningo oluzoba nengxoxo ukuhlola ulwazi mayelana nesipiliyoni mayelana nokuba yizinhloko emakhaya abo.

Lolucwaningo luzodinga abantu abayisishgalombili abazokhethwa ngoba beyizinhloko emakhaya abo. Izobandakanya ingxoxo yobuso nobuso ezothatha okungenani ihora elilodwa. Umcwaningi uzocela imvume yokuqopha ingxoxo, awuzophoqeleka ukunika imvume, kodwa uma kwenzeka unika imvume, lezingxoxo eziqoshiwe zizohlaziywa umcwaningi. Ukuze kuqiniseke ukuthi lengxoxo igcina iyimfihlo, igama lakho ngeke lihlanganiswe nalengxoxo kodwa kuyosentshenziswa ezinye izinkomba. Lengxoxo izogcinwa kwikhompuyutha ivikeleke ngegama eliyimfihlo ukuze angabi khona ozofinyelela kuyo.

Ukuzibandakanya kwakho kulolucwaningo kungaba ngentando yakho. Uma ukhetha ukungazibandakanyi, ungayeka noma nini futhi akuzoba namthelela omubi kuwe. Akunamthelela omubi kuwena, futhi akukhonto embi engenzeka kuwe uma uzibandakanya. Kodwa uma uzizwa unokuxakaniseka emoyeni sisaxoxa futhi udinga ukukhuluma nomuntu oqeqeshelwe ukusiza kulokho ungathintana nomsebenzi wase Nyuvesi kusikhungo saballuleka ngokwengqondo kulenombolo 033 260 5166. Akukho nkokhelo ezotholakala ngokuzibandakanya kulolucwaningi.

Lolucwaningo luvumelekile ngokomthetho wakhona okhishwe ngu UKZN HSREC. Inombolo yemvume ngu \_\_\_\_\_.

Uma kukhona odinga ukukubika, iminingwane yomphathi wami kanye nomsebenzi wasekomidini elikhipha imvume yocwaningo nansi ngezansi:-

Igama lomphathi: Lebo Thwala

Inombolo yocingo: 033 260 6180

Email: [Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Thwalas@ukzn.ac.za)

Iminingwane yokuxhumana nekomidi elikhipha imvume yokucwaninga eUKZN:

Igama: Phumelele Ximba

Email: [XIMBAp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:XIMBAp@ukzn.ac.za)

Inombolo yocingo: 031 260 3587

## APPENDIX 8

(English and Zulu version)



### ENGLISH VERSION

#### CONSENT TO AUDIO RECORDING

- I hereby agree to audio recording of the interview for the purposes of data capturing.
- I understand that no personal identifying information or recording of myself will be released in any form and that my identity will be kept confidential in transcripts, reports and future publications.
- I understand that no information will be tracked back to me

Signature of participant: .....

Date:.....

## ZULU VERSION

### IFOMU YEMVUME

Mina..... (Amagama agcwele ombandakanyi) ngazisiwe ngocwaningo: *Ucwaningo olumayelana nokuhlola isipiliyoni somama abayizinhloko emakhaya abo ngu.....* (Bhala igama lomncwaningi).

Ngियाqonda inhloso nemibandela yocwaningo

Umcwaningi ucelile imvume yokuqopha ingxoxo yethu (khetha impendulo)

Ngiyavuma		Angivumi	
-----------	--	----------	--

Nginikeziwe isikhathi sokubuza imibuzo ngocwaningo ngathola izimpendulo ezinganelisile.

Ukuzibandakanya kwami kulolucwaningo kuyintando yami futhi ngingayeka noma nini ngingalahlekelwa lutho. Ngियाqonda ukuthi ingxoxo yami izoqoshwa ukuze ihunyushwe bese iyahlaziywa. Ngियाqonda ukuthi ingxoxo yami izogcinwa iyimfihlo. Ngiyazi ukuthi uNomusa Mkhize angathintana nami emva kwengxoxo ukuqinisekisa ngemininingwane eqondileyo mayelana nengxoxo yethu.

Uma nginayo eminye imibuzo maqondana nocwaningo, ngingaxhumana noNomusa Mkhize noma ngimbhalele (inombolo yocingo: 078-066-1715; email: [nmsmkhize@gmail.com](mailto:nmsmkhize@gmail.com) ).

Uma nginemibuzo ngezidingo zami ngenxa yokuzibandakanya nalolucwaningo noma kukhona engingakuqondisi kahle, ngingaxhumana nomphathi kaNomusa noma abasehho visi elinikezela ngemvume yezokucwaninga.

.....  
**Isiginisha yombandakanyi**

.....  
**Usuku**