

## **FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The contribution of female headed households literature in the better understanding of the household structure of many Third World nations notwithstanding, there are some methodological issues which are crucial to the interpretation and comparison of female headship rates within the same country over time or across international boundaries. The most important of them all is the definition of a household, particularly the assumed association between economic independence and household headship and the associated method of measuring headship. As argued later in the paper, the household definition used by researchers often differs from that used by policy implementors at village. What arises out of the use of different definitions is the difficulty on the part of policy makers to implement any recommendations made out of research which uses a different definition from theirs.

The present paper sets out to point out methodological aspects of female-headed households research in order to improve future research methodology on female-headed households with the purpose of formulating appropriate strategies of reaching target groups who desperately need help. The main focus is on the definition of a household as used in demographic investigations and household head as well as the relationship between economic independence and household headship. The implications of the failure of the definition to distinguish between 'temporary' against 'permanent' households in making inferences about any aspect of female-headed households are also examined. The discussion of this paper is concentrated on Botswana and Lesotho mainly due to our better knowledge of the societies living in these two countries. The issues raised in the paper, however, can easily apply to other Third World countries, particularly African countries.



## HOUSEHOLD: ITS DEFINITION

Although the organization of domestic groups varies greatly cross-nationally and it is unlikely that a single definition of household can be universally applicable (Wilson, 1985: 97), common provision for food or sharing of cooking facilities is common to most definitions of household used in demographic inquiries. The fact that no single definition of household that can be universally applicable, it follows that household structures are not necessarily comparable across countries. For example, Youssef and Hetler (1984: 4) defined a household as a co-residential unit that must have a co-residential member who is acknowledged as its head, while in Lesotho most definitions do not place much emphasis on co-residence (Murray, 1981: 49; Bureau of Statistics, 1988: 6 and 1988A: 5) and the member acknowledged as the household head can be present or absent (Bureau of Statistics, 1988A: 5).

But more importantly, researchers working within the same country at different times often use different definitions. For example, when comparing female household headship rates for Lesotho, Murray (1981: 54) points out that comparison is difficult because criteria used to identify the household head are neither uniform nor self-evident. He goes on to argue that in practice it is difficult for a researcher to decide whether a resident widow or her junior (unmarried) migrant son ought to be regarded as the household head (Murray, 1981: 54). Furthermore, Murray (1981: 49), while following the 1966 Lesotho Population Census criterion for inclusion or non-inclusion of absent members as members of the household, he used a stricter criterion. While the 1966 census required that a person must have visited home within the previous five years in order to be considered as an absent member of the household, Murray restricted the period to two years. He also introduced a condition that the absent member should have made contribution to the income of the household (Murray, 1981: 49).

Despite these problems of defining a household or identifying the head, there is no evidence to suggest that there is doubt in the minds of the respondents in

identifying the head of the household. As Murray (1981: 48) observed, although villagers do not make any distinction between the members of their household in terms of whether they are present and the degree of correspondence with those who are absent from the household, they have no difficulty in categorising the members by their co-residence status. It is not surprising that Bureau of Statistics which is the main Government body responsible for collection of population and related data in the country has adopted a definition which leaves the decision on the members of the household on who is the head by including a qualification that the household head should be considered by other members as the main decision maker (Bureau of Statistics, 1988A: 5).

## HOUSEHOLD HEADSHIP AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION

Most household definitions imply an existence of a relationship between household headship and economic contribution to the well being of the household. While these issues are highly related, they are not necessarily correlated. According to the traditions of Basotho and Batswana, an individual's social status might be more important than economic independence in determining true household headship. First, due to the patrilineal nature of these societies, almost invariably men assume de jure household headship at marriage while women achieve it much later in life through widowhood in particular. Due to separation of spouses stemming from male labour migration into South Africa, however, there is a large proportion of households headed by women on de facto basis. But, as long as a man is not married, he remains a minor in the eyes of customary law despite his economic independence.

Due to co-existence of customary law and imported Roman-Dutch law, the criteria under which someone can qualify to be a head differ depending on the law applied. The main deciding factor is the question of the "minor". While according to Civil law age is the main deciding factor in determining whether someone is a minor or adult, as regards customary law attaining certain status in life such as getting



married play an important role. Unmarried people normally remain minors according to customary law (see Poulter, 1976 for Lesotho). As for women they remain perpetual minors under customary law and some changes in the law to abolish discrimination against women is not yet acceptable to the community (see Brown, 1983: 374 about Botswana). Harmonization of the Roman-Dutch law and customary law is another option as some analysts have suggested regarding marriage (see Maqutu, 1979: 187).

### HOUSEHOLD HEADSHIP AND DECISION MAKING

There is a lot of power sharing as regard decision making such that the use of decision making as one of the deciding factors for one to be a household head needs qualification. As Murray (1981: 48) acknowledged, in Sesotho which also applies to Setswana, the household can refer to the family, the house, the homestead or the lineage. Since a married man can be a head of his household as well as the head of his lineage, if it is not clear exactly which decision the definition is referring to, the head of the lineage can be mentioned instead of the head of the household especially if the de jure head is absent. The assumption that decision making is the prerogative of the household head, which is sometimes referred to when discussing women's lack of autonomy as regards independent decisions making, does not apply to all decisions. Individual heads ~~can make independent decision with respect to the general~~ running of their households yet decisions affecting the whole lineage are a prerogative of the lineage head. Within the household too decision making is generally shared between husband and wife except in certain areas where the decision has to be taken collectively. For instance, there are a number of decisions which women make independent of men such as arranging share-cropping (Mueller, 1981) and spending income independently earned (Sembajwe and Makatjane, 1988: 37). Indicating the type of decision associated with headship is desirable both in terms of proper separation of economic household heads from lineage heads as well as avoiding general statements about poor status of women which might not be so pronounced.

### TEMPORARY VERSUS PERMANENT HOUSEHOLDS.

Most household definitions fail to make a distinction between 'temporary' households and 'permanent' households. Most demographic investigations collect information on place of usual residence and place of work which are not necessarily the same. Except with respect to measuring internal movements, the nature of residence is usually never used to distinguish between permanent from temporary households. With the exception of absentees working in South Africa who are usually regarded as permanent members of their households in the country even if they are temporarily residing in South Africa at the time of a survey, among internal migrants generally no attempt is made to determine whether place of enumeration is temporary in relation to place of usual residence although majority of people have dual residence. It is common practice in both Lesotho and Botswana, and in deed in many African countries, for most people working in urban areas and residing almost permanently in these areas to continually invest their resources in the rural areas where they were born with the purpose of settling in the place of birth at retirement. Consideration of economic well being of such households without due consideration of their investments in their places of birth gives a false picture with respect to economic inequalities. Moreover, in planning to bring services to certain target groups, it is important to know whether the population under consideration is transient or permanent. In Botswana the question of temporary and permanent households is even more important as the rural population keeps on moving between the home (where they have their permanent settlement), the fields and the cattle posts.

Majority of school leavers who migrate to urban areas in search of wage employment and rent rooms and stay alone constitute a group of households which could be regarded as temporary. According to most household definitions, such individuals form their own households which they head. For example, household definitions normally indicate that domestic helpers who make their own cooking arrangements constitute their own households (Bureau of Statistics, 1988 and 1988a)



To talk of economic position of such households independent of those of their parents can be misleading as there is a lot of interdependence between them and those of their parents. Moreover, according to customary law, they are still dependents of their parents and directly answerable to them. While economically, these people can be considered as heading their own households, they are highly restricted in making independent decision. For instance, the single mothers working in urban areas, whose economic position has been the main concern of many researchers, they need permission whether to stay with their children in their place of work or not. For all purposes, as long as they are not yet married, they still belong to the households of their parents at their place of usual residence of the parents.

Closely related to this is the establishment of separate 'household' by single mothers described by Brown (1983: 375) for Kgatleng district in Botswana. While there is no doubt such mothers constitute their own households by many household definitions, the difficulty arises when economic position of such households is assessed independent of the parents' household. The inference that households headed by single mothers are significantly poorer than male-headed households (Brown, 1983:376), can be very misleading as economically one way or the other often fall under the household of the parents or the relatives of the single mother.

It is necessary to separate various forms of female-headed households for analysis of their economic situation. Households headed by single mothers are not necessarily comparable to those headed by separated or divorced women. Besides the fact that households of single mothers cannot be really separated from those of their parents, due to their marital status and circumstances surrounding their marriage dissolution, economic position of households of separated or divorced women can be different although sometimes these two groups are grouped together (for example see Brown, 1983: 375).

The conclusion that fathers do not support their children becomes difficult to interpret as the support differ between single mothers and those who are separated or divorced. While the support for children for ever married mothers is determined by the circumstances which mitigated the dissolution of the marriage, the situation for single mothers is influenced by whether the father of the child intends to marry the mother later. Probably it is worth be mentioned that fathering a child and supporting that child is a complicated issue culturally for Lesotho and Botswana. Since marriage is the main deciding factor as to which lineage the child belongs, besides damages claimed for seduction, it is difficult to justify support unless there is an intention of marriage. For both the parents of the girl and those of the man, it is unacceptable to support a child without any intention of marriage. This is mainly due to the tradition which demands that the child should be raised and maintained by the lineage members. For the parents of the girl to demand support would be admitting that they are not capable of maintaining their members which is unacceptable socially.

#### POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

One of the problematic areas in the female-headed households research is implementation of research findings. This emanates from the fact that the implementing definition of a household is usually different from the definition used to identify target populations; in this regard female household heads; and more importantly the dual existence of two law systems in Lesotho and Botswana which are not necessarily compatible. For example, implementation of programs at village level is done by chiefs and village committees who are still traditional. Reaching households headed by single mothers might prove impracticable in a village setting. First single mothers are not recognised as heads of households so they cannot be referred to as heads. Secondly because of their marital status they are not really referred to as mothers the way it would be done with married women. As a result they can only be reached through their parents who might not approve of the programs aimed at them particularly if they have anything to do with modern contraception.





The contention that liberalising laws to be compatible with socio-economic development is crucial for change to take place does not offer much help if the community's attitudes have not consolidated around the liberalised laws (Brown, 1983: 374). Institutional changes evidenced by new laws meant to benefit single mothers are not fully utilized and even those who try to use them do not get favourable response from the public (Brown, 1983: 374).

## CONCLUSION

Household formation is heavily influenced by the culture of any given society. Some of the issues raised in the paper are a result of an incompatibility of the definition of a household with the norms of the society. What might seem a reluctance on the part of policy makers in developing nations in general in implementing programs geared towards improving the well being of female-headed households and the status of women in general, is due partly to the conflict between the norms of the society and socio-economic development. Appropriate methodology is necessary to identify female-headed households. Grouping of female-headed households should be avoided as ways of helping any group are bound to differ. Due to both marital status and circumstances surrounding their marital status for those who are separated or divorced, their problems might both in nature and magnitude suggesting **different strategies of helping them. More attention should, however, be given to devising strategies of solving the problems of women within the existing circumstances while more education is given to the general public for facilitating change of attitudes so that the community becomes receptive to change.**

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