CHAPTER EIGHT
FEATURES OF RURAL FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

8.1 Introduction

The typical feature of rural FHHs attracts nowadays the attention of many governmental and non-governmental organizations both at global and national level. At regional and local levels, they are also targets of many development initiatives. This is due to two main reasons. The first is the steadily rise of FHHs because of the existing political, economic, social, cultural, demographic complexities found in the country, Ethiopia. The second is that FHHs have been neglected for many decades as single social category of the society so that, unlike their counterpart’s i.e., MHHs, their issues did not get attention by several policies.

Many factors contribute to the formation of FHHs in the study area. Divorce, death of husband’s, desertion (abandoning) and never-married are primary reasons for the creation of single females and males. Single males and females own unequal chance for remarriage. Women with children are, for example, less demandable for marriage since they are seen as dependents while men, whether they have children or not do not want to live alone. A man can hardly survive without the labor of a woman. Hence, women are easily exposed to household heads.

Although the formation of FHHs has been existed for centuries, the society in the study area still considered FHHs as breaking the norms of the society. Such

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19 In this context, singles are individuals, who live without partners and may mostly reside in their parents’ home. Single persons are forced to establish their own separate homes for various reasons. These may be absence of parents, disagreement with family members, lack of interest to living with parents and the like.
societal resistance has been reflected in various ways due to the fact that they do not have positive attitudes towards them, which puts FHHs under pressure to confine in their own homes. They have been isolated from participation of community affairs and development activities. This brings long lasting impact on them and their household members.

This chapter discussed, identified, and analyzed about the incidence and contextual definition of FHHs, status of female household heads among the community, psychological and economic impacts on household members and positive aspects of being household headships.

8.2 Contextual Definitions of Rural Female-Headed Households

As stated in the literature, there is no single or constant definition to FHHs found in the world although several definitions have been given to FHHs at worldwide according to many literatures. One of the definitions to FHHs is given by Chant. Chant identifies seven typologies of FHHs and their characteristics in the world. Among these characteristics of FHHs, the researcher adopted and used the definition of FHHs as “households managed by a widowed, divorced, or a single woman without the mediation of a husband, father, or male relative in the routine day-to-day activities of the household” in the study (Chant1997:5).

According to the study area, the community as well as the government sectors, as to the researcher understanding did not have consistency in using and defining FHHs. The communities usage and definition to FHHs varies, which depends on the causes of FHHs whereas government sectors’ definition to FHHs relies on the nature of their sector.
For instance, Environment Protection, Land Administration and Use Office, which is one of the sectors found in Libo Kemkem Woreda, have defined household heads depending on their land possession. A husband or a wife, or single woman or a single man whose land certificates is in his/her name is defined as a household head. Accordingly, if a woman has a land certificate in her name, the household is defined as FHHs. Similarly, if a man has a land in his name is termed as MHHs. However, if a land is registered in the name of both a wife and husband is recorded as FHH and MHH. Therefore, land in this sector is considered as a landmark to classify FHHs and MHH.

Regarding the local community, they didn’t have common name or definition to those segments of the society rather they treat them separately. Local communities have several names to FHHs, which really go in line with the causes of FHHs. For example, a widowed is a woman whose husband is dead and the community understood them by default as head of the household. But, they named as set adari. On the other hand, a divorcee is a woman who divorced her husband legally or traditionally with her husband but she may live with her parents or independently. The community calls these women regardless of their living status as galemota. The other two causes of FHHs such as desertion and being never-married are also treated similar to divorcee woman as galemota. However, the attributes galemota and set adari (or setegna adari) are familiar terms in the society, the community gives derogatory names to divorced, widowed and being never married females calling them as galemota, gefi and edilebis, respectively.

According to the study informants, the word galemotta is an insult, which is equivalent to “prostitute.” People sometime denote similar meaning to setegna adari. However, setegna adari is a woman living without a husband and carrying out various
activities except commercial sex work. Members of the society use the words interchangeably.

Nevertheless, there is an appropriate technical term used by few officials/development workers to denote female-headed families in general, which is also preferred by them called as ema-wura or emebelet. An equivalent term to male household head is aba-wura. This name is not well known by the majority. The researcher came to know this fact while the researcher was undertaking first phase of fieldwork. As a result, even if the researcher knew ema-wara was an officially accepted term since the majority didn't know it, the researcher is forced to use the term galemotta or setegna adari instead of ema-wara to refer to women who are heads of a family.

8.3 Causes for the Incidence of Rural Female-Headed Households

As illustrated by Central Statistical Agency (CSA) (2010), marital status fell under six major categories: (never-married, currently married, divorced, separated, widow/ widower and living together as husband and spouse). However, main topic of the discussion focused only on marital status, which can be causes of FHHs.

In the study area, the main causes for being FHHs include death of husband, divorce, desertion and never-married. Even though the causes for the formation of FHHs differ in extent of occurrence, they are part of the study communities. The following table clearly shows the existence of the phenomenon.
Fig. 8.1: Marital status by causes of female-headed household

Source: Author’s household survey

From the sample survey of 150 FHHs, the two most common reasons for being a female head of household are, understandably, widowhood and divorce. About 52% and 41.3% of the total respondents are widowed and divorced respectively as indicated in Figure 8.1. Desertion accounted for 9% from the total respondents. The remaining 0.7%, which is so negligible were never married. The high prevalence rate of widowed is also observed in Tigray Region of Ethiopia (Meehan 2004) and Zegie Peninsula of Amhara Region (Tihut 2009).

Widowed, divorced, desertion and never-married are also the outcomes of social, economic, political, cultural, and health factors. Under this study social factors include unequal decision power, violence, conflict over household resources, physical beatings and abuse of wife, establishing bad relations with neighbors and relatives, intoxication, jealousy, extravagancy, laziness, and accidents. Economic-political factors comprise of migration, impoverishment, resettlement, war, poor financial management and dowry shortages. Cultural factors include early marriage, caste/ethnicity, and committing adultery. Illnesses, disability, HIV/AIDS, bareness,
old age, sexual incompatibility are related with health problems. These factors, as suggested by Kumlačew (2001), Yigremew (2001) and Daniel (1994), are among the many potent reasons that accounts for the increasing rate of divorce, widowhood and separation and of lastly resulted in the establishment of FHHs.

Table 8.1: Distribution of reasons for the formation of female-headed households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of marital status</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Economic/political</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>10 (12.8)</td>
<td>2 (2.6)</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>66 (84.6)</td>
<td>78 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>25 (40.3)</td>
<td>21 (33.9)</td>
<td>8 (12.9)</td>
<td>8 (12.9)</td>
<td>62 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desertion</td>
<td>3 (33.3)</td>
<td>6 (66.7)</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>9 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never-married</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>0 (.0)</td>
<td>100 (100.0)</td>
<td>1 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38 (25.3)</td>
<td>29 (19.3)</td>
<td>8 (5.3)</td>
<td>75 (50.0)</td>
<td>150 (100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*numbers in brackets are percentages

Source: Author household survey

A detail description and analysis of the above table result are presented below.

8.3.1 Widowhood

According to CSA (2010), widowed/widower defined as those who responded they had not been married after the death of their spouse. The causes for widowhood are very momentous in the study area. Widowed sometimes occurs unexpectedly. It differs from other factors for the creation of FHHs since individuals’ life is passed forever. The causes for widowhood are: diseases, conflict and accidents (i.e. flood, fire, car, hunger, and thirst).

Health related problem is by far the largest cause of death for the husbands of widowed FHHs, which accounted about 84.6%. Others like social and economic factors contribute fewer shares for the cause of widowed, which recorded 12.8% and
The 2008-2009 report shows that the top causes of morbidity in Libo Kemkem *Woreda* include malaria, diarrhea (non-bloody), intestinal parasites, acute upper respiratory tract infections, diarrhea (bloody), and pneumonia. According to the Amhara National Regional State Bureau of Health (BoH) annual report (as reported in Alemayehu 2008), 80% of the land of the State is malarial and 75% of the population is at risk of malaria infection. Malaria is responsible for 15-40% of hospital admissions, 7-30% of hospital deaths, and has a 10-25% case fatality rate. The disease is well known in both North Gonder Zone and South Gonder Zone, in which Libo Kemkem *Woreda* situated.

Among social problems, accident like car accident is the main problem for the death of people. Although war happened many decades in the area, its contribution is very small. The result is almost similar to the study undergone in Addis Ababa by FSCE (1998).

The above result is confirmed through the life history of one of the informants. She explains how disease claims the life of her husband as follows:

**Case 1**

I am 45 years old. I am a resident of Lomiye *Gott* in Ginaza *Kebele* where I was born and grown up. I stayed in marriage for a period of 15 years. I fell ill many times during my married life. I took medical treatment but I could not get well. I went to sorceress (*tenkuay*) house in search of advice. Then, one of them told me that my source of illness was associated with superstition (*kole*). He advised me that I could be cured from my illness if and only if I stopped my relation with my husband. As a result, I divorced him on my will. After certain years of staying, I married a man who lived in the same *Kebele*. I have two children from my second husband, one male and one female. We had sufficient household assets. And we were lived better-off. But, my husband died of malaria after eight years of marriage.

**8.3.2 Divorce**

From the causes of FHHs, divorce by itself is resulted from a number of factors. In Ethiopia, at least one third of first marriages end up in divorce or separation and most of these take place in the first two years of marriage (CSA cited by...
Kumlachew 2001). According to Kumlachew (2001) and Hobben (1973), early marriage in Northern parts of Ethiopia including Amhara region appears to be frequent and similarly high rate of marital separation observed. Divorced, according to CSA (2010), is defined as persons who had been married unless they have dissolved their marriage agreement.

As shown on Table 8.1, the first reason for the cause of divorce mentioned is social factors, which accounted for 40.3%. Economic or political problem (33.9%) is also given as the second common reason for the cause of divorce. Health related problem and cultural factors comprised of equal percentage i.e., 12.9%, for the causes of divorce in the study area.

How does economic problem affect the relation of partners negatively? One of the major sources of impoverishment is soil exhaustion. Soil exhaustion occurs due to continuous use, land degradation and the climatic change. It influences and worsens the life condition of peasants because agricultural production decreases year after year. Peasants could not achieve sufficient amount of crop production. Even though some individuals have used other mechanisms to maintain their marriage relations for long, they hardly endure the problem. Thus, impoverishment breaks the bonds of partners and it is one of the causes of divorce in the study area. In food insecure area, as Yared et al (2000) argue, greater marriage instability existed.

The story of one of the informant from Ginaza Kebele, supports the above idea as follows:

**Case 2**

I, 42, am a divorcee and a resident of the Nebro Gott. I married my husband at the age of 15. We were given one cow and one heifer from our parents as gift during marriage. I have 4 children, three males and one female. We had no land throughout our life time. I did not receive land during the 1983/4 land redistribution of the Derg regime due to the mal-administration of the existed committee members. Even though we had rented and shared farmlands of our neighbors for a number of times, we got insufficient amount of crop production.
due to failure of rain, lack of inputs, and the poor quality of the farmlands. This product was very small to feed ourselves and our children. Finally, poverty could not keep us together.

Another face of impoverishment also leads to separation of households. With the exception of few peasants in general at Woreda level and in particular at selected kebeles, several of the peasants have relied on rain-fed agriculture. Hence, the amount of production remains to be insufficient to feed them throughout the year. Therefore, spouses are used to sell the household properties to cope with the problem. This creates disputes between partners, which finally become a cause for divorce.

Moreover, the shortages of resources in most households compel partners to do additional works in order to win over household problem. It is customary that in the study area partners receive bride wealth from their parents during marriage. However, the gifts which are given from both parents are not enough and the provisions have never lasted for more than a year. As a result, the labor of both the husband and the wife is vital for the survival of the household. Thus, failure to fulfill ones duty causes divorce.

Social factors are a combination of reasons, which could also be sources for the disintegration of partners. Behavior can be explained in various dimensions. Not all individuals can have good behavior. Good behavior helps to maintain households from collapse. Characteristics of tolerance, respecting and understanding among individuals are basic parts of good behavior. However, few individuals lack such quality. Bad manner is expressed through controlling absolute power at household level, establishing bad relations with neighbors and relatives, intoxication, jealousy, extravagancy, laziness, committing adultery and so on. In the study area, men, for example, complain of their wives as committing adultery; inability of keeping houses properly; being disobedient and challenging their authority. Women, on their part have also greater
number of grievances. These include being beaten and ill-treated by their husbands, especially after drinking alcohols; giving them a lot of work including obliging them to keep cattle; suffering from bad relations with the mother-in-laws; restrictions on their activity and mobility.

Due to the proximity of selected kebeles to Yifag and Addis Zemen Towns, some people are accustomed to drinking local liquors (tella, araki, tej) frequently. Individuals show ill-manner such as beating, humiliating, harassing mainly their wives when they drink a lot. Particularly this causes conflict between partners, which finally leads to the separation of spouses.

Divorce sometimes occurs when there is disagreement between partners’ parents over their couples permanent living place i.e. matrilocal (wife’s parents living place) or patrilocal (husband’s parents (fathers) living place). Moreover, children born out of wedlock become a source of conflict for partners in the study area. This leads to divorce of partners.

Men in the study kebeles are generally in charge of the larger animals which include cattle and oxen while women take care of smaller animals like chickens. Usually, men tend to sell livestock and grain and return home with cash. On the other hand, in order to meet regular household needs women tend to be more involved in the process of selling butter, home-spun wool, eggs or small quantity of grain. Thus, in the sample kebeles husbands control the income of the household. They use the incomes for various purposes. Some lose the money for household matters while others spend it for drinking. This is one of the reasons for the disintegration of families.

In some cases, disputes may arise between the couples family. Parents may change their idea before the couples start to live together. Few parents want their
married daughter and their husbands live in their locality. This is because their daughters work in close proximity to the mother-in-laws who often interfere in household matters. Since most of the couples married at their early age may not have their own houses, wives have workload in their mother-in-law houses. However, husbands do not accept their wives parents’ preference since in the study area it is not customary to live in their wives’ parent locality. In effect, divorce occurs.

In the study area, health related problem as mentioned before associated with various diseases and beliefs. For instance, barrenness is often a problem associated with the failure of women. Divorce immediately occurs when a husband and a wife are unable to give birth. Since women’s chance to remarry is low, there are many FHHs who are aged and live alone. These women are the most disadvantaged group. According to one of the informants, when women are unable to give birth, the marriage is either doomed to end in divorce or else the husband in most cases will practice adultery. However, this problem occurs both in females and males. A related problem is seen in one of the informants who express her feeling as follows.

Case 3

I, 32, am a divorcee and a resident of Woynico Gott at Ginaza kebele. I married my first husband at the age of 13 years in Shinatsion kebele in Fogera Woreda. We had one cow and an ox that were given from our parents. My husband’s parent gave us two timad of land (0.5 ha). I had a big interest to give birth but I could not because of health problem. I aborted many times. The abortion came naturally. After we lived in peace for four years, my husband divorced me. Then, I married my second husband after one year interval. He had a male child from another wife. We had two cows and three calves and two timad of land (0.5 ha). We produced a lot of onions and potato using irrigation. As a result, we got sufficient money. However, my husband disliked me due to my failure to giving birth. In my stay, I aborted two times. His parents pushed my husband to divorce me. Then, he started to squander the money by drinking tella and araki at Yifag and Addis Zemen towns. He harassed and beat me. He did not come home on time. He borrowed money without my knowledge. He practiced adultery at Yifag Town. I tried to solve the problem peacefully but he was not happy because of my failure to give birth. I asked him to take medical treatment but he had no interest. He wanted me to leave the home. Finally, I divorced him.
There are certain conditions that partners are also exposed to divorce due to old age. Usually, when a married couple get old they are more likely to divorce. At their old age, couples resort to divorce as they cannot support one another or when they lack supporter. Thus, the study revealed that old age is also one of the triggering factors for divorce.

Culture plays main important role for the preservation and continuity of generation through keeping the norms of the society. Societal norm and religion strictly forbid people to have kimits and wushimas (concubine). Though possession of concubine is illegal from religious, moral, and health aspects, few individuals possess kimits and wushimas besides to their legal wives at their kebeles, Yifag and Addis Zemen towns. Men, who are wealthy and have authority in their kebeles, want to have kimits. In addition, men may be forced to have kimits when their wives are barren. Since most FHHs lack adult labor and income, such women may not get married formally or taken upon wushimas informally. Thus, they become kimits in order to get incomes. However, disintegration of households occurs when men lack to provide and feed the households as well as their kimits.

Due to the unexpected interruption of her relation with her husband, one of the informants, 56, from Yifag Akababi Kebele, expresses her great anger to me. She states:

Case 4

I married twice but the second marriage took place through be-betechristian (religious marriage). We had many livestock, six children, six timads (3ha) of land. All the children are married. He was a breadwinner of the household. As a result, he had great decision power on household assets. Even though we were living in peace for several years, his behavior was changed through time. He sometimes did not come home after he had sold the crops. He often showed us strange behavior. However, I and my children did not know the reason for his absence. I tried to solve the problem with him but he had no interest to talk with me. Finally, he divorced me unexpectedly. We later heard the reason for divorcing me that he was getting kimit at Yifag Town. His kimit has a child from him. Our children have chosen not to intervene between us because they are afraid of his cursing.
Marriage relations are accepted when persons are at the right ages. It needs psychological, emotional and physiological preparedness of individuals, otherwise it fails soon. Among the society of Libo Kemkem Woreda in general and in rural areas in particular, according to the information obtained from Women, Children, and Youths Office and informants, people have exercised marriage at early ages. Just to repeat for the sake of convenience, in the society mostly the marriageable age for males are 10 to 25 years whereas for females it is 1 to 15 years old. Therefore, it is so difficult at these ages to carry out the responsibilities of parents. However, the effect of early marriage for divorce is shown indirectly. This is due to the fact that FHHs did not really recognize its effect as the causes of divorce and being FHHs. They mostly recall immediate causes of their divorce. As a result, early marriage was not chosen at least once though it was included as one of the option.

Fig. 8.2: Marital status by age at first marriage

Source: Author’s household survey

It can be observed from Figure 8.2 that in all selected kebeles covered, a significant proportion of ever-married female heads married before they were aged 17
years showing a high prevalence of early marriage among the samples. This might possibly be due to the high proportion of female heads. Another fact that can be easily observed from the same table is that more than three-quarter of the ever-married women in all kebeles entered into marital union for the first time before reaching age 20. The total proportion for this as indicated in the total column is more than 90%.

This doesn’t disprove the above facts because marriage in rural areas carried out through promises between couple parents. The promises will be realized when the couples feel strong enough for living together. Until then the couples live with their parents. However, this information gathered from informants as if they have started to live together.

The routine and laborious domestic work such as feeding and caring for children, managing houses properly, preparing foodstuffs (i.e., baking injera, cooking wat, grinding cereals) and the like may frustrate females who are teenagers. Participating in agricultural field operations such as planting, threshing, sowing, weeding, hoeing, collecting and transporting harvests also aggravate their problem. Therefore, females, who married early and under the drudgery of housework and the hardship of the rural life, are motivated to depart from their homes.

The aforementioned factors are, thus, heighten the frequency of divorce in the study area.
The majority of ever-married FHHs in all sample kebeles have married equally once and twice, 40.4%, as indicated in Figure 8.3. About 16.6% have married thrice. High proportion of ever married female heads, who married once and twice and thrice probably confirms to the general notion that women have high chance of remarriages.

**8.3.3 Desertion/ Separation**

Deserted or separated couples were considered to be married unless they have dissolved their marriage agreement (CSA 2010). For males, leaving the area in search of work and better life is prevalent mainly during crop failure, lack of money to pay back credits and lack of food in the household. Various factors contribute for the formation of deserted woman in the study area such as war participation, migration, resettlement, dissatisfaction and others.

Table 8.1 shows that economic and political problem comprised of 66.7% for cause of separation of partners, which is followed by social reasons, 33.3%.

Farmers are forced to migrate to faraway places to work as seasonal laborers. Some migrate to Humera, Mettema, Quara, Gondar, Bahir Dar and other remote areas.
However, migration occurs not only individually but also in group.

The following case displayed about how informants are exposed to desertion problems and become head of households. One of the informants explains her experience as follows:

**Case 5**

I am 35 years old and a resident of Dikule Gott at Yifag Akababi Kebele. I married when I was eight. I have 3 children, two females and one male. My elder daughter, 10, is a student. The other, two children are below six years old. My husband went to Quara Woreda with resettlers in 2006. He went after he sold the livestock and rented the farmland to a wealthy farmer. He did not even tell me and cancel out our marriage agreement. Thus, as you saw I live in a newly established home with my three children.

**8.3.4 Never-married**

Never-married refers to all persons who were single and had not been married earlier (CSA 2010). Although there is insignificant number of never-married woman found in the study area, informants believed that there might be few individuals who lived without getting married throughout their life due to some reasons.

One is due to their low health status according to Table 5.1. Their health problems are mainly associated with inherited diseases such as elephantiasis, epilepsy, skin disease, leprosy etc. Informants add that individuals who are categorized under the so-called slave and evil-eyed are not wanted for marriage. In short, health related problems and socio-cultural influences contributed for the causes of never-married.

One of the informants explained as “I am 32 years and a resident of Ajuhara Gott in Ginaza Kebele. I am a victim of elephantiasis. In effect, no one asked me for marriage until this age. So, I am forced to live without a partner. The chance of getting a husband is rare since the swelling increases as I get older.” **Case 6**

To sum up the study communities have been passed a number of stages throughout their life time. Some of them are divorced while others are widowed. Few
females are deserted since their husbands abandon them in search of jobs. Thus, the formation of FHHs has become a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon in the study area.

8.4 The Status of Rural Female-Headed Households among the Community

In patriarchal social systems, according to Peter (1981) and Sachs (1996), not only the social status of women are mainly derived from their husbands social status but also husbands are theoretically expected to give protection and provide their wives livelihood. In the community under study, the status of a person, like in other rural communities of the country, is ascribed rather than acquired. Likewise, if we consider the status of women particularly those who are heads of families, the problem becomes more serious and complex since the community has already labeled them as lower class group since they are living without male spouses. Studies and analysis of women, culture and society illustrate female subordination as universal. More or less women in every known culture are considered as inferior to men. According to Almaz (1991), there are two reasons, which are considered women in second status: biological and cultural. In this case, culture is regarded as superior to nature. As a result, this entails the procreative nature of women to a lower order. However, the scheme seems to be a construct of culture rather a fact of nature (Ibid).

In relation to the ascription of status in a society, Sachs (1996) argues that differences in skin color or ethnic traits may be fundamentally important in some places while in others differences in age, sex, education, or profession may be more significant. Such attribution has been reflected in the types of roles expected from men and women. According to Hirut (2000), this is because, sex and age are decisive
factors to define and ascribe the roles of men and women in traditional rural societies of Ethiopia.

Gender biased perception undermines the contribution and efforts of women in the community in general and FHHs in particular. Thus, some issues related to the status of female-headed families are discussed in detail below.

8.4.1 Societal Perceptions towards Rural Female-Headed Households

FHHs irrespective of their difference in wealth, family size, occupation, etc. are broadly perceived by the general public as one social category. This singles them out from other categories of the community. In fact, they have some special qualities like heading a family that make them competent to the MHHs.

The economic and educational backgrounds of an individual play a vital role in determining ones social and economic positions in the community. Though the community gives high value to wealth, female-headed families are not entitled for such prestige since most of them are not well-off. The community also gives important value to educational achievement since it paves the way to attain ones means of livelihood. But, since the community has negative attitude towards teaching girls/women, most women did not benefit from educational opportunities available in the community.

Regarding economic sources of FHHs, widows may relatively have better opportunities in obtaining assets than divorcees and deserted females. The reason is that most of the time widows inherit their deceased husbands’ property. However, divorced and deserted women have less access to property ownership unless they were rich enough before or backed by their parents. Divorcees own small assets since they share with their ex-husbands during divorce. In fact, women mostly do not get the right portion during divorce. Deserted women are rare in the study area. They are
poor abandoned women who have no sources of income since most of them are housewives.

However, the community considers FHHs as breaking of the norms of the society. Such societal resistance has been reflected in various ways. For instance, the community gives derogatory names to divorced, widowed and being never married females calling them galemota, gefi and edilebis (unfortunate), respectively. The attributes galemota and setegna adari (or setegna adari) are familiar terms in the society even though there is an appropriate technical term used by officials/development workers to denote FHHs i.e., ema-wura. In fact, as the researcher has mentioned before, the word galemotta is an insult, which is equivalent to “prostitute.” Setegna adari is a woman living without a husband and carrying out various activities except commercial sex work. Members of the society use the words inter-changeably. The proverb below portrays how the society looks down FHHs.

*Bal yelelat set, mantelteya yelelew kebero*

A woman without a husband is just like a drum without a strap.

A single woman, according to the proverb, is not worth of the title mistress of the household. Thus, a woman without a husband does not have equal respect as a married woman. Besides, an unmarried woman/girl is addressed as *komon ker* refers to an old maid. As mentioned earlier, women also lose their status when they become FHHs. In line with this idea, there is a proverb that lowers the status of FHHs among the communities. The following proverb emphasizes the respect of a married over the unmarried woman.

*Ye set kibrua balua.*

A woman’s honor is her husband.

In the discourse of everybody’s life too, in her childhood, a girl is considered pure and chaste by virtue of her virginity. Once she losses her virginity, it is believed
that she also loses her honor and needs to redress it through marriage.

Regarding females’ status in the community, in-depth interview from one of the informant reveals that:

**Case 7**

I am a divorcee with 2 children. I divorced my husband three years ago. Thus, I became a female household head. Our community has no positive attitude towards us (zik argew new yemiyyayun-the community despises us). Though the community treats us rudely, we still run our lives properly. We are not dependent on them. Even they do not call us with appropriate names. They usually call us galemotta or set adari. However, I am not comfortable with such terms. I feel very sorry and become angry when a person calls me with these names comparing myself with married woman because of inferiority complex. This, in turn, affected my social relation with my neighbors in particular and the society in general. They make me compare myself with married women and feel inferior.

Thus, the prevailing negative perceptions in the community towards FHHs seriously affect their active participation in the various spheres of life. It has been an obstacle that hinders them from utilizing their potential.

**8.4.2 Rural Female-Headed Households and their Social Interaction**

The domestic and outdoor responsibilities of women in the community are multifarious. These are food preparation, firewood collection, childcare, water fetching, farming, cattle raring, trading, handicraft and participating in different social gatherings and community based organizations.

Even though FHHs get involved in different activities of the community, their social interactions and relationships are limited by various constraints. The first vital factor is that FHHs do not have enough time to participate in social activities due to household responsibilities as breadwinner and a mother. The other main reason is that they are forced to get involved in non-agricultural activities to subsidize their family income other than agricultural production.

In the study area, there are a number of indigenous associations basically established for mutual-support. Some of them target in alleviating the financial
constraints that members have; and some others focus on providing labor support in cases where group labor is required at the household level such as debo and wonfel. Others have some religious ground, which gives psychosocial support to the members in cases of death, accident, and catastrophe. Among the religious based associations senbetie and mahibers can be mentioned as the main ones. Since membership to these associations needs cash or material contributions, or financial capacity to prepare feasts, some FHHs do not become members. In group discussions carried out with FHHs at Ginaza Kebele on date 13/4/2012, facts related to social organization has been pointed out:

We, female-headed households, do not have sufficient resources in our households. We do a lot in order to earn some money but we could not. Our income is simply from hand-to-mouth. We lack resources to take part in various social occasions such as wedding ceremony (serg), banquet in commemoration of a dead relative (teskar) and christening (kirstina). In addition to other expenses such as for labor, oil, firewood and etc, we have to prepare 1 to 3 pots (gan) of tella, 30 to 100 of injera, 2-3 bottles (termus) of araki, and 3-5 saucepan clay (dist) of wat. For instance, we do not participate in wedding ceremonies for the very fact that no one invites us -except our relatives- in wedding ceremony since we are considered as poor and lower status people who have no money to pay back the same. Besides, even if we get the chance to be invited, we simply reject the invitation by providing false excuse. We do this for the fear of inability to pay back such invitations. After all, we are poor and cannot afford the expenses of such big feasts.

FHHs also face other social problems. Since they have no husbands, a few FHHs are wanted by males as kimits. Married males are sometimes forced to have kimits when their wives are barren and have low health status. Others need kimits because it is considered as a symbol of wealth and authority. However, the action leads wives to lose not only their husbands affection but also household assets since their husbands start to share household assets to their kimits. Children also lack affection from their fathers as their fathers’ waste time with kimits.

Moreover, the action usually gives rise to quarrel not only between partners but also among their wives and kimits. In this regard, few wives attempt to advise
their husbands so as to stop their relation with their *kimits*. Some try to attack their husbands’ *kimits* while others leave their homes. This is because, according to the society’s tradition, the practice is considered as dishonorable for her. The revenge is done either by themselves or by their parents including relatives.

FHHs are found both in rural and urban areas. But, according to the study informants, males prefer to have *kimits* from urban areas to rural areas. The reason is that unlike rural areas, towns have large number of small bars (*mesheta betoch*) of which most of them are owned by FHHs. Males are accustomed to using bars for waiting and getting refreshment when they come to market places.

Like males, some FHHs want to have *wushimas*. Usually, poor female household heads engage in *wushimas*. Female household heads use various mechanisms to attract males. Most female heads are engaged in selling local drinks like *tella* and *areke*. This creates favorable condition for them to have more access to *wushimas* so that they could get quite a lot of sexual partners or clients at a time. In most cases they give emphasis to financial capacity of their clients rather other qualities. But, after they decided to belong to one out of the rest of the clients, they become busy to beautify themselves and decorate their houses as much as they can. And they invite and provide them with delicious food and homemade alcoholic drinks free of charge in order to show love. Thus, they make *wushimas* in this way. Due to various reasons, basically economic, rural males are easily trapped by FHHs and vice-versa.

Men misuse their household assets after they establish relationship with *kimits*. They provide them with support either in cash or in kind. *Kimits* are accepted by their *wushimas* as far as they provide assets to them. This gives rise to quarrelling of the couples. Men always quit such bad characters after they have exhausted their
household property. Consequently, due to the living style of FHHs, mostly women are easily exposed to HIV/AIDS.

8.4.3 Involvement of Rural Female-Headed Households in the Community Affairs: towards change

The decision-making role of FHHs can be seen from two angles: household and community. Decision-making roles of FHHs differ from households to community level. They have low decision-making role in the community due to socio-cultural and economic reasons. However, they have better position than women in MHHs because their husbands represent the household in political matters such as taxes, land allocation, participation in meetings and other community affairs.

The strong social embargo imposed on women has delimited their participation in communal matters and accomplishing some issues related to their rights in public places. The community has a negative attitude towards women’s participation in public gatherings. One can see this attitude of the community by observing the kinds of roles a boy or a girl given by their parents. Since it is part of the socialization process, even the female segment of the community has already accepted some of the social restrictions imposed upon them. In Amhara culture, in general, male and female children are expected to behave and act differently. Female children follow their mother’s footsteps whereas male children are like their fathers. Thus, house chores are the responsibility of girls and boys get engaged in productive works out of home. There is a saying in the community which depicts the existence of role demarcation between the sexes. It states:

Set be majet; wond be chilot

Woman in the kitchen/pantry, man in the court.

In fact, in the study community the above mentioned saying or other sayings
concerning male-female relationships helps to understand and further study the attitude of the society about sharing responsibilities and assigning of roles particularly in the formal system. The controlling of power dominantly by male in the formal system undermines the decision-making power of females in matters that affects them. The reason behind the eligibility of men for power or vital posts is that men are more exposed to outdoor activities and dealings of public affairs through which they obtain the experiences, knowledge and skills that enable them to be relatively the best fit. On the contrary, since the majority of women mainly involve in domestic activities including child carrying, their best place of work accepted by the community is their home.

Consequently, the alienation of women from the vital decision-making powers has brought the violation of their rights. For instance, if a woman appeals a case of physical or non-physical abuse (e.g. intimidation, harassment, being beaten, assault.) to the kebele social court, which is controlled by male, the probability of getting the right verdict is very low. Indeed, the case becomes very complicated if we consider the problems of FHHs since they are considered as helpless. Even if they encounter physical attack, they do not publicize the case due to fear of ex-communication the society. As a result, they resort to silence as some of the informants from Yifag Akababi village ascertained. According to these informants, females do not want to present their right related cases neither to kebele courts (mahiberawi shengo) nor to village elders basically for two reasons. First, decision-making power is restricted to males so that females do not expect fair litigations. Second, they are afraid of the resultant effect of publicizing the case.

Similarly, females do not share membership in the kebele courts as well as in village elderly council. This is due to the traditional influence of the communities.
Females are viewed as if they were ignorant. They do not have positions mainly on the patriarchal social organization of the rural communities. They have subordinate position. As a result, the exclusion of females in such institutions has an adverse impact on their rights.

Though kebele court system and council of the village elders have some problems, their contribution to the growth of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms is very high.

Such notion can easily be understood from the case history of one of the informants, aged 34, from Ginaza Kebele, who explained her experience as follows:

**Case 8**

When I divorced my husband, we had only 4 children and an ox. During divorce, village elders passed decision to divide the household assets equally. The ox was decided to be sold and the money to be shared among us equally. However, my husband took only one child, who was 12 years old. I appealed my complaint to the village elderly council where they warned him to take one more child. But, he refused to do so. Nothing has been done to make him accept the decision. Meanwhile, my final fate becomes to take the three children and shoulder the responsibility.

This scenario shows that the kebele court and the village elderly council pass decisions, which cannot be changed to reality due to their weak enforcing authority. However, women accept the decision half-heartedly only fearing the social pressure.

Moreover, results from group discussion among informants from the sample kebeles clearly provided information that women in the study community lack bargaining ability to look for alternative means to go about their cases. They share their experience as follows:

The kebele court and the village elderly council do not have permanent working hours by which they are obliged to sit to see the community’s dispute cases. Since their members are not paid, the working days and time are arranged as it fits them, and some influential clients but not the general public. In most cases, decisions are given not during the formal meetings rather in informal gatherings held in small bars. Since males have more access to the bars, they can easily get the court and council members and plead their case in advance. These local bars are conducive for enticement. Winning court cases through bribing is common and the winner is considered as a brave man. Thus, people rather than following the formal legal
process they prefer to accomplish their cases through the informal way. Even though we have been told by the kebele official that such kind of illegal act is against democracy and good governance, it is being practiced almost publicly. Indeed, it is we who are losing our rights. Even if we could get the access to bribe and win our case, we never escape from gossip of adultery.

When compared to past, as women informants from sample kebeles clearly put it, there are gradual changes in the awareness of respecting human rights particularly that of women. Efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations at all levels to curb the problem. The appealing of women's cases to court and women's appearing before the court equally with their male counterparts is part of the change process that can be mentioned as a good initiation. The establishment of Women Affairs Office formerly and now Women, Children and Youth Office at Woreda level and creation of awareness regarding to women’s issue throughout the rural areas have given power to women particularly to solve their dispute problems.

Moreover, females have begun to participate in conferences and seminars at kebele, Woreda, zonal and regional levels. Unlike women who are living within wedlock, women who are heads of families actively participate in community meetings and conferences. They also fear the backlash from the community. There is a commonly accepted notion favoring the gathering of male than female. Importantly, irrespective of the societal pressure female who are heads of households are participating in various conferences to ensure the protection of their rights. Therefore, with this lower level endeavor of women some very little improvements have been observed in empowering of women in kebeles system of administration. The low participation of women in different development activities, according to the Woreda development agents, has been exerting its influence in the preparation of women focused short and long-term programs.
Furthermore, with the intention of protecting their rights women have been organizing associations under auspices of the Woreda and kebele offices throughout Libo Kemkem Woreda. The associations are getting technical, material and financial support from non-governmental organizations operating in the region. Women issues have been addressed under Women, Children, and Youth Office. This can easily be understood through the following statement given by the Libo Kemkem Woreda Women, Children, and Youth Office (WCYO) head; she said:

The former Women Affair Office (WAO) and currently Women, Children, and Youth Office (WCYO) in Libo Kemkem Woreda plays main role for the improving the current status of women in general and female-headed households in particular. The main objective of the office is to empower women in order to make them struggle for their rights. The office focuses on various cultural, social, economic and political factors that are detaining the participation of women in the development initiatives. Though the outcome of the effort made is insignificant, the office is working in the areas that can alleviate the problems of women. For instance, in order to reach the grass root of the community, 32 women's affairs branches have been established in kebeles of the Woreda embracing around more than 2000 members. The Woreda office has been providing various supports to the branches and its members particularly in the area of capacity building through conducting workshops, training, and programs in order to enhance their awareness about women's rights. The office has also done other activities that motivate women to take part in income generating activities that helps to reduce the socio-cultural and economic problems of females.

During group discussions, participants explain the essence of WCYO as follows:

We, women, are composed of half of our population. We have a lot of responsibilities of doing domestic and non-domestic works. We work much of the household chores, but we do not have equal opportunities like our counterparts. As a result, we are much exposed to social, economic and cultural problems. Like males, we do not obtain extension services, credits, fertilizer and improved seeds properly. We quarreled with our husbands as well as other males due to assets. Even though we have presented our cases to kebele courts and village elders, we could not get justice. Court council members always mistreat us. Therefore, our only option is to become ardent supporter of WCYO. We could get justice through WCYO when our counterparts abuse us. We could keep our right if and only if we are members of women affairs. This, in turn, helps to maintain our equality with men.

In rural kebeles, individuals may sometimes lack access to advantages like access to agricultural inputs unless they join one of the established committees.
Women, thus, are forced to join WCYO. However, beneficiaries are insignificant in number. Moreover, association members lack independent power since kebele political appointees interfere. This issue was explained during group discussions and the majority participants (six out of eight) agreed that the established committees are not only time taking but the benefits obtained is not equated with the exerted efforts. In fact, they believed that few members are always beneficiaries at the expense of others.

**8.4.4 Positive Aspects of Being Female Household Heads**

The decision-making role of FHHs can be seen in two spheres: the household and the community. With respect to decision-making role of FHHs at household levels, they are more powerful than married women in FHHs. FHHs represent their families in all aspects, and decide on domestic resources and assets.

Women need economic adjustments after they become household heads. The fate of children and any household matters are in their own hands. Although they exercise full authority concerning financial matters and decision of households, the scarce resources in the households compel them to work tirelessly in order to feed themselves and their dependents. Fortunately, however, having decision power at household level enables them to accomplish various tasks both inside and outside their homes because there is no one to limit their movements.

As explained by informants, several FHHs own good quality of managing household properties. Though they face financial shortages, they have the ability to budget the incomes they obtain from diverse sources for household purposes economically and judiciously. But, few household headed by males lack the above qualities. Unlike FHHs, women in MHHs sometimes suffer from financial problems due to the ill-manner of their husbands. Husbands may squander the money
unnecessarily like for drinking alcohols and giving to their *kimits* if they have one.

Despite females in male households carrying out big share of domestic and agricultural field works, the power to decide on household properties is mainly handled by their husbands. Married mothers must take their husbands into account in everything they do. As a result, women have less decision-making power.

The existing tradition also discourages women in order not to have decision power and exercise their rights. There is a saying that shows the power of men related to decision of the household matters. It says:

*Wond balebet be ilet; set balechebet be amet*

A man fulfills his promise within the day, a woman within a year.

From the above proverb, one can understand that men are more powerful and practical than females in decisions-making. According to the proverb, unlike men, women preferences are not well maintained in short period of time. Males consider themselves as heads of the households, whether they become breadwinners or not. In effect, as the majority of the society believed, every matter of households will be correct if and only if the voices of males are kept. As female informants also explicated, “*The majority of males do not have any inclination to accept our preferences and interests. Though we established marriage relations all together, words are not respected equally. Therefore, we, female-headed households, possess more rights and freedoms than females in male-headed households.*”

Household is generally characterized by inequalities of its members both in the division of labor and decision-making on the household resources and benefits. Though decision-making authority depends on once socio-economic position in the society, usually women have less decision-making authority on household property as compared with their men counterparts. Even though this is partly because women
have subordinate position both in their households and in their society, FHHs are in better position regarding to decision-making power than females in MHHs.

8.5 Psychological and Economic Impacts on Household Members

Factors for the formation of FHHs such as divorce, widowhood, never-married and desertions are not only left to forming FHHs but it also goes beyond. Their repercussions make disorder on the psychological and economic life of household members. Especially, psychological disturbances may first occur on household members. Household members may take long time to recover from such predicaments. This does not mean that MHHs are without any problem.

8.5.1 Psychological Influences

To begin with, being fatherless or motherless for anybody is remorse. However, the extent of psychological influence on household members differs based on the causes of FHHs. Especially FHHs, who lost their husbands by death feel more than anybody else since the hope to get them is none at all.

The causes for death, as already mentioned, are many. It has psychological influences on household members. Particularly, deaths caused by conflict may put a long lasting impact not only on household members but also on their relatives. Even though it is a harmful traditional practice, revenge is common among the society of Libo Kemkem Woreda. If revenge is not done, it is considered as shameful for the rest of the family and kin member. As a result, it creates big stress on household members and relatives. For example, if a person, whose father died in conflict, quarrels with somebody else, his /her enemy’s first insult will be ‘Ante yabatkin dem yalmelesk warada neh’ (you are dishonored because you didn't avenge the person who killed your father). This may not only undermine ones self-worth but also pushes him/her
Informants add that children of female-headed and MHHs are not treated equally by the society. Children of FHHs are considered as persons who grow up in the hands of females, locally known as yeset lij. He/she who is raised by a woman is paid by disgrace. A woman’s child is mostly used as an insult. It is assumed that their children are considered to be rude or impolite. It is also believed women are not good at bringing up children. They are not competent enough to rear disciplined children or instigate proper behavior in them. In other words, men are the right persons qualified to undertake this responsibility. This, in turn, has a negative impact on the fates of children’s life headed by female, particularly in relation to getting partners.

Furthermore, children of FHHs are more exposed to various difficulties than MHHs because they share certain household responsibilities like fetching water, collecting firewood and involving in income generating activities at distant areas. Besides, they are exposed to rape. In line with this, one of my key informants explains the existence of the phenomenon as follows: “Female-headed households face similar kind of sexual assaults with their children in the study area but they never present the cases to concerned bodies since informing the action as female-headed households is considered shameful in the community’s tradition. So, they choose to be silent. However, if the assault happens on children’s of male-headed households, it is considered as murdering among the society.” Generally, it is not easy to expect the psychological strain on children if they are raped. It degrades their confidences and causes mental stress on them.

Female-headed children contribute much on both domestic and agricultural field works. During fieldwork, the researcher observed a girl of 10, baking injera. Others also regularly bring firewood and water from distant areas carrying a pot that
may weigh approximately from 15 to 40 kilograms. Therefore, physiological problems come into view more on children of FHHs than MHHs.

In MHHs too, mothers and children face psychological problems. Few husbands, who are ill-mannered, are frequently seen disturbing the peace of their homes. When they get intoxicated or dissatisfied with their wives, the families become restless. This creates psychological impact particularly on children.

**8.5.2 Economic Impacts**

In fact, at the beginning of separation, divorce or widowhood, social lives of MHHs have been curbed by the daily responsibilities of childcare. They may be independent and self-sufficient, but more likely they are overburdened and financially strained because the effects of living condition on children and their parents depend greatly on the resources available.

Moreover, women face economic problem after they become heads of households. This is due to the fact that the absence of their husbands causes problems of sources of income at household level. However, its impact may differ from one household to the other depending on the causes for the formation of MHHs.

Divorcee women, for example, face shortage of assets not only because of absence of their husbands but also they lack equal share during divorce. The article in the Ethiopian Civil Code allows women to share the property of households equally with men during divorce. But, women lack the bargaining power. FHHs, who have supporters like good relatives, obtain equally shared property than those who do not have. Moreover, in the countryside of the study area, women leave their home out as soon as conflict arises with their husbands rather than present their cases to the court or village elders. This is due to their lack of experiences and knowledge. This paves the way for few males to hide the property they want. Therefore, women lose the
chance to obtain their assets properly.

What makes women’s situation worse is that as indicated in Article No. 165 of Civil Code of Ethiopian women take child custody until children are five years old but in reality, according to Hobben (1973), children generally stay with their mothers. Ex-husbands hardly cover expenses of children. Even though village elders try to decide fairly, they do not interpret the decisions into practice. This exacerbates the financial problems and worsens the life condition of FHHs for two reasons. First, children are too young to be able to do any kind of productive work so that they are dependents of the households. Second, women are not able to carry out any work freely since their children at these ages need care and support. Otherwise, they would be exposed to various accidents like fire. Thus, women spent much time by taking care of their children rather than doing other works. Men, on the other hand, benefit more by their children since they accept them at younger ages during division of household assets and children. Hence, children support their fathers by accomplishing both domestic and agricultural field works.

Women in the study areas rarely take immovable properties like land, which is a principal productive asset, during divorce. Women are allowed to share movable assets like ox (en); however, they do not use their ox (en) if they do not have any male adult labor. So they rent out. Due to social and cultural influences, women cannot till farmlands. Moreover, women did not allow to share farming tools like plough, axe, and sickle because they are not considered as “farmers” as Frank (1999) mentioned. It’s, thus, decided to give to men.

Regarding the Amhara region including Libo Kemkem Woreda, virilocal marriage is the general pattern, and in case of separation, remaining in the virilocal
area is difficult for females, so in most cases they leave the rural area and move to families home or migrate to urban areas.

Findings show that widowed women are better than divorcee or desertion women regarding to economic status. This is due to household properties left in the hands of widowed women. However, they sometimes face severe financial problem since they spent their assets for spiritual related reason. The diseased family should perform teskar unless they would be ostracized by the community and religious leaders. On the whole, traditional as well as government influences aggravate the financial problem of FHHs.

8.6 Summary

In the rural areas of Libo Kemkem Woreda, women make up half of the total population. Some of them are FHHs whose number is increasing from time to time. Divorce, death of husbands, desertion and never married are major causes for the creation of FHHs, which are in turn the outcomes of social, economic, political, cultural and health factors.

Women are active both in domestic and agricultural works. However, their contributions are not recognized by the society as well as by government bodies since they are dominated by their counterparts. They have no place in patriarchal rural social organization. Women face various problems after they become FHHs than married women for some reasons. FHHs are considered as breaking of the norms of the society. A societal attitude towards them is improper. They did not get respect in their communities. Societal respect was just not limited on FHHs but it also affected their children. Moreover, household triple responsibilities such as taking care of children, doing domestic works, involving in off-farm activities limit their social
interaction. Even though living without male partners gave us sometimes respite for certain conditions, they have been in general more suffered both economically and psychologically.

Females in general and FHHs in particular are discriminated in terms of wealth, education and marriage. Among the FHHs, there are wealthy and poor, literate and illiterate, those who have child or not child, those who have parents and parentless, etc. heads of households. Even in cases where females attain good economic and educational achievements, they do not get equal recognition, status and value as far as they are members of FHHs. This implies how much the community gives high value to marital status than other aspects though applicable only to females.

However, social and traditional influences on FHHs are being reduced through the passage of time. Government and non-governmental organizations contribute a lot for diminishing of influences on FHHs by making aware of their personal as well as civic rights. The appearing of women in public places, in general, is considered as a breakthrough for improving their decision-making power among their communities. FHHs are participating in meetings frequently. This improves their participation in community affairs, which, in turn, has positive impacts on their life.