

CHAPTER 4: THE EXPERIENCES OF SIBLING CARERS: AN INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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1. Introduction – methodology of literature review

There is not a previously existing body of research literature dealing specifically with sibling carers. This review therefore drew on research studies into family and friends carers as a larger group which contained some information about sibling carers and studies on issues which sibling carers may face, such as childhood bereavement. The review also drew upon publicly available information about the circumstances surrounding sibling care arrangements around the world, in particular the phenomenon of 'child headed households' in the developing world. Finally, the review provides details of the way sibling carers are presented in the arts and the media, including press stories, films, TV series and literature. Information was reached using internet search engines and carrying out an academic search on the terms 'sibling care' and 'sibling carers'. The academic databases or portals which were searched were EBSCOHOST, ASSIA, SCA, IngentaConnect and JSTOR.

2. Context – children being raised by older siblings

The UK news media has recently allocated space to the proposition that not enough children in the UK are being protected by being placed in the public care system¹ or placed permanently away from their families by being adopted.² Proponents of this view often discuss public care or adoption by strangers as the only possible alternative to a child remaining at home with abusive parents and ignore a third option, namely placing children safely with relatives or friends.³ While there has been some media recognition of the difficulties that family and friends carers face,^{4,5} the carers presented in media stories about family and friends care are usually grandparents – understandably so, as in all the research studies carried out into family and friends care, the majority of the carers are grandparents. However, family and friends carers can have a wide variety of other relationships to the children they are raising, including aunts, uncles, great-grandparents, cousins, family friends and siblings.

Family Rights Group was informed by organisations which were doing some work with sibling carers (ie the Candle Project and the Childhood Bereavement Network) about what they perceived as being some of the particular problems which faced sibling carers. It was said that these arrangements were often made following the death of one or both parents, which meant that everyone involved, carer as well as young person being cared for, was dealing with feelings of grief and loss while coming to terms with the new living arrangements. Sibling carers would probably be younger than other types of carer, possibly with less experience of being a parent and less of the sort of experience which

¹ Eg M Narey, then Chief Executive of Barnardo's, Our Duty of Care The Guardian, 12 March 2009 and T McVeigh Take more babies away from bad parents, says Barnardo's chief The Observer 6 September 2009

² R Bennett, Care system must improve its parenting skills, says Martin Narey The Times, 2 April 2010

³ As proposed by FRG chief executive Cathy Ashley, Before putting children in care, we should look to the extended family, in The Guardian 26 March 2009

⁴ BBC One's The One Show, 17 March 2009

⁵ H Collett, The hidden battle of grandparent carers The Guardian 18 January 2011

would be useful in negotiating with social care agencies about the support and services they require. And while all relative care arrangements involve some degree of role-redefinition, eg grandparents or aunts and uncles taking on a parenting role, there might be particular issues for siblings, who may be used to seeing themselves as a group on roughly equal terms with each other but then have to accept one of this group in a role of parental authority.

However the perception of these as being particular issues for sibling carers was based upon the experience of the two organisations/networks mentioned above, who were working with and assisting a particular group of sibling carers, ie those who had experienced bereavement, and it would be unwise to generalise about the experience of all sibling carers from these insights. Family Rights Group is aiming, through its sibling carers project, to improve the information which is available about a wider sample of sibling care arrangements.

2.1 UK research

The major UK research studies into family and friends care over the last 25 years have all indicated that a small but significant proportion of the children being raised in family and friends care arrangements are being brought up by a sibling. In Rowe, Cain, Hundleby & Keane (1984), 3 out of the 55 family and friends placed children in the study were placed with a sibling. In Broad, Hayes and Rushforth (2001) 4 of the 50 children and young people in the study were being looked after by a sister. Farmer and Moyers (2008) record that 5 of the 142 family and friends placed children from their study, were placed with siblings. Wade, Dixon and Richards' (2010) study of special guardianship found that of 104 special guardians who were family and friends carers, 6 were sibling carers.

Two other studies noted the presence of sibling carers among the family and friends carers studied without quantifying them. Hall (2007) found that 15% of the family and friends carers in her study of special guardianship were 'other kin', which included cousins, step-parents and siblings. And Hunt, Waterhouse and Lutman (2008) record that 8 of the 113 children in their study were placed with relatives other than grandparents or aunts and uncles, although the study does not break down how many of these were sibling care arrangements and how many were placements with other relatives.

However, beyond their existence as a defined group within each study, there is little information about the characteristics of care arrangements where children are being raised by siblings. These studies are in broad agreement in a range of their findings about family and friends care *in general*. The carers were often facing problems such as financial difficulties and overcrowding as a result of their decision to raise a child who was a relative or friend. The carers themselves were often experiencing health problems. The children they were raising had faced just as many adversities as (if not actually more than) children who had entered the care system and been placed with unrelated foster carers or placed for adoption at the end of care proceedings. The outcomes for children in family and friends placements were likely to be just as successful, across a range of measures, as the outcomes for children placed in foster care or with adopters and were likely to provide the children with a greater degree of placement stability. However, the relationship between the carers and the children's parents, particularly concerning the children's contact with their parents, could be more problematic in family and friends placements.

As a sub-set of the group of all family and friends carers, sibling carers are likely to be dealing with similar issues to those which have been identified for the larger group. However, the generalised information from these studies about all family and friends placements is not broken down in any of the studies to provide information specifically about the sibling care arrangements, possibly because the sample numbers were seen as being too small to provide significant information. Therefore there is no information about which issues affect sibling carers to a greater or lesser degree or whether there are any issues which are distinctively theirs.

Because many sibling care arrangements arise following the death of one or both parents, some interesting information about the challenges which may face children in these arrangements can be gleaned from Fauth, Thompson and Penny's study (2009) of bereaved children. Compared to their peers, children who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling are more likely to have experienced other stressful events in their lives (eg parental separation, parent with serious financial crisis, parent with serious mental illness, child with serious illness requiring stay in hospital), more likely to have changed schools and experienced school exclusion, less likely to participate in clubs and activities, be in and out of school and more likely to have problems with anxiety and drinking.

There are two studies which provide a historical perspective on the role of siblings as caregivers. In an earlier study of kinship ties in a community in East London, Young & Wilmott (2007, first published 1957) describe how, in 1950s Bethnal Green, the eldest daughter in the family would often take on a parental role towards the other siblings while the parents were out at work or ill. The oldest child would often take responsibility for bringing adult siblings together after the death of the parents, with siblings who were single often moving in to live with the families of those who were married.

Eunice G Pollack (2002) describes the role of sibling caregivers in the United States between 1900 and 1970. During this period, it was extremely common for the oldest girl in the family to become a full-time carer for all the younger siblings. However, this was often at a cost to the girl, who was likely to miss parts of her education, lose significant portions of the experiences of childhood and youth which her siblings could enjoy and also often had a difficult relationship with her mother.

2.2 Disability

The involvement of children in helping to provide the care for their siblings is recognised as being a particular issue when one of them is a disabled child. Where a disabled child's care needs draw extensively upon the family's resources, parents may delegate some caring tasks to the non-disabled children in the family. These caring children may need help with managing their feelings at having to take on additional caring responsibilities which are not expected of their friends and peers. There are a number of publications which are aimed at the siblings of a disabled child. They are generally written for children who are not that sibling's sole or primary carer but who may have some caring role with regard to the disabled child in their family.

Special-needs-books.co.uk has published a series of eight books (<http://www.special-needs-books.co.uk/siblings.shtml>), aimed at the siblings of disabled children. The books present the experiences of children and young people with disabled siblings, exploring their feelings, providing advice on practical coping techniques and dealing with particular conditions such as autism or Asperger's Syndrome. *Special Siblings: Growing Up with*

Someone with a Disability by Mary McHugh draws on her own experience of growing up with a brother with a learning disability, as well as research and interviews with other siblings of those with disabilities. In *Brothers and Sisters of Disabled Children*, Peter Burke uses family interviews and one-to-one meetings to record siblings' views on issues facing them, such as: the everyday social restrictions of their lives and the discrimination they face at school; the difficulties of finding their own identity in "disabled" families and competition for parental attention and their concerns about the future. *Sibshops: Workshops for Siblings of Children with Special Needs* by Donald J. Meyer and Patricia F. Vadasy provides practitioners with guidelines for organizing and conducting workshops for siblings of children with a broad variety of special needs.

In Carmarthenshire, Barnardo's runs a project for young carers and sibling carers. The sibling carers supported by this project are helping "to care for brothers or sisters with disabilities, terminal illness, mental health problems or learning difficulties". Barnardo's website (<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/carmarthenshireyoungcarers.htm>) reports that 20 such carers aged between 11 and 19 are supported by this project, in an area where there are estimated to be 500 young carers.

The issue of children providing care for disabled siblings is discussed in *The Guardian*, in Judith Cameron's *Who Cares?* article on 2 November 2005. The author discusses the situation within her own family, where her 15 year old daughter assumes additional caring responsibilities for an older sister who is severely brain-damaged through illness.

An Australian study described the phenomenon of siblings taking over the caregiver role for their disabled adult sibling when the parents, who have been the caregivers, are no longer able carry out this role.⁶ The study observes that the relationship between siblings can be different to the relationship between the disabled person and the parents who were caring for them. Adult sibling carers tended towards affective or emotional rather than instrumental or direct practical support and the disabled sibling was often able to help out in return, for example by assisting with childcare.

2.3 Child Headed Households

Internationally, there is significant reporting in the media, in academic papers and on the Unesco and other websites, of children being raised by older siblings. The term generally used to describe these arrangements is 'child headed household' which is defined as households which are led by a child under 18, where the child is taking on responsibilities usually carried out by parents.⁷ This is happening particularly in areas where populations have been devastated by natural or man-made disasters such as, HIV/AIDS, the Asian tsunami, war or genocide, and the extended family networks that might usually be available to raise orphaned children can no longer be relied upon. There are reports of projects in South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda and parts of India which are supported by government funding, Unesco, or by charitable organisations. More recently, this has been noted in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, where child-headed households were one of the groups being targeted for food assistance by the World Food Programme.⁸ Following Cyclone Nargis in Burma, in April 2009, the Burmese government was urged by aid agencies to seek to use extended family networks for orphaned children, rather than building orphanages to house them. The *Guardian* newspaper reported that "in a

⁶ Day, Llewellyn and Bandalin "Post-Parental Care: A New Generation of Sibling-Carers." *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability* 29.2 (2004): 176-9.

⁷ International HIV/AIDS Alliance <http://www.ovcsupport.net/sw3256.asp>

⁸ World Food Programme Operational Update - Haiti Earthquake <http://usa.wfp.org/news-release/wfp-operational-update-haiti-earthquake>

few cases the aid agencies have discovered 'children-headed households', where unaccompanied children are cared for by an older teenager supported by adults"⁹.

In South Africa, the 2001 census estimated that there were 248,000 child-headed households, with the number likely to have increased significantly since then¹⁰. The majority of these are households affected by HIV or AIDS and children who are heading households may either be orphaned or also be caring for their sick parents. In November 2007, Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya stated that: "*We encourage children from child-headed households to remain in their communities instead of alternative care, such as orphanages. It is important for them to grow up with a cultural identity and a sense of belonging. It also places an obligation on neighbours and the community in general to look after these children, and not outsource this responsibility to government.*"¹¹ This statement recognises two important advantages of child-headed households: the sense of belonging that continuity within a particular family and within a particular culture can provide and the need for neighbours and the community to support these households. However, the final reference to 'outsourcing to government' makes it clear that, in the face of a rising tide of need stemming from the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa, the government seems keen to encourage the perception that responsibility for helping families where the parents are dead or gravely ill is primarily the duty of the rest of the community and not the government.

Despite the potential advantages described above, there are many difficulties which face the children in child-headed households, described by UNICEF in its reports on projects in Zimbabwe¹² and Uganda¹³. For example, there may have to be a significant re-writing of the dynamics in a family. In other kinship care arrangements, a similar change can occur when grandparents have to give up a more benevolent 'grandparent' role for the stricter regime involved in parenting a child but sibling carers, who have to make a comparable progression from older brother/sister to parent/carer, usually do so without the previous parenting experience that grandparents can fall back on.

Child headed households are usually arranged at a time of crisis within a family but the additional difficulties that the children and young people involved can face are sobering. The children report being stigmatised by other family members and members of their community, for example they are avoided because they are seen as being associated with the deaths in their families. There is a high drop-out rate from school, as the children often need to go out to work because of the family's poverty¹⁴.

Children also reported some exploitation, such as other family members taking their parents' assets and pension entitlements and a number of children reported being beaten by older family members. Girls reported sexual abuse, such as elderly men promising to take them as second wives and raping them but then not fulfilling their promise.

⁹ Guardian 31st May 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/31/cyclonenargis.burma>

¹⁰ allafrika.com website: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200711121071.html>

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² A Study on Children Affected by AIDS in Zimbabwe (UNICEF 2001) http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/ZIM_01-804.pdf

¹³ A Ugandan village rallies around children orphaned by AIDS (UNICEF, 2006) http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_29786.html

¹⁴ 2001 ZIM: A Study on Children Affected by AIDS in Zimbabwe (UNICEF, 2001) http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/ZIM_01-804.pdf
http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_14425.html

Although sibling carers in the UK are likely to assume their caring responsibilities in a very different social context from the sibling carers in these child-headed households, potentially they could be dealing with some common issues:

- **Parent's dying wish for oldest child to keep the family together by assuming responsibility for younger siblings:** The Unicef website tells the story of a 16 year old girl raising two younger siblings, who recalls "When our mother was dying, we were so scared of being on our own. I remember feeling that there was no hope at all but I also remember her telling us to make sure we stayed together. She did not want the family to fall apart. She said the older children, in this case me, should look after the young."¹⁵
- **Obstacles to assuming legal responsibility for siblings:** Sageena and Shivangi of the Lawyers Collective HIV/AIDS Unit in India outline the legal obstacles that sibling carers there can encounter, particularly if the sibling carer has not attained the age of majority and cannot get legal recognition of their role.¹⁶
- **Problems with accessing financial support:** Dodds and Ellis report that in South Africa sibling carers may find themselves unable to claim maintenance grants which the state provides in order to supplement the monthly income of poorer households. Eligibility for these grants is based upon production of either a bar-coded identification document, which is granted upon provision of a birth certificate, or the birth certificate itself. Many child-headed households do not possess these identity documents.¹⁷
- **Social isolation of sibling carers:** This can result from them having assumed responsibilities which their same-age peer group have not yet taken on. Children who are acting as carers may no longer be perceived as children because they have stepped into an adult role. From the Unicef website: "In Zimbabwe, orphans in child-headed households were asked about how they are treated. Many children heading households reported that they are made to feel like outsiders from the local community and from relatives and treated very badly. When they were asked to describe in what way, many answered:
 - They are laughed at because of their poverty.
 - Relatives and community members said their families are cursed because there are so many deaths so people stay away from them.
 - At school they are bullied by other children.
 - The older girls reported that community members no longer treated them as children, even though they treated other girls of the same age with parents as children. The community now saw these girls as "mothers" and expected them to work hard to care for their younger brothers and sisters. As a result, the girls had no friends except those who were also heading child-headed households."¹⁸
- **Vulnerability to exploitation:** Unicef in Mozambique reports: "Three sisters: Laura, Cremilda and Anastacia spend their afternoons studying in the shade as the afternoon slips into evening. It seems like a perfect family scene - three young girls aged 14, 12 and 10 quietly doing their homework in preparation for school the next day. But it's far from perfect. The three girls are orphans living alone in their parents'

¹⁵ A Ugandan village rallies around children orphaned by AIDS (UNICEF, 2006) http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/uganda_29786.html

¹⁶ Sageena, A. and Shivangi, R. Silent Cries and Hidden Tears: the failure of the law to respond to the needs of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in India, Lawyers Collective HIV/AIDS Unit, India, 2007

¹⁷ Dodds, J.M. & Ellis, M., Birth registration is a priority for child survival from Journal of Tropical Pediatrics (2010) 56 (2): 73-74.

¹⁸ ZIM 2001/804: A Study on Children Affected by AIDS in Zimbabwe, available on the International UNICEF website http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_14425.html

house. In the last six months, both their parents have died. Now they are getting through their days as best they can without them. Shortly after their mother's death three months ago, their few possessions were stolen from their house, which is a simple bamboo and wooden structure on the edge of town."¹⁹

- **Poverty, and effects on the education of the sibling carer:** Unicef Voices of Youth: Life Without Parents reports: "Justin, who lives in Malawi, is only 14, but since he lost his parents to AIDS he has had to look after his 10-year-old brother and 9-year-old sister. 'The main problem we have without our parents is finding food,' he says. Without parents or guardians, Justin had to drop out of school to earn a living, carrying food for merchants so he and his siblings could have enough to eat."²⁰

While the issue of child headed households has not been given particular prominence in the British media, there has been some coverage, usually in special features. Child headed households which arose in the aftermath of the genocidal conflict in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis have been covered by Woman's Hour on BBC Radio 4²¹, in a feature on the BBC's World Service website²² and in a feature in The Guardian newspaper's website, produced jointly with the child poverty charity ActionAid²³. The phenomenon of child headed households in Lesotho has been covered in The Independent²⁴ and in Zimbabwe, by the Independent²⁵ and the Daily Telegraph²⁶. The last three articles cited all start with a sensationalised headline (eg *He's the head of his family - at just 7 years old*), followed by a case study and then a discussion about the general issue of the problems facing children living together in child headed households.

There have also been a number of papers and academic studies of the phenomenon, including:

- Dr Ruth Evans *The experiences and priorities of young people who care for their siblings in Tanzania and Uganda*: Research report University of Reading, July 2010. This study investigated the lives of sibling-headed households in Tanzania and Uganda by talking to the young people and their carers, project workers and community members. This was a small-scale study of groups of children and young people who had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. This study found that "young people showed considerable resilience and competencies in caring for their younger siblings, developing interdependent caring relationships within the household and sharing household chores, income-generation activities and other responsibilities, often according to conventional gendered and age-related hierarchies. However, their ability to exert control over their lives was often undermined by poverty, stigmatisation and wider processes of exclusion."

¹⁹ Report from UNICEF website <http://www.unicef.org.nz/school-room/hivaids/unicefswork.html>

²⁰ Orphans, HIV and AIDS: Life Without Parents (UNICEF) http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/aids/explore_194.html

²¹ BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour 7th April 2004 Rwanda: Child-headed households http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2004_14_wed_04.shtml

²² BBC World Service Children of Conflict - Child Headed Households <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/childrensrighs/childrenoconflict/headed.shtml>

²³ The Guardian From war, to peace, to prosperity <http://www.guardian.co.uk/actionaid/story/0,,2198667,00.html>

²⁴ The Independent Aids orphans abandoned on Lesotho's streets to die alone <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/aids-orphans-abandoned-on-lesothos-streets-to-die-alone-522867.html>

²⁵ The Independent Aids and a lost generation: Children raising children <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/aids-and-a-lost-generation-children-raising-children-478364.html>

²⁶ The Daily Telegraph, 4th August 2002 He's the head of his family - at just 7 years old

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/zimbabwe/1403555/He%27s-the-head-of-his-family---at-just-7-years-old.html>

- Geoff Foster, Choice Makufa, Roger Drew and Etta Kralovec (Family AIDS Caring Trust, Mutare, Zimbabwe) *Factors leading to the establishment of childheaded households: the case of Zimbabwe* Health Transition Review, Supplement 2 to Volume 7, 1997, 155-168. This study found that although there were sometimes other relevant factors, most child-headed households in the study existed because of the death of the mother or both parents from AIDS related illnesses. Some of the children in the study did have other relatives such as aunts and uncles who, for a variety of reasons had chosen not to take them in or support them. Households without extended-family support were particularly vulnerable.
- David Donald and Glynis Clacherty *Developmental vulnerabilities and strengths of children living in child-headed households: a comparison with children in adult-headed households in equivalent impoverished communities* African Journal of AIDS Research, Volume 4, Number 1, May 2005 , pp. 21-28(8) <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/nisc/ajar/2005/00000004/00000001/art00004;jsessionid=3hwhl7r5800iw.alexandra?format=print> . This study made a comparison between child-headed and adult-headed households in impoverished communities around Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Differences were statistically or thematically analysed as appropriate to the data collected. Specific areas of vulnerability in the child-headed households were: access to institutional/social services, income (cash or kind) and resource generation, unresolved grief, lack of attainable long-term goals, poor self-worth, and poor internal locus of control. Specific strengths of children in those households were demonstrated in social networking, time and money management, and family interactions.
- Lynn Walker, Executive Director, FOST: “*We will bury ourselves*” *A Study of Child-Headed Households on Commercial Farms in Zimbabwe* Farm Orphan support Trust of Zimbabwe http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000070/P83_FOST.pdf <http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000070/index.php> . This study showed that many child headed households were living in very difficult circumstances without sustained adult guidance. The study recommended that: “Any future interventions to respond to the needs of child headed households identified in this study will need to balance material and psycho-social aspects in order to avoid undermining already existing coping mechanisms. Involvement of all key stakeholders, including young people and the children themselves is crucial. Supporting community-based responses will involve long-term capacity building and training and require thorough support and follow-up.”
- International HIV/AIDS Alliance in India has published *A situational analysis of child headed households and community foster care in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh states, India* which identifies the importance of empowering the children living in this arrangement, protecting their rights and ensuring that they receive appropriate support with regard to their health, education and vocational training. The report makes policy recommendations aimed at ensuring that the children’s basic needs for food, shelter and avoidance of poverty and stigmatisation are met, suggesting that communities should be made aware of the needs of children living in child headed households. The report points out that children living in this situation in India are legally vulnerable, unless one of them adopts the others. http://www.saathii.org/ovc/care_and_support/foster%20care%20in%20TN%20and%20AP.pdf
- S Germann & J Siwela *Coping strategies of teenage orphan headed households in urban Bulawayo* Int Conf AIDS. 2002 Jul 7-12; 14: abstract no. ThPeG8357. This study of 130 teenage orphans, of whom 35 were heading households, identified a high level of resilience in the face of limited peer and community support. The report

recommends increased support of such households regarding household management skills and other support elements. <http://gateway.nlm.nih.gov/MeetingAbstracts/ma?f=102253327.html>

- Monica Francis-Chizororo's paper Orphanhood, childhood and identity dilemma of child headed households in rural Zimbabwe in the context of HIV/AIDS pandemic (University of St Andrews) studied orphaned children living on their own as child headed households in rural Zimbabwe. This study noted that due to traditions and culture of not including children in such matters, many of the children in the study were not informed about parental illness and death, and had no choice in deciding whom to live with after their parents' death, despite observing the extent and severity of the parent's illness before they died. The report recommended that if children were better prepared for parental death, they would be less traumatized by the experience and may be better able to cope with it. <http://uaps2007.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=70431>
- Zamani Maqoko & Yolanda Dreyer's article *Child-headed households because of the trauma surrounding HIV/AIDS* (University of Pretoria) noted the role that churches could play in supporting child headed households, where support was not being provided by other family members. https://www.up.ac.za/dspace/bitstream/2263/3252/1/Maqoko_Childheaded%282007%29.pdf
- Shimelis Tsegay's 2008 study for the African Child Policy Forum *Reversed Roles and Stressed Souls: Child-Headed Households in Ethiopia* describes the plight of the child headed households studied in Ethiopia as "alarming and unprecedented", stating that "the majority of child-headed households are victims of sexual and physical abuse, and property grabbing."

The Children In Distress Network in South Africa proposed an amendment to section 136 of the Children's Amendment Bill, which required that there be adult supervision of child headed households, with the following comment: "Section 136, to enable child headed households to access social services, the involvement of child headed household members in the running of their households under a mentor depending on age and maturity of the children. We applaud this clause that allows for a mentor to assist child headed households. We believe that this will be a relief for these children who get overburdened by adult responsibilities and who consequently fail to perform in, or drop out of school. We also welcome the inclusion of a clause that ensures that the mentor is held accountable. However there is need to include a clause that allows children in the household recourse if the mentor is no longer acting in the best interest of the children."

The issue was dealt with in section 137 of the Children's Amendment Act (2007) which extended the safeguards for children in a child-headed household, by stating that a person who was unsuitable to work with children could not supervise a child-headed household. An additional paragraph which was inserted into this section of the Act also stated: "The child heading the household or, given the age, maturity and stage of development of the other children, such other children, may report the supervising adult to the organ of state or non-governmental organization referred to in subsection (2)(b) if the child or children are not satisfied with the manner in which the supervising adult is performing his or her duties."

2.4 Sibling carers depicted in the arts and the media

In the UK, awareness of the issue of sibling carers may have been heightened when the biographical details of Labour politician Alan Johnson became known. Orphaned as a 12 year old, he was placed in a council flat in the care of his 15 year old sister by a child welfare officer (*New Statesman*, 29th November 2004 <http://www.newstatesman.com/200411290022>). Johnson was then married with two children by the time he was 18, and pursued a trade union career before entering parliamentary politics. His sister Linda Edwards has recalled how his early experiences have motivated his defence of non-traditional families.²⁷

It has also been revealed that Mary Portas, star of the TV show *Mary Queen of Shops*, at the age of 18, became a sibling carer for her younger brother after they had been orphaned. They were the fourth and fifth out of their family's five children, and Mary cancelled her place at the Royal Academy of Arts, so she could stay on in the family home with her brother.²⁸

The issue of pairs or groups of siblings surviving without adult help has been dealt with from time to time in literature and popular culture. The *Boxcar Children* is the first in a series of books for children written by Gertrude Chandler Warner which describes the adventures of a group of four orphans who run away and live in an abandoned boxcar (a covered rail freight carriage) that they come across. Originally published in 1924 by Rand McNally and reissued in 1942, the novel *The Boxcar Children* tells the story of four orphaned children, Henry, Jessie, Violet and Benny, who run away from the orphanage they have been placed in and create a home for themselves in an abandoned boxcar in the forest. They fear their legal guardian, their grandfather, believing him to be cruel. They enjoy their freedom but find their lifestyle has many problems and is not a long term solution. They eventually meet their grandfather, James Alden, who is a kind and wealthy man. The children agree to live with him, and James moves the beloved boxcar to his backyard, so the children can use it as a playhouse. In the subsequent books, the children encounter many adventures and mysteries in their neighborhood or at the locations they visit with James. The majority of the books are set in locations the children are visiting over summer vacations or Christmas breaks.²⁹

A Series of Unfortunate Events is a series of children's novels (or novellas) by Lemony Snickett (the *nom de plume* of American author Daniel Handler) which follows the turbulent lives of Violet, Klaus and Sunny Baudelaire after their parents' death in an arsonous house fire. The children are placed in the custody of their distant cousin Count Olaf, who begins to abuse them and openly plots to embezzle their inheritance. After the Baudelaires are removed from his care, Olaf begins to doggedly hunt the children down, bringing about the serial slaughter of a multitude of characters. Although they enlist various helpers, the children must largely draw on their own ingenuity and resources to escape him as they try to claim their inheritance.³⁰

Party of Five is an American TV drama series which ran for six seasons between 1994 and 2000. It told the story of five siblings who grew up orphans after their parents were killed by a drunk driver in a car accident. 24-year-old Charlie Salinger, the eldest sibling,

²⁷ Marks, K. and Elliott, F., Johnson's sister reveals how father's abuse still drives the 'minister for lone parents' London, *The Independent* 4 March 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/johnsons-sister-reveals-how-fathers-abuse-still-drives-the-minister-for-lone-parents-438791.html>

²⁸ Davidson, A. "Tills ring for Mary Portas, queen of shop — Page 5". London: *The Sunday Times* 5 July 2008

²⁹ Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Boxcar_Children

³⁰ Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Series_of_Unfortunate_Events

became legal guardian to his four younger siblings: 16-year-old Bailey, 15-year-old Julia, 11-year-old Claudia, and infant Owen. The siblings take over the running of their family's restaurant, with Charlie initially serving as manager and later with Bailey taking over. The struggles faced by the Salingers over the years included cancer, alcoholism, domestic violence, and the long term effects of parental loss.³¹

My Brother, My Sister, and I (1994) by Yoko Kawashima Watkins is a semi-autobiographical novel. With their mother dead, separated from their father and living in extreme poverty, the Kawashimas — 13-year-old Yoko, her 17-year-old sister, and her 21-year-old brother — struggle to survive as refugees in post-World War II Japan in extreme poverty. The young people lose their wretched temporary home and are accused of burning a warehouse and committing a double murder. With the aid of new friends and personal aplomb, they find clues that clear their names and lead to the discovery of the true culprits. Along the way are fascinating details of how they make do and manage to preserve their dignity; the cruelty and humiliation Yoko endures in school; the interesting friendship they share with a Burakumin (outcast) couple; and an emotional reunion with their POW father, during which they must tell him that their mother died six years ago.³²

The Cement Garden (1978) by Ian McEwan tells the story of four children who stay on in their family home after the death of both of their parents, fearful of outside intervention breaking them up as a family. This book is often compared to *Lord of the Flies* in its depiction of childhood. Without the moral guidance of adults, the children in the book are simultaneously innocent and unsure of where their moral boundaries lie.

The incredible Adam Spark by Alan Bissett (2005) is told from the point of view of a young man with a learning disability, Adam, age 18, who has been raised for the last 3 years by his 21 year old lesbian sister, Jude. The pair have been orphaned, although Adam's understanding is that his parents have gone to the Land of Oz. The story is set in a housing scheme in the Scottish town of Falkirk and is written in a transcription of the Scottish dialect spoken by the book's characters. Adam believes that he acquires strange powers following an accident. Adam is an innocent but unreliable narrator, unable to see the effect that his dependency on his older sister is having on her. His jealousy leads him to try, with increasing force, to interfere with Jude's relationship with a fellow-student and results in Jude trying desperately to reconcile Adam with her partner. Adam also wants to be part of a local gang, unable to see that their relationship with him is exploitative and he is drawn into a series of increasingly dangerous exploits. There is a lot of rough humour in the book, with Adam an engaging and not always sympathetic character.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000) by Dave Eggers is an account of Eggers' experience at age 22 of raising his 8 year old brother Christopher, after the deaths of both their parents from unrelated cancers in less than five weeks. Based on true events, Eggers introduces elements of fiction into a postmodern telling of how he raised his younger brother in the years immediately following the deaths of their parents. Despite some strains in the relationship between these brothers, they have a deep understanding and commitment to each other, which outsiders will always find it difficult to penetrate.

³¹ Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Party_of_Five

³² Amazon website: <http://www.amazon.com/My-Brother-Sister-I/dp/0689806566>

Winter's Bone was published as a novel by Daniel Woodrell in 2006, and then released as an Oscar-nominated film in 2010. It depicts a 17 year old girl, Ree Dolly, who has responsibility for raising her two younger siblings, due to her mother's mental state and her father having disappeared. The story takes place in an impoverished and isolated rural area of the Ozark Mountains in America, and it tells of Ree's efforts to find out what has happened to her father. They stand to lose their home unless he can be found, as he used it as collateral for bail before disappearing. It becomes clear that he has been murdered but Ree's efforts to get the evidence of his death which would save their home are putting her in danger. Young as she is, Ree is prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in her duty of care towards her younger siblings.

A number of themes emerge from these fictional and fictionalised depictions of siblings living together without adult care or supervision. These siblings are invariably living together due to the absence of both parents, usually through death of the parent who was the primary caregiver although there might be a surviving parent living elsewhere. The bond between siblings is generally shown as being the strongest relationship that these children and young people have. However, it is not without potential problems, and can come at a cost to the older, caring sibling, who may experience a conflict between their responsibilities as a sibling carer and their development towards maturity, which begins to separate them from their siblings. The siblings in these books sometimes withdraw from the world into the private world of their sibling relationship. People outside of the sibling relationship are often seen, initially at least, as a threat or of malicious intent towards the siblings. Sometimes the threat turns out to be genuine, even life threatening. Even outsiders of friendly intent, will not always be admitted to the world of the siblings and usually have to demonstrate not only goodwill but also a sympathetic understanding before they will gain any degree of admittance.

Following the publication of Eggers' book, Time magazine published an article by Heather Won Tesoriero which dealt with the subject of children being raised by older siblings³³. Tesoriero reports an estimate that in the USA there are roughly 140,000 cases where children are being raised by sibling carers, out of an estimated two million children in family and friends care in that country. If these figures are accurate, it would mean that sibling care accounts for seven per cent of all family and friends care arrangements in the United States, which is comparable to the figures found in some UK studies (Broad et al 2001, Rowe et al 1984), although higher than the figure in Farmer and Moyers' 2008 study. In her article, through the individual cases she reports, Tesoriero identifies a number of the issues which have been identified elsewhere as being particularly significant in sibling care arrangements: the decision to become a sibling carer having to be taken in the immediate aftermath of bereavement or personal tragedy; the youthfulness and inexperience of the carers and the redefinition of roles in the sibling relationship when one becomes the primary carer. She reports the views of Anthony Jurich, professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University, that anyone with a say in creating such a family structure should ask three questions: "First, what is the responsibility level of the older sibling(s)? Second, to what degree does the younger sibling agree to this? And finally, what is the nature of the relationship between the siblings?" Jurich maintains that if the siblings have a hierarchical relationship then the transition can be a lot smoother and the siblings are less likely to become entangled in power conflicts.

³³ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,999887,00.html>

3. Conclusion

From this literature review, we can see that sibling care is truly an international phenomenon. Children may be cared for or raised by siblings in vastly different social circumstances, according to whether they are in the developing or the developed world, but such arrangements do share much common ground.

The arrangements are often made in the wake of the death of one or both parents or, where the parents are unable to provide the care that the children involved need. This means that the caring sibling is often experiencing feelings of loss or anger but may be unable to express or deal with their own feelings because of feeling that they have to be strong for their siblings.

Sibling carers are frequently reported as being intensely loyal to the brothers and sister they are caring for, often in very adverse circumstances. There is an impression that sibling carers do not give up on their caring responsibilities easily and a comparison of placement stability between sibling care arrangements and other types of placement would be of interest.

Although sibling carers are a minority of all family and friends placements, they are still a significant minority. UK research supports findings in the USA, showing a willingness by many older siblings to come forward to care for their younger brothers and sister, despite the difficulties and uncertainties this is likely to present them with. If the proportion of family-and-friends-placed children who are with siblings is the same in the UK as in the USA, ie 7%, then it could mean there are upwards of 14,000 children in the UK being raised by older siblings although most of them will have little or no contact with official support services. However, it is unlikely that sibling carers will be concentrated in any particular geographical area and sibling carers may find it difficult to make contact with others in a similar situation to them because they are geographically spread.

It may be occasional and intermittent but there is, nevertheless, a slow but steady flow of fictional presentations of sibling care in books, films and television. It is a scenario which provides an opportunity to explore particular topics, for example children living without adult care and supervision, tensions between the inward and outward looking aspects of family life, or the strength of sibling bonds compared to other social relationships.

Internationally, there is evidence of sibling carers showing extraordinary resilience and sacrificing much in terms of work and education, in order to safeguard their younger siblings and keep themselves together as a family. These family groups can be assisted by being mentored by a suitable adult. However, they are also vulnerable to exploitation by outsiders (including extended family members). Fictional accounts of groups of siblings who are wary of and threatened by outsiders may have a justifiable basis in fact.

This would indicate that, while sibling care arrangements are clearly likely to benefit from support being provided, this support has to be carefully considered, taking full account of the perspective of the sibling group and being offered in a way that meets any of the sibling group's concerns about outside interference.

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