

Gender asymmetries in household headship

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Abstract

Censuses and surveys predominantly report men as heads of households despite women carrying out the majority of domestic and care work. Recent evidence, however, shows that an increasing number of households are headed by women today. Using data from the newly released CORESIDENCE database, which includes over 770 data points from 155 countries worldwide spanning from 1960 to 2021, this study presents the first global map of female household headship, traces its recent evolution, and compares female-headed households with male-headed ones based on household size and composition. The results confirm the widespread increase in female household headship in virtually all world regions and demonstrate a growing gender symmetry between households headed by women and men. Nevertheless, significant cross-national differences persist, and changes are not uniform across all regions. We discuss the potential factors behind these transformations and consider their implications for research and gender equality.

Introduction

Household-based censuses and surveys commonly designate a reference person or head of household to establish kinship or non-kinship relationships among its members (Bruce and Lloyd 1997; Budlender 2003). In most cases, men (fathers or senior adult males) occupy this position (Biddlecom and Kramarow 1998; Chant 1998). Gender norms primarily drive the dominance of male household headship, rather than operational reasons that would make men more suitable reference points for reconstructing intra-household relationships than women. As a result of these practices, the number of households headed by women tend to be those with few or no adult men and are typically associated with single motherhood or widowhood (Chant 1997). Nevertheless, this is changing. Data from the most recent available censuses and household surveys show that female headship is on the rise across the globe.

In this paper, we investigate the widespread growth in female household headship and compare the diversity in forms and characteristics between male and female-headed households based on household size and composition. We use the recently harmonized household data from the CORESIDENCE database, which derives from population censuses and surveys from 155 countries worldwide. Is the rise of female headship a widespread

phenomenon? How have rates of female headship varied across time? What are the characteristics of female-headed households compared to male-headed ones? How have differences between them evolved in recent decades? Are they converging? The spatial and temporal depth of the paper, along with its comparative approach, aims to shed light on the position of women in the household, the erosion (or not) of gender asymmetries within households, and the implications for research on the rise and changing characteristics of female-headed households.

Background

Across societies, men head the majority of households despite women doing most of the unpaid domestic and care labor in the home. Identifying a head of the household or reference person remains a central feature of censuses and surveys. It is used to avoid duplicating those enumerated and to determine the family or non-family interrelationships between household members. The availability of such data enables studying headship as an indicator of gender (a)symmetry in the household and how it may be changing at different paces and degrees over the decades. For practical reasons, the head of the household is an adult person with a central position in the household. There is no obstacle, technically speaking, to appoint women as heads. In fact, with only a few exceptions, censuses and surveys often leave open to household members to decide who to recognize as the head of the household (see Appendix 1 and later discussion in the Data section for details on the definitions of head of household). Thus, under these criteria, the common practice of consistently appointing men and omitting women in this role, even though women typically serve as “convenient” questionnaire respondents (Tivers 1978), is just another reflection of how they hold different positions in and out of the household (Chant 2020; Folbre 1986; Moser 1993; 1989). Such bias towards men does not result from a simple statistical reason or a random selection among adult members in the household. It represents a structural gender asymmetry derived from long standing and socially constructed gender norms, stereotypes and relations rooted in a broader patriarchal regime of male power that has historically subordinated women (Ferree 1990; 2010). If selecting a head among the adult household members was random, the number of women heads of household would be much higher and reach the fifty per cent threshold in most countries. Furthermore, from an operational perspective, it is essential to challenge the idea that men inherently facilitate data collection and interpretation of households’ interrelationships. While this assumption could be valid in regions with polygyny (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa), these situations are limited to a minority of countries, and the prevalence of such practices appears to be declining (Tabutin and Schoumaker 2004).

Despite the prevalence of men as heads, the incidence of households headed by women seems to be changing: female-headed households are rising at global and regional levels. Historically, this type of households was associated with non-nuclear coresidential units with permanently absent adult men due to divorce, separation or widowhood (Chant and McIlwaine 1998; Moser 1989; Rosenhouse 1989). These were known as *de jure* female-headed households. *De facto* female-headed households, in contrast, were those in which men were absent during long term periods due to gender-selective migration or refugee status (Moser 1989). That has generated a broad literature on the material conditions, social vulnerability and precarity of female-headed households, and their implications for the welfare of children (Buvinić and Gupta 1997; Handa 1994; Kossoudji and Mueller 1983; Pearce 1978; Rosenhouse 1989). Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the pattern of female-headed households as necessarily “the poorest of the poor” has been theoretically and empirically challenged (Chant 1997; 2003; Jackson 1996; Kabeer 1997; Moser 1993; O’Laughlin 1998). In Jamaica, for example, Moser (cited in Budlender 2003) found that female-headed households were less poor than the average household. More recently, Liu et al. (2017) concluded that the linkages between female headship and poorer living conditions cannot be generalized across Latin American countries. It has also been asserted that in fact, households headed by women may be more stable and secure than those headed by men and that resources may be more child-oriented and equitably distributed among members (Bruce and Lloyd 1997; Chant 1997). Furthermore, the “feminization of poverty” debate can divert focus from other important issues for women such as intra-household or secondary poverty in male-headed units (Jackson 1996; Varley 2014), fail to recognize the heterogeneity of female-headed households (Chant 1997; 2003; Fuwa 2000), and stigmatize this type of households (Rogan 2016).

Recent demographic, socioeconomic and cultural shifts appear to encourage the rise in female household headship, although considerable differences across and within regions persist. From a demographic perspective and based on studies generally focused on single or a few countries, increases in female headship in Western societies, Latin America and some parts of Asia have been associated with high levels of singlehood resulting from divorce, separation and widowhood; the postponement of union formation and childbearing; the choice of staying unmarried and/or childless; the rise of cohabitation; the decline of extended family systems; higher prevalence of single motherhood and adolescent pregnancies; and the expansion of solo living (Acosta Díaz 2001; Aghajanian and Thompson 2013; Arias and Palloni 1999; Chant 1997; García and de Oliveira 2005; Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017; Miralao 1992; Nathan and Paredes 2012). In African countries, absent male partners who have migrated for work towards urban areas and women with non-resident polygamous husbands have been considered crucial factors leading to female headship (Buvinić and Gupta 1997; Milazzo and Van De Walle 2017; Moore 1994). Female-headed households also arise during war, insecurity and disaster, regardless of whether human

actions or natural events cause these situations (Moser 1993). All these factors indicate that the rise in female headship could be related to changes in family patterns and household structures, and not reflect important transformations in power dynamics and gender relations within nuclear or extended households.

Nonetheless, at the same time, there are reasons to believe that the present increases in female headship could be going beyond shifts associated with the denuclearization of households. Women's social positions and gendered roles and expectations are changing (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård 2015; Riley 1998). In the socioeconomic and cultural spheres, rising levels of women's paid labor force participation and more access to education may allow them to gain greater economic independence to configure and sustain their own households (Bradshaw 1995; Nathan and Paredes 2012; O'Laughlin 1998; Posel, Hall, and Goagoses 2023). Growing evidence suggests that the rise in female-headed households may, under specific contexts, result from deliberate choices rather than being solely attributed to male abandonment and neglect (Bradshaw 1995; Chant 1997; McIlwaine and Datta 2003). Actually, portraying women heads as "the victims of male desertion" underplays women's agency (Varley 2014). Changing power relationships and more gender egalitarian values may lead as well to a higher proportion of women reported heads, even in dwellings where their male partners or other adult men are present (Varley 1996). That breaks with the patriarchal family model associated with households composed of a male breadwinner head and women's gendered roles limited to being wife and mother (Moser 1989; Varley 1996). These changes are also manifest in headship definitions. Even though we did not see an explicit instruction to appoint men as heads in most cases, there was neither an emphasis that the head could be a woman. It is not until recent decades that we see an emphasis on this. If we look at Latin American countries, this is paradigmatic as nouns in Spanish are explicitly gendered (*jefe / jefa*). Earlier census questionnaires referred to the head directly as *jefe* (implicitly male), but this has changed and since the 1990s both men and women can be flexibly identified as *jefe* or *jefa* (Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017) (see Appendix 1). Until now, adult men were commonly designated heads whether women were the principal economic providers or the chief decision-makers in the household, in turn, underrepresenting the actual number of households that are supported by women (Bruce 1995). Women were commonly recognized as heads *only* when an adult man was not a member of the household (Chant 2003; 2016; Moser 1993; Varley 1996).

Whether the surge in female-headed households responds to structural and demographic shifts or to normative and socio-economic changes, this phenomenon compels us to reassess the significance of female-headed households in the twenty-first century. In fact, since the 1990s, there has been concern regarding the limitations inherent in the concept of 'head of household' (Budlender 2003; Folbre and Abel 1989; Kleinjans 2013; Presser 1998; Rosenhouse

1989). It has been considered ambiguous and vague, especially when it is left to the interpretation of survey and census respondents. Typically, they may be simply asked: 'Who is the head of the household?' thus leaving to their own (subjective) criteria determining who is recognized as such (Dungumaru 2008; Rogers 1995). That makes us use our household data with caution, acknowledging the diversity of cultural and social contexts in which women-headed households emerge. Headship conceptualizations are contextual and culturally specific and, as such, they may be interpreted differently and endure distinct meanings depending on the country, the social circumstances, and across rounds of censuses and surveys. As a result, the automatic comparison of large scale data from different countries and sources is inevitably limited (Budlender 2003; Buvinić and Gupta 1997). Critics have also drawn attention to how 'headship' not only reflects hierarchical dynamics between household members and a patriarchal system of domestic governance and decision-making - it reinforces them, often assuming that the head makes all decisions, provides the principal economic support in the household, and is regularly present at home (Folbre and Abel 1989; Presser 1998; Rosenhouse 1989).

Although such concerns raise important issues and well-founded conceptual problems to bear in mind, there is still a place for headship-based studies. We continue to lack a thorough understanding of the background factors and complex social processes influencing the rise in female household headship seen in censuses and household surveys, and little is known about how headship is perceived and assigned by respondents (Rogan 2016). Whether current changes follow structural or normative transformations will inevitably determine what value and utility we give to the 'head of household' as a key household dimension and gender equality indicator. Despite the potential importance of the transformations behind their rise, there remains a significant gap in comparative research on women-headed households at a global scale. Existing studies tend to focus on individual or a few countries, such as South Africa (Posel 2001), the Dominican Republic (Rogers 1995), Panama (Fuwa 2000), Thailand and Vietnam (Klasen, Lechtenfeld, and Povel 2015), primarily examining the links between female-headed households and the "feminization of poverty" in low- and middle-income countries (Saad et al. 2022). Consequently, leaving unexplored headship patterns in regions like Western and Southern Europe, North America, and Oceania. Research has also overemphasized the single mother with dependent children household, thereby marginalizing other female head groups like older women and women who live alone and reinforcing the assumption of care as the center of women's lives (Varley 1996). To the best of our knowledge, there is limited to no work to date that explores female headship trends globally and across time.

In this study, our objective is to expand the scope by documenting regional and temporal trends in female headship across a wide range of societies. We also aim to compare the

characteristics of female-headed households with those headed by men. Our overarching goal is to provide a diverse and substantial overview encompassing most countries worldwide, spanning various demographic, social, family and gender systems. While this approach may entail some degree of generalization, bringing insights from diverse places together enables us to better understand diversity and variability, identify common patterns, account for continuities over time, and trace the unevenness of change across and within regions. The goal of a global study that covers as many countries and societies as possible requires a simplification in the analysis, which, in turn, limits the range of hypotheses and explanations that could be explored with more detailed data. We have prioritized adopting this global perspective, which is very much lacking in existing research.

The paper is structured in two main sections. First, we examine observed levels of female headship and standardize them based on household size. In light of the prevailing trends of diminishing household sizes, primarily driven by declining numbers of children in households (Esteve et al., *forthcoming*), women now have greater opportunities to head households. If rising trends persist after standardization, it would suggest that normative factors beyond the shrinkage in household size, such as shifts in gender relationships, seem to influence women's likelihood of becoming heads of households. Second, to capture the transformations occurring within female-headed households, we assess whether countries with high levels of female headship are experiencing a convergence between the structure of male and female-headed households, or if women are merely gaining more opportunities to head households without necessarily replicating the structures observed in male-headed units. We compare male and female-headed households over time, focusing on average household size, the proportion of unipersonal households, and coresidence with spouses and partners.

Historically, households headed by women have tended to be small or unipersonal (Kabeer 1997; Klasen, Lechtenfeld, and Povel 2015). In cases of extended households, they have often comprised multiple generations of women living together, a common scenario in Latin America (Acosta Díaz 2001). Concerning unipersonal households, they are becoming increasingly common globally (Esteve et al. 2020). While such households have generally been associated with Western countries and the elderly population, particularly elderly women (Reher and Requena 2018), they are now expanding to other age groups and among men of all ages (Esteve et al. 2020), and could be having an impact on the rise in female headship. With regard to the average number of spouses and partners, this indicator allows us to measure whether female heads of households live with them. That has not usually been the norm, since female-headed households have typically had fewer to none couples in comparison to male-headed ones, where couple coresidence is more prevalent (Bruce and Lloyd 1997). Should the rise in female headship extend beyond changes in household size

and the expansion of solo living, a diminishing gender gap in spousal coresidence would suggest that shifts in gender relations within nuclear households are underway. We conclude our paper with a discussion of our findings.

Data

We use a wealth of anonymized household-level data from the CORESIDENCE database (Galeano et al., *forthcoming*), which facilitates indicators of household size, composition and living arrangements worldwide. The CORESIDENCE database comprises population censuses and surveys from four primary repositories, and complements them with data from country-level and regional surveys. In this paper, our analysis draws on data from The International Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS-International), the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS), the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the European Union Labor Force Survey (EU-LFS), the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) surveys, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey for South Korea and the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) harmonized in the CORESIDENCE database. All the data used in this paper is publicly accessible (<https://zenodo.org/record/8142652>). Our final analysis encompasses 770 data points spanning from 1960 to 2021. Appendix 2 provides details of the samples used, categorized by country, year, and source. In the presentation of our results, trends are represented by lines color-coded into four macro regions: Africa (48 countries), Americas (29), Asia and Oceania (39), and Europe (39).

To measure the prevalence of female headship, we identify such households within the CORESIDENCE database using the indicator 'hh02', which denotes the proportion of female-headed households. Rising levels of female headship may potentially reflect reduction in household size across countries. To minimize these effects, we standardize by household size and compare observed and standardized values of female headship. As a standard, we have taken the household size distribution of female-headed and male-headed households from the first sample available for each country. Then, we examine the differences in average household size, proportion of unipersonal households, and average number of spouses for female-headed and male-headed households in comparative perspective. Given data from the same country often comes from various sources, each source is represented independently in all visualizations.

It is important to note that this paper does not delve into the specific definitions of household headship employed in each country and data collection round nor covers the instructions provided to interviewers and enumerators during the data collection process.

The term ‘head of household’ has been used to cover a range of concepts, from the chief economic provider and the chief decision-maker in the household to the oldest member or the person exercising authority and being responsible for the household (Bruce and Lloyd 1997). A universal standard definition of household headship is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, what we see is that a prevailing trend exists wherein men are typically designated as household heads, even in the absence of explicit instructions to appoint an adult man to this role (Hedman, Perucci, and Sundstrom 1996). In a societal context marked by gender inequalities, conventional gender norms persistently influence such designations, making it unlikely for a woman to be appointed as the head when an adult male is present (García and de Oliveira 2004). Household headship is not exempt from patriarchal dynamics, and its conception and understanding are embedded in, and reflect, sociocultural contexts (Deere, Alvarado, and Twyman 2012; Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017). To illustrate that, in Appendix 1 we have recollected and classified the various definitions of household headship employed in samples obtained from IPUMS. Only a limited number of general instructions given to national statistical offices and household survey agents were available for DHS, MICS, EU-LFS, and EU-SILC data therefore we have restricted the analysis of Appendix 1 to all the available definitions and detail from IPUMS census data. Detailed PDFs containing instructions provided to census agents are available on the IPUMS website for most cases, both in the original language and translated into English (Minnesota Population Center 2023). We have categorized all available definitions and understandings of headship in Appendix 1 into four distinct categories:

- (i) *Gender-neutral*: when household members determine who is the head of household without explicit instructions specifying gender, or when despite referring to the head as male (e.g., *jefe*), instructions explicitly allow for either a male or female head;
- (ii) *Male-oriented*: when there is an implicit reference to the head of household as male (e.g., using terms like *jefe*) or when instructions position the wife of the head after the head in the listing;
- (iii) *Male exclusive*: when instructions predominantly specify the husband, father, or male in the household as the head in most cases;
- (iv) *Female inclusive*: when there are explicit instructions allowing for either a male or female head, or when gender-equal terminology is used (e.g. *jefe / jefa*).

In cases where headship is “automatically” assigned to men (*male exclusive* definitions), this can already be a key indicator of how that society may be socially organized. How headship has been defined is not an issue that we can correct nor harmonize but it is, indeed, something that we consider in the results interpretation and discussion. Analyzing headship has a value in itself, either when countries explicitly designate adult men as heads (e.g. Hungary 1970 and Laos 2005) or the other way around when headship is assigned in a more

aleatory and neutral manner (e.g. Austria 1971 and India 1983) or classified in a more gender-equal and female-inclusive way (e.g. Peru 1993 and Zimbabwe 2012).

Results

(a) Trends in female headship around the world

Figure 1 displays a global map illustrating the proportion of female-headed households by country, based on the most recent available observation since the year 2000 in our data. 151 countries are depicted on the map, which provide a snapshot of most of the world at the time. Color categories in each country represent the proportion of female headship, ranging from the lowest (blue shades) to the highest (red shades) levels. Female headship ranges from 1.6% in Afghanistan to 70.6% in Latvia. The highest levels of female headship are found in Europe, the Americas, and Southern Africa. At the opposite extreme, we observe low percentages in the rest of the African continent and most Asian countries. Interestingly, a “blue belt” emerges covering Northern and Western Africa, and parts of Western, Central and Southern Asia which is home to the lowest proportions of female headship (0-15%). Africa stands out as the region with the greatest heterogeneity having several countries in Southern Africa (Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, South Africa) displaying levels of female headship equal to or above 40% and others in Northern Africa staying below 19% (e.g., Algeria and Egypt). Figure 1 provides a useful visible introduction to the subject at a global scale.

Figure 1. Proportion of female-headed households by country, most recent available data since year 2000. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of female-headed households by country, and its variation over time, derived from observed data (top panel) and when standardized by household size (bottom panel). Observed values indicate overall levels of female headship. Standardized values show female headship trends independent of the effect of the changes in household size over time. We have highlighted some countries in each region based on their population size, sub-regional and temporal representativeness, and analytical interest (the country selection is consistent in Figures 4, 5 and 6). ISO-2 codes identify the selected countries¹. The lines between points in time connect observations from the same country and data source.

¹ ISO-2 codes correspond to the following countries: AF Afghanistan; BR Brazil; BW Botswana; CL Colombia; CM Cameroon; CN China; CR Costa Rica; DE Germany; DK Denmark; DO Dominican Republic; EG Egypt; ES Spain; GR Greece; HU Hungary; ID Indonesia; IE Ireland; IN India; KE Kenya; KR South Korea; LU Luxembourg; MA Morocco; MX Mexico; NG Nigeria; NL Netherlands; NP Nepal; PR Puerto Rico; SI Slovenia; TG Togo; TH Thailand; US United States; UY Uruguay; ZA South Africa.

Solid lines correspond to census data observations and two-dashed lines to survey data. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates where an equal percentage of households headed by men and women would be. Generally, these data offer strong evidence that female headship is rising across the world. Yet there is much heterogeneity, and the gender gap remains far from closing with many countries at a great distance from reaching the 50% threshold.

Figure 2. Observed and standardized trends in female household headship. Countries highlighted based on region representation, size of the country and number of samples available over time. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

The top panel shows that all world regions in our data started in the 1970s at a similar level of female headship. The share of headship among women approximately varied between 10% and 25% at the time, with only some exceptions observed in countries like Austria (29% in 1971), Kenya (29% in 1969) and Pakistan (3.4% in 1973). A substantial rise during the 1990s increased the proportion of female-headed households to levels up to 40%. The most remarkable rise happened in Europe. In the decades to follow, female headship unambiguously rose across all European subregions and in almost all countries, in some cases even surpassing the 50% mark. Clear examples of this pattern are Spain, where female headship has more than doubled over three decades, from 18.5% in 1990 to 46% in 2021, the Netherlands, where it went from 22.3% in 1985 to 52% in 2021, and Ireland where the share of female headship jumped from 24% in 1985 to 53% in 2021. Exceptionally, some countries in Western Europe like Germany and the United Kingdom, have only experienced minor changes from 1985 to 2015 going from 30% to 34% and 24% to 28% shares of female-headed households respectively. The rise in the Americas is similar but less pronounced, and only Puerto Rico and Argentina have, at present, a share of female headship at 50% or above. Among countries, in the United States, there were 27.7% of female-headed households in 1990 compared to 49.6% in 2015. In Uruguay, female headship grew from 21.3% in 1963 to 48.4% in 2011. An upward trend also stands out in the case of Brazil, from 18% in 1991 to 38% in 2010.

Concerning Africa and Asia, they emerge as the world regions with the relatively slowest rising path with countries experiencing almost no change. They also display the greatest heterogeneity in headship behavior. The 1990s and early 2000s were significant for countries like Cameroon or Nepal, which increased the proportion of female-headed households by 8 and 16 percentage points respectively. But female headship remained stable in India with shares slightly moving from 9% in 1983 to 15% in 2019. In Indonesia, we even observe modest declines, from 17% in 1971 to 15% in 2017. In contrast, South Korea stands out in the Asian region for tentatively following the Western path. In 1970 there were 10.2%

female-headed households, the country crossed the 20% threshold in the 2000s and reached 27% of female headship in 2010. In Northern Africa, countries like Morocco experienced a rise of roughly one percentage point in almost four decades and, in Egypt, female headship remained almost the same. Ghana's female headship even experienced declines, from 37% in 1993 to 31% in 2016, although it maintained a high level of female headship in the region. In contrast, we observe salient increases in female-headed households in Southern Africa, with levels of female headship in Botswana and Namibia going from 37% in 1981 to 48% in 2011, and from 31% in 1992 to 44% in 2013 respectively.

The bottom panel of Figure 2 shows standardized values of female headship by household size, enabling us to assess the importance of household size – and its ongoing shrinking pattern– in determining female headship worldwide. The widespread increases in the incidence of female headship seen in the top panel are confirmed when we standardize. Throughout, observed values are slightly higher than standardized ones but, for the most part, they stay nearly the same, suggesting that structural changes in household size may have little to do with the rise in female headship and that such rise, instead, could be alternatively explained by cultural, attitudinal, socioeconomic and normative transformations in society, as well as by technical-definitional changes in the data collection process. Only in some countries is the situation somewhat different when we standardize. In Figure 3 we zoom into 9 countries to illustrate the differences between observed and standardized levels of female headship: two from Africa (Cameroon and Kenya), two from the Americas (Chile and the United States), two from Asia (Indonesia and South Korea) and finally three from Europe (Greece, Hungary and Switzerland). They have been selected because they show long data series and some exhibit significant differences between the observed and standardized proportions of female-headed households.

Figure 3. Observed and standardized in female household headship in a selected group of countries (Cameroon, Chile, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Kenya, South Korea, Switzerland and the United States). Source: CORESIDENCE database.

In South Korea, Hungary and Greece female headship trends dramatically change when we standardize. If household size had remained the same since the first country-year sample available in our data, female headship would have not increased. In South Korea, observed values rise from 10% to 27% while standardized ones remain stable, hardly rising to 12%. Similarly, in Hungary, observed values rose from 18% to 32% and standardized shares of female headship increased by only one percentage point. Survey data for Greece shows a rise of 14 points in observed female headship (14-28%) and a rise of just 4 points when we standardize (14-18%). This suggests that the rise in female headship in these areas may have

been “mechanical”. In other words, it may be the reflection of a general decline in household size and a rise in unipersonal households over the last decades, which “automatically” create new opportunities for women to head households. The observed rise may reflect changing household sizes rather than a consequence of social change towards more gender egalitarian values in nuclear households and in society. In Switzerland and the United States, standardized values are lower than the observed but the differences are not as pronounced as in the previous cases. In contrast, observed and standardized values in countries like Cameroon, Indonesia and Kenya remain roughly the same, thereby suggesting that the rise in female headship in these areas may be related to normative and social shifts or to changes in the wordings of questionnaires to more gender-neutral definitions rather than to changes in household size. If the size of households had not changed, female headship would have risen anyway. In Chile, we even find that standardized values are higher than observed ones.

(b) Household size and composition: differences between male and female-headed households

We started analyzing female headship in relation to a basic demographic measure of households: the average household size, and observed that its decline does not account for most of the rise in female headship worldwide (Figures 2 and 3). Instead, factors such as rising divorce rates, the higher prevalence of unipersonal households, and a shift towards more gender-neutral understandings of headship could be likely contributing to the rise. Transformations like these would make us think that a convergence between the structures of male and female-headed households is underway. Next, we turn to examine the characteristics of female-headed households and their evolution over time compared to male-headed ones based on household size, proportion of unipersonal households and proportion of spouses of the head in the household.

Household size

Figure 4 reports the differences in average household size between male and female-headed households in absolute terms, and how these have varied over time. Values above zero indicate larger average household sizes among male heads and negative values, the opposite. Overall, the differences are evident, male-headed households are larger than female-headed ones with some exceptions since the 1990s in Africa (Botswana, South Africa, Namibia), the Americas (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Saint Lucia), and more recently Europe (Luxembourg, Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, Netherlands). The size difference between male and female-headed households is diminishing in many countries, with more pronounced converging trends in the Americas and Europe. Beginning in the 2000s, the Americas display a convergence trend in household size, with almost all countries showing values closer to zero and below one-person difference between male and female-headed

households. Europe follows a similar pattern but there is more diversity. In some countries, male-headed households continue to be larger than female-headed ones by one person or more (e.g., Greece, Hungary) while, in others, the gap almost closed at the beginning of the twenty-first century (e.g., Netherlands, Slovenia). Convergence in size could be related to the overall fall in average household size mostly driven by a generalized fertility decline, with the disappearance of larger households and the increase of smaller ones (Esteve et al., *forthcoming*).

Asian and African countries exhibit more modest convergence patterns and, again, the greatest heterogeneity. Most of the data points for Asia are situated far from zero, suggesting that male and female-headed households in the region are potentially home to diverse family types and different numbers of children. Indeed, one of the main reasons explaining why female-headed households are smaller could be, in many countries, that the partner or spouse is not present in the dwelling (see Figure 6 for detail on this aspect). Across African nations, we observe a widespread decrease in the differences in household size between male and female-headed households, but at very different paths and levels. While there are countries with differences between one and two persons today (e.g., Cameroon, Egypt and Morocco), in others the gap in size is almost nonexistent (e.g., Gabon) and, as mentioned, in some parts of Southern Africa female-headed households are larger than male-headed ones and such difference is even increasing (e.g., Botswana and South Africa).

Figure 4. Trends of the difference in average household size between male and female-headed households. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

Proportion of unipersonal households

Figure 5 illustrates the trends in the prevalence of unipersonal households among female and male heads. Values above zero indicate larger proportions of one-person households among male heads and negative values, the opposite scenario. Notably, a significant result emerges: female heads consistently exhibit higher rates of residing in unipersonal households than male heads. This pattern is evident in the majority of data points, mostly situated below the dashed line. Exceptions to this trend are observed in select African, Latin American and European countries (e.g., Botswana, Dominican Republic and Luxembourg). Asian nations, on the other hand, present limited convergence trends. Female heads consistently demonstrate a more stable pattern of living alone in greater numbers than male heads. Clear examples of this are Indonesia and India, where the differences persist at approximately 20% throughout the examined period. South Korea stands out as a country

where the gap in solo living between male and female heads appears to widen over time, with the differences being greater in 2010 (40%) than in 1970 (0.3%). Consistent with the results presented in Figure 3, Figure 5 reaffirms that the observed increase in female headship in South Korea may be closely connected to the growing tendency among women to live independently, and, consequently, to head their own households. Latin America exhibits relatively stable trends, with subtle indications of convergence in the proportions of women and men heading unipersonal households. In contrast, European countries showcase the most convergent trend, with decreasing disparities in the rates of living alone between men and women household heads, as exemplified by countries like Ireland and Spain. Nonetheless, differences across countries exist. At the other extreme we find Germany, Greece and Hungary, where a sustained larger proportion of female heads reside in unipersonal households compared to their male counterparts.

Figure 5. Trends of the difference in the proportion of unipersonal households between male and female heads. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

Average number of spouses

As mentioned, female-headed households were traditionally defined as those where a male partner, spouse or any other adult man was not present. In other words, women became heads of households only when there was no alternative candidate (e.g., due to the male head's death or absence). Despite a few exceptions, this trend seems to persist over time, with more male heads coresiding with their spouses compared to female heads. Female heads may live instead with other relatives, children or alone, but not with their partners. Figure 6 illustrates the gap in the average number of spouses in the household by headship over time, confirming that the gender disparity in this aspect of household composition continues very much in place. Typically, male heads live with their partners, whereas female heads do not. However, we can observe a slight convergence trend in the Americas and Europe since the 1990s, as well as in some Asian and African countries like China, Thailand, Botswana, Cameroon and South Africa that coincides with the timing of rising female headship. The most significant change over time is observed in Europe, specifically in Ireland, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, where more female heads of households now report living with their spouses compared to the past. Figure 6 clearly indicates that, in recent decades, in most Asian states there have been minimal changes in the differences in the average number of spouses present in male and female-headed households. For example, this pattern remains constant in countries like Indonesia and India, and the presence of spouses experienced little to no change in Kenya, Egypt and Morocco. Interestingly, countries with high levels of female headship shown in Figure 2, such as Uruguay, the United States, or Puerto Rico, are positioned well above the dashed line in

Figure 6. This indicates that their observed rise in female headship might not be due to changes in nuclear households where a male partner is present. Otherwise, the values would be closer to zero. Instead, these “new” households headed by women may continue to have structures other than nuclear, such as unipersonal or extended configurations with higher complexity in their composition.

Figure 6. Trends of the difference in average number of spouses male and female-headed households. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have documented trends in female-headed households and analyzed factors related to its rise and to changes in household size and composition. We have explored the levels and evolution of female headship across the globe based on 770 censuses and surveys conducted in 155 countries, offering the most geographically and temporally ambitious approximation to date to the topic. In this sense, the conclusions are evident. First, there is a lot of diversity of female headship levels and trends, not only across countries but within world regions. Second, in most countries, the proportion of female-headed households has increased beyond the reduction of household sizes, which suggests a progressive pattern towards higher gender symmetry in headship designation potentially related to cultural and normative changes, women’s emancipation in society and the paid labor market, and more gender-neutral and less male-oriented definitions of headship. By the 2000s, in countries such as Cuba, South Africa, Sweden, and Thailand, more than 40 per cent of women reported they were heads of household. Indeed, in Europe and the Americas, some countries have reached the 50% threshold in the last decades (Argentina, Belarus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Puerto Rico, Russia, and Slovenia). Even though we have performed a partial standardization calculation, the overall results suggest that gender asymmetries in household headship are decreasing beyond a generalized reduction of household sizes.

In the second part of the analysis we have compared the gender gap between the characteristics of male and female-headed households on the average household size, the proportion of unipersonal households among male and female heads, and the average number of spouses. Overall, the structural differences in size and composition continue, which suggests that household headship is still very much gendered. Female-headed households were, and continue to be, smaller than male-headed households. That may be partially due to the number of unipersonal households headed by elderly (and widowed) women and increasingly by women from other age groups who live alone (Esteve et al.

2020). Considering gendered patterns, the most striking trend is the minor presence of spouses and partners in female-headed households, consistent with the prevalence of recognizing men as heads if they are present in a nuclear household. Yet these differences are reducing, and we observe a convergence pattern in household size and composition. However, despite some commonalities, these trends are not uniform globally. Differences among countries and world regions continue over time. European countries evolve uniformly with a generalized transformation and household structure convergence trend between female-headed households and male-headed ones across sub-regions. Latin America follows a similar pattern. Africa and Asia endure as the most heterogeneous regions of the world, preventing us from generalizing. There are countries where the shift in female headship stands out significantly (e.g., Botswana, Nepal, South Africa, Thailand), whereas in other areas, the change is minimal or nearly nonexistent (e.g., Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Zambia). South Korea is of interest as an example of a female headship transformation that, for the most part, is caused by demographic changes such as the shrinkage in household size, which has created new opportunities for women to head their households.

Although the results presented in this study open an array of important research issues on gender equality in the household and the changing characteristics of women-headed households, the study does not come without limitations. First and foremost, our study does not base its analysis on a standard understanding of household headship, which, in turn, limits its comparative approach when it comes to capturing local complexities, cultural specificities and definitional nuances between countries. How this wide range of censuses and surveys rounds identified female-headed households continues to be a challenge for researchers in the field of household demography. Other limitations are related to the level of information and detail available and, thus, the possible hypothesis explored here to measure differentiation between male-headed and female-headed households but also among female-headed households themselves. Yet despite these limitations linked to headship definitions and differentiation, the results of this study contribute to the body of research on family demography and sociology on female-headed households. Our research adds to it by investigating and documenting, for the first time, female headship trends globally and over the past few decades.

Future research might exploit more precise and detailed data to analyze, from a comparative perspective, the conditions and family contexts in which diverse female-headed households emerge. That implies including, for example, the marital status, age and stage in the life course, the number of children in the household, educational level and employment status of women heads in the analysis, of which many are available and identifiable variables in most censuses and surveys. As remarked in the development and feminist literatures, it is

crucial to unpack the category 'women' and consider the heterogeneity and dynamism of female-headed households (Budlender 2003; Chant 1997; 1998). Besides the different pathways and trajectories that lead women to head households (choice, involuntariness, widowhood, separation), the urban-rural dimension of household headship is of interest as well (Chant 1998). Another way forward might be enriching the analysis with contextual data coming from international gender indicators (Chant 2003), such as the Gender Inequality Index by the United Nations Development Programme. These might allow for deeper and more context-specific understandings of the potential explanations and factors associated with the current changes and living conditions of female-headed households. That will involve, however, a reduction of the countries covered in the analysis based on available data. In conclusion, this paper aims to make a meaningful contribution to the study of the feminization of household headship. It highlights the potential use of the household head as an analytical category for examining how gender dynamics and structures may manifest within domestic settings and how gender and family change is ongoing. Future research should explore the vast diversity within female-headed households and among differently situated women who head households given the growing presence of these types of households around the world.

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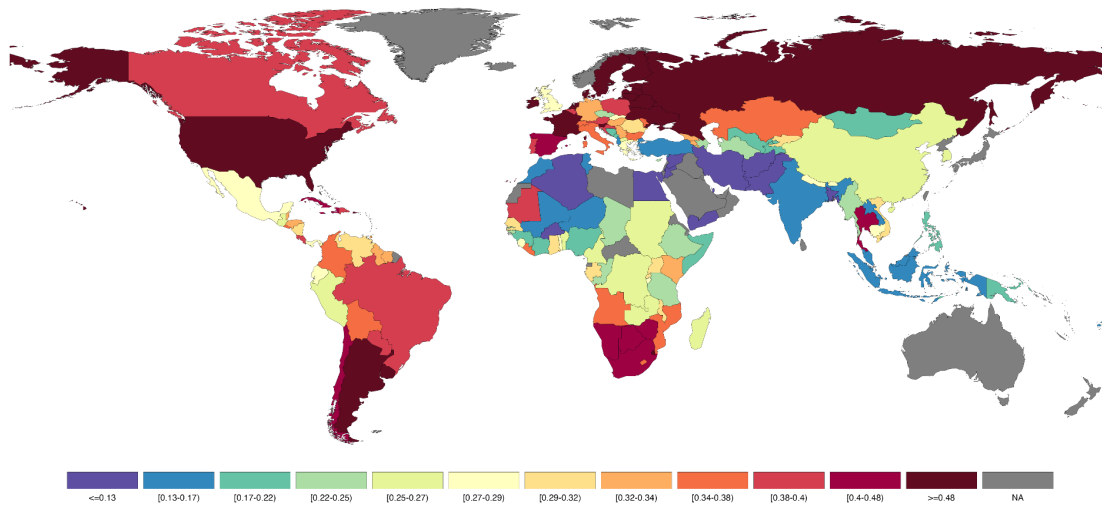


Figure 1. Proportion of female-headed households by country, most recent available data since year 2000. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

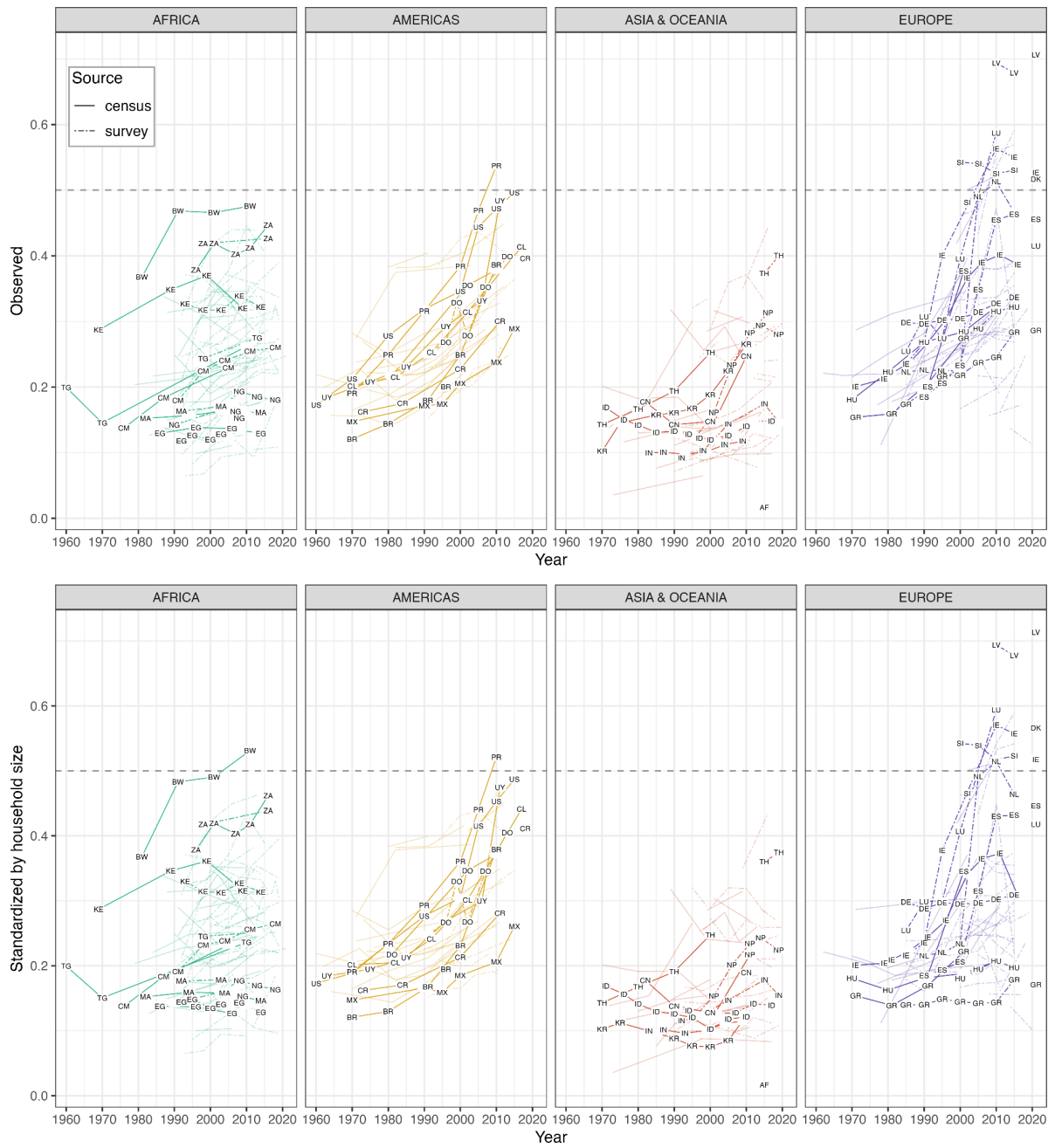


Figure 2. Observed and standardized trends in female household headship. Countries highlighted based on region representation, size of the country and number of samples available over time. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

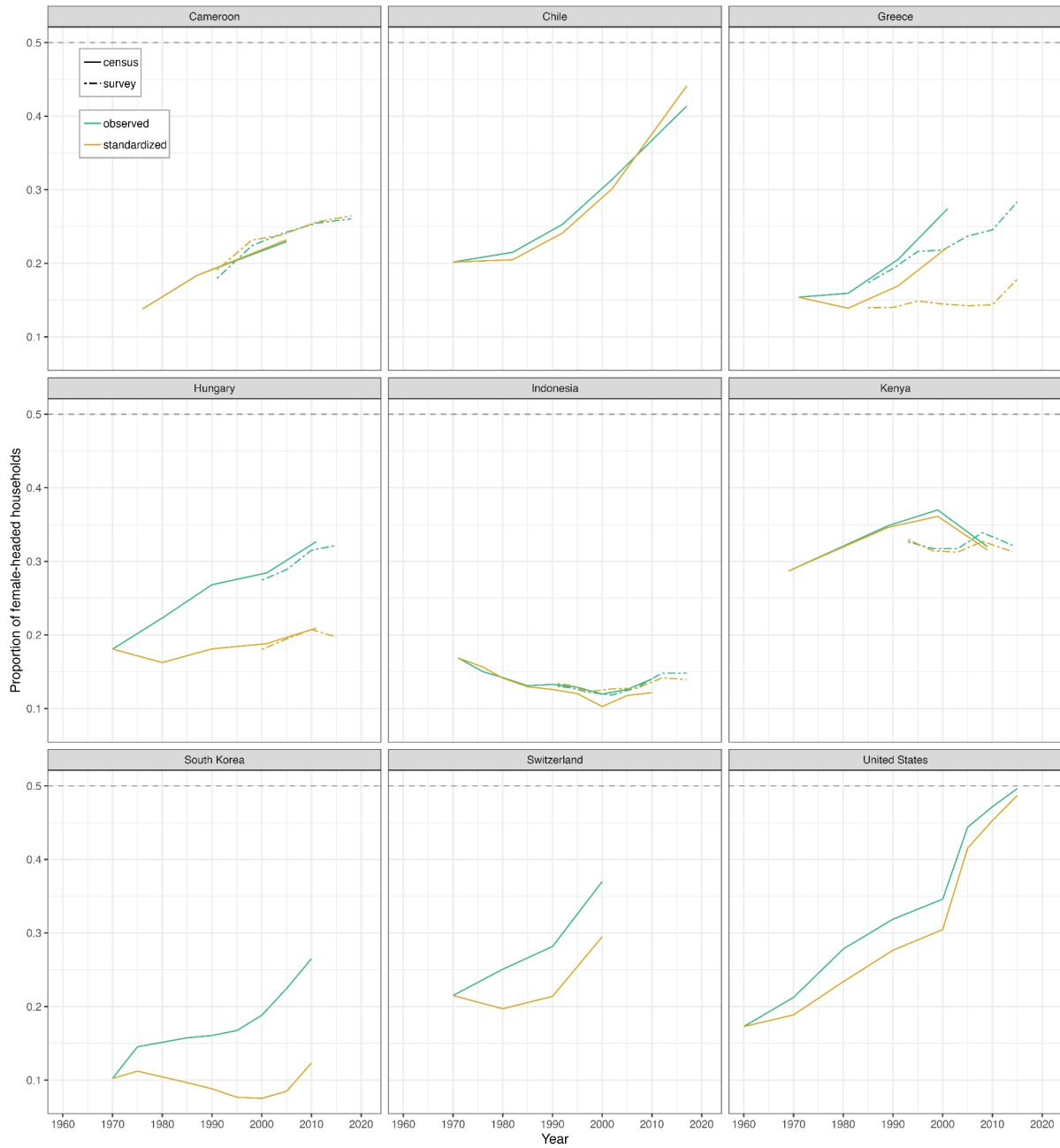


Figure 3. Observed and standardized trends in female household headship in a selected group of countries (Cameroon, Chile, Greece, Hungary, Indonesia, Kenya, South Korea, Switzerland and the United States). Source: CORESIDENCE database.

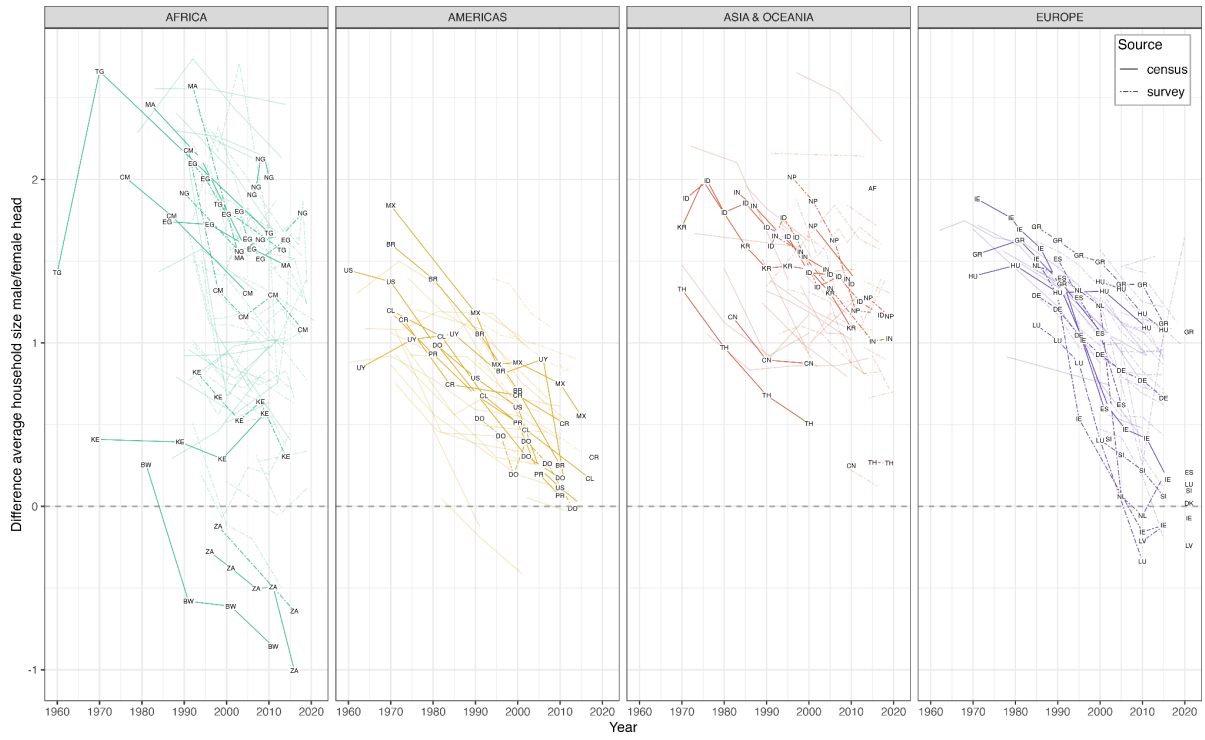


Figure 4. Trends of the difference in average household size between male and female-headed households. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

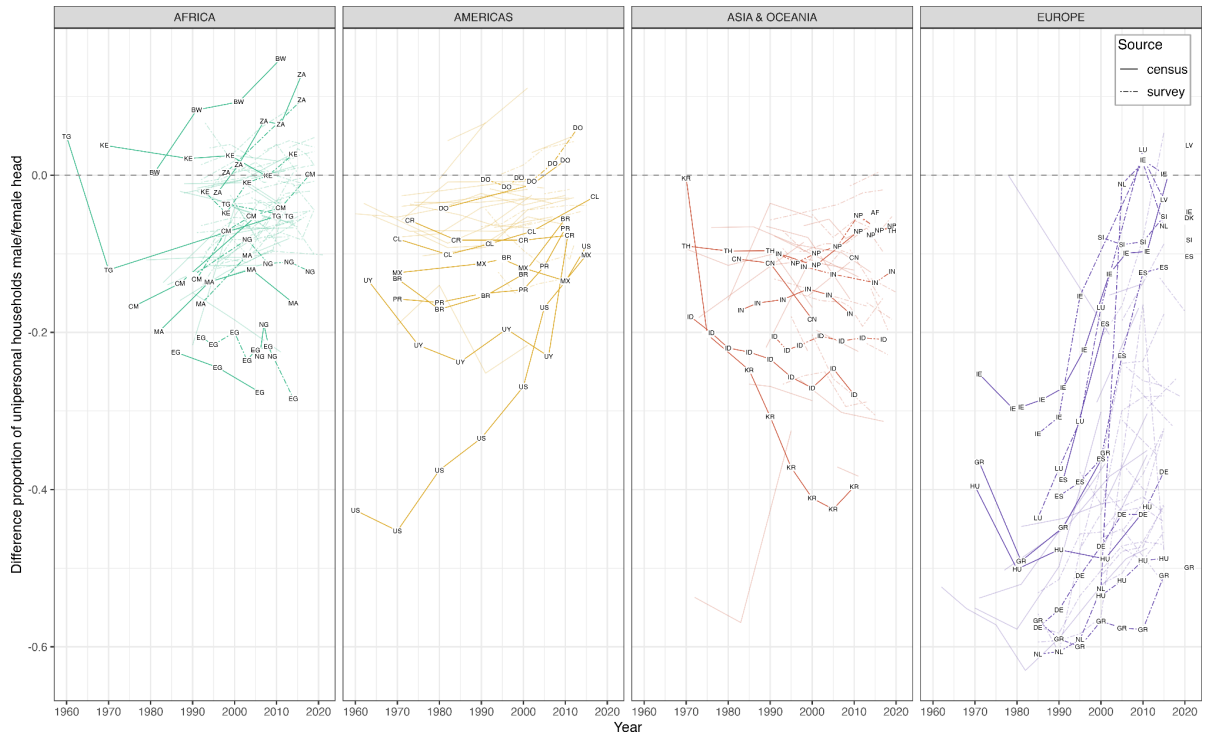


Figure 5. Trends of the difference in the proportion of unipersonal households between male and female heads. Source: CORESIDENCE database.

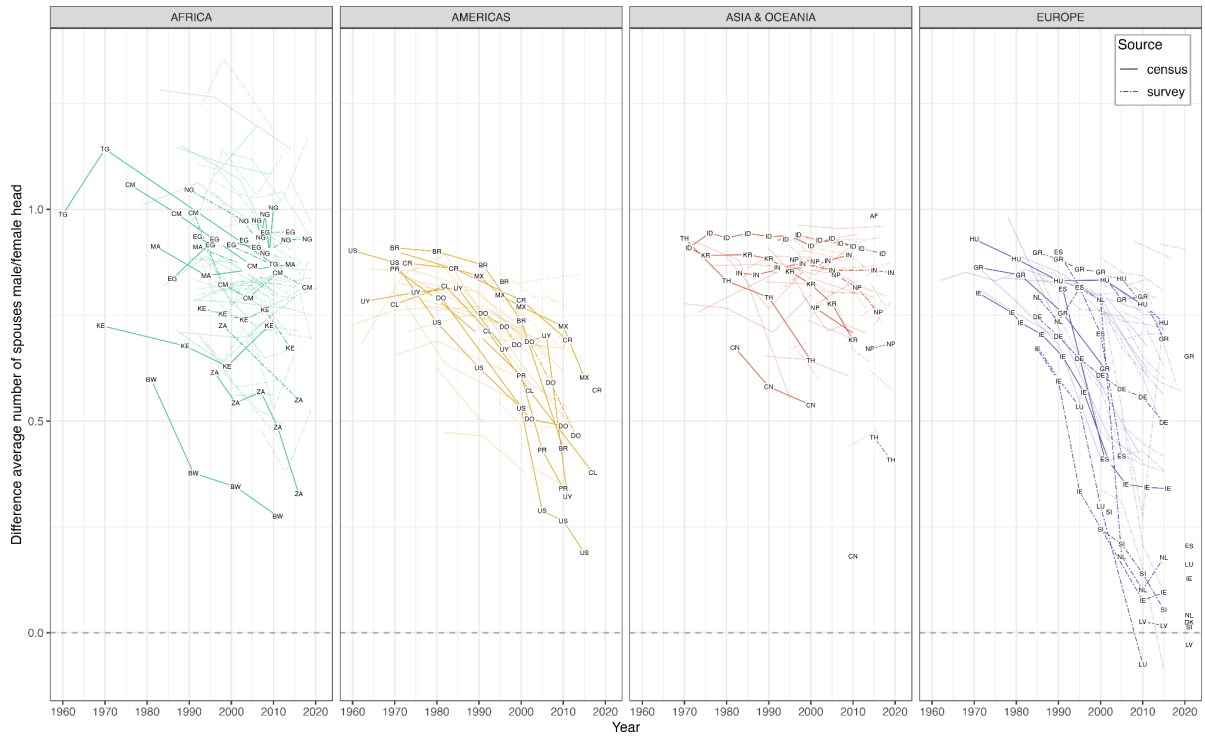
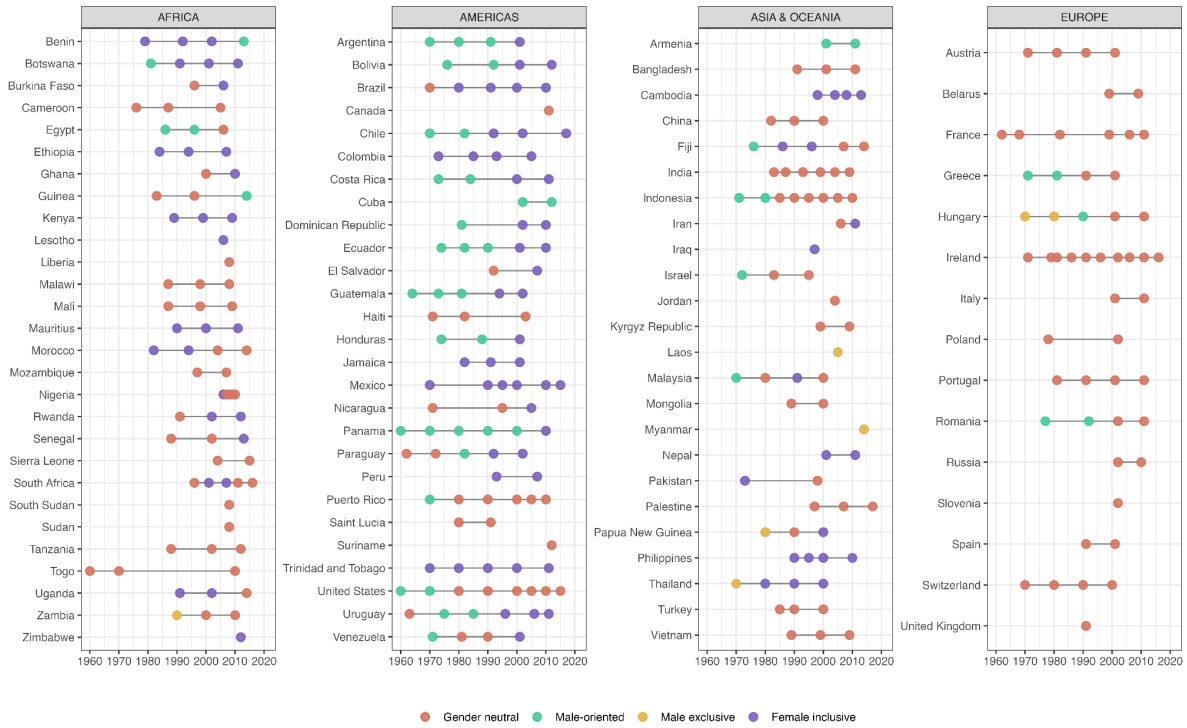
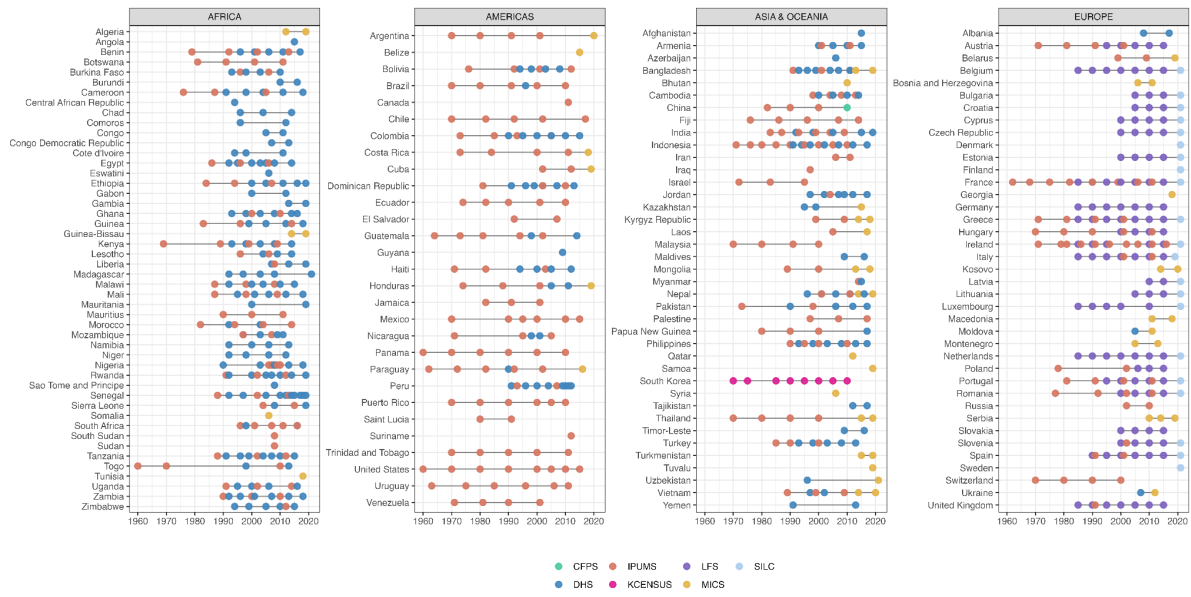


Figure 6. Trends of the difference in average number of spouses male and female-headed households. Source: CORESIDENCE database.



Appendix 1. Definitions of household headship based on the categorization ‘gender-neutral’, ‘male-oriented’, ‘male exclusive’, and ‘female inclusive’ (IPUMS data only). Source: CORESIDENCE database.



Appendix 2. Data samples used by country, year and source. Source: CORESIDENCE database.