

## Maltreatment of Youth Heads of Households in Rwanda

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### Abstract

#### Background

In Rwanda, the combined effects of the 1994 genocide and the spread of AIDS have resulted in large numbers of orphans. Many of these are not only orphans but also youth heads of households (YHH). Orphans and YHH are particularly vulnerable to maltreatment because of marginalization from the community. The objectives of this study were to: (a) determine the prevalence of maltreatment among YHH after a two year follow-up by age and gender; (b) assess the association between certain behavioral, contextual, and socio-demographic factors and maltreatment; and (c) determine predictors of maltreatment in that community.

#### Methods

Cross-sectional survey of 692 YHH, aged 10-24, in Gikongoro, Rwanda, all beneficiaries of a World Vision basic needs program. In addition, four gender-mixed focus groups with youth with a total of 32 participants and nine gender-mixed focus groups with adults from the community with a total 61 participants were held.

#### Results

The findings reveal that the prevalence of maltreatment is very high, with 71.5% of YHH self-reporting at least one type of abuse and 88% reporting having land or possessions taken or damaged. Focus group discussions identified four primary factors representing a source for violence and exploitation of YHH and results from the regression analysis showed that factors indicating community connectedness and children's externalizing behaviors were the most salient predictors of positive treatment or maltreatment of YHH. Additionally, because of the support they had received from World Vision Program, the YHH are perceived as "better-off" or "rich" by some members of the community and this jealousy contributes in the mistreatment of orphans. Survey results are consistent with this assertion as almost 78 % of YHH reported that people were jealous of the services they were receiving.

#### Conclusion

These findings provide new information on the issues surrounding the maltreatment of orphans in a poor, rural setting in Rwanda. Although the results should be regarded as primarily exploratory suggestive for further studies, they call for urgent need to address such a serious problem. The findings also suggest the importance of considering any new programs for orphans and YHH in the context of the wider community so as not to inadvertently add to their problems by creating resentment in the surrounding community.

**Key words:** maltreatment ,abuse ,youth heads of household,orphans, rural, Rwanda

### Background

In Rwanda, the combined effects of the 1994 genocide and the spread of AIDS have resulted in large numbers of orphans. Recent data show that overall 21% of children under age 18 have lost their fathers and/or mothers: 4 % have lost both parents, 13% have lost their father, and 3% have lost their mother. However, the proportions vary according to age with the highest levels found among children age 10-14 (36%) and 15-17 (41%).<sup>[1]</sup> According to UNICEF, recent estimates put the total number of orphans in Rwanda at 820,000 among whom 26% were orphaned by AIDS. This drastic increase in the number of orphans has overwhelmed the traditional caring mechanisms for orphans. Currently, many orphans lack adequate care-giving from surviving family members many of whom are self-struggling daily to survive under

conditions of extreme poverty. The consequence of a diminished traditional foster care system has been the emergence of a new phenomenon whereby youths are heads of households.<sup>[2]</sup> The number of children living in youth-headed households is estimated to lie between 200,000 and 300,000 and it is believed that the majority of these are headed by orphaned girls.<sup>[2]</sup> One study in Gikongoro found that among Youth Heads of Households (YHH) with children aged 0-5 years, 75.3% were females,<sup>[3]</sup> while in Gitarama, females accounted for 56% of the YHH.<sup>[4]</sup> Most of these YHH lack role models and are likely to be marginalized from community structures. In fact, several studies have noted that YHH in Rwanda are subject to stigma, discrimination and lack community support.<sup>[5-7]</sup>

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Youth Heads of Households in Rwanda are also considered to be highly vulnerable to sexual coercion, maltreatment, or exploitation, especially through dispossession of their land property, or forced child labor. With regard to land, several researchers have observed that higher population densities throughout the country are putting increased pressures upon limited land and resources, thereby leading to unequal land distribution, reduced family's land holding, over-cultivation, and frequent land disputes.<sup>[8]</sup> Although the literature on orphans in Africa and the hardships they face is flourishing, especially concerning AIDS orphans, very little addresses the land access problems experienced by orphans. One particularly serious risk is the possibility of losing assets, especially land, either because these will be appropriated by other members in the extended family or because they have to be sold off in order to provide for family needs.

One study in Uganda found that, 21 % of older orphans reported experiencing property grabbing. Moreover, despite substantial concerns about and experience with property grabbing in the community, only 10.2 % of parents possessed written wills.<sup>[9]</sup> A study in Zambia shows, however, that even when wills from PLWA specifically stated that their extended family was not allowed to tamper with their possessions in the event of death, property grabbing proved to be a prevalent and difficult issue to manage.<sup>[10]</sup> This study also shows that although males represented 64% of the individuals who completed wills; only about 34% of them willed residential property to their wife and/or children. In Rwanda, orphans face serious problems in asserting land rights, particularly when they are confronted with land-grabbing by relatives and neighbours. Most cases involve orphans' family members, particularly those who were supposed to be their guardians and defendants of their rights, but who shamelessly take over their agricultural land and occupy their houses or transact with others over the assets of the orphans.<sup>[11]</sup>

Sexual coercion is another serious issue for vulnerable children and youth that has been increasingly reported in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).<sup>[12-15]</sup> For example, findings from a community-based sample among males and females aged 10–24 years in Kenya show that among those who reported sexual activity, 21% of females and 11% of males have experienced sex under coercive conditions.<sup>[16]</sup> Sexual coercion can be defined as physical or verbal pressure to engage in sex or sexual activity.<sup>[12]</sup>

Concern over the issue of coerced sex among adolescent women has been elevated by a growing number of studies that have indicated high rates of non-consensual intercourse in developing countries.<sup>[12]</sup> However, comparatively few studies have explored the prevalence of sexual abuse specifically among orphans.<sup>[17]</sup> Orphans, especially young girls and female adolescents, are considered as being highly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>[18]</sup> Orphanage (being an orphan) has been documented as a risk factor for early initiation of sexual intercourse among young females in SSA,<sup>[19]</sup> and studies have indicated that young age of sexual initiation may put girls at high risk of sexual coercion.<sup>[14, 16, 20]</sup> The WHO's Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence against Women also found that women reporting first sex before the age of 17 were more likely to report forced sexual initiation than women who reported later sexual initiation. Of women who reported first sex prior to age 15, between 11% and 45 % reported that it was forced.<sup>[21]</sup>

Significant associations between coerced sex and a range of negative health and reproductive health outcomes for women of reproductive age have been widely reported.<sup>[22, 23]</sup> Compared with young women who have not been sexually abused, those who have been abused tend to have more sex partners, less control over the terms of sex, a lower likelihood of practicing family planning and using condoms<sup>[14]</sup> and a higher likelihood of experiencing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy.<sup>[24]</sup> In South Africa, 32% of pregnant teenagers reported that their sexual initiation had resulted from sexual coercion as compared with 18% of never-pregnant teenagers.<sup>[25]</sup> The literature also suggests a number of psychological impacts as possible results of sexual abuse of children and teenagers. Long-term psychological consequences of sexual abuse may include depression, thoughts about suicide, negative self-esteem and lowered self-efficacy, drug addiction and alcoholism.<sup>[26, 27]</sup>

A number of published researches have also provided evidence on the relationship between sexual coercion and HIV transmission.<sup>[15, 24, 28]</sup> Among the women living in Kigali, Rwanda, sexual coercion was associated with being HIV-positive.<sup>[29]</sup> A further feature of the African literature that is linked to AIDS is the increase in the occurrence of sexual abuse of very young children in SSA. Although a growing awareness of the extent of child sexual abuse exists in the media, peer-review research is very limited.<sup>[15]</sup> The growing interest in sex with the very young comes from a widespread belief, spread by traditional healers,

that having sex with a child below the age of 10 years may cleanse men of AIDS. <sup>[12, 30]</sup>

Much research has provided evidence of high levels of transactional sex among orphans and youth in SSA. <sup>[31-33]</sup> Poverty appears to be a major factor leading to trading sex for survival and material goods, although the need for protection may also be a reason. <sup>[31]</sup> Street children, among whom orphans may represent the majority, are at particularly high risk of transactional sex. <sup>[34]</sup> For example, studies in South Africa and Nigeria found that half of the street children have engaged in sex for money, goods or protection. <sup>[35, 36]</sup> While transactional sex may place adolescents at increased risk for HIV, <sup>[37]</sup> several studies have also noticed associations between transactional sex and gender-based violence. <sup>[18]</sup> In fact, women who have experienced some forms of gender-based violence, particularly child sexual abuse, have been found to be more likely to subsequently trade sex for money or drugs. <sup>[38, 39]</sup>

While sexual abuse is a major problem for young adolescents, particularly in disrupted communities or in areas with high levels of poverty and violence, researchers have highlighted that few cases are often reported due various drawback among which are the fears of retaliation, social stigma and lack of social support in the African settings. <sup>[16]</sup> In addition, the subject of sexual abuse itself is taboo in many cultures and traumatic events such as sexual child abuse are likely to be under-reported. In South Africa for example, the 1998 Demographic Household Survey (DHS) results showed that only 15% of sex abused women had reported the event to the police. <sup>[12]</sup> Close friends were the most common confidants. Also, young age at rape and knowing the perpetrator were independently predictive of delayed disclosure. <sup>[40]</sup> One study of sexual coercion among young people in Kenya found that for females who had experienced sexual coercion, boyfriends were the most common perpetrators (51%), followed by husbands (28%) and acquaintances (22%). <sup>[16]</sup>

In Rwanda, the war, genocide, and HIV/AIDS are known to have long threatened health and well-being. The impact of these factors on children, families, and communities represents a growing burden. YHH living on their own face an increased vulnerability to exploitation, violence, and abuse, particularly for girls in a disrupted society with inadequate social and legal protections. <sup>[43]</sup>

The aim of this paper is to share documented findings from a study recently carried out about maltreatment experienced by YHH in the context of high poverty and disrupted communities in Rwanda and to provide evidence-based recommendations to guide the authorities responsible for planning and implementation of relevant community-based interventions within and outside Rwanda. The authors suggest that if prevention programs for orphaned, YHH are to be successful in the future, a better understanding of the factors associated with maltreatment among this subgroup is necessary. The objectives of this study were to: (a) determine the prevalence of maltreatment among YHH after a two years follow-up by age and gender; (b) assess the association between certain behavioral, contextual, and socio-demographic factors and maltreatment; and (c) determine predictors of maltreatment in that community.

## Methods

### Setting

Rwanda is a small, landlocked country in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa with over nine million inhabitants living in a territory of 26,000 square kilometers. Approximately 95% of the population live in rural areas and are engaged in farming. Overpopulation is a serious problem. Poverty is widespread essentially due to a series of interlocking issues including scarcity of land, high population growth, limited resources, and the consequences of governance that was experienced in years preceding the genocide. All these factors have contributed to continued degradation of welfare. This study took place in Gikongoro in the Southern Province.

## Participants and procedures

### Youth focus groups

Four gender-mixed focus groups were conducted with YHH in October 2003. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with youths aged 15-19 years and two FGDs with youths aged 20-25 years. In total 32 youths participated, with each group averaging eight participants. All youth participants were beneficiaries of a World Vision Rwanda (WVR) basic needs programme. With regard to maltreatment, the FGDs were aimed at identifying the problems seeming to be specific to vulnerable youths, uncovering abnormal behaviour patterns of youths, and available support in the community.

## **Community adult focus group Discussions**

Nine FGDs with adults were conducted. Participants were selected by WVR program staff and included neighbours of youth beneficiaries, local leaders, and representatives of the Area/Local Church groups and associations and such groups had mixed genders with fairly equal representation of men and women. In total 61 community members participated in the discussions with an average of seven participants per group.

## **Youth survey**

A cross-sectional baseline survey was conducted in March 2004 with YHH beneficiaries of the WVR program. A team of 20 trained data collectors supervised by the Rwanda School of Public Health conducted the fieldwork. Face-to-face interviews lasting 1–2 hours were conducted in respondents' homes in order to ensure confidentiality and improve disclosure. A total of 692 interviews were completed with YHH age 24 and younger.

## **Ethical issues**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Tulane University Health Sciences Institutional Review Board and the Rwandan National Ethics Committee. Before starting any interviews, informed consent was sought through which each individual YHH respondent was informed of the objectives of the study, time to be taken for their participation in the study e.g. discussion sessions without actual payment, their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and confidentiality of the information they thought needful to be so-treated. Fieldworkers were sensitized to anticipate all adverse consequences of the youths involved in the investigation and were prepared on how to respond appropriately once they discover the youths in danger e.g. suicidal idealism or history of abuse and neglect sexually or through other means. These youths were reported to World Vision – Rwanda staff for referral and intervention. A small bag of household items consisting of a candle, matches, soap, rice, and flour have been provided as token of appreciation and in compensation for participant's time.

## **Variables**

### **Demographic characteristics**

We included demographic characteristics of youth household heads (YHH) that might be criteria for direct intervention or provide control when considering outcome variables. The measures (i.e. explanatory/

predictor variables) were age, gender, number of years as head of household, number of other children and youth in the household, current school enrolment and education achievement, and assets owned as a proxy of the socioeconomic status.

### **Youth maltreatment**

Maltreatment was assessed by asking respondents whether they had ever experienced any of the following: been beaten, been not paid for work, suffered damage to property, or experienced attempts to have land/possessions taken. In addition, they were asked whether they felt safe in their home. In order to assess sexual coercion, respondents were asked whether they had ever been forced to have sex, threatened with losing or not obtaining a job if he/she refused to have sex with someone. For YHH who reported experiences of being beaten or a history of sexual coercion, further questions were asked to determine if the abuse was currently happening. A 5-item maltreatment index was then constructed by summing the score for each type of maltreatment experienced by the youth including sexual coercion ( $\alpha = .54$ ). Each youth was given a score of 1 if he/she was victim of a certain abuse. The score ranged from 0 to 5, with higher score indicating more abuses. The scale was recorded into three maltreatment levels according to the score computed for each youth.

### **Adult support and marginalization**

A scale was generated to assess the level of adult support available to the youth. The scale consisted of four items including whether they had had an adult in their life that they could always depend on, someone to give them advice and guidance, someone to comfort them when they are sad or sick, and an adult who would go to the authorities with them if they needed help. Each item was scored using a 5 point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with don't know scored in the middle ( $\alpha = .77$ ). The score range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater availability of adult support.

A marginalization scale was also developed to assess the felt stigma and isolation of youth from the surrounding community. The scale consisted of six items ( $\alpha = .85$ ) and respondents had to indicate their agreement with the following statements: I feel like no one cares about me, people in the community would rather hurt me than help me, people make fun of my situation, people speak badly about you or your family, the community rejects orphans. Each item was based on a 5 options ranging from strongly disagree

to strongly agree, with don't know/uncertain scored in the middle. The scores ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating more marginalization.

### Other variables

A number of other variables with an empirical and/or theoretical link to maltreatment have been collected and they include: youth behaviours such as alcohol consumption, tendency to enter into fighting, whether s(he) has ever stolen anything from neighbours and whether s(he) has ever been arrested, peer relationship, cause of parent death, and whether a parent was in prison. The parental death variable was coded 'yes' if either parent was reported to have died in the genocide or after the war. Peer relationship was measured by asking the responding youth about whether or not they have had at least one close friend of the same age they could count on and whether they felt like belonging to a group of friends of their own age. Community involvement was assessed by asking the YHH about whether or not they belonged to one or more community groups.

### Data analysis

The analysis uses data from multiple sources to increase understanding of the vulnerability and the level of maltreatment experienced by YHH. Thematic analyses of FGD data were conducted to identify and provide an in-depth understanding of the major factors potentially related to abuse based on which some elements of the identified factors were included in the regression analyses to predict the maltreatment among YHH.

Data from the youth survey were double-entered into EPI-INFO, 2002 and analyzed with SPSS 15.0. The internal consistency method was used to assess the reliability of each of the three scales presented in the previous sections. The reliability estimate used with this method is Cronbach's Alpha. All the socio-demographic variables and types of maltreatment experienced by youth were stratified by age ( $\leq 18$ ,  $> 18$ ) and gender. Means and standard deviations were computed for continuous variables and proportions for categorical variables. Chi-square test were performed to assess whether there were differences in the socio-demographic characteristics, social outcomes of the youths and the distribution of the types of maltreatment depending upon their age and gender. Student's *t*-tests were computed to test the difference in means according to age and gender for the scales constructed in this study.

Regression analyses were conducted to examine principal factors related to the maltreatment of YHH in Rwanda. First, linear regression analysis was used with potentially important variables including socio-demographic characteristics, whereabouts of parents, youth behavioural problems, and measures of youth involvement in the community. All these variables were entered and maintained in the model regardless of significance level.

Secondly, logistic regression analysis were conducted to assess the independent contribution of each factor described above in predicting two types of maltreatment (physical abuse and property damaged) after controlling for socio-demographic variables and other independent variables. Only variables that were significant in the bivariate analysis at *p* value less than .05 were entered into the model. Risk estimates, their confidence intervals and significance levels are presented.

## Results

### Focus group discussions

Analyses of qualitative data provide a range of factors related to maltreatment of YHH. Four primary factors representing a source for violence and exploitation are identified: (a) poverty, (b) contextual factors related to the recent history of Rwanda, (c) isolation and lack of community involvement, and (d) youth behaviors.

### Poverty

A predominant viewpoint shared by participants is their difficulties in coping with hardship living conditions. The high level of poverty has a negative impact on the traditional caring system for vulnerable children. Adults have indicated their inability to even meet the needs of their own children. Youth living on their own are certainly the most affected and the inability to meet their basic needs leads to unsafe behaviours such as prostitution or becoming street children as expressed below:

*Because of poverty and lack of projects, girls choose to exchange sexual services for money in order to earn a living.*

[Youth female age 19]

*If you want adults to like you, you have to accept whatever they want even if it's bad.*

[Youth female age 22]

Many YHH are landless or lack shelter and live on the streets. Others may have access to temporary shelter in exchange of for labor. Participants in focus groups described needing to accept any offer that might improve their living conditions, thus exposing themselves to exploitation, as expressed in the quotations below:

*There are even those who take you to their homes to take care of their cows, even if they abuse you, you stay in order to live.*

[Youth male age 19]

*There are times when one does not have a shelter and because people became bad even those who can accommodate you take only girls because they are the ones who work, and if their boys make them pregnant they put them out.*

[Youth male age 17]

Furthermore, it was reported that some community members are resentful of the aid youths receive from NGOs. Survey results are consistent with this assertion as 77% of YHH reported that people were jealous of the services they were receiving (Table 3). Youth beneficiaries of NGO assistance are perceived by the community as better off and “rich” compared to the rest of the community. The following statements quoted from the discussants reveal:

*Whenever you get help even those who liked you become your enemies. For example, when we get seeds they [neighbors] want us to give the seeds to them.*

[Youth female age 22]

*We were given goats, as they were grazing kids with parents came and started beating them.*

[Youth female age 24]

### Contextual factors

The 1994 genocide has brought important changes in communities that currently comprise perpetrators and survivors of the genocide and people returning from many years of exile. Participants highlighted social disruption, division and mistrust among community members, as revealed by the following statements:

*There are three groups: group of those coming from outside the country, the group of survivors, and persons with relatives or parents jailed. Those from outside do not understand well what happened because they went out with a certain culture and come back with it. They do not understand how someone came to survive from the horrible situation. In general, we are not in accordance. When the survivor meets with the person with relatives or parents jailed they do not get in accordance. They accuse one another.* [Adult male]

*Today there is a lot of suspicion among people because you know that someone participated in the genocide and so killed your parents or relatives or so contributed in jailing your people.* [Adult female]

The majority of youths (73%) believed that since the war people no longer trust each other and 89.5% indicated that the community is divided (Table 4.1). The YHH often bear the consequence of this division as they are labelled ‘genocide perpetrators or survivors’ depending on the whereabouts of their parents.

**Table 1: Youth heads of household perceptions regarding the community**

n=692	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Uncertain %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %
<b>Isolation</b>					
You feel isolated from others in the community	11.8	38.9	0.1	41.9	7.2
People are jealous of the services you get	29.5	48.1	4.5	14.2	3.8
People don't like you because they did not like your parents	19.7	45.8	6.8	23.1	4.6
The community rejects orphans	23.7	51.7	4.0	19.4	1.2
People in this community would rather hurt you than help you	14.9	42.1	1.4	35.7	5.9
<b>Changes after the war</b>					
Before the war, people helped kids more than they do now	14.9	40.8	27.1	14.8	2.5
People no longer trust each other since the war	19.9	53.0	5.5	19.4	2.2
Since the war, the community is divided	28.8	60.7	3.6	6.8	0.1
You trust that local or grassroots authorities would look out for your best interests if you went to them with a problem	27.0	58.7	1.7	11.0	1.6

### Isolation and lack of community involvement in favour of YHH

The results from FGDs point out that in addition to the breakdown in the traditional social support structure around vulnerable youths, children are very often associated with their parents' history and thus face stigma and isolation. While 50% of surveyed youth felt isolated from the community, 67% of YHH indicated that people do not like them because of their parents and 75% reported that the community rejects orphans (Table 1). The detrimental consequences of isolation and the ensuing loneliness lead many youth to despair:

*Where we live they isolate us, anything wrong is attributed to orphans... Everything that goes wrong in our sector is ascribed to us because we are defenseless.*

[Youth female age 19]

*Orphans relatives are the ones who reject them mostly, that is why you find kids who become delinquents or commit suicide.*

[Youth female 19]

Without connection to their community, support, guidance and protection from adults in their lives, these youth report serious problems of abuse and exploitation. Many youth feel threatened and fearful due to the harassment, as reflected in the following statements:

*During the night, there are people who go to frighten the YHH because they do not respect them. This especially happens to girls but if they live with a boy even if he is small those people do not disturb them.*

[Youth female age 22]

There are times when boys come to our house and refuse to go.

[Youth girl age 18]

Participants also expressed the lack of protection when their possessions are damaged, destroyed or stolen by community members.

*They let their livestock graze in our land (spoil our crops) and when you complain they tell you that they will kill you.*

[Youth male age 20]

*Sometimes one cultivates and gets high yields and some people come to steal it or to rape girls in their households. There are girls who were raped recently.*

[Youth female 19]

Several YHH feel traumatized and helpless in coping with abuse that sometimes may happen within the confine of youth's home, as expressed in the following quotations:

*Even boys are assaulted. People break into your house, like when you grow beans, they come and break your window and steal them or they tie you up and beat you.*

[Youth male age 16]

*When someone beats you no one rescues you, but all say that it is the orphan!*

[Youth male age 24]

Youth also highlighted their inability to protect themselves against the confiscation of their land. It appears that YHH land rights are not respected and access to legal protection is uncertain. The following statements highlight difficulties faced by YHH for asserting their land rights and indicate the importance of official documentation on landholding, which may have been lost or simply ignored by youth:

*All one's relatives' want is to take over his/her land. When you report them to the authorities they ask you for official documents that you don't know and when you fail to get them they make you believe that your parents had borrowed it.*

[Youth male age 18]

*Sometimes people took over your land and you have to rent the neighbors land to cultivate.*

[Youth male, age 17]

While nearly 86% of YHH approached expressed mistrust in the local authorities' support in solving the reported problems to their best interests (Table 1), views based on FGDs indicated circumstances that illustrate the lack of an appropriate administrative structure for the protection of youth. In addition, in the context of poverty and land scarcity, access to land for YHH has become competitive even with relatives from whom they might expect support for protection and compassion.

*When one's parents die his/her relatives take over his/her property and when you report them to the authorities this one disregards you or try to discourage you.*

[Youth female age 17]

*When there is a problem of sharing inheritance with their relatives, the YHH are given a small part because their relatives have many children.*

[Youth female age 20]

### **Youth behaviors**

FGDs suggest that despair and lack of community support may push youth to engage in deviant behaviours such as prostitution, drug use and thievery. However, YHH also recognize that misbehaviours may stem from traumatizing conditions endured during the genocide. This is reflected by the following words from the discussants:

*Hearts of the youth were hurt because of what they saw during the genocide, they became gangsters and take drugs to free themselves... Youth take marijuana, glue and petrol.*

[Youth male age 17]

*When kids see that there is no one to solve their problems, they learn malicious acts, hurt their friends and do the opposite of what they were told especially boys. ... Girls practice witchcraft in order to retaliate to those who hurt them.*

[Youth female age 19]

Deviant behaviour is always not welcomed in the community. In the case of YHH, it is evident that socially unacceptable behavior may further aggravate their level of marginalization from the society as illustrated by the following statements:

*Children supported by World Vision act like hooligans. Many have given birth. In addition to those she is looking after she gives birth to others, hence she fails for all of them*

[Adult female]

There are children without any sort of discipline, no one approaches them.

*An older child may even refuse to be advised. You also may fear approaching them.*

[Adult female]

### **Sample characteristics for the Youth Heads of Households survey**

Socio-demographic characteristics of the 692 youth interviewed are presented in Table 2. There were more males (53.6%) than females (46.4%) heads of households, with the majority of youths (72.4%) aged 19-24. Almost 70% reported both parents deceased with 17% reporting one or both parents killed during

the genocide, 6.9% after the war and 4.2% had a parent in jail. Forty-five percent reported a parent who died from poison. Approximately 76% of the youths cared for between one to four younger children at home, 19.5% lived alone, and 88.3% had been YHH for nine years or less. The majority (75.1%) had at some point been at school but never achieved a primary school level and only 6% reached the secondary school.

Most of the youths possessed livelihood commodities such as farm/grazing land, livestock, mattress, blanket and shoes. However, females were more likely to own a spare set of clothes. Globally, YHH aged 18 and above were more likely to possess more assets than their younger peers.

While 62.7% of YHH belonged to one or more community groups with no difference between genders, youth aged 18 and above were more likely to be involved in community groups (67.1%). With regards to the relationships between orphans and other youths in the community, proportions were high and equivalent for both gender groups and no difference was noticed according to age. However, males were more likely to behave poorly by getting into fighting, stealing from the community and being arrested, and in particular 12% of males reported having been arrested. In addition, males were more likely to drink alcohol and use drugs than females. While marginalization and adult support scores were similar between gender groups, older youths were more likely to report available support from the community than their younger peers.

### **Prevalence of maltreatment experienced by Youth Heads of Households**

Table 3 presents the distribution of maltreatment experienced by YHH, by gender and age. In terms of sexual coercion, 6% of YHH reported being threatened by community members by either losing their jobs or the denial of a job if they did not consent to sex, and in particular more victims were the females (10.8%) and older youth (8.5%). Sexual abuse was reported by 31 YHH (4.5%) and all the cases but three were among the females. Only 2 YHH were still in contact with the perpetrator. Approximately 10% of the sexual abuse cases happened before the age of 15, 48.3% between age 15-18, and 41.4% above age 18. Fifty-two percent of the perpetrators were known community members.

Table 2 : Socio-demographic characteristics of participants by gender and age

	% Male (n =371)	% Female (n =321)	% <18 years (n =191)	% >18 years (n =501)	% Total (n = 602)
Orphan Status					
Double	72.8	66.7	68.6	70.5	69.9
Maternal	18.1	24.6	23.0	20.4	21.1
Paternal	4.9	5.0	4.7	5.0	4.9
Both alive	0.8	0.9	0.0	1.2	0.9
Uncertain	3.5	2.8	3.7	3.0	3.2
Number of years as head of household					
<5	46.6	45.9	67.0***	38.4	46.3
5-9	40.4	43.8	29.8	46.6	42.0
≥10	12.9	10.3	3.1	15.0	11.7
Number of other children & adolescents in household					
0	25.1***	13.1	28.3***	16.2	19.5
1-2	49.9	53.0	50.8	51.5	51.3
3-4	11.8	27.4	18.3	26.9	24.6
5 or more	3.0	6.5	2.6	5.4	4.6
Education completed					
None	77.0	72.8	80.0	73.2	75.1
Primary (7 years)	16.8	20.9	14.7	20.2	18.7
> Primary	6.2	6.3	5.3	6.6	6.2
Assets owned					
Farm/grazing land	94.6	95.6	94.8	95.2	95.1
Livestock	75.5	73.8	72.8	75.4	74.7
Mattress	9.4	12.1	12.0	10.2	10.7
Blanket	83.6	83.5	79.1	85.2*	83.5
Shoes	59.8	64.5	50.8	66.3***	62.0
Spare set of clothes	69.8	78.5**	61.8	78.4***	73.8
Assets index (mean score, range 1-6)	3.5	3.6	3.1	3.7***	3.6
Community connectedness					
Belong to community group	60.1	65.7	51.3	67.1***	62.7
Peers Relationships					
One close friend they can count on	91.6	91.3	90.1	92.0	91.5
Feel they belong to a group of friends	91.1	91.3	92.7	90.6	91.2
Adult support index (mean score, range 1-5) <sup>φ</sup>	3.3	3.4	3.6	3.3***	3.4
Marginalization index (mean score, range 1-5) <sup>φ</sup>	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.3	3.2
Youth behaviors					
Drink alcohol	59.6***	37.7	55.5*	47.1	49.4
Use drugs	2.2**	0.0	0.5	1.4	1.2
Tendency to get in lots of fights	5.7**	1.2	1.6	4.6*	3.6
Steal from neighbors	5.1*	1.6	2.1	4.0	3.5
Ever been arrested	11.9***	0.6	4.2	7.6	6.6
Whereabouts of parents					
Parent killed in genocide	15.6	19.4	15.7	18.0	17.4
Parent killed after the war	8.6	5.0	4.2	8.0	6.9
Parent died from poison	45.6	44.9	47.6	44.3	45.2
Parent in prison	3.0	5.6	5.2	3.8	4.2

 $\chi^2$  \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001; <sup>φ</sup> t-test

While 36.4% of YHH complained of land or property dispossession, destruction of their property was as well common. Half of YHH reported that their property, land or crops were damaged, with higher proportions among females (53.9%) and older youth (53.4%). In addition, one out of four YHH was hired for a job but had never been paid. Male and older YHH were more likely victims of labour exploitation than females and young YHH.

Twenty-five percent of YHH reported being beaten since they were on their own with males being more

likely to report physical abuse than females (31% versus 20.9%). The proportions were almost equivalent according to group age (24.6% for males versus 26.9% for females). 10.4% of those YHH indicated being currently beaten.

The total level of maltreatment was high, with nearly 72% of YHH reporting being victims of at least one type of maltreatment. The maltreatment scores were significantly higher among YHH age 18 and above.

**Table 3: Prevalence of maltreatment experienced by youth, by gender and age**

	Male (n = 371)		Female (n = 321)		≤ 18 years (n = 191)		> 18 years (n = 501)		Total (n = 692)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Have been threatened to lose job or not obtain a job if no sex	10	2.7	34	10.8***	2	1.1	42	8.5***	44	6.5
Have been forced to have sex	3	0.8	28	8.7***	6	3.1	25	5.0	31	4.5
Are still in contact with the perpetrator	1	33.3	1	4.0	1	16.7	1	4.5	2	7.1
Have been beaten	115	31.0**	67	20.9	47	24.6	135	26.9	182	26.3
Currently being beaten	9	7.8	10	14.9	3	6.4	16	11.9	19	10.4
Feel safe	248	66.8	200	62.3	133	69.6	315	62.9	448	64.7
Land or home possessions taken	132	35.9	118	37.1	62	32.8	188	37.8	250	36.4
Have had property, land, crops or animals destroyed or damaged	181	48.9	173	53.9	87	45.5	267	53.4	354	51.2
Have been hired for a job or service but not paid	127	34.3***	50	15.6	38	19.9	139	27.9*	177	25.7
Maltreatment level										
None	102	27.7	93	29.3	68	36.0*	127	25.6	195	28.5
1	95	25.8	88	27.8	46	24.3	137	27.6	183	26.7
2-3	146	39.7	124	39.1	68	36.0	202	40.7	270	39.4
4-5	25	6.8	12	3.8	7	3.7	30	6.0	37	5.4
Maltreatment (mean) <sup>o</sup>	1.51		1.35		1.25		1.50**		1.43	

$\chi^2$ \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001; <sup>o</sup> t-test

### Linear regression of factors associated with experienced maltreatment by youth heads of households

A number of variables were hypothesized to be associated to youth's self-reported maltreatment. The selection of the variables for the model was guided by the contextual aspects of poverty and post-conflict as highlighted by results from the focus groups. Factors reflecting wealth such as assets owned, as well as the cause of parental death, or having a parent in prison were considered. Each of these indicators reflects potential sources of jealousy, marginalization or even attitudes of hatred from community members, and was hypothesized to be positively associated with maltreatment. In addition, five measures to assess

youth involvement in the community and their social connectedness were considered. The study hypothesized that higher levels of social involvement and community support and less marginalization would reduce maltreatment. Delinquency is usually unaccepted in the community and youth with poor behaviors may be subjected to punishment and maltreatment. Variables reflecting behavior problems of YHH such as alcohol consumption, stealing from neighbors, tendency to get in fights or having been arrested were considered in the model. Lastly, the study also included key socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, years served as head of households, and number of other youth or children in the household.

**Table 4: Linear regression model of factors associated with maltreatment of youth heads of household (n=692)**

Predictor	Coefficient	Standard error	T	P value
<b>Socio-demographics</b>				
Age	0.017	0.018	0.040	0.348
Gender	0.106	0.092	1.148	0.251
Orphan status	-0.067	0.052	-1.304	0.193
Years served as Head of Household	-0.041	0.015	-2.744	<b>0.006</b>
<b>Household</b>				
Number of children in household	-0.050	0.057	0.875	0.382
Education completed	-0.113	0.079	-1.432	0.153
Assets owned	0.014	0.033	0.422	0.674
Number of years received WVR support	-0.025	0.024	-1.069	0.285
<b>Behavioral problems</b>				
Drink alcohol	-0.085	0.090	-0.941	0.347
Use drugs	0.268	0.416	0.645	0.519
Tendency to get in fights	0.594	0.245	2.424	<b>0.016</b>
Steal from neighbors	0.327	0.245	1.333	0.183
Ever been arrested	0.243	0.179	1.357	0.175
<b>Whereabouts of parents</b>				
Parent killed in genocide	0.116	0.123	0.938	0.349
Parent killed after war	0.522	0.173	3.024	<b>0.003</b>
Parent died from poison	0.265	0.093	2.845	<b>0.005</b>
Parent in prison	-0.271	0.214	-1.265	0.206
<b>Community involvement</b>				
Belong to community group	0.162	0.093	1.748	0.081
One close friend	-0.054	0.176	-0.305	0.761
Belong to a group of friends	-0.013	0.171	-0.075	0.940
Available adult support	0.073	0.046	1.580	0.114
Marginalization	-0.473	0.060	-7.841	<b>0.000</b>

R<sup>2</sup>=0.212

To test the hypotheses, all variables were simultaneously entered into the regression model and retained regardless of significance level (Table 4). Three variables including behavioral problems (such as tendency to get in fights), parent died after war, and parent died from poison indicated positive significant association with maltreatment. Years served as head of household and being marginalized from the community have also been associated with one's experience with maltreatment. The regression coefficient for marginalization was negatively significant indicating that youth reporting isolation were more likely to suffer from maltreatment. Similarly, youth who served as heads of household for more than five years were more likely to experience maltreatment. None of the other variables indicating community connectedness were associated with maltreatment. Twenty-one percent of the variance in maltreatment was explained by the linear combination of the 22 variables in the model. These results highlight the importance of adult guidance, the need to consider contextual factors and marginalization in reducing violence against YHH in a war-disrupted society. The findings also indicate the need for specific attention with regard to difficult YHH with poor behaviors.

#### **Correlates of YHHs' physical abuse and property damaged by community members**

The correlates of youth physical abuse (particularly having been beaten) and the destruction of their possessions by the community in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, social connectedness, youth behaviors and parents' whereabouts were analyzed.

Results in the bivariate analysis indicate that youth with delinquent behaviours are more likely to experience physical abuse than other YHH (Table 5). Youth who steal from neighbours, have been arrested or get in fights had significantly higher likelihood of being beaten (OR=2.95, 3.37, and 2.69, respectively). YHH who use marijuana were at even higher risk of physical abuse (OR=8.66). Similarly, tendency to get in fighting and ever been arrested was associated with having possessions damaged or destroyed (OR=3.95, OR=1.86).

Parent's cause of death is also associated with an increased risk of maltreatment. YHH whose parents died after the war were two times more likely to be victims of beatings, while having a parent who died during the genocide or from poison had a risk of 1.5. Only YHH whose parent died from poison had a significantly higher likelihood of having their properties damaged (OR=1.36).

Factors pertaining to community connectedness were also strongly associated with physical abuse. Youth reporting less adult support or more marginalization were more likely to experience beatings (OR=1.77, OR=2.29). The same direction of the association is found with possessions damaged (OR=1.97 for adult support and OR=3.81 for marginalization). The mean score for marginalization was higher among victims of maltreatment (3.4 versus 2.8, p=.000), while YHH less adult support was noticed among the same group (3.3 versus 3.7, p=.000).

**Table 5: Bivariate association between various correlates and having been beaten and having possessions damaged (n = 692)**

	Beaten		Possessions damaged	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age				
<=18	.88	.60 – 1.29	.73	.52 – 1.02
>18	–	–	–	–
Gender				
Male	1.70**	1.20 – 2.41	.82	.61 – 1.10
Female	–	–	–	–
Orphan Status				
Double	–	–	–	–
Maternal	.61	.20 – 1.84	.79	.34 – 1.88
Paternal	.71	.22 – 2.22	1.16	.47 – 2.86
Both alive	.15	.13 – 1.70	1.06	.36 – 3.10
Uncertain	.22	.03 – 1.53	.042	.06 – 2.77
Number of years as head of household				
<5	.71*	.50 – 1.00	.98	.73 – 1.33
≥5	–	–	–	–
Number of other children & adolescents in household				
Live alone	1.53*	1.02 – 2.30	.69*	.47 – 1.00
Live with others	–	–	–	–
Education completed				
None	–	–	–	–
Primary and more	1.01	.67 – 1.51	.89	.63 – 1.27
Assets index (continuous)	1.09	.97 – 1.22	.92	.84 – 1.02
Community connectedness				
Belong to community group	1.14	.80 – 1.61	.77	.56 – 1.05
Peers Relationships				
One close friend	.62	.35 – 1.08	.69	.41 – 1.20
Belong to a group of friends	.91	.51 – 1.64	.65	.38 – 1.12
Adult support (≤3 versus >3)	1.77***	1.25 – 2.50	1.97***	1.43 – 2.70
Marginalization (>3 versus ≤3)	2.29***	1.59 – 3.29	3.81***	2.77 – 5.23
Youth behaviors				
Drink alcohol	.84	.59 – 1.17	.79	.59 – 1.08
Use drugs	8.66**	1.73 – 43.2	2.88	.59 – 14.41
Tendency to get in lots of fights	2.69**	1.20 – 6.00	3.95**	1.47 – 10.6
Steal from neighbors	2.95**	1.29 – 6.68	1.34	.59 – 3.06
Ever been arrested	3.37**	1.84 – 6.17	1.86*	.99 – 3.47
Whereabouts of parents				
Parent killed in genocide	1.51*	.98 – 2.31	1.11	.75 – 1.65
Parent killed after the war	2.33**	1.28 – 4.24	1.24	.69 – 2.24
Parent died from poison	1.46*	1.04 – 2.05	1.36*	1.01 – 1.84
Parent in prison	.72	.29 – 1.79	.89	.42 – 1.87

$\chi^2$  \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

Other factors showing a positive association with physical abuse include gender male and living alone (OR=1.70, OR=1.53), while youth who served as head of household for less than 5 years were less likely to suffer from beatings (OR=.71). Similarly, youth living alone were less likely to have their possessions damaged by community members (OR=.69).

Based on the results presented in Table 5, logistic regression analysis was conducted to assess which factors were associated with physical abuse and having possessions damaged after controlling for socio-demographic factors. As presented in Table 6, results indicate that YHH whose parents died after the war or

died from poison, use drugs, report marginalization and being a male had a significantly high likelihood of being beaten (OR=3.25, 2.03, 5.45, 1.93, 1.54). Conversely, YHH who served as heads of household for less than five years were less likely to report physical abuse (OR = .58). With regard to having the properties damaged, only marginalization, adult support, and tendency to get in fights remained in the model (OR=2.97, OR=1.44, OR=2.78). The findings highlight the underlying role played by parents' background, youth delinquent behaviours, marginalization, and lack of adult support in increasing youth vulnerability in post-genocide Rwanda.

**Table 6: Predictors of having been beaten and having possessions damaged in the last two years (n=692)**

	Beaten		Possessions damaged	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Age				
≤18	1.47	.92 – 2.36	.82	.54 – 1.23
>18	–		–	
Gender				
Male	1.54*	1.01 – 2.35	1.32	.92 – 1.89
Female	–		–	
Orphan Status				
Double	–		–	
Maternal	.93	.56 – 1.54	.63*	.41 – .97
Paternal	.65	.27 – 1.53	.78	.39– 1.70
Both alive	.09*	.01 – .61	1.56	.22 – 10.90
Uncertain	1.07	.28 – 4.10	.58	.20 – 1.53
Number of years as head of household				
<5	.58*	.38 – .88	1.06	.74 – 1.52
≥5	–		–	
Number of other children & adolescents in household				
Live alone	1.29	.79 – 2.11	.63*	.40 – .99
Live with others	–		–	
Education completed				
None	–		–	
Primary and more	1.12	.72 – 1.74	1.09	.74 – 1.61
Assets index	N/A		N/A	
Community connectedness				
Belong to community group	N/A		N/A	
Peers Relationships				
One close friend	N/A		N/A	
Belong to a group of friends	N/A		N/A	
Adult support (≤3 versus >3)	1.35	.89 – 2.07	1.44*	.99 – 2.09
Marginalization (>3 versus ≤3)	1.93**	1.25 – 2.97	2.97***	2.07 – 4.24
Youth behaviors				
Drink alcohol	N/A		N/A	
Use drugs	5.85*	.99 – 34.67	N/A	
Tendency to get in lots of fights	1.18	.43 – 3.23	2.78*	.96 – 8.05
Steal from neighbors	2.11	.83 – 5.42	N/A	
Ever been arrested	1.79	.87 – 3.69	1.59	.76 – 3.37
Whereabouts of parents				
Parent killed in genocide	1.54	.91 – 2.61	N/A	
Parent killed after the war	3.25***	1.62 – 6.52	N/A	
Parent died from poison	2.03***	1.31 – 3.12	1.32	.93 – 1.87
Parent in prison	N/A		N/A	

$\chi^2$  \*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

Six basic socio-demographic variables (age group, gender, orphan status, number of years as HH, number of other children & adolescents in household, education) and variables that attained  $P < 0.01$  in the bivariate analyses were entered into the logistic regression model.

N/A = Not Applicable; OR = Odds Ratio; CI=Confidence Interval

## Discussion

In a study of YHH living in a rural setting of Rwanda, we report the prevalence of self-reported history of maltreatment. To our knowledge, this is the first study to document the patterns of violence against orphans and YHH living on their own in a post-conflict community. The findings reveal that the prevalence of maltreatment is very high, with 71.5% of YHH reporting at least one type of abuse. These findings demonstrate the urgent need for protection of vulnerable youth.

Results from regression analysis showed that factors indicating social community connectedness and children's externalizing behaviours were the most salient factors of maltreatment towards YHH. The findings demonstrate that youth who reported less marginalization were less likely to suffer from beatings (OR=.61) and having their possessions damaged or destroyed (OR=.46). Previous research in Rwanda has highlighted the fact that marginalization is a serious constraint to community-based programs for orphans and vulnerable children.<sup>[2]</sup> One study found that nearly half of YHH believe that "no one cares about them" and 86% feel "rejected by the community"<sup>[41]</sup> Marginalization can be seen as a consequence of the 1994 genocide that has dismantled the traditional caring systems for orphans.<sup>[34]</sup> In the aftermath of the war, the repatriation of Rwandans who were in exile for many years, the creation of new settlements, and the imprisonment of the perpetrators of the genocide, has tremendously changed the society in its composition and organization. In addition, mistrust and social divisions are rampant as community tribunals (GACACA) are organized countrywide to judge suspects of the killings. Youth Heads of Households are victims not only of the disruption of the customary patrilineal solidarity chain for orphans and vulnerable children, but also, as survivors of the genocide, they are often subject to some form of retaliation because they are either considered by some as potential witnesses or children of "genociders" by others. Thus, hostile attitudes towards youth orphans are prevalent in the Rwanda post-genocide community which could explain the consistent pattern of associations between adult support, marginalization and parent killed in the genocide or after the war with maltreatment histories.

Another key issue limiting community response is stigma surrounding YHH. One study has reported that three out of four Rwandan children orphaned by AIDS were isolated from the community and one out of five was ill-treated by other children.<sup>[42]</sup> Stigma around people living with HIV/AIDS is predominant in this community. Forty-five percent of YHH respondents reported their parents died from poison,

but previous research has showed that poisoning was an attempt to avoid stigma surrounding parent death from HIV/AIDS.<sup>[43]</sup> Stigmatization can also originate from poverty and orphan status, rather than issues surrounding AIDS discrimination. As one respondent indicated:

*"We don't socialize with kids who have parents because we don't have the same problems. How can you talk with someone who eats every day and you, you don't? (Youth female age 22)."*

Poverty also poses serious challenges to the survival of YHH and it may affect the willingness of the community to support orphans. In fact, results from focus groups indicate that the general community struggles with its own problems:

*"One sees that s(he) hasn't enough for his family, hence people became less generous and they lack a compassionate heart (adult male)."* In addition, as basic needs are hardly covered in the community, people are jealous of the assistance received by YHH from non-governmental organizations. Youth are perceived as "better-off", "rich", and this community jealousy plays a role in the mistreatment of orphans.

Poverty also raises concerns on YHH engaging in transactional sex in order to ensure their survival. Consistent with other studies in SSA, the results show that youths in need are often involved in some form of transactional sex, for example trading sex for money, school necessities or simply for a home.<sup>[44, 45]</sup> In these circumstances of dependency, youths have expressed how very difficult it is to protect themselves from sexual exploitation and they very often have to tolerate abuse.<sup>[46]</sup> It has also been suggested that poverty forces female youths to carry out a range of domestic activities in ways that place them at risk of physical abuse.<sup>[12]</sup> In this study, only 12 % of YHH had access to piped water and 98% used wood for cooking. In a hostile environment, the daily collection of these resources may expose them to physical abuse. Sexual abuse is important with respect to public health because it is associated with a greater likelihood of experiencing unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and long-term psychological consequences.<sup>[24, 26]</sup> For a young girl, a coercive initiation may also disempower her, leaving her without the skills to resist pressure from partners or negotiate condom use.<sup>[23]</sup>

The results also indicated that children's externalizing behaviours problems were among the most prominent factor of corporal punishment or physical maltreatment. Youth who stole from neighbours were nearly three times more likely to suffer beatings than those who behave normally.

These findings are in line with existing literature on samples of non-orphan children where corporal punishment is used to discipline children.<sup>[47,48]</sup> Physical maltreatment towards children occurs widely in Rwanda, as in many SSA countries, and is most often perpetrated by the individuals charged with their safety and well-being.<sup>[51]</sup> It is accepted and commonly used as an effective form of child discipline. Children are commonly hit with a wooden cane or they may be subject to flogging, slapping, kicking, or pinching. Although the country has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Children that obliges governments to protect children from all forms of physical violence, many children continue to suffer violence and abuse. Given the abundance of evidence on negative consequences of corporal punishment,<sup>[48]</sup> community members should be assisted to shift from corporal punishment to other nonviolent forms of child discipline. As child victims are unable to represent themselves, responsibility for improving their conditions should come from programs and government agencies that need to recognize child physical abuse as a significant cause of child morbidity and the necessity of appropriate support. There are many reasons explaining poor behaviours among YHH. In addition to the lack of adult guidance, research has reported post-traumatic disorders and high levels of depressive symptoms among orphans in Rwanda.<sup>[3, 49]</sup> Many children were exposed to extreme levels of violence during the genocide which may predispose them to greater frequency of externalizing (aggressive, delinquent) behaviour problems in comparison to other children who did not witness violence. Research in the US has shown that among adolescents who have been exposed to violence throughout their lives, high levels of aggression and acting out are common, accompanied by behaviour problems, school problems and truancy.<sup>[50]</sup>

This study did not investigate the perpetrators or the origins of the maltreatment experienced by YHH. There is certainly evidence that suggests maltreatment is often perpetrated by neighbours or persons known to victims. In the future, it would be valuable to conduct a qualitative follow-up on the specific circumstances and relationships that lead to these experiences. Future research should also include information on where these incidents occur, for example, in isolated places or public places in full view of the community, to develop more appropriate interventions. Given the fact that violent experiences are likely to be under-reported, the high prevalence of these experiences suggested in this study is a cause for serious concern and underscores the

need for appropriate and comprehensive prevention and response in Rwanda. Efforts to raise awareness of the urgency of preventing and responding to violence against OVC need to be supported.

This study should be regarded as an initial exploration of risk factors for maltreatment amongst YHH in a post-conflict setting and it represents an attempt to move beyond the simple recognition of pre-existing violence against vulnerable children in Rwanda. There are still several limitations on the interpretation of the data imposed by the study design and analysis. First, the cross-sectional nature of the study design unfortunately prevents us from the ability to establish temporality or causality in many of the observed relationships. Further research is required to elucidate the specific pathways through which youth behaviours, marginalization or parents' history increase YHH vulnerability to violence from community members. Secondly, this study relies on youth self-reported exposure to violence. Youth might be encouraged to underreport or over-report their exposure to violence and young children are especially vulnerable to reporting unreliable information. Reporting errors of such a sensitive experience may have led to inaccurate estimation of the prevalence of maltreatment, especially sexual abuse. Finally, the sample was solely rural and generalization to urban YHH and those in other parts of Rwanda should be made cautiously. Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings highlight the magnitude of violence among YHH in this rural Rwanda population and the need for prevention interventions.

## Conclusion

These findings provide new information on critical issues surrounding orphans maltreatment experiences in a poor, rural setting in Rwanda. Given the newness of these measures, the magnitude of the phenomenon, and the scarcity of national data with which to compare results, these analyses should be regarded as exploratory and the findings as suggestive. However, providing information and knowledge represents the most effective form of child protection. A community-wide recognition of child abuse and an understanding of the traumatic consequences for children are the best ways to sensitize Rwandan society to this problem. The results underscore the urgent need to address this serious problem more openly, and to make more resources available for the prevention of maltreatment among youth heads of household and

for support to victims. Additionally, the findings point to the importance of considering any new programs for orphans and YHH in the context of the wider community so as not to inadvertently add to their problems by creating resentment in the surrounding community.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### Authors' contributions

JN conceptualized the study, supervised data collection and participated in the interpretation of data and drafting of manuscript. LB participated in study design and the interpretation of findings and drafting of manuscript. NBM participated in the interpretation of findings and drafting of manuscript. All the authors approved the manuscript.

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