

# Examining the Effectiveness of Coping Strategies among Child-headed Households in Lubombo Region, Eswatini Kingdom

Zanele Ngcamphalala<sup>1</sup> & Chrispin Matuka<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Humanities and Business, Information and Communications University, Lusaka, Zambia*

<sup>2</sup>*School of Humanities and Business, Information and Communications University, Lusaka, Zambia*

\* Corresponding Author: Zanele Ngcamphalala, [zngcamphalala@yahoo.com](mailto:zngcamphalala@yahoo.com)

**APA Citation and Referencing:** Ngcamphalala, Z., & Matuka, C. (2026). Examining the effectiveness of coping strategies among child-headed households in Lubombo Region, Eswatini Kingdom. *JENER Journal of Empirical and Non-Empirical Research*, 2(1), 210-213

ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>            Published on 17<sup>th</sup> Jan 2026</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>            Child-headed households            Coping strategies            Vulnerability            Social Work            Service effectiveness</p>	<p>Child-headed households (CHHs) represent one of the most vulnerable groups in Eswatini, particularly in the Lubombo Region where poverty and HIV/AIDS have left many children without parental care. This study examines the effectiveness of coping strategies employed by CHHs in managing daily life challenges. Using an ecological framework, the research explores coping at individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys. Findings reveal that CHHs rely heavily on informal networks, subsistence activities, and community-based support, but these strategies are often unsustainable and expose children to risks such as exploitation, disrupted education, and psychosocial distress. While resilience and agency are evident, effectiveness is limited by structural gaps in policy, weak institutional support, and cultural norms. The study concludes that strengthening formal safety nets, integrating culturally sensitive interventions, and amplifying children's voices in policy design are critical to improving coping outcomes.</p>

## 1. Introduction

Child-headed households represent a critical social issue in many developing countries, where children are thrust into adult responsibilities prematurely due to parental loss from HIV/AIDS, poverty, conflict, or abandonment. These households face multiple vulnerabilities including food insecurity, limited access to education and healthcare, emotional distress, and social stigma. Understanding how these children cope with daily challenges is essential for developing effective support systems.

### 1.1 Global Context of Child-Headed Households

Globally, an estimated 15 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS-related illnesses alone, with many assuming caregiving roles for younger siblings. Children in these circumstances adopt various coping mechanisms, but the sustainability and effectiveness of these strategies vary widely depending on socio-economic and policy environments. In Africa, the phenomenon is especially pronounced due to disproportionate burdens of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and fragile social protection systems.

### 1.2 The Eswatini Context

In Eswatini, child-headed households have become increasingly prevalent due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and persistent poverty. These children face significant challenges including meeting basic needs, maintaining school attendance, and managing household responsibilities. Despite interventions by government and civil society organizations, many child-headed households continue to experience food insecurity, stigma, and psychosocial distress, with fewer than 45% consistently accessing formal support services.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature reveals diverse perspectives on child-headed households across different regions, highlighting both the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ.

### 2.1 Lived Experiences of Child-Headed Households

Studies from South Africa and Eswatini document that children in child-headed households face significant challenges including food insecurity, exposure to abuse, psychological strain, and disrupted education. These children often assume adult-like responsibilities such as managing medications, household leadership, and caregiving for siblings, creating tension between their

identities as children and caregivers. Research indicates that while children demonstrate resilience and agency, they also experience emotional distress and social isolation.

2.2 Coping Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Research across various contexts shows that child-headed households employ diverse coping strategies including reliance on extended family and community networks, engagement in informal labor, participation in income-generating activities, and dependence on humanitarian aid. Education and vocational training emerge as particularly effective strategies, providing both immediate support and long-term hope. However, many coping mechanisms are perceived as trade-offs between short-term survival and long-term well-being, with children recognizing both the benefits and limitations of their strategies.

3. Methodology

A descriptive qualitative research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences, coping strategies, and perceptions of effectiveness among child-headed households in the Lubombo Region of Eswatini.

3.1 Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of children from child-headed households in Lubombo Region. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 participants, with data saturation determining the final sample size. Participants were children who had assumed household leadership following parental death or abandonment.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with informed consent, and supplemented with note-taking. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, using an inductive approach to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data. Ethical considerations included participant validation, triangulation, thick descriptions, reflexivity, and maintenance of an audit trail.

4. Findings

This section presents the thematic findings from the qualitative analysis, organized around the study's major themes and sub-themes related to experiences, coping strategies, and perceptions of effectiveness.

4.1 Experiences of Child-Headed Households

Participants described how their households became child-headed following parental death or abandonment, forcing them into premature caregiving roles. This sudden shift created deep uncertainty and fear about survival and future prospects.

Table 1: Experiences of Child-Headed Households

Major Theme	Sub-Theme
Experiences of child-headed households	Death of Parents or Guardians
	Feelings of Vulnerability and Insecurity

Source: Research Data, 2024

Qualitative Insights:

Children expressed significant emotional distress, with statements such as: "I feel scared because I don't know if we will have food tomorrow" (Participant F) and "I worry what will happen if I get sick" (Participant G). The loss of parental safety nets exposed them to heightened vulnerability and emotional distress.

4.2 Coping Strategies among Child-Headed Households

Participants employed various coping strategies to manage daily challenges, demonstrating remarkable resilience despite limited resources.

Table 2: Coping Strategies and Their Characteristics

Coping Strategy	Characteristics	Examples from Data
Child Labor & Income-Generating Activities	Casual work for neighbors, small business ventures, selling assets	"We sometimes sell goats whenever we need something at home" (Participant E)
Reliance on Social Support Networks	Extended family, NGOs, government support, community assistance	"SOS support us with Food, Electricity and school fees and Clothes" (Participant I)
Education & Vocational Training	School attendance, skills development, confidence building	"Education has given me confidence, and I feel I can take care of my siblings better" (Participant F)
Acceptance & Faith	Prayer, church involvement, self-encouragement, spiritual practices	"Praying makes me feel like I am not alone in this struggle" (Participant B)

Source: Research Data, 2024

4.3 Perceptions of Coping Effectiveness

Children demonstrated nuanced understanding of their coping strategies, recognizing both benefits and limitations. Education and vocational training were consistently perceived as the most effective strategies for long-term stability, while immediate survival

strategies like child labor were seen as necessary but unsustainable. Participants expressed that while faith and acceptance provided psychological strength, material support was essential for tangible improvements in their circumstances.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This section synthesizes the key findings from the study on coping strategies among child-headed households in the Lubombo Region, Eswatini. It draws evidence-based conclusions regarding the effectiveness of these strategies and provides actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening support systems, enhancing resilience, and informing policy and practice for vulnerable children in similar contexts. The discussion integrates qualitative insights with the broader socio-economic and policy landscape to offer a holistic perspective on sustainable interventions.

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study reveals that child-headed households in Eswatini's Lubombo Region face significant challenges following parental loss, including vulnerability, insecurity, and emotional distress. Despite these difficulties, children demonstrate remarkable resilience through diverse coping strategies including child labor, social support networks, education, vocational training, and psychological approaches. While these strategies provide immediate relief and demonstrate children's agency, they are insufficient for long-term stability without systemic support. The findings highlight the need for integrated interventions that address both material needs and psychological well-being while strengthening community support systems.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Strengthen Social Protection Systems: The government should enhance social protection measures by providing consistent food aid, clothing, school fee support, and child-sensitive welfare services to ensure survival and educational continuity for child-headed households.
- ii. Expand Educational and Vocational Opportunities: Government and NGOs should expand access to education through fee waivers and scholarships, while developing vocational skills programs and youth entrepreneurship initiatives with start-up support to create sustainable livelihood options.
- iii. Strengthen Kinship and Community Support: Extended families should be encouraged and supported to provide consistent kinship care, while community structures and schools should promote peer support networks to reduce isolation and foster collective resilience.
- iv. Enhance Institutional Support Systems: The Department of Social Welfare should decentralize support services, strengthen case follow-up mechanisms, and provide child-sensitive protection services including safe shelters and mentorship programs for vulnerable children.
- v. Develop Integrated Policy Frameworks: The government should develop comprehensive policy frameworks that specifically address the needs of child-headed households, ensuring coordinated efforts across education, health, social welfare, and community development sectors.

## References

- [1] American College Health Association. (2019). *National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2019*. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association.
- [2] Beck, A. T. (1964). Thinking and depression: I. Idiosyncratic content and cognitive distortions. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 9(4), 324-333.
- [3] Bloc, L., de Araujo, J. L., Leite, J. M., Barreto, S. R., Carneiro, K., Melo, A. K., Boris, G., & Moreira, V. (2022). Virtual Clinical Listening Groups for Psychological Intervention with University Students in the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 13, Article 772698.
- [4] Dlamini, S., & Hlophe, T. (2022). Access and utilization of counselling services among university students in Eswatini. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, 20(2), 45-62.
- [5] Eswatini Ministry of Health. (2023). *Mental health policy review and implementation framework 2023–2028*. Mbabane: Government of Eswatini.
- [6] Hunt, J., & Eisenberg, D. (2010). Mental health problems and help-seeking behavior among college students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 46(1), 3-10.
- [7] Johnson, M., & Lee, C. (2021). University counselling adaptations during COVID-19: Teletherapy, student engagement, and resilience. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(8), 921-929.
- [8] Rickwood, D., Deane, F. P., Wilson, C. J., & Ciarrochi, J. (2007). Young people's help-seeking for mental health problems. *Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health*, 4\*(3), 218-251.
- [9] World Health Organization. (2021). *Mental health: Strengthening our response*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- [10] Evans, R., & Becker, S. (2009). *Children caring for parents with HIV and AIDS: Global issues and policy responses*. Policy Press.
- [11] Ibebuike, J. E., Van Belkum, C., Van Rensburg, G. H., & Van Rensburg, E. S. J. (2014). An empowerment programme to support children in child-headed households in resource-poor communities in South Africa. *BMC Public Health*, 14(Suppl 2), S10.
- [12] IISTE. (2017). The challenges and coping strategies of child-headed households: A case study of Kibera slum, Nairobi County, Kenya. *Journal of Poverty, Investment and Development*, 33, 26-34.

- [13] Karuga, J. (2022). Coping strategies among child-headed households in Nairobi's informal settlements: A photovoice study. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 28(2), 123-140.
- [14] Mkhathshwa, N. (2017). The gendered experiences of children in child-headed households in Swaziland. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 12(4), 315-324.
- [15] Motsa, S. (2022). Caregiving challenges of grandparents raising grandchildren in Eswatini: Implications for children's well-being. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), 1-10.
- [16] Thwala, S. K. (2018). Experiences and coping strategies of children from child-headed households in Swaziland. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 6(7), 85-94.
- [17] Thwala, S. K. (2021). Socio-economic supports available for the education of adolescent girls in child-headed families in the Kingdom of Eswatini: Policy implications for educational evaluators. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 25(4), 6300-6314.
- [18] Tshivhase, S., Ntsieni, M., & Diphofa, K. (2025). My cry as an orphaned child living in a child-headed household: A case of a rural community in a Bosheka Village, South Africa. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*.
- [19] UNICEF. (2021). \*The state of the world's children 2021: On my mind - promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health\*. UNICEF.