*Social epidemiology – theoretical frameworks and causal pathways to health*

Household headship and child nutrition: A case study in Western Kenya

**Adelheid Onyango**[**1**](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VBF-4663BJ0-B6&_user=217827&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F1994&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1580339784&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000011279&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=217827&md5=84d2ca694417b8e41635c929e5705ef8&searchtype=a#aff1)**, Katherine Tucker**[**1**](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VBF-4663BJ0-B6&_user=217827&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F1994&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1580339784&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000011279&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=217827&md5=84d2ca694417b8e41635c929e5705ef8&searchtype=a#aff1)**,****[\*](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VBF-4663BJ0-B6&_user=217827&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F1994&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1580339784&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000011279&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=217827&md5=84d2ca694417b8e41635c929e5705ef8&searchtype=a" \l "fn1) and Thomas Eisemon[†](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VBF-4663BJ0-B6&_user=217827&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F1994&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1580339784&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000011279&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=217827&md5=84d2ca694417b8e41635c929e5705ef8&searchtype=a" \l "aff3),**[**2**](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6VBF-4663BJ0-B6&_user=217827&_coverDate=12%2F31%2F1994&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&view=c&_searchStrId=1580339784&_rerunOrigin=scholar.google&_acct=C000011279&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=217827&md5=84d2ca694417b8e41635c929e5705ef8&searchtype=a#aff2)

1 School of Dietetics and Human Nutrition, McGill University, Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, Canada

2 Faculty of Education, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

† The World Bank, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

**Abstract**

The effect of female household headship on child nutrition has been hypothesized by some to be negative, based on the assumption that mothers alone will be poorer and will have greater demands on their time and resources. On the other hand, there is some evidence in Kenya that the nutritional status of children of female heads may be better than that of children of male heads, suggesting that when women have more control over resources, more goes to the children. In Kenya, *de facto* female headship is common due to male labor migration. This study examines the relationship between child nutrition and *de facto* female vs male household headship in western Kenya through the examination of family income and decision making patterns. Women in male-headed households had greater financial responsibility for household maintenance. Female heads assumed more farming responsibilities and had higher remittances from husbands. Husbands of female heads purchased food and other goods in the city for use by the household. Male headed households produced more food crops and used a larger proportion of them for home consumption. In this study, children of female heads consumed a greater variety of foods. Despite a greater prevalence of stunting, there was a lower prevalence of low weight for age among children of female heads. However, in statistical analyses, headship did not relate significantly to nutritional intake or status. In attempting to understand the possible factors influencing the relationship between headship and nutritional status, we found trade-offs in the ways families were coping, which appeared to balance some of the negative and positive effects of each situation.

**Author Keywords:**Kenya; female headed households; nutrition; diet; preschoolers

Please read the abstract above and then complete the following exercises in groups. At the end of the session you will present your work to the other groups.

1. Can you list the different factors influencing child nutrition mentioned in the above abstract? What other factors can you think of that might influence child nutrition?
2. Discuss and write down possible groupings for these factors (e.g. structural factors, social factors, family and community level factors, individual factors etc).
3. Can you construct your own theoretical framework to illustrate the relationship between the factors you have listed and child nutrition?
4. Can you write down two of the hypotheses that the authors of the above abstract report having tested regarding the effects of different factors on child nutrition?
5. Use your own framework to develop a hypothesis about a causal pathway involving at least two risk factors for child nutrition.
6. What data would you need to test your hypothesis? Can you design a study to test your hypothesis?
7. Present your framework, hypothesis and study design to the other groups.

**References and further reading**

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