

Determinants of female family headship in Sub-Saharan Africa
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1. Introduction

The female family headship show an increasing trend in most of the countries in all over sub-Saharan Africa 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. 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 headed families are often thought to be characterized by poverty and social isolation. Concerning poverty, a synthetic wealth indicator built on data about good's possession and housing conditions shows that the economic disadvantage does not concern all types of household headed by women, but it is a reality for women living alone with their children. 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. A possible area of critic situations is constituted by isolated mother children groups. On this family form deeper investigation are being carrying out.

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. Various elements in the data we examined seem to support this hypothesis.

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.

2. Data and 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.

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. A general overview refers to all the countries for which diachronic data are available (about 30 countries). Deeper analysis refers to the following ten 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 major ethnic groups of all these countries are extensively examined: Fon, Adja, Yoruba, Bariba, Peul, Bemba, Tonga, Kewa, Lozi, Akan, Ewe, Mole-Dagani, Bambara, Peul, Sanakole/Soninke/Marka, Malike, Senufo/Minianka, Dogon, Sonrai, Bobo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kamba, Kalenjin, Oromo, Amhara, Guraje, Tigray, Sidama, Haoussa, Djerma, Tuareg, Oshiwambo, Damara>Nama, Herero, Kavango(languages).

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 three countries - Ethiopia, Ghana and Namibia - which show the highest proportion of female single-parent households in their respective geographical area (East, West and South Africa).

3. Female headship and single-parent families

The assumption of household heading responsibility by women 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 households are headed by a woman, more than a third in Rwanda, Kenya and Ghana, between a quarter and a fifth in the other countries, apart from Mali and Niger where the proportion falls to more modest levels of 12-14% (Tab. 1 and Fig. 1).

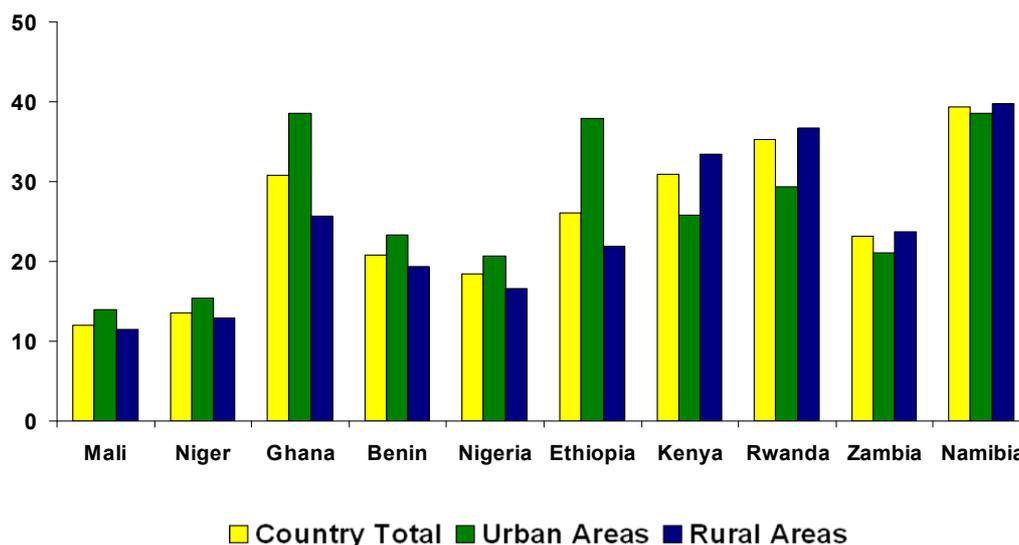
Tab. 1 Percent female headed household by rural/urban residence in several Sub-Saharan countries DHS – Years between 1998 and 2003

Type of residence	Mali 2001	Niger 1998	Ghana 2003	Benin 2001	Nigeria 2003	Ethiopia 2000	Kenya 2003	Rwanda 2000	Zambia 2001/2002	Namibia 2000
Country Total	12.0	13.6	30.8	20.8	18.4	26.0	30.9	35.2	23.1	39.3
Urban Areas	14.0	15.4	38.6	23.3	20.6	37.9	25.8	29.4	21.1	38.6
Rural Areas	11.5	12.9	25.7	19.3	16.6	21.8	33.4	36.7	23.7	39.7

Source: DHS data, family files

Fig.1

Percent female headed households by rural/urban residence in several Sub-Saharan countries – DHS - Years between 1998 and 2003



The urban/rural differential is noticeable in all the countries, but its sign - and hence its meaning - are not the same everywhere: as we have already seen, in fact, female headed households can be more frequent in either urban or rural areas. The differences between ethnic groups are extremely marked (from less than 6% among the Senufo/Minianka, Mali to 53-54% among the Damara>Nama and the Herero, Namibia) and the picture is even more variegated if we observe ethnic groups by residence, the sign of the difference between rural and urban contexts not being the same for all groups (Tab.2 and Figs. 2-3).

The variability of these situations is linked to the combination of multiple causes that contribute to determining the position of the woman as head of a family. Among these, the most frequent is obviously the loss of a male presence, due to death, divorce or migration. But it is also clear that there is a background of ancient traditions that may favour or contrast this female assumption of responsibility. In matrilinear and matrilocal regimes where the coresidence of the spouses is not an absolute rule, or where there is a widespread acceptance of premarital childbearing, it is easy 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 and levirate, where the women left on their own are generally received in the households of relatives.

Tab. 2 - Percent female headed household in several Sub-Saharan countries and in their main ethnic groups, by rural/urban residence

Ethnic Group	Total Ethnic Group	Urban Areas	Rural Areas
Mali, 2001	12.0	14.0	11.5
<i>Barbara</i>	9.0	13.6	7.4
<i>Peul</i>	9.7	12.8	8.1
<i>Sanakole/Soninke/Marka</i>	14.7	16.1	13.9
<i>Malike</i>	8.5	15.5	5.2
<i>Senufo/Minianka</i>	5.8	6.6	5.4
<i>Dogon</i>	7.2	11.8	6.0
<i>Sonrai</i>	13.0	15.0	11.8
<i>Bobo</i>	7.5	8.0	7.4
Niger, 1998	13.6	15.4	12.9
<i>Haoussa</i>	7.8	11.8	6.9
<i>Djerma</i>	14.6	10.9	16.0
<i>Tuareg</i>	9.0	10.2	8.8
<i>Peul</i>	12.5	16.3	11.3
Ghana, 2003	30.8	38.6	25.7
<i>Akan</i>	46.4	53.1	38.7
<i>Ewe</i>	36.0	37.7	34.8
<i>Mole-Dagani</i>	15.6	28.6	9.7
Benin, 2001	20.8	23.3	19.3
<i>Fon</i>	21.9	27.6	17.9
<i>Adja</i>	24.8	28.7	22.4
<i>Yoruba</i>	24.3	31.0	15.9
<i>Bariba</i>	13.5	17.6	11.0
<i>Peul</i>	6.5	22.2	4.8
Ethiopia, 2000	26.0	37.9	21.8
<i>Oromo</i>	19.0	37.7	16.1
<i>Amhara</i>	21.8	38.6	16.1
<i>Guraje</i>	28.9	26.2	29.9
<i>Tigray</i>	36.5	52.7	29.9
<i>Sdama</i>	19.6	0.0	19.6
Kenya, 2003	30.9	25.8	33.4
<i>Kikuyu</i>	36.6	33.9	37.9
<i>Luhia</i>	36.1	33.6	36.9
<i>Luo</i>	36.3	24.4	41.3
<i>Kamba</i>	42.7	38.1	43.9
<i>Kalenjin</i>	26.8	18.8	27.3
Zambia, 2001/2002	23.1	21.1	23.7
<i>Bemba</i>	21.1	20.9	21.4
<i>Tonga</i>	18.6	16.7	19.4
<i>Kewa</i>	20.6	22.9	19.8
<i>Lozi</i>	23.2	24.4	22.6
Namibia, 2000 <i>(Languages)</i>	39.3	38.6	39.7
<i>Damara>Nama</i>	54.0	58.2	46.8
<i>Oshiwambo</i>	50.9	47.2	52.4
<i>Herero</i>	53.3	63.0	43.2
<i>Kavango</i>	32.2	31.0	32.4

Source: DHS data, family files

Fig.2

Percent female headed households in the main ethnic groups of several Sub-Saharan countries - DHS – Years between 1998 and 2003

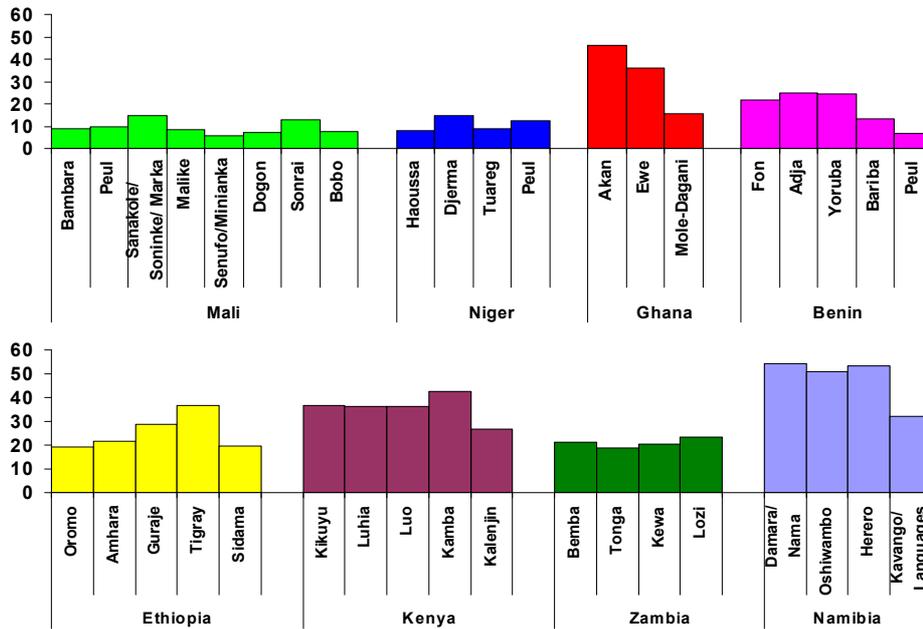
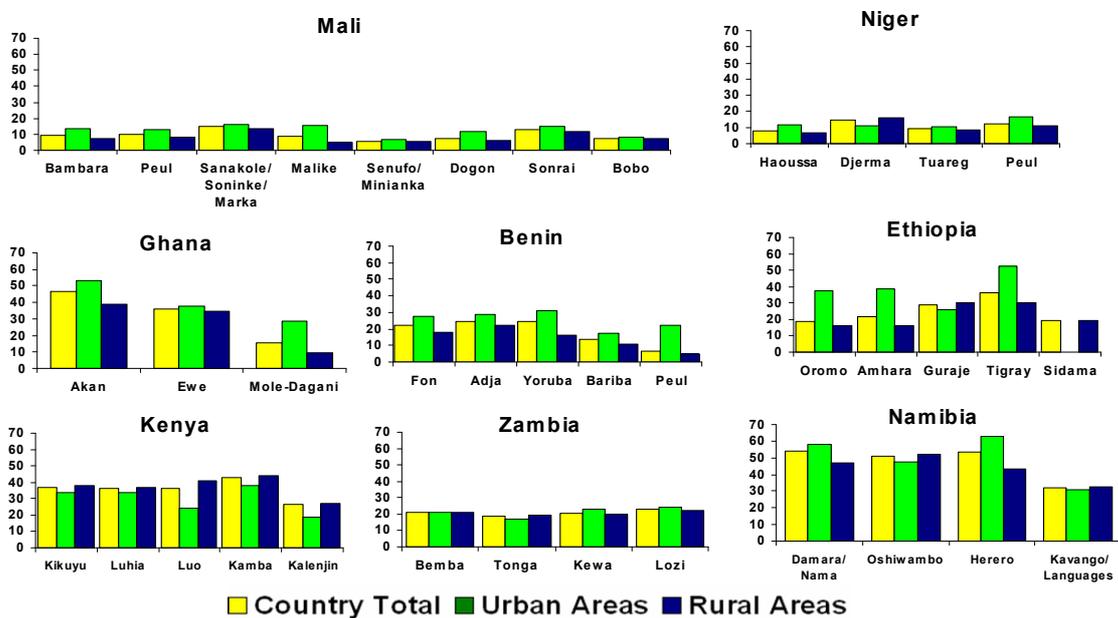


Fig.3

Percent female headed households in the main ethnic groups of several Sub-Saharan countries by rural/urban residence -DHS– Years between 1998 and 2003



As a consequence of all this (Tabs. 3-6) women heads of family are in many cases widowed, divorced or never married and the households headed by them are prevalently single-parent and non-nuclear households, but they host relatives more frequently than their male-headed counterparts. These relatives being 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.

Tab.3 - Marital status of women head of family, according to urban/rural residence

Current marital status	Mali 2001	Niger 1998	Ghana 2003	Benin 2001	Nigeria 2003	Ethiopia 2000	Kenya 2003	Rwanda 2000	Zambia 2001/2002	Namibia 2000
Country total										
Never married	1.4	2.2	10.6	9.0	19.0	5.5	11.9	8.3	10.7	36.2
Currently married	80.9	70.7	58.9	63.6	54.2	43.3	55.1	27.3	23.6	45.0
Widow	13.1	14.5	8.0	13.0	16.1	23.7	19.1	34.5	30.0	6.8
Sep/Divorced	4.5	12.7	22.6	14.4	10.6	27.5	13.9	29.8	35.7	12.0
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Urban areas										
Never married	3.3	10.9	13.7	10.2	24.9	14.6	29.7	11.5	11.6	40.1
Currently married	75.3	27.8	56.9	58.8	47.8	28.7	30.2	29.8	14.2	40.9
Widow	13.9	24.8	5.4	12.3	14.1	19.4	13.0	35.0	43.4	5.3
Sep/Divorced	7.5	36.4	23.9	18.7	13.3	37.4	27.1	23.7	30.7	13.6
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Rural Areas										
Never married	0.7	0.6	6.5	7.9	14.1	1.9	5.4	7.9	10.1	32.5
Currently married	83.2	78.6	61.6	68.2	59.7	49.1	64.2	26.9	29.4	48.9
Widow	12.8	12.6	11.3	13.7	17.9	25.5	21.3	34.4	21.6	8.1
Sep/Divorced	3.3	8.3	20.6	10.3	8.3	23.6	9.2	30.7	38.9	10.4
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: DHS data, women files

Tab. 4 - Marital status of women head of family, according to urban/rural residenceDHS data

Current Marital Status	Botswana 1988		Camerun 1991		Kenya 1989		Niger 1992		Nigeria 1990		Togo 1988	
	urb	rur	urb	rur	urb	rur	urb	rur	urb	rur	urb	rur
Never married	66.1	60.2	21.5	20.3	32.4	16.2	3.3	0.4	38.5	24.7	29.7	14.7
Currently married	21.1	28.5	40.9	48.2	44.9	68.9	20.0	29.2	38.1	34.5	50.4	65.4
Widowed	2.1	2.9	17.4	14.5	7.3	8.8	51.0	56.1	9.9	29.0	5.3	7.5
Sep/Divorced	10.8	8.3	20.2	17.0	15.5	6.1	25.7	14.4	13.5	11.7	14.6	12.4

Tab. 5 - Distribution of heads of family, according to current marital status, per sex : Ethiopia, Census 1994

Current Marital Status	Female Head			Male Head		
	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
Never married	1.7	8.8	3.3	2.6	12.9	2.6
Currently married	31.9	19.9	29.2	93.8	80.8	93.8
<i>of which: husband in the same household</i>	1.6	5.0	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>husband elsewhere</i>	30.6	14.9	26.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Divorced	20.7	36.9	24.1	1.8	3.9	2.1
Widowed	44.7	33.6	42.7	1.7	2.2	1.7
Not known	1.1	0.8	1.0	0.1	0.3	0.1
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Tab.6 Distribution of households by type, according to the sex of the head. Ethiopia Census 1994

Household Type	Sex of HH Head	
	M	F
Non-nuclear	6.6	27.9
Couple with or without children*	90.5	2.3
One-parent family*	2.8	69.8
Total	100.0	100.0

*With or without OR N

A question which is widely debated in the literature is whether the female headed families generally live in more straitened circumstances than those headed by men, as it is natural to expect if these are formed prevalently in conditions of *force majeure* owing to the temporary or definitive absence of the father/husband who in many societies represents the family's main source of income. However, in sub-Saharan countries the economic regimes regulating the relations between spouses and their respective obligations towards their children may be very varied and they are not always centred on the male figure of the breadwinner, especially in matrilineal regimes, where the main costs of bringing up the children are supported by the mother and her family. Moreover, the

assumption of the role of family head by women can, in some cases, have an emancipating effect. T. Locoh (a researcher with a wide experience of African demography) has repeatedly sustained the thesis that, at least in some cases, the formation of a family headed by a woman might be a free choice dictated by the desire for independence on the part of some women of higher social classes. She has stressed how the position of a non-coresident second or third wife of a polygamist might be advantageous for educated women with economic independence, because it would combine what is traditionally considered a respectable status with conditions of autonomy and independence. Unfortunately, in the examined countries the DHS data on the possession of goods and on the housing characteristics show a certain economic disadvantage for both rural and urban households headed by women (some indicators are shown in Tab.7). We can then see the lower educational level of women heads of family compared with that of the wives of male heads of family (Tab.8).

The differences, partly due to older mean age of female family heads, are nevertheless such as to suggest that even if some narrow female sectors express a desire for emancipation, this cannot emerge on a statistical aggregate level. Further and deeper examination is needed that focuses on this issue. In any case, the concern about the economic difficulties of woman headed families, and particularly of isolated mother-offspring groups, suggests a need for further investigation on the causes and consequences of the increase over time of these family forms.

According to a current opinion the proportion of female family heads has been growing all over sub-Saharan Africa in recent decades (Cfr. Adepoju and Mbogue, 1997). Our data confirm this view. An increasing trend is observed in all the five countries for which temporal series are available. There are also other indications that could be read in this sense, since female headship appears to be intensified by modern social dynamics. Development, urbanization, modernization, rural exodus, and ideational changes are all factors thought to give impetus to the phenomenon in many ways. However, the great diversities between ethnic groups also make it clear that different cultural backgrounds and different traditions concerning relations between spouses and their residential customs contribute strongly to determining the different levels of female family headship. In other words, the phenomenon is probably largely pre-existent to those processes of social evolution that are often thought to be its cause.

This observation is also supported by the greater frequency of female headed households in the ethnic groups with a matrilinear and matrilocal tradition in which the non-coresidence of spouses is widespread¹. In Ghana the Akan (of matrilinear lineage) and in Namibia the Oshiwambo (of matrilinear lineage and matrilocal residence) reach the maximum levels of non-coresidence, which involves respectively 36.8% and 29.2% of couples (59.1% and 36.3% in the case of polygamous marriages). In these same ethnic groups almost half the families are female headed. Between the two predominant ethnic groups of Ethiopia, the Amhara (matrilinear/bilateral) and the Oromo (patrilinear), there are greatly differing levels of non-coresidence only in the case of polygamous unions: 35.8% for the former and 18.8 for the latter. The proportions of female headed families is slightly but significantly higher among the Amhara (see the results of the logistic regression in Tab.9). All this is easy to understand if we consider that in the matrilinear, and even more so in matrilocal situations, when the husband is socially annexed to his wife's family, the coresidence of the spouses is difficult, and it becomes almost impossible in the case of polygamy, above all if, as occurs in some ethnic groups, the custom is to marry outside the village. When there is not coresidence between spouses it is certainly easier for the woman to take on the role of family head, even if she is married. In some cases, polygamy can also become a factor positively related to the frequency of female headship of families. These considerations show the interaction of the cultural heritage and "modernization" factors in shaping family evolutions.

¹ The real meaning of the concept of "non-coresidence" is linked to various factors; these include the configuration of the habitat, both urban and rural, and the statistical definitions adopted.

Tab.7 Proportion of household disposing of particular facilities, according to sex of the head of the household and rural/urban residence, in selected Sub-Saharan countries –DHS data

Sex of the head	Mali 2001	Niger 1998	Ghana 2003	Benin 2001	Nigeria 2003	Ethiopia 2000	Kenya 2003	Rwanda 2000	Zambia 2001/2002	Namibia 2000
	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH	HH
Country Total										
Piped water into dwelling/yard/plot										
Man	27.9	28.1	12.6	60.5	15.1	0.8	22.4	34.9	38.2	79.2
Woman	19.2	17.8	11.4	71.2	12.2	0.7	20.2	28.5	32.9	75.8
TV										
Man	44.1	27.4	51.7	35.4	56.7	24.2	41.9	20.3	49.2	58.2
Woman	31.5	13.4	36.1	25.4	39.4	17.1	35.6	8.0	30.1	54.3
Urban Areas										
Piped water into dwelling/yard/plot										
Man	2.0	0.2	0.8	11.2	2.2	0.0	3.9	1.0	2.7	34.6
Woman	2.1	0.2	0.9	17.9	2.8	0.0	4.1	0.6	1.2	19.5
TV										
Man	4.4	0.5	9.3	5.7	15.9	0.0	13.4	0.3	4.2	14.2
Woman	2.6	0.2	7.3	3.3	11.5	0.0	9.9	0.2	0.8	7.2
Rural Areas										
Piped water into dwelling/yard/plot										
Man	7.8	7.8	5.0	28.0	7.3	0.2	10.6	8.8	13.0	54.0
Woman	6.6	5.7	6.2	39.0	7.1	0.3	8.7	5.5	9.4	43.5
TV										
Man	13.2	7.8	25.4	15.8	31.9	5.2	23.7	4.9	17.2	33.4
Woman	10.2	4.3	21.7	12.1	24.3	6.4	17.2	1.6	8.4	27.2

Tab. 8 Percent distribution of female head of household and of wives of the male head of household by level of education, according to the urban/rural residence, in selected Sub-Saharan countries –DHS data

Level of education	Mali 2001		Niger 1998		Ghana 2003		Benin 2001		Nigeria 2003		Ethiopia 2000		Kenya 2003		Rwanda 2000		Zambia 2001/2002		Namibia 2000		
	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	HH	Wives	
No education	74.1	63.9	79.4	67.4	36.7	30.7	53.9	57.2	48.7	41.6	59.2	45.7	21.8	12.5	32.9	14.3	16.2	6.7	12.7	8.7	
Primary	10.3	16.8	13.5	18.9	14.1	13.1	27.9	25.4	18.2	22.8	18.7	22.7	32.9	40.2	40.0	48.1	46.1	49.9	32.2	23.3	
Sec/Higher	14.4	18.3	6.4	13.4	49.2	56.1	17.9	27.2	33.1	35.5	22.1	31.6	44.6	47.3	27.0	37.6	37.6	43.3	54.6	67.5	
Urban Areas																					
No education	93.5	92.9	95.0	94.6	54.2	64.3	85.1	86.9	64.7	65.2	94.0	91.5	43.2	30.2	61.4	46.7	45.1	26.6	38.9	34.3	
Primary	5.0	6.2	4.4	4.8	19.2	15.3	11.5	10.6	18.9	20.0	4.5	7.5	44.0	53.1	35.9	49.5	46.6	63.2	39.1	40.2	
Sec/Higher	1.6	0.8	0.6	0.6	26.6	20.4	3.0	2.5	16.4	14.8	1.4	0.9	12.4	16.5	2.6	3.8	8.1	10.2	21.8	24.9	
Rural Areas																					

4. Determinants of the spreading of female single-parent household.

In understanding the present evolution of the family, the descriptive analyses carried out so far are insufficient to make it possible to disentangle the respective weight of tradition and cultural background on one side and that of the ongoing historical processes on the other. For this purpose, it is necessary to define a model which facilitates the investigation of the respective impact of both factors, also taking into consideration the effect of other individual variables (age, education, and economic status of woman) which could produce confusing effects, and conceal the relationships which we are interested in here.

This part of the analysis has been placed at a micro-level, utilizing DHS-Women data sets. Specifically we want to verify the hypothesis that the probability for woman to become head of single-parent households (dependent variable) is significantly influenced by ethnicity – considered as a proxy for cultural background - and that the impact of this factor can be as important as that of the type of residence, considering the opposition between rural and urban situations as a way of summarizing the impact of the ongoing social changes.

The analytical procedure is developed in three steps. In the first step age, education and socio-economic status of women were identified as the variables to include in the model, along with ethnicity and residence. As the numerous variables available with regard to the economic condition of women were not significant if taken individually, we summarized them by means of a multiple correspondence analysis. The active variables were basically those relating to housing conditions and goods' possession. The modalities of several individual variables were then projected into the factorial space in order to better interpret the meaning of the new dimensions identified. The first dimension resulting from the multiple correspondence analysis was adopted as a synthetic indicator of economic status.

At the second step, a method of recursive partitioning was used to explore the data structure. Classification trees were constructed using proportion of women heads of one-parent households as class variable, and residence, ethnicity, age, education and socio-economic status as explanatory variables. At the third step of the analysis, logistic regression models were fitted to data using the same dependent and explanatory variables, in order to establish the predicting value of each explanatory variable with respect to the category of outcome for individual cases, and to provide knowledge of the relationships and reciprocal strengths among determinants. To facilitate the interpretation of the findings, the results of the logistic models are presented as odd ratios, calculated by exponentiating the coefficients.

The whole procedure was performed distinctly for the three countries - Ethiopia, Ghana and Namibia – with the highest proportion of female single-parent households in their respective geographical area. The results of classification trees are presented in Figs. 10-12 and those of logistic regression in Tab. 14. They reveal complex and varied situations. The variables in the models interweave in such a way as to present both aspects that are similar in the three countries and distinctive traits that are specific to each of them.

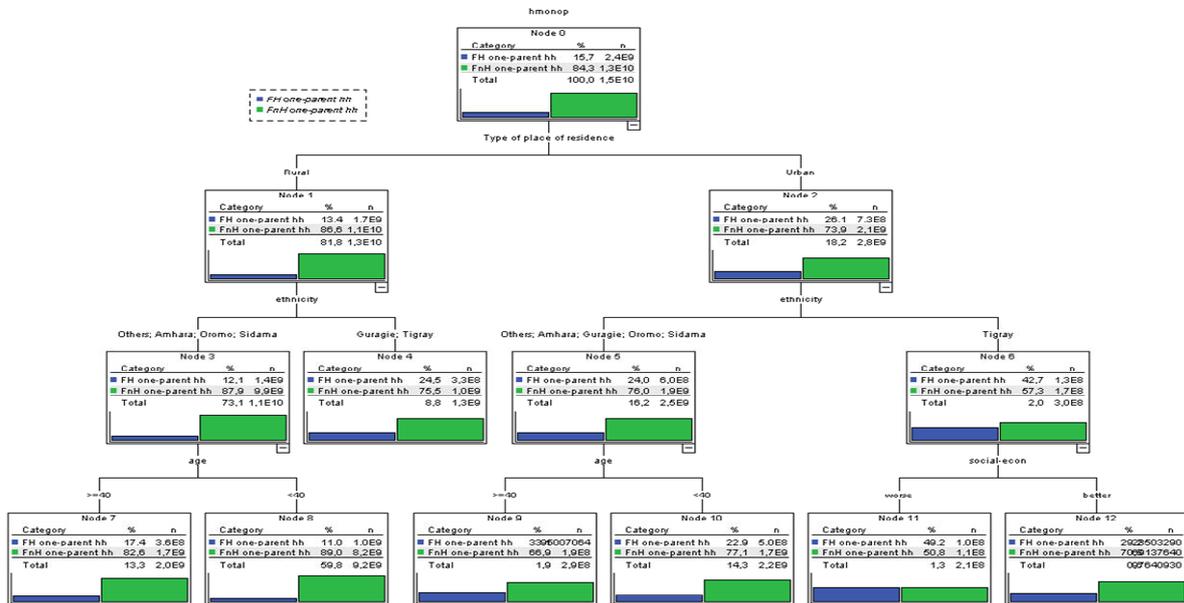
Tab. 9 b coefficients, odds ratios and confidence intervals for logistic regression on the coefficients, odds ratios and confidence intervals for logistic regression on the proportion of female headed one-parent household

Independent Variables		B*	Odds ratio	Confidence Interval (95,0%)
Ethiopia, 2000				
Ethnicity	Tigray	0.184	2.755	2.754-2.755
	Guragje	0.515	1.673	1.673-1.674
	Amhara	1.013	1.202	1.201-1.202
	Sidama	0.054	1.056	1.055-1.056
	Other	0.016	1.016	1.016-1.016
	Oromo (ref.)		1	
Residence	Urban	0.710	2.034	2.034-2.035
	Rural (ref.)		1	
Age	≥ 40	0.562	1.755	1.755-1.755
	<40(ref.)		1	
Education	Secondary/High	0.298	1.334	1.333-1.334
	Primary	0.288	1.348	1.347-1.348
	None (ref.)		1	
Socioecon. conditions	Worse	0.237	1.268	1.267-1.268
	Better (ref.)		1	
Ghana, 2003				
Ethnicity	Akan	1.123	3.074	3.073-3.075
	Ewe	0.668	1.951	1.951-1.952
	Other	0.599	1.821	1.820-1.821
	Mole-Dagbani(ref.)		1	
Residence	Urban	0.797	2.219	2.219-2.220
	Rural (ref.)		1	
Age	≥ 40	0.328	1.388	1.388-1.389
	<40(ref.)		1	
Education	Secondary/High	0.514	1.672	1.672-1.672
	Primary	0.437	1.548	1.548-1.548
	None (ref.)		1	
Socioecon. Conditions	Worse	0.689	1.992	1.992-1.992
	Better (ref.)		1	
Namibia, 2000				
Ethnicity	Herero	0.748	2.113	2.112-2.113
	Damara>Nama	0.647	1.910	1.909-1.910
	Oshiwambo	0.631	1.880	1.880-1.881
	Others	0.263	1.300	1.300-1.301
	Kavango (ref.)		1	
Residence	Urban	-0.228	0.796	0.796-0.797
	Rural (ref.)		1	
Age	≥ 40	0.199	1.220	1.220-1.220
	< 40 (ref.)		1	
Education	Secondary/High	0.541	1.961	1.961-1.961
	Primary	0.673	1.717	1.717-1.717
	None (ref.)		1	
Socioecon. conditions	Worse	0.207	1.230	1.230-1.231
	Better (ref.)		1	
* All b coefficients are highly significant				

Ethiopia: The binary tree built for Ethiopia produced seven leaves, identifying subgroups where the percentage of women heading one-parent households is more homogeneous.

Fig.4

C&RT Classification Tree of female heads of one-parent household in Ethiopia
Independent variables: age, ethnicity, type of place of residence, education, social- economical conditions



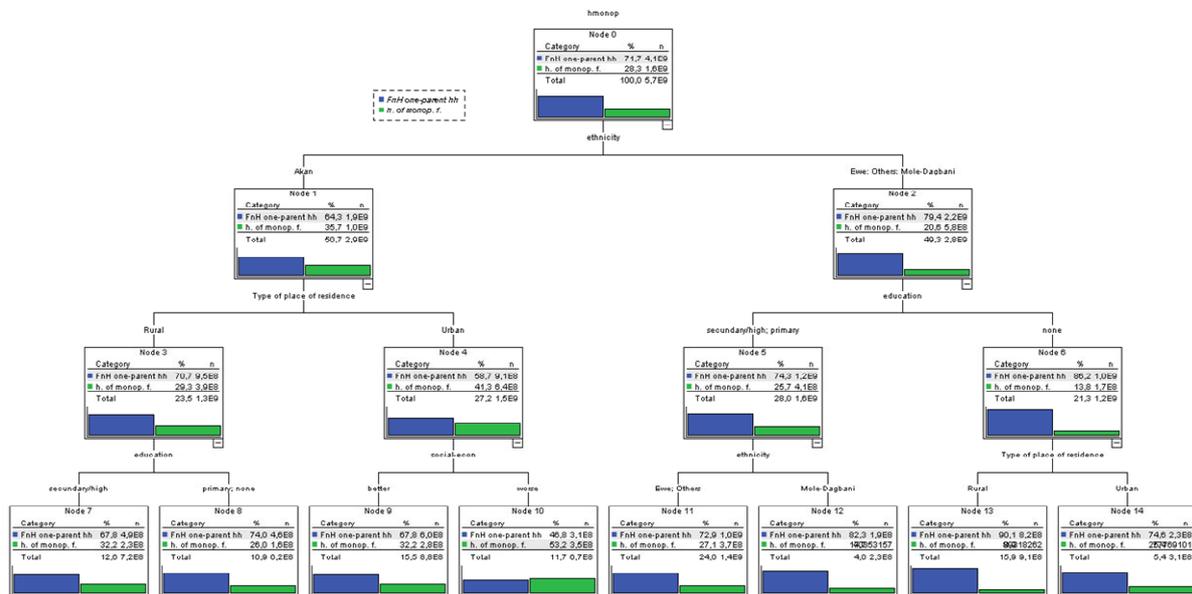
The variable at the basis of the partitioning process is rural/urban residence; immediately after comes the factor of ethnicity, and only at this point are the effects felt of variables such as age and economic conditions which act as expected: older women in worse economic conditions are most often found in the role of family head. The educational level does not play any role. The subgroup where the dependent variable reaches the highest value is that of Tigray women residing in towns in the worst economic conditions, almost half of whom are the family head of single-parent households. At the opposite extreme the rural young women of other ethnic groups are found. At an intermediate level the Guraje women are found, more than a quarter of whom both in the urban and rural areas are single-parent family heads.

Logistic regression confirms that all the explanatory variables are highly significant. Ethnicity and residence are the principal predictive factors, together with the woman's age – a variable which obviously has only a structural meaning. For the Tigray women the “risk” of becoming a single-parent family head is almost three times that of the base category (Oromo group). Economic conditions and educational level reveal a more modest predictive power, which nevertheless is striking for an apparent anomaly: the probability of becoming a single-parent family head falls with the improvement of economic conditions, but rises with the educational level. This is a very interesting result which may indicate the existence of a modest phenomenon of emancipation, according to the hypothesis suggested by Locoh.

Ghana: In Ghana eight leaves are produced by the classification tree. In this case ethnicity is the most important variable in determining the structure of the data.

Fig.5

C&RT Classification Tree of female heads of one-parent household in Ghana
Independent variables: age, ethnicity, type of place of residence, education, social- economical conditions



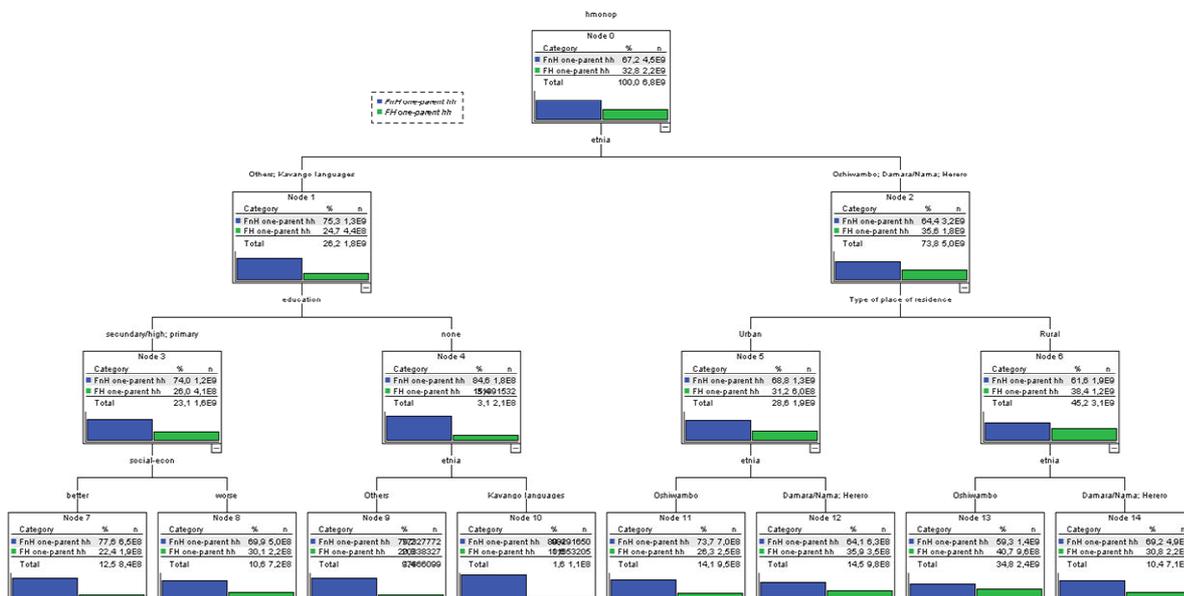
The first subdivision isolates the Akan, among whom some 36% of the women are heads of single-parent families. The Akan are then subdivided on the basis of residence, while the other ethnic groups are subdivided according to educational level. Only at this point do the economic conditions play a role, splitting the urban resident Akan woman in the two groups of the better and worse off : 53% of single-parent family heads are observed in the latter category. It is confirmed that the role of education is the reverse of that of economic conditions.

Logistic regression found relationships between variables that are similar to those observed in Ethiopia. Also in this case ethnicity and residence are the main determinants of the dependent variable. An Akan woman is three times more probable than a Mole/Dagbani to become the head of a single-parent family; for an urban woman it is twice as probable than for a rural one. Economic conditions and educational level have a greater impact than they do in Ethiopia, but in the same direction, while age has a more limited effect.

Namibia: In Namibia, as in Ghana, eight leaves are produced. The variable at the basis of the partitioning process is ethnicity.

Fig.6

C&RT Classification Tree of female heads of one-parent household in Namibia
Independent variables: age, ethnicity, type of place of residence, education, social- economical conditions



Education and residence take the second place, for the Kavango speaking group and for the other ethnic groups respectively. At the third level, the partitioning of the educated Kavango speaking women is according to socio-economic status, which also in this case acts in the opposite sense to educational level. As regards the logistic regression, Namibia is distinguished from the other countries because the effect of rural/urban residence is not only less important, but also acts in the opposite direction: the probability of urban women becoming single-parent family heads is 20% lower than that of their rural counterparts. In this country the two most predictive variables are ethnic background and educational level.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be taken as proved that the point of view of ethnicity always provides highly clarifying contributions, which are connected to cultural contexts and lifestyles of the populations examined. The role of type of residence is important, but varies according to the characteristics of rural-urban migrations and of nuptiality and marital disruption. Where it is especially men who migrate to towns, the phenomenon of “women left behind” is produced, with a consequent growth in the number of female headed rural households, particularly marked in cultural contexts where women in this position are more easily accepted. Where the greater fragility of urban marriages is combined with few and not immediate new unions for divorcees and widows, there is an accumulation of one-parent households with female heads in urban contexts. Where pre-marital childbearing is traditionally accepted or tolerated urban/rural differentials are generally modest.

The contrasting action of two lifestyle related factors – socio-economic conditions and educational level – suggests that there may effectively be two aspects in the increasing number of female family heads: one – involving free choice for reasons of autonomy and independence – concerning very limited sectors of educated women belonging to ethnic groups that traditionally assign the women non-secondary roles; another – much more widespread everywhere –

corresponding to various situations of *force majeure*, often involving inferior economic conditions, but not necessarily isolation, because in fact the family management is often guaranteed collectively by groups of more or less closely related women.

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