

Households headed by women: all poor and vulnerable? The case of south eastern Madagascar

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, the number of households headed by women has increased both in northern and southern societies. Various factors have contributed to this phenomenon: wars and conflicts, male migration, marital instability and family disruption, unpartnered adolescent fertility...

According to several studies, households headed by women have specific characteristics compared to households headed by men. They often have an unfavorable demographic structure linked to a greater proportion of dependents (inactive members, young children) for instance (reference). In fact, lone-mother households, who often represent the vast majority of this category of households, are indeed characterized by the absence of a second breadwinner. The existence of gender inequalities faced by women also disadvantages the households they are heading by limiting access to crucial resources regarding the well-being of the household (land, wages, credit, social network ...). Moreover, the frequently observed over-representation of households headed by women among the poorest led to consider them as more deprived or more vulnerable compared to households headed by men. Beyond the goal of eliminating gender disparities which harm the welfare of these households, there is also a concern on intergenerational transmission of deprivation and vulnerability. Children from these households can be disadvantaged in terms of human capital accumulation. The need to target households headed by women with specific public policy has thus been raised and put into practice in some countries. However, classifying households headed by women as the poorest of the poor and as the most vulnerable has led to controversy. Some studies showed that this common assumption is not enough justified empirically. Other factors other than the gender of household head matter.

This paper aims to identify whether there is a possible heterogeneity of situations within the group of households headed by women and if that is the case, to develop a typology of this particular category of households. We use original data collected in rural observatories that allow us to compare different aspects of well-being of rural households and monitor their situation over time. These data are particularly relevant to analyze the vulnerability of sub-groups of households. The two selected

observatories are located in the Southeastern region of Madagascar, a geographical area where a relatively high incidence of households headed by women is observed. The identification of differences between types of households headed by women, along with differences with households headed by men, would help to improve public policy and anti-poverty strategies through a better targeting. Preliminary results have shown the existence of a subgroup of households headed by women that belong to the wealthier households and those who are better off in terms of agricultural production and food security. The results related to land ownership in particular suggest that there is a superposition of inequalities (social inequalities and gender inequalities) that can lead to various situations of households headed by women in terms of poverty and vulnerability.

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