

Title >> **Determinants of Livelihood Strategies of Urban Women: The Case of Female Household Heads in Wolenchiti Town, Ethiopia**

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Date of Publication >> 2009



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This paper is published as part of the KDSC series 'Research and Perspectives on Development Practice'. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Kimage Development Studies Centre.

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## Abstract

This paper is a summary of a thesis submitted to the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA Degree in Development Studies. The paper aims at identifying the determinants of the livelihood strategies of female household heads in Wolenchiti town, in the Eastern Oromia Region of Ethiopia. Qualitative research techniques were applied to collect and analyze data from both primary and secondary sources. The findings show that the major livelihood activities pursued by the female household heads in the town include petty trading, domestic services, daily labour, prostitution and involvement in urban agriculture. Income diversification, frequent change of occupations, remarriages and involving children in income generating activities are also among the livelihood strategies widely pursued by female household heads in the study area. With regard to factors determining the choice of livelihood strategies, the study found that age, age at first marriage, household size, number of years of headship and marital and migration status are the most important demographic factors at work. As regards socio economic factors, the results of the study show that access to financial, human, social, physical and natural capital were the leading determinants of livelihood strategies. Formal and informal institutions that either facilitate or constrain the success of various livelihood strategies were also important factors behind the choices of livelihood strategies among the women studied. The results of the study also indicate that provision of credit and skills training for female household heads are important areas of intervention that could help improve their livelihoods.



## 1. Introduction

With a GDP per capita of about USD 177 in 2006, Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the World. Not less than 80 percent of its 72 million people are living in rural areas (Adem 2002). Due in part to this fact there is a general understanding among scholars that the incidence of poverty is highest in the rural areas of the country. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Ethiopian government is following a national economic development strategy known as Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI). Much of the development interventions of international and local NGOs that are operating in the country are also focused on rural areas. However, the fact remains that the incidence of poverty has been on the rise in the urban areas of the country especially in the recent past. According to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED), the incidence of poverty in the rural areas of the country dropped from 47 percent during the 1995/96 Fiscal Year to 45 percent during the 1999/2000 Fiscal Year. Comparatively the poverty indices in the urban areas of the country rose from 33.3 percent to 37 percent during the same period (MOFED 2002).

Female-headed households are among those that are hit the hardest by the incidence of poverty in both rural and urban areas of the country. This is mainly due to the poor social and economic conditions of women, which result from the gender inequalities that exist in the country (Nuri 1992, Selamawit 1994, Tesfu 1996 and Gerawork 1997). It is well known that such households do not fold their hands and wait for development assistance, as they are fully aware of the fact that such assistance is in short supply. As a result they engage in different types of coping and adaptive mechanisms as livelihood strategies (O'Connell 1992).

The overall aim of this study was to assess the determinants of livelihood strategies pursued by urban women that are in the low-income bracket, with a particular focus on those who head households in the small towns of Ethiopia. More specifically, the study sought to answer the following key questions:

- i. What are the leading livelihood strategies pursued by female household heads in the study area?
- iii What are the demographic, socio-economic and institutional factors that determine their choice of livelihood strategies?
- iii What areas of intervention could help to improve the livelihoods of female headed households in the study area?

This study will be useful for policy makers and development workers as it provides fresh and context specific information on the issue focusing on the case of a small town in Ethiopia that is located outside the immediate sphere of influence of the capital city.



## 1.1 Methodology

For this research, which was conducted in Ethiopia in 2007, qualitative tools were applied for data gathering and analysis of the study. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources in Wolenchiti town, in the Eastern Oroma Region of Ethiopia. Focus group discussion and life history were the two data gathering techniques applied to collect primary data. A statistically representative sample size was not considered, however, findings from each source were triangulated to improve data quality and to cross check a number of points. A total of three focus group discussions were conducted, and this included one group of key informants and two groups of female household heads, one for each administrative unit in the town. The life history method was applied with five female household heads. Those women whose life history was studied were selected from the two focus group discussions conducted with female household heads. Findings of the life histories of the women, which were conducted on a self-reporting manner and individual basis, provided a supplementary source of primary data to triangulate the collective views, experiences and attitudes gathered from the focus group discussions.

A perspective of feminist research methodology was taken into account throughout the research process. Based on his review of the works of Cook and Fonow (1990), Sarantakos (1998) stated that a feminist research methodology has five elements. These elements are: a female prism that perceives reality from females' experiences and point of views; consciousness raising that helps women to realize and act against oppression; an effort to overcome the subject-object dichotomy in order that the subject and object of the research participate on an equal basis (no domination by the researcher); a feminist ethics that avoids biased and oppressive manners and empowerment and transformation that brings social change. Efforts were made in this study to incorporate these elements.

The focus group discussions created opportunities of consciousness raising among the women involved as they freely shared their ideas, beliefs, attitudes and experiences in the company of other women who have the same socioeconomic and gender backgrounds as themselves. The subject – object dichotomy was controlled as a result of the fact that focus groups minimize the control of the researcher as it gives particular significance to the voices and feelings of participants (Madriz in Denzin & Lincoln 2003). Moreover, the study was based on the day to day experiences of the women as a source of information taking into account the points emphasized by feminist researchers regarding the need to perceive reality from the women's experiences and their points of view.



## 1.2 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is taken from the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (De Satgé 2002). This framework looks at the different factors that contribute to people's livelihood strategies. It draws on a holistic understanding of livelihoods, and as such, goes far beyond defining poverty only in terms of the absence of income and consumption and includes the absence of other capabilities such as the social and natural capitals required to meet these needs (DFID 1999; Farrington et al. 1999; Neefjes 2000; De Satgé 2002).

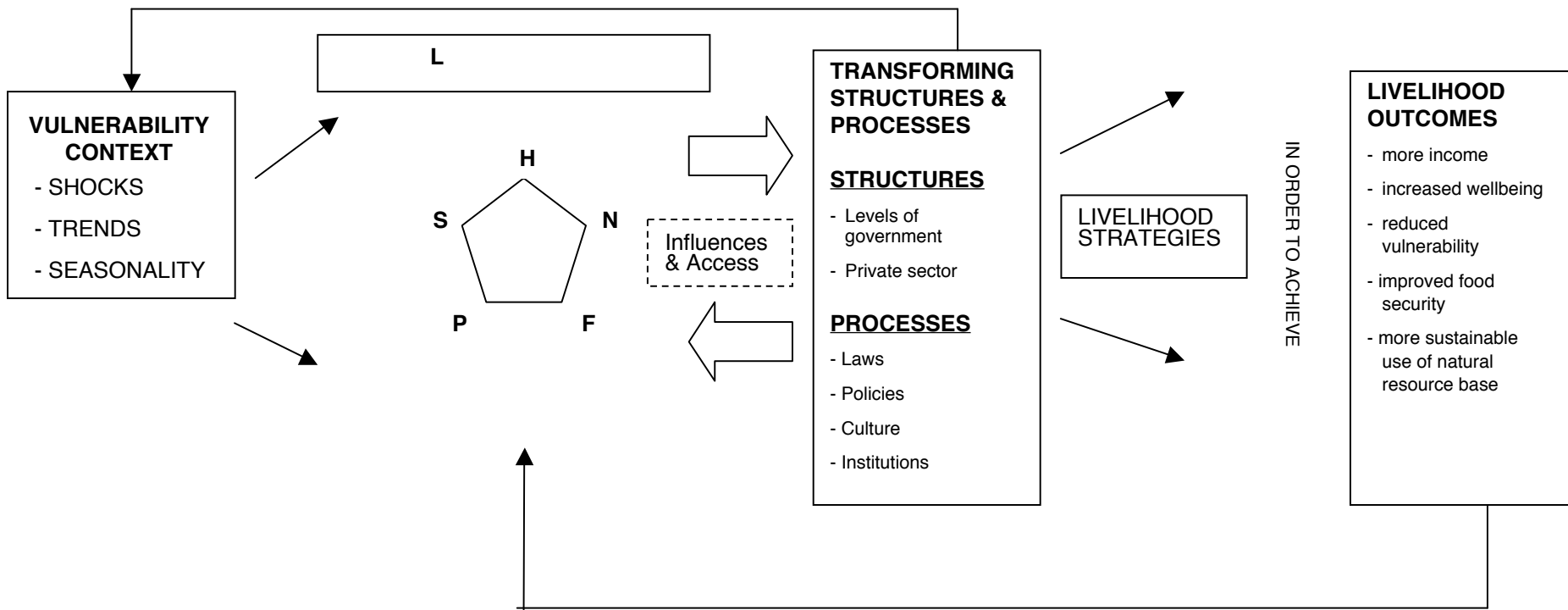
The fact that the framework can be applied at different levels from the individual to community to the nation at large is identified as one of its advantages (De Stage` 2002). The framework is also advantageous for its wider perspective in the analysis of poverty and livelihoods where both economic and non economic factors are included. Its holistic approach and the pro poor and participatory techniques applied have been identified as highly beneficial for policy formulations and planning and management of development programs (Scoones 1998; De Satgé 2002). However, the framework has been criticized for not sufficiently addressing important issues (Scoones 1998). For instance, it has been criticized for not considering structural constraints that perpetuate poverty by giving more emphasis to the assets and capabilities of the poor, and for overlooking efforts for equitable distribution of resources (De Satgé 2002). The framework has also been criticized for not providing a clear explanation of how conflict over access to resources affects choice of livelihoods and the means to address it (Farrington et al. 1999).

This study does not attempt to explore and interpret in great depth all aspects of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as applied to female headed households in the study area. It is restricted to one aspect of the framework that identifies factors that determine the choice of livelihood strategies of females that head households. Nevertheless, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the key elements of the framework and how they are interrelated. The following diagram illustrates these linkages.





Diagram 1: DFID's Livelihoods Framework



H - human capital  
P - physical capital  
S - social capital  
F - financial capital  
N - natural capital

Source: De Satgé (2002, p.5)

## 2. Livelihood Strategies of the Urban Poor

According to Scoones (1998), Farrington et al. (1999) and De Satgé (2002) livelihood strategies of the poor are determined by the range of assets available to them to pursue different activities that would enable them to secure a sustainable livelihood. However, the poor are highly influenced by their vulnerability, shocks, overall trends and seasonal variations. In addition, structures such as the role of government and the private sector and processes such as institutional, policy and cultural factors, which people face, also determine options for choice of livelihood strategies.

Khan (2003) explains the role of formal and informal institutions in livelihood strategies of the poor. He argues that formal institutions, both governmental and non governmental, neglect the poor. The poor are usually unaware of their rights to benefit from formal institutions and as such largely depend on informal institutions for their livelihoods. However, informal institutions could also affect the poor negatively neglecting them or exercising power to control their resources.

According to Salah (1985), Beall and Kanji (1999), Khan (2003) and Hossain (2005), the urban poor are mostly engaged in self managed low paid jobs in the urban informal sector to cope with urban life. A very small proportion of them are also engaged in low paying employment in government or non governmental organizations. In the informal sector, the urban poor are mostly engaged in activities like street vending and selling, construction work, driving and transport work, factory work and personal services facing physical, mental and sexual harassment at their work places. Widespread and persistent lack of employment opportunities and physical illness are common among the urban poor (Salah 1985, Katapa 1993).

The urban poor diversify their income sources, put more family members into the workforce, increase their family size, reside in low cost housing, lease land and rent houses, depend on utility services from informal sources and use kinship as a social capital in order to sustain themselves with the low income that they earn from informal activities. Those who migrate from rural areas keep their rural ties as they rely on supports from their relatives and friends in times of need. Mutual supports through participation in community based organizations are also essential for the urban poor to mitigate their economic and social crisis (Beall and Kanji 1999, Khan 2003 and Hossain 2005).

Women are disproportionately represented among the urban poor both in the category of those whose long-term poverty is deepening and those for whom poverty is relatively recent (UNDP 1995 cited in





Sweetman 1996). Beall (1996) gives three reasons why women dominate among the poor in cities. The first one is that the jobs women are engaged in are poorly paid part time jobs where job security is low even in the contexts where women workers are preferred. The second one is because of inequalities in resource distribution, and decision making power within the household, women do not always control their income. The third reason is that women generally do not command equal resources or assets compared to men in their society.

For the majority of poor women, living in the urban centres of developing countries demands survival through informal work (Sweetman 1996). According to Salah (1985), women engage in informal activities without adequate resources or formal training and their interest is simply in survival. As a result, many of them do not succeed in making enough income to make ends meet. Most of the time women engage in trade and related activities (Hoynes 1995, UN 1996), often engaging in home based informal activities as a livelihood strategy, using their living quarters both for production and reproduction (Hossain 2005).

Poverty among urban women is exacerbated when they become household heads. There is a common assumption that the 'feminization of poverty', or the fact that women bear a disproportionate and growing burden of poverty at a global scale in recent decades, is a result of the 'feminization of household headship' (Chant 2003). Chant presents a finding of an internet circular distributed by the Mexican Ministry of Economy, which states that the 'feminization of poverty' is being accelerated by increasing rates of divorce and separation. What's more, the traditional freedom of men from reproductive roles, which makes women entirely responsible for their children, throws more and more women into the poverty trap. Of no less significance is the fact that poverty of female household heads affects not only women but also their children thereby deepening the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty (ibid). As stated earlier, this research explored the livelihood strategies of urban women in Wolenchiti, a small town found at a road distance of about 125 kilometres to the southeast of Addis Ababa, the national capital of Ethiopia.



### 3. General Overview of Female Household Heads and their Livelihood Strategies

According to Chant (2003, p.5), female household headship refers to “situations where an adult woman (usually with children) resides without a male partner (or, in some cases, in the absence of another adult male such as a father or brother)”. Tiruwork, on the other hand, distinguishes between *de-jure* and *de-facto female headed households*. Female household heads in the *de-jure* category are those who never married and those that are legally or permanently separated from their partners or husbands. *De-facto* female heads are those whose partners or spouses are temporarily absent or women that play dominant economic roles in the family though their partners reside with them (Tiruwork 1998). According to Tesfu (1996), 80-90% of female household heads are without partners i.e. *de-jure* type of female household heads.

Economic conditions of female household heads vary depending on their marital status, access to income and productive resources and their social networks (Wabwire 1997). However, study findings of O’Connell (1992), Selamawit (1994) and Fuwa (1999) have shown that female household heads are considered to be the poorest of the poor largely owing to their readily observable low economic and social status. Bennett (1992) further explains this, stating that access to and constraint of productive resources directly contributes to poverty of female household heads as it plays a major role in their choice of livelihood strategies. Todaro (1997) also states that low access to resources constrains choice of livelihood strategies. Accordingly, the restricted range of choices that female household heads have due to their low access to resources stagnates their productivity as it creates good opportunities for men to continue improving their livelihoods.

Roung (1995) mentions the social and economic supports of institutions such as development organizations, community based organizations and others in the life of female household heads. However, it is only a few women household heads who access these services. For instance, Wabwire (1997, p.38) describes some of the disadvantages of female household heads with regard to credit services by stating that “they have particular disadvantages in securing loans because of such problems as lack of information about credit programmes, low and irregular income, lack of collateral, complicated loan application procedures, and women’s lack of legal standing in certain areas”.

Chant (2003) noted that poverty of female household heads has become a proxy for poverty in general and poverty of women in particular. She stated that female-headed households face more risk of poverty mainly in terms of income, health and nutritional status. In addition, women are more disadvantaged than men because of their lack of entitlement,



constraints in socio-economic mobility due to cultural and legal factors and their heavier burdens because of their triple roles in the community (income generation, childcare and community/social activities). It is all the more difficult for women, the already disadvantaged group, she argues, when they become heads of households that are incomplete (lacking a male bread-winner) and under resourced. In her explanation of the choices of livelihood strategies of female household heads, Chant indicates that female heads are not only missing bread-winning partners:

On one hand, female heads are conjectured to have less time and energy to perform the full range of non-market work so vital to income conservation in poor neighborhoods, such as shopping around for the cheapest foodstuffs, or self-provisioning rather than purchasing market goods and services. On the other hand, women's 'reproduction tax' (Palmer, 1992) cuts heavily into economic productivity, with lone mothers often confined to part-time, flexible, and/or home-based occupations. This is compounded by women's disadvantage in respect of education and training, their lower average earnings, gender discrimination in the workplace, and the fact that social and labour policies rarely provide more than minimal support for parenting (Chant 2003, p.7).

According to Mayee (2003, p.21), "when a female loses her husband she discovers herself in a world of problems—the difficulty to earn an income topping the list. Not accustomed to doing works outside her home, it becomes a huge task for her to manage a job". Mayee argues that women lose income and social networks when they lose their partners and become household heads, as it is the male head that is primarily responsible for household income, and men usually play a role in public life.

Women may also lose their identities when they become household heads. This mainly results from taking up the heavy responsibilities of being household heads which includes taking care of their children, earning income to sustain their families and trying to maintain and develop their social network with their kin and non-kin relationships. They sometimes face stigma from wider society because of their new roles and identity changes, nevertheless, according to Mayee (2003), they may become more vocal and courageous as a result.

The poor urban female household heads earn their daily bread by engaging in various forms of urban informal activities. In most cases such informal sector engagements are characterized by little or no fringe benefits, social security coverage or pensions (Salah 1985, Sweetman 1996, Ongile 1997). A study conducted by the UN (1996) confirmed this by stating that female household heads choose the informal sector, as



they often do not fulfil the educational requirements of the formal sector. In addition, flexible working conditions and ease of entry, as well as small initial capital requirements also contribute to their participation in informal activities.

In the informal sector, the financial difficulty of female household heads is aggravated by women's limited access to 'physical capital assets' or 'non-labour resources' such as infrastructure, land and property ownership. For example, where informal businesses require homes, female household heads that have no place and have to rent or share their accommodation with others can see their choices or scale of entrepreneurial activities seriously constrained by property owners or co-dwellers. They may also face labour shortages due in part to the number and gender mix of their household members (Chant 2003).



#### 4. Livelihood Strategies of Female Household Heads in Urban Ethiopia

Poverty is a serious problem in Ethiopia. The proportion of people living in poverty was estimated to be 44% in the year 1999/2000 (Adem 2002). However, men and women experience poverty differently due to gender differentiated processes. In the same manner their livelihood strategies are also different (Zenebe 2002). Women head 21% of the households in urban Ethiopia. A welfare monitoring study conducted in 1999/2000 indicated that the incidence of poverty is increasing in urban areas mainly among female headed households (Adem 2002).

Like in most other developing countries, the informal sector has embraced a significant proportion of the urban population in Ethiopia. According to the reports of the Central Statistical Agency (1999), it absorbs 50.6% of the urban population. These are full time workers and also part-timers who work to supplement the income they earn from the formal sector. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the sector is dominated by those who work to satisfy their basic needs and in so doing ensure the survival of themselves and of their immediate dependents (Selamawit 1994).

According to findings of a study conducted in Ethiopia by Nuri (1992), the majority of women, including those who head households, participate in low status and low paying jobs in the urban informal sector depending on their demographic and socio-economic characteristics. In fact, most of them are not successful as informal sector workers and are often observed diversifying and changing jobs from time to time in search of better income. The major types of activities that these women participate in include petty trading, domestic service, daily labour and prostitution. This is still the case for women in Ethiopia today.

Involvement in petty trading includes those women who sell food, beverages, clothes and handicrafts and other immediately needed goods in a local market in or outside their neighbourhood (Nuri 1992, Selamawit 1994). Under domestic service, women serve as household help (baby sitters, house servants. etc.) (Nuri 1992). Involvement in daily labour includes those who work in construction areas (buildings, roads, etc.) and are paid on daily performance (Selamawit 1994). Prostitution also serves as a source of income for young female migrants. As indicated by Andargachew (1998), women usually do not become involved in prostitution in areas where they are born and brought up. Such women are understandably more likely to be infected by sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.



At present, it appears that the number of female household heads is increasing at a faster rate in the towns and cities of Ethiopia. The reasons behind this, according to Tesfu (1996), Tiruwork (1998) and Zenebe (2002), could be early marriage, increasing rates of widowhood, high divorce rates and the apparently fast growing number of children who are born outside wedlock and are expected to be raised by their mothers. Moreover, due to such factors as unemployment, illness and occupational mobility, many fathers simply fail to play their paternal roles (ibid).



## 5. Determinants of Livelihood Strategies of Female Household Heads in Wolenchiti Town

As stated earlier, writers such as Salah (1985), Beall and Kanji (1999), Khan (2003) and Hossain (2005) have stated that in order to cope with urban life, the urban poor are mostly engaged in self-managed low paid jobs in the urban informal sector. The findings of this research also support the views of these scholars on this critical issue. In fact, nearly all the poor female household heads in Wolenchiti town are engaged in urban informal activities in order to survive. With respect to specific areas of engagement, these scholars have identified that the major livelihood activities of the urban poor include manufacturing, processing (e.g. food, garments, etc.), trading and service provision. In the Ethiopian context, writers such as Nuri (1992) and Selamawit (1994) have stated that the major urban informal activities in the country tend to be petty trading, domestic services, daily labour and prostitution. The findings of this study have strongly confirmed that all these livelihood activities comprise the major livelihood activities of the poor female household heads in Wolenchiti town. In addition to these activities, a considerable proportion of the female household heads in Wolenchiti are engaged in urban agriculture in order to augment their meagre incomes.

As mentioned earlier, the literature on the urban informal sector indicates that urban women engage in informal activities without adequate resources, formal training and occupational interest (Salah 1985). In fact, they join the sector merely for the purpose of survival and often end up getting involved in petty trade and related activities. As Salah's work suggests, women who join the sector in this way often find it hard to improve their lives after years of hard work simply because the incomes they earn are not adequate even to meet their basic needs let alone to save and invest in business undertakings that could draw better returns. The findings of this study are very much consistent with this view. In fact, as repeatedly stated earlier, most female household heads in Wolenchiti, are engaged mainly in low paying home based petty trades such as the sale of traditional drinks and prostitution.

### 5.1 Demographic, Socio Economic and Institutional Factors

As discussed above, the livelihood strategies of the poor are determined by their vulnerability contexts and their access to different assets (Scoones 1998, Farrington et al 1999 and De Satgé 2002). As shown below, the case of poor women in Wolechiti town confirms that both factors, that is, vulnerability context and access to different assets are determined considerably by the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the female household heads.



### 5.1.1 Demographic Factors

According to the findings of this study, one of the major demographic factors that determines the livelihood strategies of the poor female household heads in Wolenchiti town is marital status. This is consistent with the view of Wabwire (1997) that economic conditions of female household heads vary depending on their marital status. While attempting to further explain this, Mayee (2003) states that *de-jure* female household heads are more destitute and vulnerable than the *de-facto* ones. More specifically, she states the following:

The *de-facto* type's problems are usually temporary. But the *de-jure* are not equally lucky. The *de-facto* female heads are relieved of their duties and responsibilities once their male member, usually husbands return home. Even those with sick or disabled husbands can look for mental support and advice from them. But the *de-jure* have to fend for themselves most of the time (Mayee 2003, p.38).

Very much in agreement with the arguments of Wabwire (1997) and Mayee (2003), the findings of this study indicated that those women who receive support from their spouses are better off than those who are widows or those who do not receive support from some other sources. Furthermore, the research findings have shown that remarriages are among the key livelihood strategies of female household heads in Wolenchiti town. Nonetheless, our findings strongly indicated that remarriage is not a good livelihood strategy in the study area because it tends to worsen the situation of the women due to the increasing number of children that result from each marriage. For instance, a woman described the negative effects of her remarriage as follows;

*One of the reasons for my misery are the number of children that I got from each of my marriages...my first husband left me with two children without any support...then I got remarried to my third husband and added two more children. I have now four children to raise all by myself. I was in a better condition before I got married to my third husband.*

As stated above, age is one of the major demographic factors that determine the livelihood strategies of female household heads. For instance, according to Nuri (1992) and Selamawit (1994), it is mainly the young female household heads that are mostly engaged in domestic service, daily labour and prostitution. This is also true in the case of Wolenchiti where younger female household heads in the town are mostly engaged in domestic service, daily labour and prostitution as stated earlier.





Nuri and Selamawit have also written that migration status is very much associated with the type of livelihood strategies chosen. As discussed above, the findings of this study have established that demographic factors play a crucial role in the choice of the livelihood strategies of poor women in Wolenchiti town. For instance, it has shown that those women who have migrated from the surrounding rural areas tend to be much more engaged in agricultural production in comparison to those born in the town proper. Moreover, the study also indicated that the number of years that these migrant women have stayed in the town is considerably associated with the types of livelihood activities that they practice. For instance, the findings revealed that while migrants who are recent arrivals tend to be engaged in prostitution, those who have stayed longer seem to be predominantly involved in other livelihood strategies. Those who recently migrated face different challenges until they get well settled and pass their adjustment period to their new urban life. Prostitution appears to be the only option available for the overwhelming majority of the migrants that have newly arrived in the town. Those who have stayed longer are in a better condition as they are well aware of their environment and have established a good social network that enables them to get employment and other social and economic supports. Besides, under normal circumstances, long time residents are less likely to get involved in prostitution, due mainly to the fact that most community members consider the activity as an extremely shameful way of earning an income. One of the respondents explained this by saying, *“there is no single woman who openly tells that she is a prostitute, as it is a very shameful work in our community”*.

### 5.1.2. Socioeconomic Factors

As shown in the conceptual framework, five types of assets (human, financial, social, physical and natural capital) are thought essential to build the livelihood strategies of the poor (Scoones 1998, Farrington et al 1999 and De Satgé 2002). The findings of this study suggested that all these socio-economic factors play significant roles in the choice of livelihood strategies of female household heads in the study area. For instance, the results of the study showed that financial capital is a key factor behind the involvement of most female household heads in Wolenchiti in petty trading. As nearly all poor women in the town have no access whatsoever to credit facilities, they find petty trading as the only area of work that they could enter with little difficulty. As petty trading is often a hand to mouth affair in Wolenchiti, nearly all of those involved in this activity tend to face frequent financial shortages. As mentioned earlier, researchers such as Salah (1985), Beall and Kanji (1999), Khan (2003) and Hossain (2005) have written that financial shortages



are common among the urban poor of the developing world. These researchers have also explained that the reasons for these financial problems are frequent unemployment due to lack of employment opportunities and physical illness. This is particularly true in the case of female household heads in Wolenchiti, who for the most part find it a daunting uphill struggle to effectively run modest petty trades or to remain employed in a town where the purchasing power of the population is woefully low. In fact, most women in Wolenchiti face unemployment from time to time as their employment opportunities are seasonal (e.g. daily laborers get employment only in peak agricultural seasons and the need for domestic service is not regular or is available only when there is a demand).

In Wolenchiti, shortage of financial capital, which is commonly faced by all female household heads, forces women to diversify their livelihood activities in order to increase their income. When Hossain (2005) attempted to explain the mechanisms used by female household heads to cope with financial shortages, he stated that the poor restrict their expenses to cover the basic needs of food and shelter. Accordingly, their expenditure tends to be very low on clothing, medicine, education and other items that they think of as luxurious. Even for food and shelter, they rely on cheap food stuff from retail shops in their neighbourhoods. This is commonly practiced by the female household heads in Wolenchiti town. In a related work Masika (1997) argues that the expenditure patterns of female headed households are biased towards nutrition and education in comparison to those of male headed households. However, the study found that this is not always possible in Wolenchiti, where it is quite common for children of female headed households to be considerably malnourished and frequently dropping out of schools.

The findings of this research have also confirmed the importance of human capital (Scoones 1998, Farrington et al 1999 and De Satgé 2002) in the choice of the livelihood strategies of female headed households. In fact, the results of the study particularly revealed that the poor female household heads in Wolenchiti town are highly dependent on economic, social and psychological supports from their children and other dependents. For instance a woman described the financial support she gets from her children as follows; *“my eldest daughter used to support me by engaging in different income generating activities such as daily labouring...my second born is epileptic and as a result he is not able to contribute to the family income. I was devastated when I lost my eldest daughter due to a car accident...I am now supported by my two daughters who are 10 and 13”*. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Khan (2003), Hossain (2005), and Beall and Kanji (1999) which underline the fact that the urban poor increase their income by putting more family members into the workforce.



The findings of the research have also revealed that educational qualification plays a major role as one of the determinants of the livelihood strategies of female household heads in Wolenchiti town. This is very much in line with the above mentioned widely held view that female household heads choose to join the informal sector, as they do not fulfil the educational requirements of the formal sector (UN 1996). What is more, very few female household heads in Wolenchiti got proper training for the livelihood strategies that they are presently engaged in.

As indicated above, the social status of the female household heads in Wolenchiti also plays an important role in determining their livelihood strategies. In fact, most female household heads in Wolenchiti face problems for the simple reason of lacking partners or spouses because the community doesn't give due respect to households that are headed by women. Mayee (2003) explained this situation by stating that women face stigma and isolation when they become household heads because of their new roles as bread winners.

Many writers hold the view that the poor depend on utility services from informal sources and use kinship as a social capital in order to sustain themselves and their families with the low income that they earn from informal activities (Beall and Kanji 1999; Khan 2003 and Hossain 2005). This is quite common in Wolenchiti where the poor female household heads tend to draw on their social networks and group membership to make a living. Even those who migrated from rural areas keep their rural ties as they rely on supports from their relatives in times of need. When one female household head explained this during the focus group discussion, she stated, *"I always look for financial and other supports from my relatives that live in the nearby rural area. For instance, it was my relatives who provided me with grain when I had not enough cash to purchase food"*. Another woman also supported this by stating, *"my rural relatives are the ones who would take care of my children if something happens to me"*.

It is also widely held that mutual supports through participation in community based organizations are essential for the urban poor to mitigate their economic and social crises (Beall and Kanji 1999; Khan 2003 and Hossain 2005). As shown above, the fact that most of the female household heads in Wolenchiti are found to be members of community based organizations such as *Eddir* and *Equb*<sup>1</sup>, strongly confirms that this is also true in the case of the study area. A woman described the support she gained from *Eddir* as follows,

*by the time my husband died I didn't have anything even to process the funeral. This was a time when I completely relied on the assistance of Eddir for which I used to contribute money on a weekly basis. The Eddir covered all my funeral expenses and also provided me with some money to keep me going after the death of my husband.*

<sup>1</sup> *Eddir* is a community based association the principal function of which is taking care of funeral services whereas *Equb* is a voluntary saving association.



### 5.1.3 Institutional Factors

As discussed in the initial chapters of this study, the livelihood strategies of the poor are also determined by formal and informal institutions that are operational among them (Scoones 1998, Farrington et al 1999 and De Satgé 2002). Rounq (1995) also mentions the social and economic support role of institutions such as development organizations, community based organizations and others in the life of female household heads. Very much in agreement with this view, this research found that formal and informal institutions play a considerable role in the choices of the livelihood strategies of female household heads in Wolenchiti town. For instance, this can be seen in the fact that, as mentioned earlier, NGOs such as World Vision Ethiopia and Christian Children's Fund Ethiopia are presently involved in projects that are intended to improve the living conditions of female household heads in Wolenchiti town. Aside from these NGOs, the other formal organizations that support the female household heads in the town are governmental organizations that include the Women's Affairs Office and the Cooperatives Office.

With regard to informal institutions, poor female household heads get shelter, work opportunities, food and other basic materials from relatives and neighbours. On the other hand, as alluded to in earlier sections, families and neighbours are the most influential sources of support for female household heads in the town in addition to the two well known community based organizations such as *Eddir* and *Equb*. Scholars like Khan (2003) argue that formal institutions, both governmental and non governmental, tend to neglect the poor. The research findings also support Khan's argument that the poor tend to draw more support from the informal institutions as their livelihood strategies revolve around informal activities. The views of Khan (2003), which underline that religious institutions and community based organizations are influential in shaping the livelihoods of the poor by providing, or withholding, facilities and services, have also been found to be relevant as far as the findings of this study are concerned. In fact, religious institutions are among the formal institutions that provide moral and psychological support for female household heads in Wolenchiti town.

As discussed above, there are also negative institutional and cultural factors that play major roles in determining the livelihood strategies of the poor (Scoones 1998, Farrington et al 1999 and De Satgé 2002) in the so-called 'developing world'. One of the most important findings of this study in this regard, is the negative role played in the lives of female household heads by the cultural practice known as "*Fole*" in Wolenchiti town. The '*Fole*' culture, which requires women in Wolenchiti to remarry without their consent after their widowhood, is in fact a good



example of the negative impacts of informal institutions on the livelihood of female household heads. What is more, the study has found that the culture of early marriage, which is widely practiced in the community, is another negative informal institutional factor that tends to expose young women to unstable marriages and their consequent choices of livelihood strategies such as the sale of traditional drinks and prostitution in Wolenchiti.



## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusions

Female household heads in Wolenchiti town involved in this study live in poverty. Gender inequality with regard to access to education and training has made it all the more difficult for them to lead a decent life with well paying jobs and income generating activities. As a result, the majority earn their living by engaging in different livelihood activities in the informal sector. The strategies that they use in order to survive in this course of struggle are many and varied. The most commonly used survival strategies, however, are frequent change of occupations, performing two or more income generating activities at the same time, and remarriage. Other important survival strategies used include leasing or subletting their dwelling units and letting their school aged children engage in income generating activities. Income from these livelihood activities is not adequate and as a result poor female household heads face critical shortages of basic needs such as food.

Petty trade is the most common livelihood activity practiced by the majority of female household heads in Wolenchiti town. From the petty trading category, the majority are involved in the sale of local drinks which is mostly conducted in their living quarters. The livelihood activities that are considered as preferable by the community are selling grains and other essential goods in the local market and the fattening of sheep and goats.

Age, marital status, age at first marriage, number of years of headship and migration status are the major demographic factors that determine the livelihood strategies of female household heads. In addition, socio-economic factors such as access to different resources that include financial, social, human, physical and natural capital play major roles in the livelihoods of female household heads. Institutional factors that include governmental and non governmental organizations, and community based institutions also make a difference in the choice of livelihood strategies of female household heads. Social networks with neighbours and friends and kinship are also key factors in the livelihood strategy of female household heads.

As regards future plans, the female household heads do not seem to have any concrete plans that are significantly different from the livelihood strategies that they have been pursuing. Most of them feel that they have already exhausted all the avenues of economic improvement that were open to them. Many of them cannot even look forward to the support of their children, as the probability of their children finishing school and securing gainful employment is very low.



## 6.2 Recommendations

The results of the research in general showed that the livelihoods of virtually all of the female household heads in Wolenchiti town are nothing more than a series of struggles to survive against all odds. The research has conclusively shown that such women cannot improve their living conditions on their own. Nearly all of them have apparently exhausted all the avenues to improvement that are open to them. None of the livelihood strategies they have been able to use have been effective in alleviating their problems let alone in improving their living conditions.

Solutions suggested by the female household heads to improve their livelihoods include institutional support through governmental and non governmental organizations. This type of support should come in a package where female household heads can get skills training on income generating activities and be able to get credit services for the initial capital required to start a business with the skill they have acquired. In general, the alleviation of the plight of these groups of society lies in the timely, systematic and coordinated assistance of all concerned including public and private institutions in the country.



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