

2006 POPULATION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA MEETING

**“Female Headship: Comparing Peruvian and Vietnamese Households”**

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## INTROUCTION

Traditional household models and gender ideology theories assign older males as the household head. These theories assume that men are the family's main income providers, granting them greater decision power, and thus, the implicit household head responsibility (Lampietti, 2000). Nevertheless, recent demographic changes such as increases in female/maternal labor force participation, divorce rates, ideological changes, and growing male unemployment rates have raised questions about the accuracy of assuming males as the household head. These changes have affected not only household composition, but also the household members' breadwinner roles. Although mostly receiving attention in Western industrialized nations as a consequence of changes in non-marital childbearing and marital disruption, increasing numbers of female headed households are a demographic reality for many societies, including lower-income countries.

Although these changes have been observed across all countries, specific cultural and macro-economic conditions are likely to shape these female headed households' economic, overall well-being conditions, and vulnerability. More specifically, lower-income countries such as Vietnam and Peru face large inequality and poverty levels. Both these countries have also experienced significant recent economic growth and have high rates of women's labor force participation. However, it appears that women heading households in these countries face unique individual, family/household, and contextual issues.

Vietnamese households are commonly single-family units, whereas Peruvian households, particularly those in urban areas, are multi-family units. Additionally,

Vietnam's economy, which was previous centrally planned economy, has implemented large poverty reduction efforts since its transition to a market-based system. On the contrary, Peru's social policies and implementations have been largely unstable, scarce, and have focused on temporarily alleviating short-term extreme poverty. Clearly, these differences shape all, and particularly those headed by women, households' workforce participation decisions, household structure, capacity to cope and to overcome unexpected negative shocks as well as long term poverty, and their overall well-being. Utilizing the 1998/1997 and 2002/2000 Living Standards and Measurement Survey (LSMS) and 2002 Young Lives surveys from Vietnam and Peru, this investigation aims at analyzing differences between Peruvian and Vietnamese female headed households, exploring alternative household head definitions. In addition, differences regarding coping strategies and overall well-being levels are also investigated.

Investigations have proposed different definitions describing the household head concept. Although these definitions could potentially describe the same individual within the household, they could as well be identifying very different household members. Conventionally, the household head is the dominant earner and decision maker who has regular presence in the household (Lampietti, 2000; Rosenhouse, 1994; Varley, 1996). A second definition, widely utilized in surveys and censuses, is the person recognized by other household members as the head (Rosenhouse, 1994). More recently, studies have defined the household head as the person working the greater number of hours in the household (Lampietti, 2000).

Researchers need to be cautious when generalizing conclusions that could lead to stigmatization of female headed households. Commonly, these households have been

linked to single mothers with young children. However, this narrow classification overlooks the significant diversity of women headed households. Indeed, despite the common belief that female headed households are always more disadvantaged and vulnerable, studies present a different picture. Evidence indicates that Vietnamese female headed households show better overall conditions than male headed households (Tuan et al., 2003). Similarly, investigations indicate that Peruvian female headed households are less vulnerable to external shocks (Glewwe, 1998).

Narrowing our understanding of female headed households' actual economic and social conditions could bias policy designs and implementations. Additionally, understanding country differences between Peru and Vietnam directly affecting these households' cultural differences, family-household structure/composition, coping strategies, external support network access, and household head characteristics provides valuable information for developing more effective poverty alleviation programs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Traditionally, women-headed households have been considered a highly disadvantaged and vulnerable group. These households are perceived as more likely to be poor, have non-traditional family structures, have unmarried household heads, have greater proportion of dependents, and face greater vulnerability and chronic poverty. Although some of these characteristics are generally valid across different contexts, countries, and cultures, studies analyzing these women-headed households should be aware of certain issues. First, the lack of consensus regarding the household head definition affects potential inferences and conclusions concerning female-headed households' behaviors (Chant, 2003; Rosenhouse, 1994; Varley, 1996). This issue is

particularly important for policy design and implementation's development. Second, female-headed households are likely to behave and respond differently to (external and internal) changes depending on their government, community, and extended family's economic and social support availability (Buvinic, Valenzuela, Molina, & Gonzales, 1992).

Initially, the concept of household head was used in surveys and censuses to reduce problems of double counting household members.[provide example to explain this a little more] As a result, survey managers started to define a household head as the person who other household members recognize as the head (Rosenhouse, 1994). Another commonly utilized household head definition is the single or dominant earner and decision maker, who has regular presence in the household (Lampietti, 2000; Rosenhouse, 1994; Varley, 1996). Despite its wide utilization, this definition presents some problems because in many cases there is no one sole person who actually fulfills all these roles in the household (Lampietti, 2000).

Alternative definitions are elaborated for solving this dilemma. Rosenhouse (1994) proposes a working/economic household head definition, possibly more functional for policy design purposes. Using the actual number of hours worked, this definition controls for potential cultural biases that would lead to reporting the oldest men as the default household head (Lampietti, 2000). Also, it controls for labor returns and social discrimination against women, capturing the actual poverty and well-being status of these households (Varley, 1996). In addition, it reduces the large variability among self-reported female head characteristics (*e.g.* family size, age, marital status, and education) (Lampietti, 2000; Varley, 1996).

Nevertheless, even though the working head definition can be useful for policy design purposes, several problems can be found. Varley (1996) states that this definition marginalizes certain women who might have greater disadvantages in the labor market, networking, and decision making capacity within the household. This could even lead to the stigmatization of female-headed households. In addition, Lampietti and Stalker (2000) argue that using this definition without considering *de jure* (*i.e.* no male partner present, and has no role supporting the household) and *de facto* (*i.e.* no male partner present, but has a role supporting the household) presence of male partners might bias certain results. This issue is important particularly during periods of economic crises when migration processes are higher.

Unfortunately, few studies have analyzed differences between these various female head definitions, and the different pictures that emerge about female headed households depending on the definition used. Utilizing particular definitions could lead to different conclusions, and hence poor policy designs aimed at improving female headed households' capacities to cope with unexpected shocks. Although in some cases, all the definitions could describe one sole person, they mostly identify different household members.

Using data from the 1985/86LSMS Rosenhouse (1994) shows differences between self-reported and working head female-headed households. Although male-headed households are the majority using both definitions, the proportion of female-headed households is greater when the working head classification is used. In addition, female working heads are less likely to be widows, and more likely to be married and younger than reported heads. Compared to male heads, they have smaller families but

more dependents, they are more likely to work in the informal sector, and more likely to live in multi-generational households with multiple earners. Also, when including housework hours, female heads supply 17 more working hours per month than male heads.

Regarding poverty and well-being characteristics, Rosenhouse (1994) finds that Peruvian female-headed households' per capita expenditures are lower than men-headed households'. However, despite greater female market disadvantages, these differences are small. These women-headed households are more likely to have multiple earners, potentially compensating for these disadvantages.

Additional studies present similar finding using the self-reported head definition. Using a 1985/86-1990 Peruvian LSMS data panel, Glewwe and Hall (1998) show that female-headed households are actually no more vulnerable to macroeconomic shocks than men-headed households. Although Peruvian women-headed households are more likely to be poor and their government-based social support is minimal, these households are more likely to receive community and extended family transfers during critical economic periods (Alderman, 2003; Glewwe, 1998).

Similar results using more recent LSMSs are observed utilizing the 1994-1997 LSMS panel data. Ilani (2001) shows that Peruvian female-headed households cope with exogenous macroeconomic shock increasing both male and female household members' labor market participation. Male-headed households are less likely to increase male members' work participation under these circumstances (Ilani, 2001).

Although also largely at risk, Vietnamese households headed by women show different family structures, cultural/ideological, and political/policy contexts.

Vietnamese women-headed households are more likely to live in single-family units and to have fewer children than Peruvian families<sup>1</sup> (FAO & UNDP, 2002; Tuan et al., 2003). Evidence indicates that 71 percent of Vietnamese households are nuclear-family units. Although males are more likely to be identified as household heads, numbers show that 26 percent of households report being headed by women (FAO & UNDP, 2002).<sup>2</sup>

Vietnamese female heads are typically less disadvantaged than the average population, reside in urban areas, have fewer young children, and potentially greater access to government social support (compared to those living in Peru). These characteristics seem to contradict conventional beliefs regarding the feminization of poverty. Nevertheless, it is critical to acknowledge the large variation within the female head group. Female heads range from widows, single parent families, and married women with and without co-resident partners. Unfortunately, few studies have analyzed these various groups separately, despite their significant differences, particularly regarding their access to social support programs in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

These results suggest that female heads' poverty problems are less severe than initially argued. Nevertheless, these households are still at high risk of experiencing poverty. This issue is particularly important as numbers of female-headed households are rapidly increasing, potentially raising not only poverty, but also income distribution inequality levels (Lampietti, 2000; Varley, 1996).

However, it is also important to be cautious about stigmatizing female headship when designing policies targeting female-headed household. Economic hardship and

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<sup>1</sup> Smaller Vietnamese families are a consequence of fertility policy regulations that limited families to have no more than 2 children.

<sup>2</sup> A great majority of these households' heads are, however, widows (44 percent) (FAO & UNDP, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Particularly widows are likely to receive priority support from the government.



vulnerability issues are mostly emphasized when exploring female-headed households' conditions. Non-financial gains associated with greater independence, economic self-sufficiency, and emotional empowerment are typically overlooked (Chant, 2003). These factors clearly affect the household's overall well-being and resource allocations. Indeed, even though women-headed households are more likely to have fewer total resources, they are more likely to invest these resources in direct expenses, most likely on children, basic food, clothing and housing.<sup>4</sup>

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Comparing Vietnamese and Peruvian populations, this study aims at identifying different characteristics, overall well-being, and coping strategies, utilizing alternative female household head definitions. Three main household head definitions are used in this investigation: (i) person recognized by other household members as the head, (ii) person working the greater number of hours in the household, (iii) dominant earner who has regular presence in the household. Two factors are particularly examined, (i) household composition (single vs. multi-family units) and (ii) access to social programs (substantial vs. scarce/unstable). These differences are likely to shape mothers' workforce participation, easy access to safety nets, solving capacities, and general welfare. Specifically, the following hypotheses are tested:

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Chant (2003) presents a list of positive and negative factors associated with targeting women-headed households as "the poorest of the poor". Negative factors include historical and academic literature associating of female headship with poverty, use of aggregated rather than per capita income for determining poverty, assuming female head as the only household breadwinner, and absence of additional economic support from non-present spouse. Positive factors include securing public resources for women, covering a large proportion of poor households, and reducing potential poverty problems transferring economic support to children.

- All female household head definitions are more likely to identify the same household member in the Vietnamese population than in the Peruvian population. Peruvian households' multi-family unit structure increases the possibility of assigning the household head role to the older male in the household.
- Female headed households classified as single-family units are likely to perform better in Vietnam than in Peru. On the contrary, those categorized as multi-family units are likely to perform better in Peru than in Vietnam. Vietnamese single-family households are more likely to receive government support as a major external assistance source. Peruvian multi-family households are more likely to rely on family-based aid for coping with negative shocks.

Descriptive and regression analyses are utilized to test these hypotheses. Several dependent variables are explored as proxies for household well-being. These variables include financial/poverty situation, social capital access, female head labor force participation, and responses/strategies utilized/planned after facing a negative external shock. Maximum likelihood categorical models are estimated.

This investigation utilizes two main information sources for developing analyses and comparison between countries and over time. The first datasets are 1997/1998 and 2000/2002 Living Standard Measurement Surveys (LSMS), and the second data sources are the 2002 Young Lives Project Surveys (YLPS). These information sources have been purposely designed for developing comparative studies, as part of the World Bank and

Save the Children's projects, respectively. Also, an additional advantage of these datasets is their potential for producing longitudinal analyses.<sup>5</sup>

The LSMSs are national representative household surveys. Their unit of analysis is the household, collecting household, family, and individual level characteristics. Surveys include demographic, health, education, social program access/utilization, and labor force participation information from all household members. Additionally, the Vietnamese 1998 and 2002 LSMS surveys and the Peruvian 1997 and 2000 LSMS surveys were designed to have a panel component. Follow-up surveys were conducted to individuals interviewed during the previous data collection and who were still living in the same household. In addition to this basic design, the Vietnamese LSMS also interviewed individuals who had moved short distances between interviews.<sup>6</sup> Although attrition problems led to potentially under-representative panel samples, they still provide valuable information for analyzing macro-changes over time (Falaris, 2003).

**Living Standard Measurement Surveys: Vietnam and Peru**  
**Sample Size by Years**

Year	Vietnam		Peru	
	1998	2002	1997	2000
Sample size: Households	6,000	5,994	3,843	3,977

The 2002 YLPSs' sample include a main cohort of poor children aged 6 to 17.9 months (labeled "one-year olds") from four participant countries, Ethiopia, India, Peru,<sup>7</sup> and Vietnam. The YLP is a 15 years longitudinal study with data collections occurring

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the Young Lives Project has only collected their first round of interviews. The second round is scheduled for October-December 2006.

<sup>6</sup> This additional effort was possible given that the Vietnamese government restricts all citizens from moving outside their villages or urban clusters without explicit permission from the government (Falaris, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> This project is know in Peru as Niños del Milenio (Children of the Millennium).

every three to four years, aimed at understanding causes and consequences of child poverty. Participant children were selected from 20 sentinel sites specifically defined in each country, aiming at gathering randomly selected nationally representative samples of children living in poor areas. The 2002 Vietnamese sample includes 2,000 one-year old children and the Peruvian sample 2,052 participant children.

In addition to collecting typical demographic, health status, socioeconomic, income and employment, and infrastructure variables, YLPSs gather psychological (*e.g.* depression and anxiety symptoms, child's behavioral problems, domestic violence) and sociological (*e.g.* social capital) information. Indeed, this is the first study to gather detailed and comprehensive data at the national level regarding psychological (*e.g.* depression and anxiety symptoms, child's temperament, domestic violence), and sociological (*e.g.* social capital) characteristics. Additionally, although this feature does not directly affect this particular study, it is worth noting that the YLP project is the first attempt to collect longitudinal and comparative data for nationally representative samples.