



African Population and
Health Research Center



POLICY BRIEF
JULY 2025

Jamaa na Afya ya Mtoto

Kinship, Nuptiality and Child Outcomes in Kenya



Context

Despite noteworthy progress in improving child survival, sub-Saharan Africa continues to have some of the worst outcomes of children's physical growth and early childhood development. This is driven, in large part, by elevated risks for children living in low-income urban communities. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified urban health and the wellbeing of children in low-income urban contexts in the developing world as one of the key focus areas for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Kenya's progress in meeting child health and survival benchmarks, as in other African countries, has been uneven, and least beneficial for children residing in urban slums. Whereas the overall probability of dying before the age of five years declined nationally from 102.3 per 1000 live births in 1990 to 39.9 in 2023. Under-five mortality was 79.8 in slum communities compared to 22 out of every 1000 children born in Nairobi.

39.9

*deaths for every
1000 live births*

Moreover, intra-urban differences, manifested most starkly in slum areas, are becoming so profound that the “urban health advantage” is likely to be wiped out. The Jamaa na Afya ya Mtoto (JAMO) project team worked with 1,203 mothers (aged 18-29 with co-resident children aged 0-24 months) over a period of four years (October 2020 to June 2025) to identify models of family support that offer optimum protection for vulnerable mothers and young children living in Nairobi’s urban slums. We focused particularly on understanding how paternal and maternal kinship support and the context of mothers’ unions impact developmental outcomes.

Objectives

The project had two (02) main objectives at its core:

- Examine the effects of union formalization and kinship support on children’s physical growth and early childhood development (ECD).
- Assess the extent to which key intermediate outcomes, namely, breastfeeding/nutrition, maternal mental health, illness management, and child stimulation explain the relationships among kinship support, union formalization and physical growth and ECD.

The importance of the JAMO project is underscored by the fact that family-level factors play a crucial role in child health and development, yet little is known about the effect of kinship support in general. Moreover, data from the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) and the Institute for Family Studies at Strathmore University has pointed to a crisis in the institution of Marriage and family in Kenya. It is therefore crucial to examine the current interplay between unions, kinship support, and child welfare in depth.

Methods

Mixed methods longitudinal data collection:

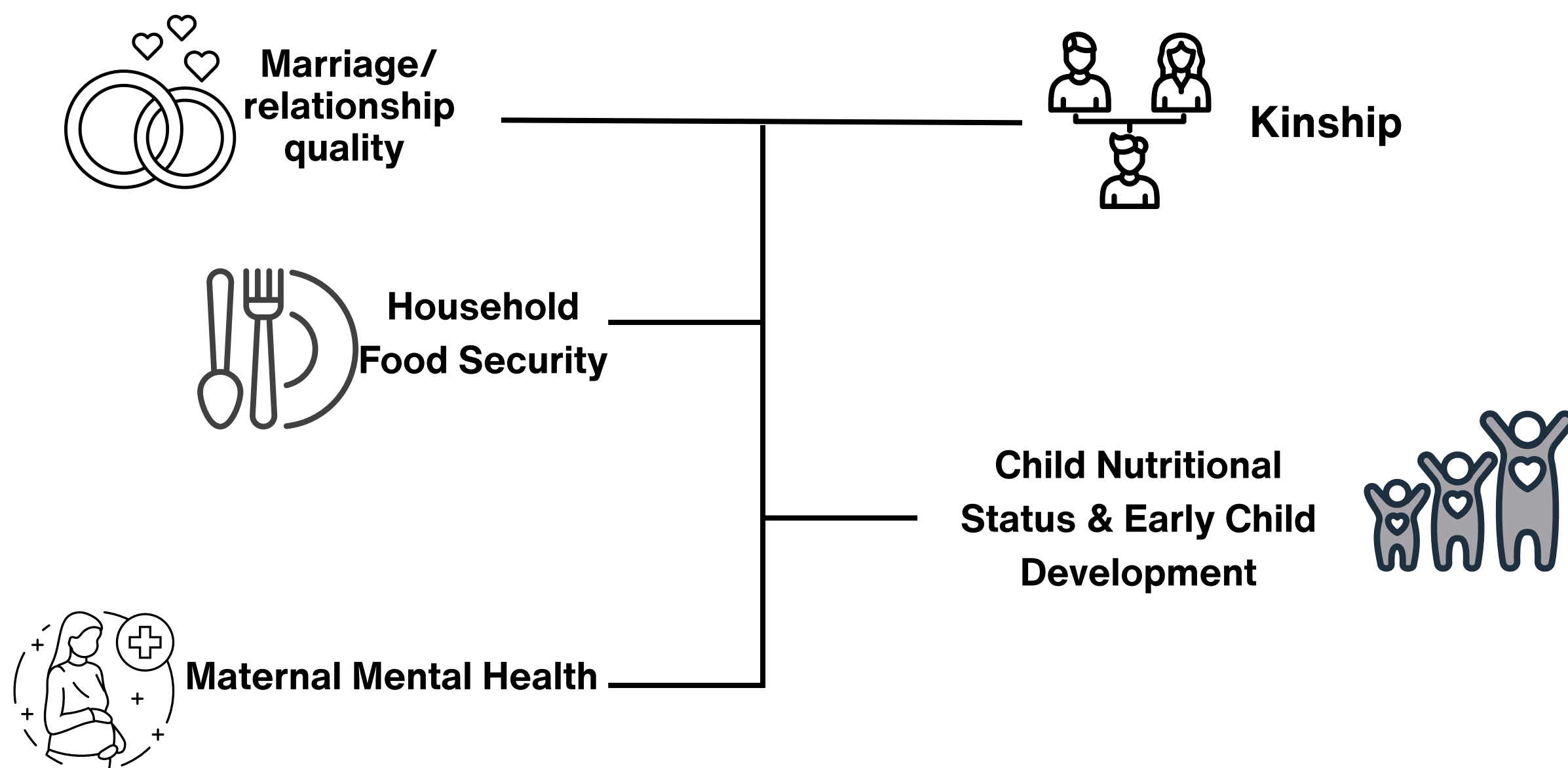
- Quantitative surveys conducted across six waves: March 2022, September 2022, March 2023, September 2023, March 2024, September 2024
- Three qualitative data collection rounds: August 2022, August 2023, and August 2024.
- The principal areas of data collection include marriage and relationships, kinship tree and kinship support, child nutritional status and early childhood development, maternal mental health, and household food security (See Figure 1)



Number of women aged 18-29 who participated in the study

We began the survey with 1203 mothers aged 18-29, pregnant or with at least 1 child 0-24 months old living in Korogocho and Viwandani.

Figure 1. The five principal areas addressed by the JAMO project



Key findings

1) What do the data tell us about women in unions in Korogocho and Viwandani?

Most surveys that measure unions in the past have done so by asking whether someone is married or living together as if they are married. This is not adequate because unions in most African settings, including Kenya, have many steps that couples take to formalize. For the JAMO project, we methodologically approached the measurement of unions using a dynamic variable called ‘union formalization.’ The union formalization measure (UF) we have developed captures these steps.

Figure 2 illustrates the union formalization steps undertaken by the mothers in the sample at Wave 1 (March 2022) and at Wave 6 (September 2024). At the start of our project, while most women reported having gone through the introduction process, fewer than 10% had received some form of bride price. Most respondents indicated that the introduction and dowry payment were the most critical steps to take to gain recognition and respect from kin and the community. Significantly, to make a marriage more formal, kin members must be involved.

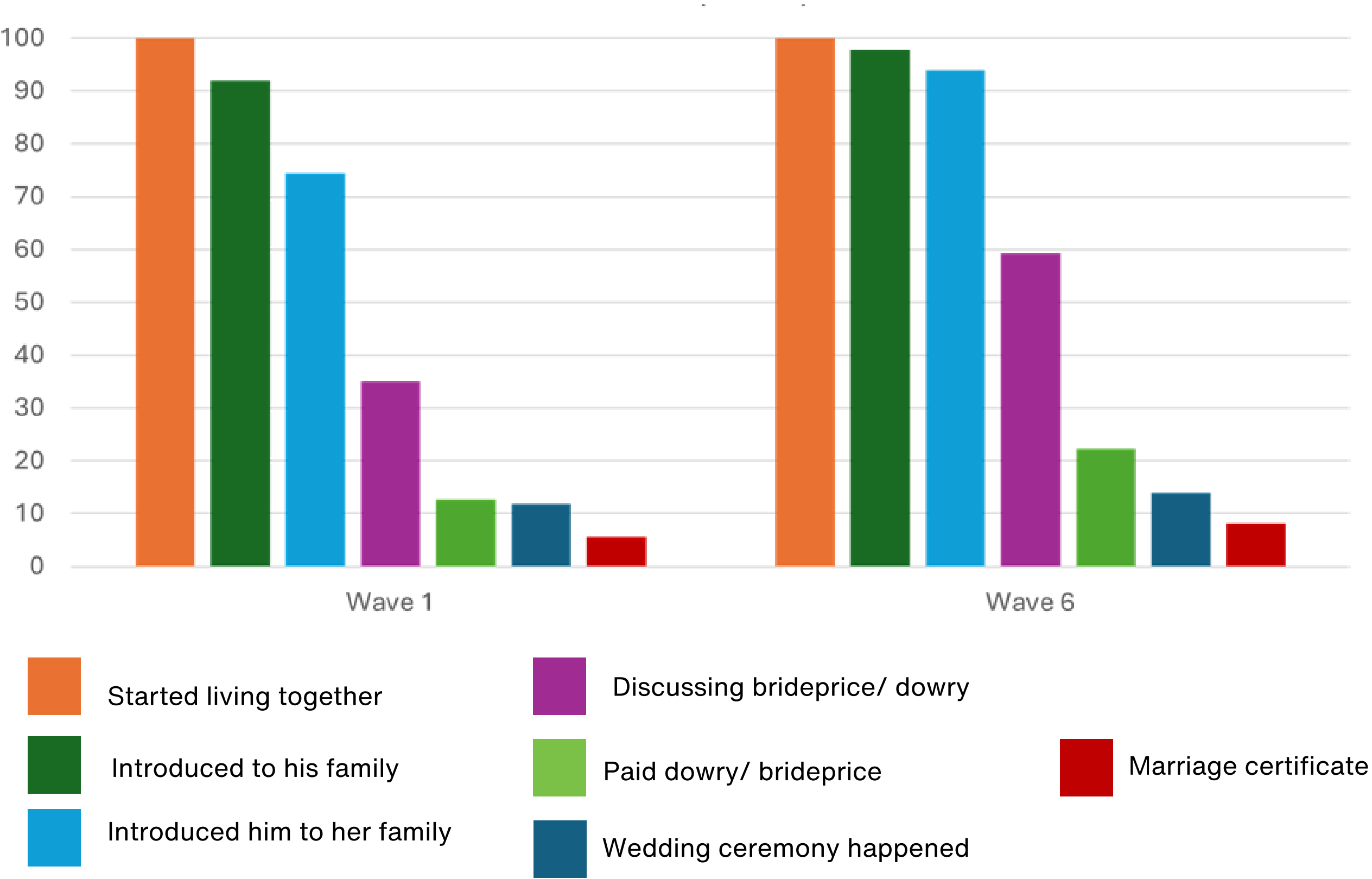
As one 27-year-old mother of three indicated about the importance of introductions:

I was happy that he came to take me from my home, because I did not leave by hiding myself, I left with my parents knowing. I was also happy when I went to be introduced to his people... so that I got to be known there.

Men also highlighted the importance of dowry payment, as described by one of the male participants, a 32-year old father of three:

You know you must have money. “An empty hand is not licked.” To a parent’s home, I cannot go without... I don’t feel good. I don’t feel good. It is just that I don’t have the resources. If I had them, I would have already completed these steps.

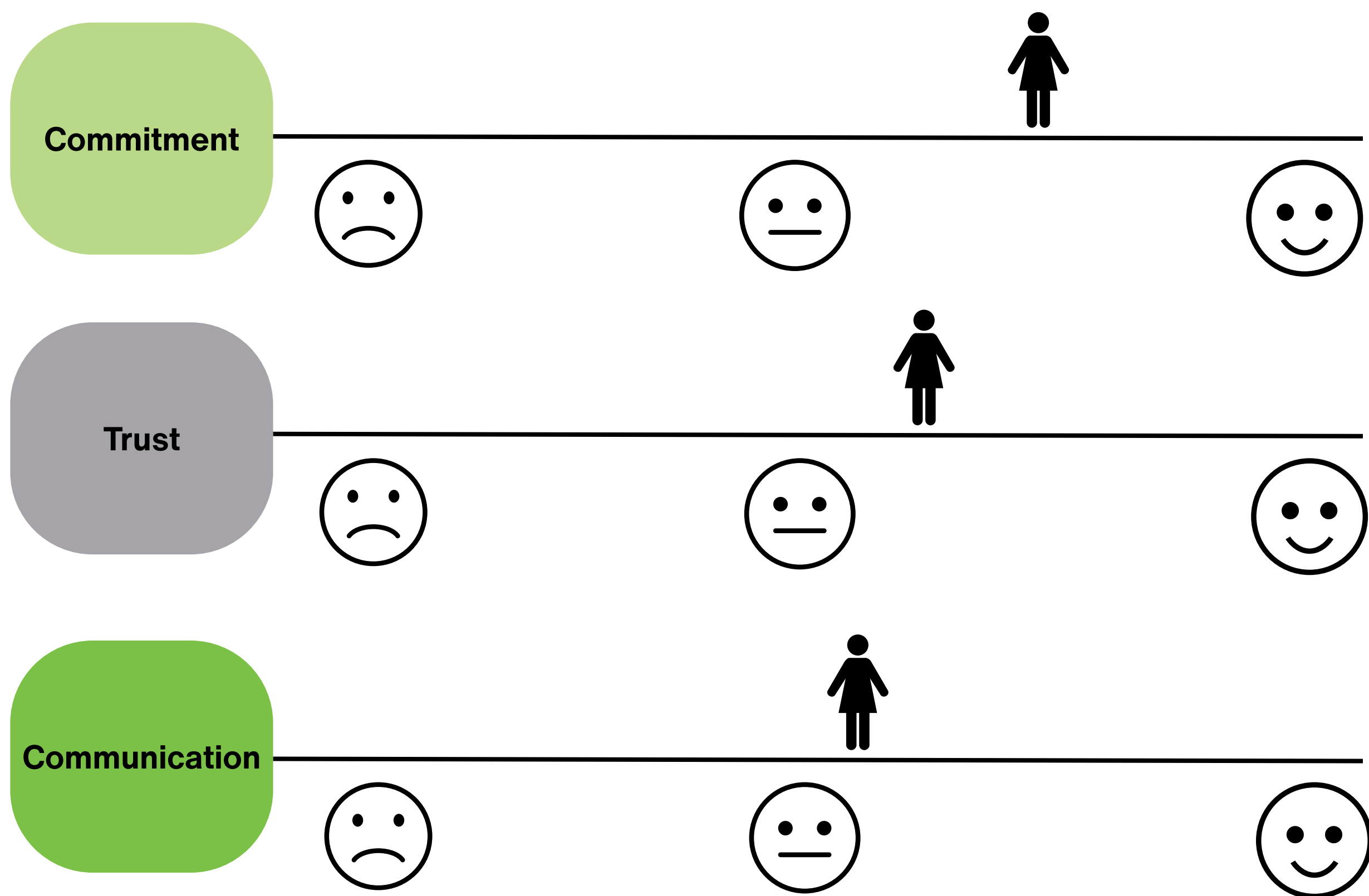
Figure 2. Union formalization steps achieved for mothers by Wave 1 and Wave 6 (n=1,203 women)



2) What is relationship quality within unions?

While kin remain important for union formalization, the emotional bond within couples has also become more important over time. Therefore, we measured relationship quality and how it changes over time by asking 21 questions about the extent to which they were committed to their partner, how they trusted their partner, and how well they felt they communicated and resolved conflicts with their partner (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perceptions of relationship quality among mothers in wave 1 (n=939)



We found that most of the women at the start of the study were highly committed to their relationships, but there was greater variation in their levels of trust and communication within their relationships. As one woman from Korogocho explained about trust:

I can say that for a marriage to last, the first thing that has to be there is trust. if you do not trust each other, the marriage cannot work from the start.

A man from Korogocho concurred, adding:

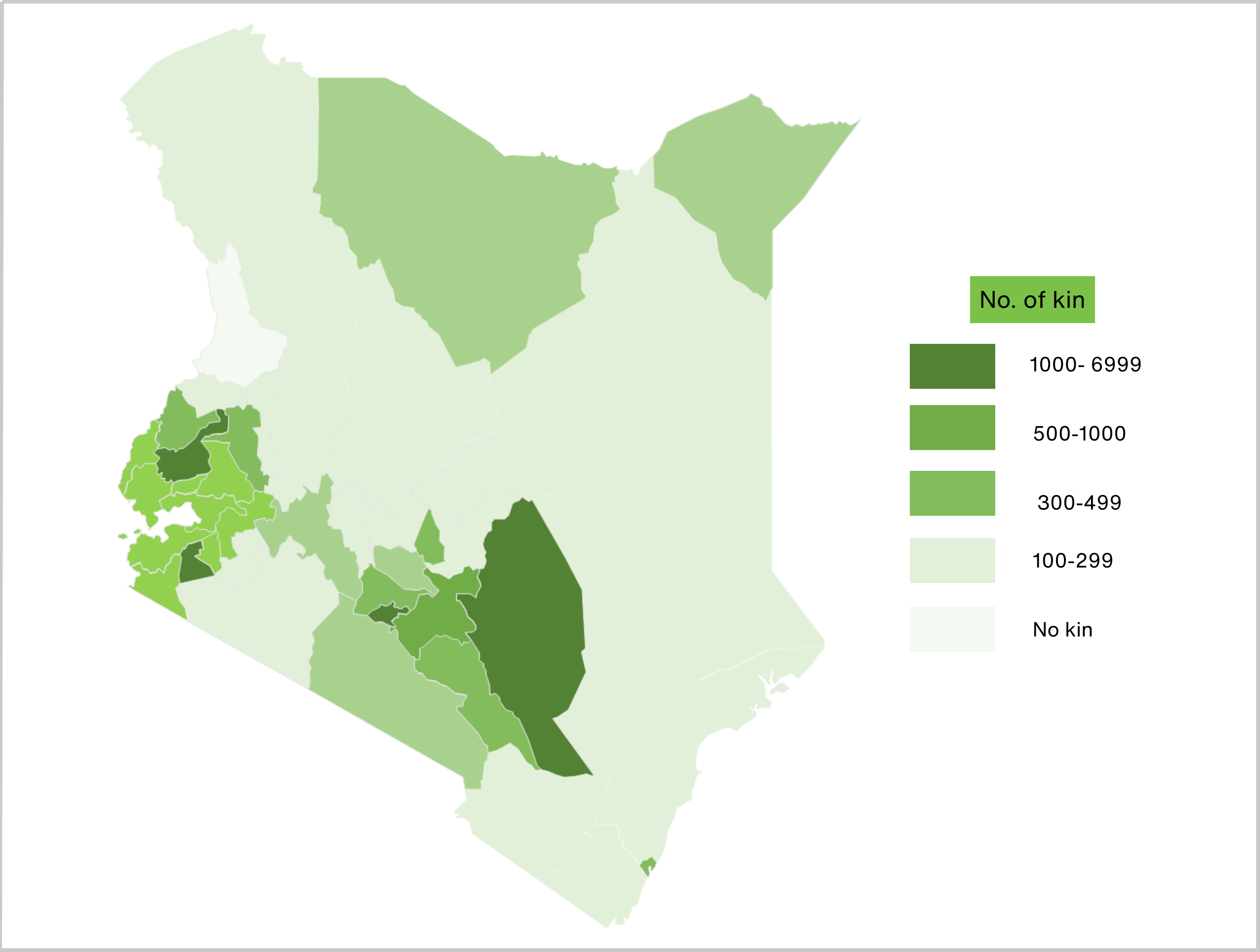
If we trust each other our relationship will be strong and in case of any problem we sit and discuss since discussing shall bring each other's opinion on the table and we will reach to an agreement."

3) What are the kinship dynamics observed?

For this project, we developed the Kinship Support Tree to enumerate a child's siblings, maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, no matter where they live, and collected demographic data on each person as well as the type of support- monetary, non-monetary (food, clothing), childcare and emotional support, they provide at each wave.

The majority of kin resided in Nairobi and the neighboring province with smaller concentrations in western Kenya (Figure 4). On average, mothers enumerated 11 kin members over the age of eight.

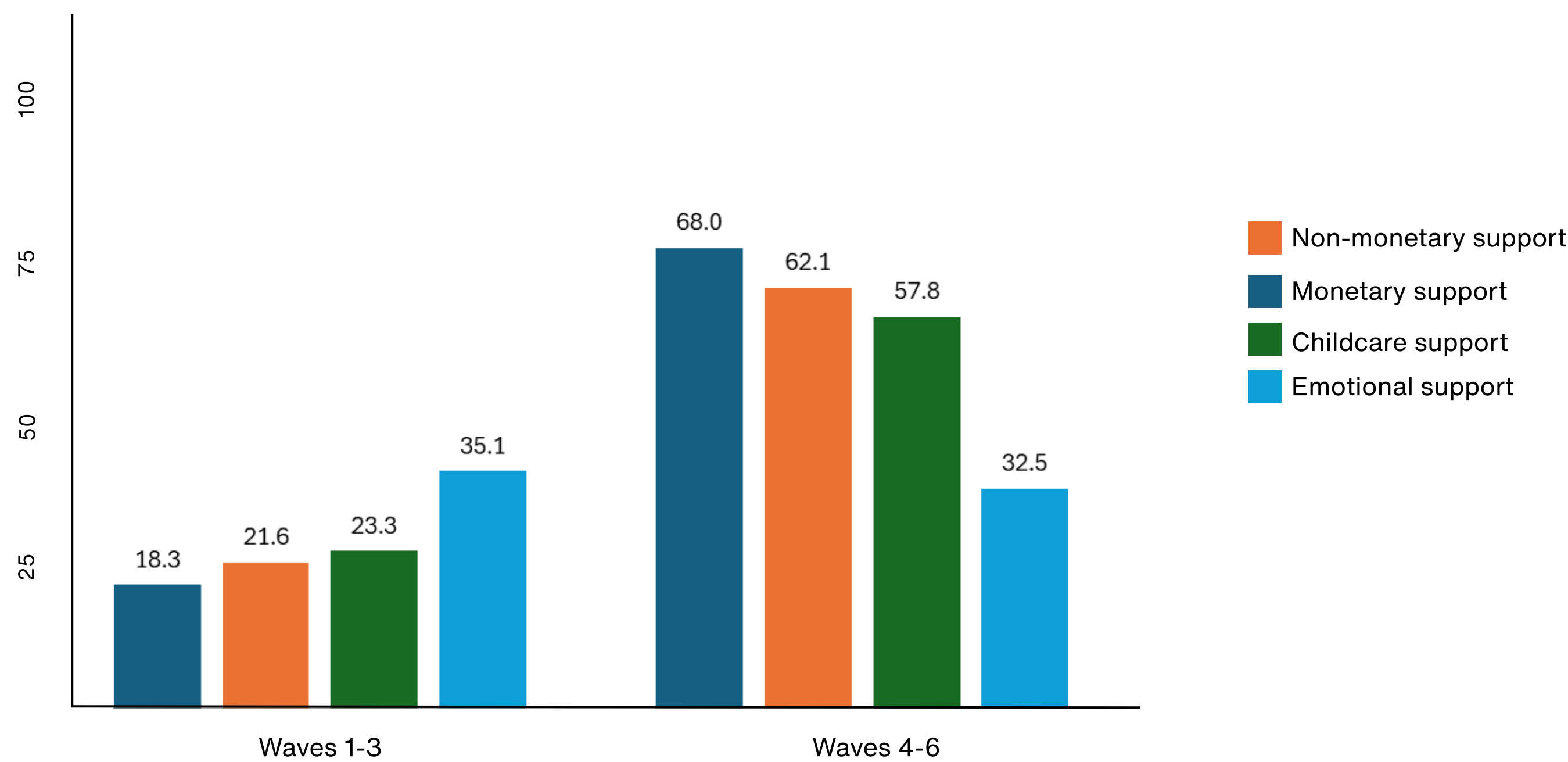
Figure 4. Location of kin at Wave 1 (n=13,949)



The vast majority of mothers report received financial support, but also non-monetary and childcare support for at least four waves (Figure 5). Only 50% of women reported receiving emotional support, while the data shows that one in four women in the sample were at risk of moderate-to-severe postpartum depression.

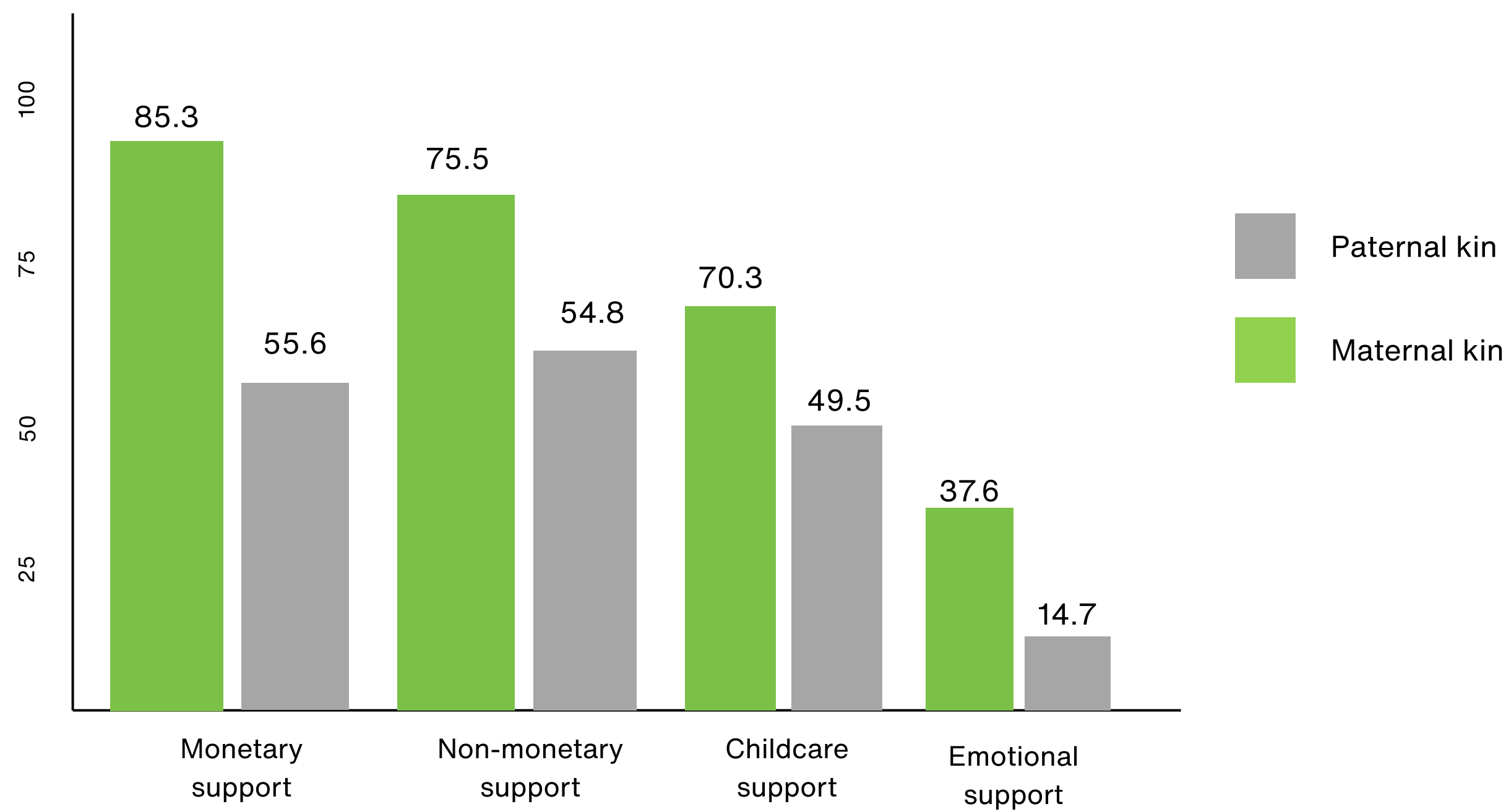
Given the limited data on fathers and negative portrayals of their involvement in childrearing, we highlight their support for mothers and children. While about 12-18% of mothers report that biological fathers do not provide anything, it is notable that the vast majority of mothers report that biological fathers provide all types of support and do so continuously.

Figure 5. Types of support received by mothers from biological fathers



Women received more support from the maternal kin than the paternal kin in general. Emotional support from the paternal kin was significantly lower.

Figure 6. Support from maternal as compared to paternal kin at Wave 1

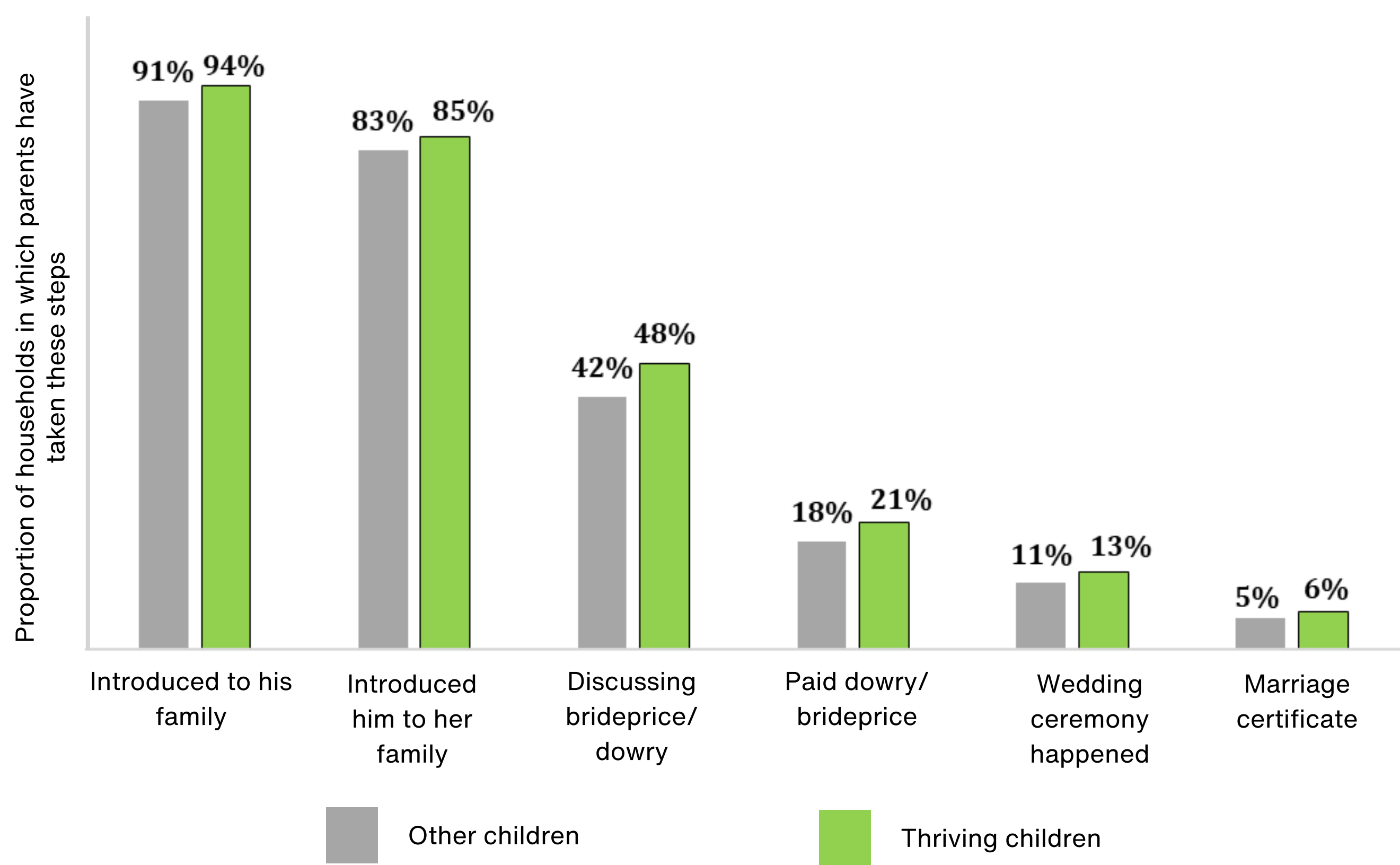


4) What factors influence children’s outcomes?

We used a set of models to examine the features of children who are doing very well or very poorly based on all factors considered in this study. We examined anthropometric measures of child health as well as seven measures of child development and found that all of these measures could be summarized in one factor and then we looked for features that explain why some children are doing well and others are doing poorly. We went beyond the obvious (children of wealthier households and those from food-secure households tend to do well) and examined the roles of stages of union formalization, relationship quality,

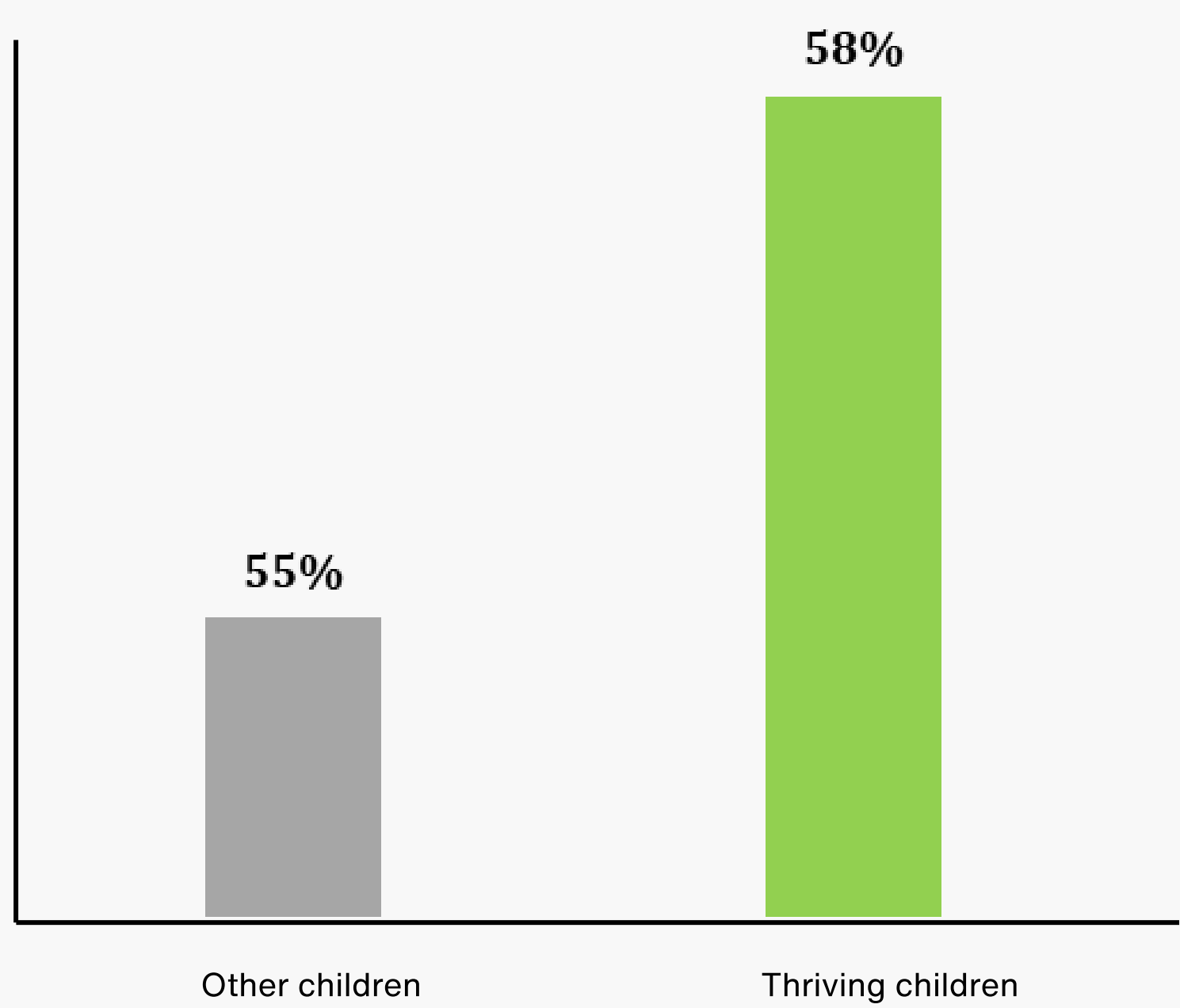
and the quality of kin networks. Children who achieve their developmental milestones as expected have parents who have gone through all stages of union formalization (Figure 7). This is because they are more likely to have high relationship quality and are also more likely to have educated kin and kin living in rural counties that are experiencing above-average harvests. Children who do not attain their milestones as expected are less likely to have mothers who have been introduced to the father’s kin or discussed or paid any dowry, less likely to be in a high quality relationship and less likely to have educated kin.

Figure 7. Union formalization effect on children’s outcomes



Children from households in which the mother reports being happy are less likely to be experiencing difficulties (Figure 8). Examination of these scores reveals a significant common latent factor: children tend to perform well or poorly across all these scores simultaneously. The existence of a common latent factor allows us to define two categories of children: those who are doing well (thriving) and those who are doing poorly (struggling).

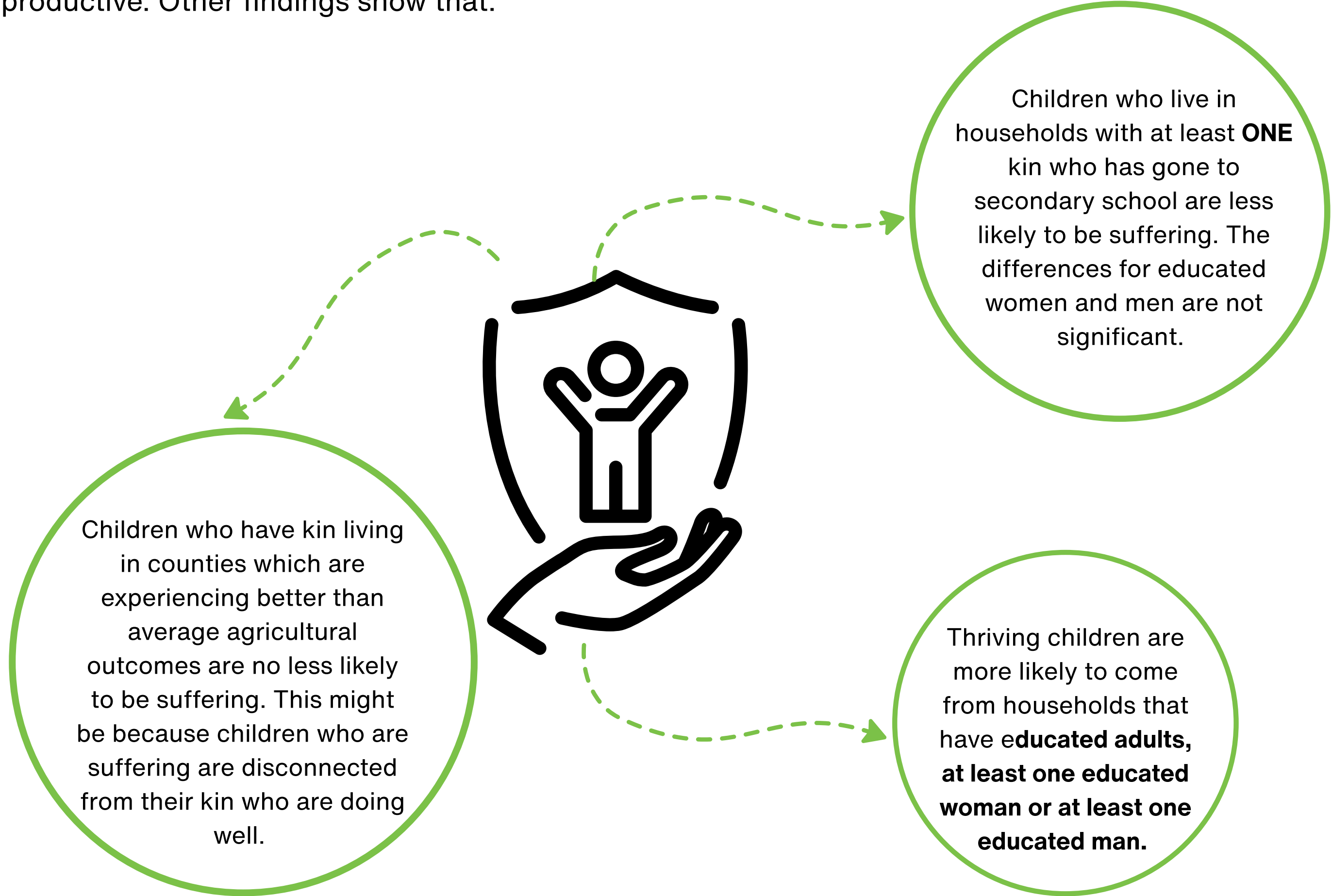
Figure 8. Relationship quality effect on children's outcomes



Children from households in which the mother says she is happy are less likely to be suffering.



We also computed aggregate variables related to the quality of kin networks. For quality, we consider whether there are educated kin members and whether kin reside in counties in Kenya that are experiencing favorable agricultural harvests. This latter measure is a way of estimating the income and well-being of kin outside of Nairobi-even if they are not farmers, they do better when farms are productive. Other findings show that:



Tying it all together

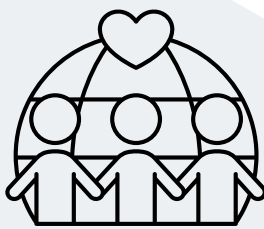
The central focus of the JAMO project was to examine the relationship between kin, including kin who do not live in Nairobi and the well-being of the child. We set out to demonstrate that it is not just the number (or even the quality) of potential kin that matters but also the degree to which institutions, such as marriage, can enhance the significance of kin or foster social embeddedness. The JAMO findings can contribute to strengthening the implementation of the following interventions:



JAMO findings have shown the critical role of relationship quality; therefore, strategies must be put in place to support marriages' thriving. Marital counseling services should therefore be made available, affordable, and easily accessible.



Fathering initiatives such as Kenya Dads and new mHealth interventions in Kenya should be strengthened to empower men and enhance men's caregiving abilities for their children as well as their partners.



Considering the impact of mothers' happiness on children' outcomes, community awareness of mental health or emotional needs and support should be prioritised to ensure communities are well informed. Community health (Level 1) should be equipped to identify and refer community members in need of mental health or emotional support.



- Considering the Marriage Act on the legal institution of marriage and the identification of the different kinds of marriage, it may be valuable to consider formalization steps such as introductions to kin as signifying a legitimate union.
- To enhance child protection and development, the government should fully implement the 2022 Children's Act by streamlining childcare policies. Prioritizing access to quality care and safeguarding children from neglect and abuse is crucial. Strengthening family support systems and regulating early childhood development (ECD) centers, along with ensuring free primary education, are essential for children's cognitive and emotional growth.

Acknowledgements

This work would not be possible without the support of the following institutions:

- Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Grant #5R01HD101613-02
- The University of Maryland through:
 - Population Research Center Seed Grant
 - School of Behavioral and Social Sciences
 - Vice President for Research



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