

## **Determinants of female family headship in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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### **1. Description of the topic and data used**

The objective of this study is to explore the interaction of “modernization” and the subjacent socio-cultural structures in determining the levels and trends of female family headship in sub-Saharan Africa: a phenomenon that appears to be spreading up and may bring about important social consequences, especially concerning women’s and children’s conditions of life. In this aim, the hypothesis is made that rural/urban contrast reflects the ongoing social changes, and that ethnicity is a proxy for the values and norms governing kinship and family relationships.

Data from DHS Family Data Sets were used and different statistical procedures were explored, in order to find the way to disentangle these complex phenomena.

The analysis refers to the following countries: Benin (2001), Botswana (1988), Cameroon (1988, 1998), Ghana (2003), Kenya (1989, 1998, 2003), Mali (2001), Namibia (2000), Niger (1992, 1998), Nigeria (1990, 1999, 2003), Rwanda (2000), Togo (1988, 1998), Zambia (2001/2002), Ethiopia (Census 1994; DHS 2000). The following ethnic groups are also examined: Fon, Adja, Yoruba, Bariba, Peul, Bemba, Tonga, Kewa, Lozi, Akan, Ewe, Mole-Dagani, Bambara, Peul, Sanakole/Soninke/Marka, Malike, Senuso/Minianka, Dogon, Sonrai, Bobo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kamba, Kalenjin, Oromo, Amhara, Guraje, Tigray, Sidama, Haoussa, Djerma, Tuareg, Oshiwambo, Damara>Nama, Herero, Kavango(languages). The analysed ethnic groups differ from each other for many critical characteristics concerning family systems. Among these are the lineage and traditional residence of the newly-formed couple. For example, the Oromo, the Haoussa, the Bambara, the Fon, the Ewe, and the Kikuyu are patrilinear and patrilocal, while the Bemba and the Oshiwambo speaking people are matrilinear and matrilocal. The Amhara and the Akan are patrilocal, but their lineage can be either patrilinear or matrilinear. Clearly family systems so radically dissimilar cannot but show divergent problems with regard to family life.

### **2. Theoretical focus**

The female family headship is a phenomenon frequently found all over sub-Saharan Africa, but on a scale that differs greatly from country to country. In Namibia almost 40% of the households are headed by a woman, in Mali and Niger the proportion falls to more modest levels (12-14%). The urban/rural differential is very pronounced in all of the examined countries, but female headed households can be more frequent in either urban or rural areas. The differences between ethnic groups are extremely marked (less than 6% among the Senuso/Minianka, Mali; 53-54% among the Damara>Nama and the Herero, Namibia).

The variability of these situations derives from the multiplicity of the causes that can determine the position of a woman as family head. Frequently the reason is the absence of a husband due to death, divorce or migration. But different traditional backgrounds may favour or contrast this female assumption of responsibility. In matrilinear and matrilocal regimes where the co-residence of the spouses is not a rule, or where there is a widespread acceptance of premarital childbearing, it is easier to find women heads of family. The opposite occurs where the rule is to refute premarital childbearing, where the re-absorption of widows and

divorcees in new unions is easy thanks to polygamy, where the women left on their own are generally received in the households of relatives.

The female family headship show an increasing trend in most of the countries for which temporal series are available. The contemporary social dynamics (development, urbanization, modernization, rural exodus, and ideational changes) appear to boost the phenomenon in many ways. However, the great diversities between ethnic groups also suggest that different customs and traditions contribute strongly to determining the different levels of the female headship. In other words, the phenomenon is probably largely pre-existent to the social evolutions that are generally thought to be its cause.

The female headed families are often thought to be characterized by poverty and social isolation. Concerning poverty, unfortunately the DHS data on the possession of goods and on the housing conditions show a certain economic disadvantage for both rural and urban households headed by women. But, considering that the male breadwinner is not always central in the economic organization of the African family, further and deeper analyses on the topic are being carried out.

Concerning social isolation, the analysed data show that the households headed by women, that are mostly single-parent and non-nuclear households, host relatives more frequently than their male-headed counterparts. These relatives are most frequently women. It seems that when a man's support is lacking, a kind of female solidarity is established, that helps to fill the vacant role.

An apparently contradictory aspect, stressed by some researchers, is that the assumption of the role of family head can, in some cases, be a free choice dictated by the desire for independence on the part of some women of higher social classes. Some elements in the data examined seem to support this hypothesis.

### **3. Methods**

To try to disentangle the impact of cultural background, on one side, and that of societal changes, on the other, on the spreading of female single-parent households, a risk factors analysis at a micro level has been carried out.

Specifically we wanted to verify the hypothesis that the probability for a woman to become head of a single-parent household (dependent variable) is significantly influenced by ethnicity and that the impact of this factor can be at least as important as that of the type of residence.

The analytical procedure has been developed in three steps. In the first step, that refers to all the above mentioned countries and ethnic groups, the variables age, education and socio-economic status were identified as the variables to include in the model, along with ethnicity and residence, in order to avoid confounding effects. The economic conditions were described summarizing the rich available information on housing and goods possession by means of a multiple correspondence analysis.

In the second step, a method of recursive partitioning was used, to explore the data structure. Classification trees were built, using proportions of women heads of one-parent households as class variable, and residence, ethnicity, age, education and socio-economic status as explanatory variables. In the third step, logistic regression models were fitted to data, in order to establish the predicting value of each explanatory variable.

The whole procedure was performed distinctly for the three countries - Ethiopia, Ghana and Namibia – showing the highest proportion of female single-parent households in different regions of Africa.

#### **4. Some Provisional Findings**

The classification trees show that the variables at the basis of the partitioning process are ethnicity and rural/urban residence. The effects of education, age and economic conditions are of secondary importance.

The logistic regression confirms that all the explanatory variables are highly significant, but ethnicity is by far the principal predictive factor. For example, an Akan woman is three times more likely to become head of a single parent family than a Mole-Dagani woman. The role of the type of residence is almost as important as that of ethnicity, but it varies according to the characteristics of rural-urban migration, and of nuptiality and marital disruption in urban and rural contexts. From this mix of factors a large variety of situations is originated.

It is interesting to observe that in all the examined countries the educational level and the economic conditions act in an apparently contrasting way. The probability of becoming a single-parent family head falls with the improvement of economic conditions, but rises with the educational level (controlling for the other factors). This result may indicate that actually some higher class educated women may freely choose to become a head of household for reasons of autonomy and independence. But the relationship with the economic conditions (on which analyses are still in progress) show that the phenomenon has less appreciable aspects, deserving political attention and a strengthening of the commitment to family-related policies.