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## **Rising Female-Headed Households among the Nubians: A Case of Historical Marginalisation of an Ethnic Minority in Kenya**

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### **Abstract:**

*The historical marginalised of the Nubian community in Kenya has affected the Nubian women and men's social-economic and political affairs in similar and differential ways at the household level. In the recent past, the Nubian community has witnessed an increase in the number of female-headed households. Despite the marginalisation and silencing of the Nubian women, they have assumed new role at the household level in a patriarchal community. There is inadequate information on the factors that have contributed to the rise of female-headed households among the Kenyan Nubians. The objective of this paper was to establish the factors that have led to the rise of female-headed households among the Kenyan Nubians. A sample of 74 respondents from female-headed households was drawn from the Nubian settlement of Kibra and Nubia through stratified purposive sampling. The study established that the state and changing socio-economic structures have played a critical role in the rise of female-headed households among the Kenyan Nubians. The recommends for addressing the Nubian land question, poverty in Nubian settlements and fairs treatment of the Nubians in accessing socio-economic and political entitlements. The study also advocates for recognition of Nubian female-headed households as a marginalised group.*

**Keywords:** Nubian, marginalisation, household, female-headed

### **1. Introduction**

Existing studies continue to reveal that the number of female-headed households is on the increase globally (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008). Historical analyses on the past and contemporary societies establish that with the exception of matriarchy, majority of African societies have been patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy has been the organizing principle in decision-making and provision of material needs at the household, clan and state levels (Mokebo, 2015). As a result, men have been looked upon by their family members as bread winners and family leaders. In contemporary African societies, the household is experiencing rapid transformation with rising number of female-headed households in both the local and urban areas.

The transformations being experienced at the household level has not only contradicted patriarchal ideology but also altered the gender allocation of tasks at the household level in most families. What it means to be a man or a woman needs to be redefined. There is scanty information on the rise of female-headed household among the marginalized ethnic groups in Kenya.

A number of factors have been associated with the rise of female-headed households in Kenya on case to case basis. However, existing studies have paid less attention to the Nubian community in Kenya (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2010). The Nubian community is unique because the Nubians have been historically ignored and treated as Sudanese aliens in Kenya. Consequently, the Nubian men and women have faced multiple forms of discrimination in their areas of settlement in Kenya. The Kenyan Nubians predominantly profess Islam, a patriarchal religion that for some time was differently treated in Kenya (Equal Rights Trust, 2012). The British colonial master considered the Nubian community above the native communities in the Kenyan colony and subsequent marginalization of the Nubian by the post independent Kenyan state raise many questions on the status of the Nubian community in post independent Kenya.

#### **1.1. Objectives of the study**

The objective for this study was;

- To assess the factors that have led to the rise of female headed households among the Kenyan Nubians.

### *1.2. Significance of the study*

Little information exists on the impacts of marginalisation of the Nubian community at the household levels. The Nubian community has been side-lined and treated as second class citizens in Kenya. The Nubian are missing even in standard primary and secondary school text books including those of social studies and history. Majority of existing studies have linked Kenya's social-economic and political challenges to the British colonial master. Few studies exist on the role of the Kenyan post independent state in the subjugation of its people either by acts of commission or omission and the resulting impact on household organisation. This study contributes to the Nubian history from below by taking into account the Nubian experiences at the household level in country they consider home yet treated as strangers.

The study also contributes in understanding the changing power relations between the men and women at the household level. The accruing challenges and opportunities associated with female-headed households in Kenya.

### *1.3. Scope of the study*

The study locale was limited to Kibra and Nubia- Nyanchwa, Kisii County. The study focused on the factors enhancing women-led households among the Nubians in Kenya. The study examined the Nubians from early 1920s to 2018. The study interrogated how aspects of colonial and post-independent Kenyan governments' policies of have led to the rise of female-headed households among the Nubians. The study equally focused on how socio-economic dynamics such as poverty, declining masculinity, marital status, engagement in micro enterprises, women groups and empowerment programs.

### *1.4. Limitation of the study*

The major limitation of this study is the assumption that the household head was the main provider of his family. This is because the role of women in productive activities has been overlooked in African history.

## **2. Literature Review, Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

### *2.1. Review of Related Literature*

Studies have established that the African household was a basic social unit of production, allegiance, protection in pre-colonial times. In most families, the household head was a male province. However, women assumed the household status through "woman husbands", status. These were women who were allowed to take wives for themselves so that they could get heirs (Mokeybo, 2015). The household was however in a state of change due to natural disasters and human activities such as flooding, droughts, epidemics or slavery. The changes in the role of women at the household level has been linked to the family's changing interaction with the natural resources, the state and the society than the change in women's personal characteristics (White,1995).

Women in African societies have played a critical role in production processes at the household level. However, their success in the production and distribution of material goods has been credited their husbands. Most studies have focused on how women have lost their status within the family for over a century (Asante,2007). Existing studies that address the role of colonial rule in the transformation of women's role in the African family objectively are scanty. Existing studies have associated urban women with four emerging roles namely, as homemakers, food vendors, prostitutes and brewers of illegal liquor (White, 1995). The Nubian women form part of the historical inquiry on how the colonial and post independent states Kenyan has transformed their roles at the family level. Additionally, contemporary studies on the impact of enhanced women's status at the household level are inadequate.

### *2.2. Theoretical Review and Conceptual Framework*

#### 2.2.1. Feminist Theories

This study was premised on feminist framework underpinned on gender, as a tool of analysis of society. Feminists of all persuasions agree that women are marginalized in many aspects of life and that there is need to organize for change (Mokeybo, 2015). The feminist theories use gender as a tool of analyzing the society, institutions and structures to uncover unequal power relations between men and women. The subordination of women in economic activity has been associated with the private and public sphere ideology (ibid). The liberal feminist theory is rooted in liberal political philosophy which encompasses basic beliefs in the equality of human beings on the basis that they are all essentially rational and self-interest seeking agents (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2010; Mokeybo, 2015).

The liberal feminists advocate for legal mechanisms to guarantee equality to all sexes to exploit their potential to the largest extent possible. There are numerous legal requirements that have been enacted and domesticated at various levels of governance to mitigate discrimination on women, chief among them is the Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2010). These legal frameworks hold that the gender differences can cease to exist once equity in access to resources among men and women is achieved. Despite the legal guarantees, a number of other regulatory systems have continued to constraint women participation in the economy. This

study interrogates the role of legal frame works in influencing the growth of Nubian women micro enterprises in both objective and subjective dimensions.

### 2.2.2. Conceptual Framework

The factors leading to the rise of Nubian female-headed households were treated as the independent variables while the Nubian female-headed households were treated as the dependent variable.

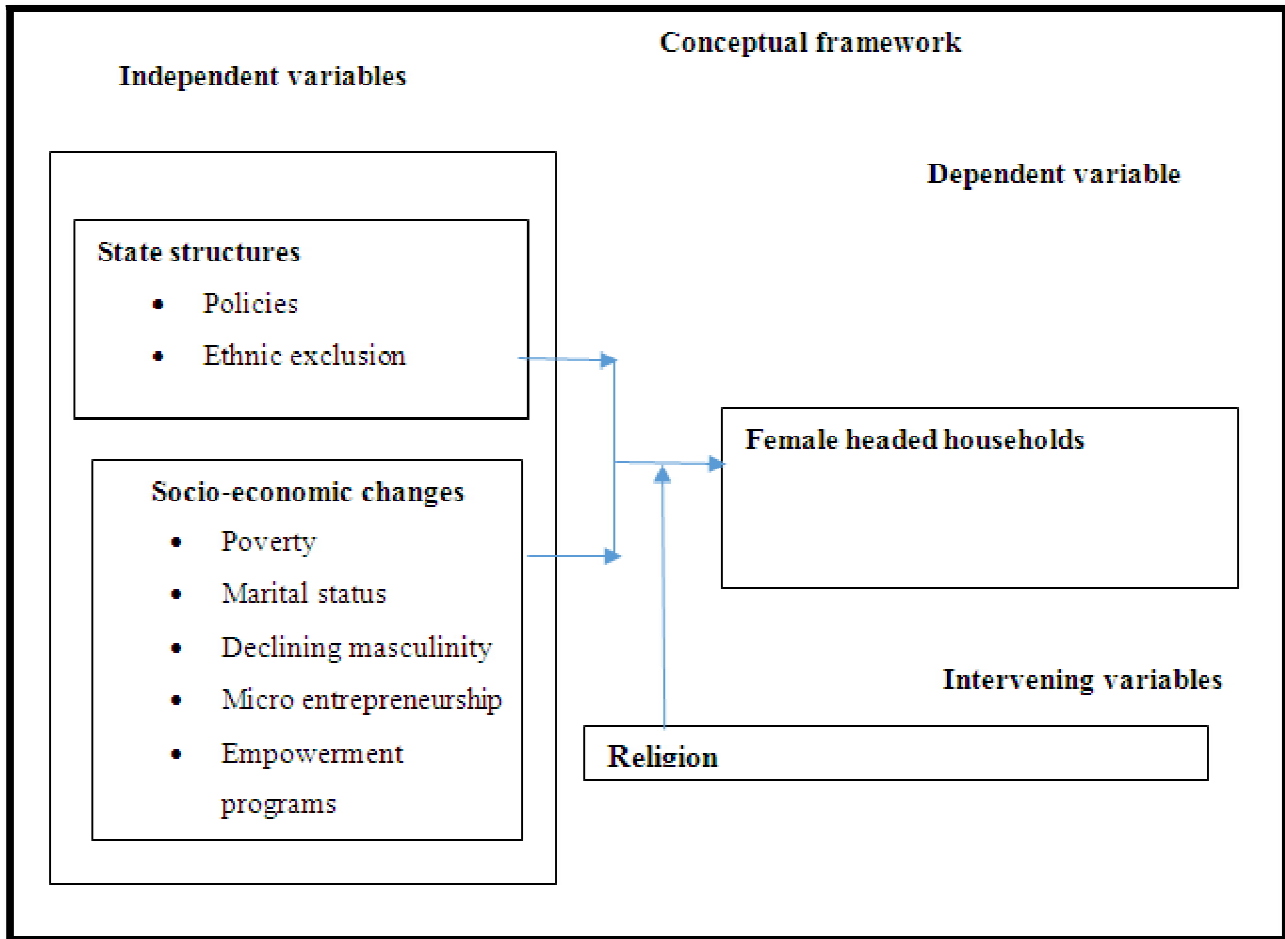


Figure 1: Factors Leading to the Rise of Female-Headed Households among the Nubians  
Researcher, (2018)

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed method research design that was largely qualitative in nature. The data was collected by use of secondary literature, archival sources, personal documents, interviews, observation and focus group discussions. The target population was all the Nubian women above the age 18. A sample of 74 respondents was drawn from the Nubian settlements of Kibra and Nyanchwa through stratified purposive sampling techniques of study locale units and marital status. Purposive sampling was preferred because first, the exact population of the Nubian is unknown (KNBS, 2010). Secondly, it enabled sampling of rich information cases. Self-administered semi-structured questionnaires and observation checklists were used in obtaining primary data. Collected data was qualitative and quantitative analysed through comparison, corroboration, generation of themes and simple descriptive statistics. The study was guided by the principle of objectivity throughout.

### 4. Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

#### 4.1. House Hold Organisation in Pre-Colonial African Societies

In pre-colonial African patriarchal societies, gender ideology was the guiding principle in household organisation. Household responsibilities were mainly shared depending on sex, age and marital status alongside other considerations. In either monogamous or polygamous households, the household head was a man. The household head was the family leader, provider and main decision-maker. On the demise of the household head, his grown up and eldest son replaced him as the household head. In cases where the household head died and his sons were youngsters, then his widows exercised household

head status or would be inherited and, the inheritor assumed the household head status. This practice of household headship was widespread across African societies including the Nubians of Eastern Africa (Asante, 2007).

#### *4.2. Impact of British Colonialism on Nubian Household Organisation*

The origin of the Nubian community and the subsequent Nubian question is rooted in the British colonial system. The Nubian men were first brought to Kenya as indentured military personnel in the King's African rifles in the beginning of colonial Kenya (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2010). Although the Nubians are spread in some major towns in Kenya, they were initially settled in Kibra in Nairobi, which in the recent past has been transformed into one of the largest slums in Africa. Kibra was a fertile and forested area that enabled the Nubian women to practise crop cultivation and animal domestication for subsistence needs. Although the British allocated land to the Nubians, they were still treated as tenants of the British crown. Upon the death of each Nubian, military personnel the wife and family members were expected to leave (Balaton-Chrimes, 2005). This British mentality formed the basis for the psychological preparedness among the Nubian women as shadow household-heads in their families.

#### *4.3. The Post-Independent Kenyan State and Nubian Community*

##### 4.3.1. Ethnic Marginalisation in Land Ownership

The Nubian community has suffered from multiple forms of ethnic marginalisation in Kenya. Historically Kenya has only recognised 42 tribes whereas other community like the Nubians, Makonde and other minority groups have been treated as ethnic strangers. In Kenya, the ethnic ideology has guided the allocation of resources and each ethnic group has a territory they refer to as homelands. These homelands are under communal titles or individual absolute titles. However, the Nubian settlements in Kenya are largely treated as informal settlements. As a result, they have been subjected to constant demolition, evacuations or encroachment by government and private developers without due compensation. The state classification of Nubian homeland as an informal settlement has led to insecure source of livelihood and of poverty to the Nubian community with adverse effects on Nubian women and children. Women have been forced to develop alternative survival strategies to cope with insecure livelihoods and poverty. Although a number of resettlement programs were undertaken during the reign of Kenyatta I, Moi, Kibaki and Kenyatta II, the Nubian land issue has not been addressed.

##### 4.3.2. Denial of Identification Documents

The question of the Nubian classification as stateless arose due denial of limited access to identification documents by the Nubians in Kenya (Equal Rights Trust 2012). Chief among these documents are the national identity cards, passports, birth certificates, schools leaving certificates, birth notifications among others. For a long time, the Nubian community has been treated as Sudanese foreigners in Kenya and acquisition of identity cards was not granted. Despite the constitutional guarantees on citizenship and qualification to gain citizenship, the Nubian have been side-lined since Kenya's independence in 1963. The acquisition of identification documents by the Nubians of Kenya has been subjected to a vetting process that is more limiting rather than facilitative.

Lack of identity cards means limited access to land rights, education, healthcare, sports, operating business and accessing banking facilities among others. Denial of these documents did not only limit the Nubian men as breadwinners but increased women burdens of feeding their children and husbands. The Nubian women dependence on their husbands declined because majority of their men were grounded and could not get formal employment.

#### *4.4. Socio-Economic Dynamics*

##### 4.4.1. Poverty

The study established that although individual families are accountable for their wellbeing, the state has played a key role in subjecting the Nubians to abject poverty. The respondents observed that have been deprived of formal employment, access to quality education, healthcare and political goodwill. Through decades of neglect by the government. The Nubian homeland and other Nubian settlements across Kenya have no access to clean water, poor road networks and lack of adequate social amenities. The Nubian settlements have largely become shanties. Although poverty affects the Nubian men and women, women experience it differently. Poverty has pushed most women in Nubian households to think on alternative survival strategies for coping with urban poverty. Most of these women engage in informal businesses or engage on service delivery in the posh neighbourhoods as domestic servants to earn income for supporting their families.

##### 4.4.2. Declining Masculinity among the Nubian Men

The Nubian men were initial elevated above the natives by the British colonial officials, received tax reliefs, and favoured by the British to an extent that felt that they had achieved some prosperity during the colonial period (Balaton-Chrimes, 2005). However, these feelings were followed by long periods of marginalisation of the Nubian community through denial of full citizenship. The Nubian male identity declined, the community was overshadowed and the men went to the

background. Some of the Nubian men took into alcohol to drown their identity crisis. In the face of increased alcoholism among the Nubian men, some of the Nubian women household headship status became situational.

#### 4.4.3. Marital status

Marital state	Frequency	Percentage
Single	8	10.8%
Married and staying with husband	32	43.2%
Married but with absentee husbands	4	5.4%
Separated with husband	2	2.7%
Widowed	18	24.3%
Divorced	6	8.1%
Concubines/Come we stay	4	5.4%
Total	74	100

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents' Marital Status

Source: Researcher, (2018)

The study established that marital status played a significant role in emergence of female-headed households among the Nubians. 43.2% of the respondents were in stable marriage with both the wife and the husband staying together. Widowhood played a significant role in the rise of women-headed households among the Nubians accounting for 24.3% of the respondents. It was established that Widowhood was mainly caused by age gaps and health related complications. Alcoholism and attacks by criminal gangs caused widowhood to relatively lower rates. Although majority of the widows were the elderly, a relatively higher rate of young widows was noticed among the Nubians. 10.8% of respondents were young single women. The study established that cases of households headed by single females were considered odd among the Nubians. However, young single females took up household-headship due to absence of both parents and where parents were alive but were totally incapacitated by either old age or poor health related complications.

The other interesting category of female-headed households among the Nubians was characterised by absentee husbands. Female-headed households where husbands were present but absent from home comprised 5.4%. In these households, women played a key role in resource mobilization and decision-making most of the time. Their husbands were physically absent and their remittances to the families were irregular or absent. Other emerging household forms emerging among the Nubians was come we stay arrangement or marital relations that were not yet officially recognised. In these households, the women had greater say given that majority of the men were part timers.

#### 4.4.4. Engagement of Nubian Women in Small Micro Enterprises

Historically, the Nubian women were engaged in small-scale crop and animal domestication as a source of income during the colonial period and post independent period (Mumma, 1987). However, these productive activities are currently marginal in the Nubian settlements of Kibra and Kisii due to shrinkage of available land. Consequently, women have ventured into small micro enterprises as coping strategies in the changing urban environment. The Nubian women engaged in the production of liquor, vending of food, vegetables stalls, retail shops, saloon and outside catering services. The Nubian women control over half of small micro enterprises in the Nubian settlement across the country. The remaining Nubian micro enterprises are categorised as male owned, joint family businesses or group owned. The entry of the Nubian women into micro enterprise was necessitated by increased family needs. However, the income from women owned micro enterprises has not only provided necessities to the family members but also altered household relations with women having a greater say.

#### 4.4.5. Membership to Women Groups

The study established that majority of the respondents belong to one or more women groups. Some of these women groups are purely of Nubian women while others were mixed groups with membership extending to other residential women from other ethnic groups residing Nubian settlements. Women groups enables the women to pull resources together and then buy household goods for each of the member on rotation basis. The groups also contributed to members when faced with some acute problem. The "other" women have relatively better education and adequate identification documents. Thus, they are hand in registration of group businesses and share leadership of the groups with the Nubian women.

#### 4.4.6. Nubian Dependence on Rental Income

In both Kibra and Nubia, the population has been rising due to rural-urban migrations largely from western Kenya. Many Bantu speakers such as the Abaluhya, Abagusii, Agikuyu and Akamba have settled in Kibra. However, the Nilotic Luo form the majority of the tenants in Kibra. In Nubia-Nyanchwa there is a mix of various ethnic groups with students and workers forming the majority of tenants. Despite the ambivalent ethnic relations, the Nubians have always hosted these communities as tenants or neighbours. The increase in population due to these incoming immigrants has reduced dependence on land for agricultural activities. As a result, the Nubian have become depended on rental income as main source of income. In

many Nubian households, a man decides on allocation of land for new settlement or even selling a portion. However, women have remained in charge of cleaning of rental compound and rent collection.

The study established that although the Nubian main house is built by the household patriarchy, the Nubian rental premises are primarily built from women's income in contemporary times. Rental income among the Nubians is one of the leading sources of secure income for the family. By virtue that women control and decide largely on how rental income is spend has given them great control over decision- making and provision of household needs that was largely a male province.

#### 4.4.7. Empowerment Programmes and Nubian Household Organization

The respondents established that the Nubian women have relatively improved their status due to empowerment programmes by the Kenyan government targeting women and youths in the last decade mainly in the president Kibaki and Kenyatta II. Other sources of empowerment programmes to the Nubian women have been Non-Governmental Organizations, Mass media houses and local community welfare organisations. The respondents also observed that some micro finance institution had empowered Nubian women through provision of loans for their business. The study established that empowerment to the Nubian women has largely been through seminars and mentorship programmes. The combined effect of this empowerment has led to widening the household space for women.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

### *5.1. Conclusion*

This study established that the Nubian household has undergone rapid transformation and that female-headed household among the Nubians in Kenya is a practical reality. The study established that the rise of the Nubian female-headed households has been a historical process that existed during the past and present era. The study attributes the rise of the Nubian female-headed households as a function of the British colonial administrative culture and subsequent discrimination of the Nubian community by the post-independent Kenyan state through ethnic marginalisation and denial of identification documents to the Nubian men and women, as a result the Nubian have been subjected to poverty. Consequently, the Nubian men have experienced declining masculinity that have given room to the rise of female-headed households.

The changing family and marital status such as widowhood, absentee husbands, divorce, come we stay relations, separation, married and single status have led to the rise of female headed households among the Nubians. Involvement of the Nubians to small and medium micro enterprises, women groups, the Nubian dependence on rental income and empowerment programmes have led to the rise of female headed among the Nubians in Kenya. The study established that majority of female headed households are experiencing complex challenges.

### *5.2. Recommendation*

This study recommends for state recognition of Nubian settlement of Kibra as their homeland. There is an urgent need to provide land titles to Nubians in Kibra and other areas that they have settled in major towns across the county. The Nubian alienated land to be returned or proper compensation and resettlement programme put in place for affected families. The Nubian should be recognised as one of the ethnic groups in Kenya and that their citizenship status in Kenya recognised through rapid provision of identification documents. The Kenyan government adopt an inclusive approach to all its citizenship by ending ethnic and other forms of discrimination against the Nubians in Kenya.

The Nubian community and female-headed households be considered as marginalised groups. The study recommends for affirmative action for Nubian community and women in access to employment, appointments, access to education, financing, healthcare and development of infrastructure and social amenities. The study also recommends that the media and academia play a leading role in reconstructing the narratives that have led to the marginalisation of the Nubian community in Kenya. There is need to recognise the role of the Nubian women in their societies and supporting their efforts to improve their standards of living.

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