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in association with  
BUREAU FOR GENDER EQUALITY

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**Female-headship in Eastern Sri Lanka:**  
A comparative study of ethnic communities  
in the context of conflict

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Recovery and Reconstruction Department

International Labour Office  
Geneva

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## Preface

The ILO is actively involved in efforts to develop programmes for recovery and reconstruction in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the armed conflict. In the context of these activities, the InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction (IFP/CRISIS) seeks to strengthen knowledge and understanding of the situation in the country in regard to the recent conflict as well as with respect to longer-term development issues. Issues relating to female-headedness, which are covered in this paper, are not unique to conflict situations and raise several issues relating to gender in the context of both crises and development. We are therefore particularly happy that this paper by Kanchana Ruwanpura and Jane Humphries on female headship in Eastern Sri Lanka is coming out under the joint aegis of IFP/CRISIS and the Bureau for Gender Equality.

This study explores patterns and causes of female headship of households among the three major ethnic communities in Eastern Sri Lanka and explodes several myths. It demonstrates that female-headed households are an enduring feature and not a temporary product of war, although conflict may have contributed to their increase. It argues that policies to deal with the problems of these households cannot only be the provision of temporary pensions, but must also involve measures to help these households to help themselves without recourse to child labour. The study finds that women who are deserted or widowed cannot rely on traditional sources of support and that the case for programmes of economic assistance is strong. The study concludes that the decision to become a female-headed household was often dictated by factors outside the control of the female head, but the struggle of these women to make a life for themselves and their families has given them legitimate pride and self-worth.

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## Executive summary

Many debates concerning the welfare of women and intra-household allocation of resources tend to assume a “male breadwinner” family structure. In Sri Lanka, for example, this is misleading as about a fifth of households are female-headed and this is not only due to the conflict, but has deeper roots. Eastern Sri Lanka provides an ideal setting for exploring ethnicity as a source of variations in the origin of female headship and its implication to family and economy.

The paper discusses the conceptual difficulties encountered in overcoming the invisibility of women and identifying female headship and explaining its existence. Female headedness appears to be on the rise due globalisation, neo-liberal economic strategies of financial institutions, population growth, as well as the increased attention given to women’s status and well being and policies which make it a little easier for women to remain outside marriage.

In Sri Lanka it is argued that the trend to female headedness predates the conflict. Other variables like out-migration of men may help to explain this phenomenon. The major factors precipitating or inhibiting the formation of female-headed households is examined for the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala populations and common factors as well as differences are noted.

The region selected for study, eastern Sri Lanka, is largely rural, with dependence on irrigation for rice cultivation. Deep sea and lagoon fishing as well as plantation crops, trade and informal economic activities account are non-agricultural activities of some importance. The area is impoverished and the three districts have been exposed to conflict in differing degrees. Ampara perhaps is the best off and least affected, Batticaloa the most conflict-affected, and Trincomalee lies somewhere in between. The paper is based on evidence collected by one of the authors in Eastern Sri Lanka in 1998 and 1999, but supplemented with a variety of information from different sources. The aim has been to deconstruct the idea of a “family strategy” and understand how collective family interest was understood and decisions taken and how conflicts of interest were resolved.

How did women become heads of households? The field study suggests that widowhood was the prime cause and migration of the male head is likely to have been another cause. However, widowhood may not be only due to the conflict. Again, it is significant that many female heads were currently married, and such female-headed households face special difficulties in securing outside support. While the routes to female headship do not differ significantly by ethnicity, conflict-related death was a much more important cause of widowhood among Tamils when compared with the other two ethnic groups.

In terms of household income, the evidence suggests that widows of all ethnic groups were poor, possibly reflecting cross-cultural constraints on the economic treatment of widows. Even though, in the case of Tamils and Sinhala, non-widows may appear poorer than widows, one has to consider other relevant factors such as the age of the widow, the cause of widowhood, and the dependency burden. Non-widows who become female heads are generally viewed as less “deserving” and regarded as partly to blame for their situation. As non-widows are a large component of female-headed households, it cannot be construed that female-headedness is the result of conflict. But the conflict has, directly and indirectly, put greater pressure on the resources available to support female-headed households and could have led to men migrating out to meet these economic demands. These pressures may lead to increased default by men on their obligations and further increases in female-headedness. Since female-headedness is not just a product of civil war,

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and is here to stay, policies must not be limited to short-term subsidies, but extend to longer-term measures to make such households self-supporting.

The economic reliance of female-headed households on children often results in child labour with damaging, often irreversible, effects. There is, however, no systematic gender preference and the decision depends on family circumstances and local opportunities.

Support networks of kin and community play an important role. Tamil and Muslim female-headed households tend to receive more by way of remittances than their Sinhala counterparts. But non-financial support is greatly valued, especially by Sinhala female heads who are more likely to accept wage employment and therefore need child-care support. In general, financial support from male relatives outside the immediate family is much less important than the women's own efforts and the contributions of their children. Non-pecuniary support from female relatives, friends or neighbours is highly valued. While unrecognised in the literature, the evidence presented in this study suggests that the need to retain respectability and merit in the eyes of kin and community often places female heads in a difficult situation of having to choose between employment and community and kin support, and often prefer the former to the latter.

This study explodes several myths. Female-headed households are an enduring feature and not temporary products of war, although conflict may have contributed to their increase. Policies to deal with the problems of these households cannot only be the provision of temporary pensions, but also measures to help these households to help themselves without recourse to child labour. Women who are deserted or widowed cannot rely on traditional sources of support and the case for programmes of economic assistance is strong. The decision to become a female-headed household was often dictated by factors outside the control of the female head, but the struggle of these women to make a life for themselves and their families has given them legitimate pride and self-worth.



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## 1. Introduction

Until the end of the 1970s Sri Lanka was a “model” of democracy and development. The adult franchise had been achieved in 1931 and there were regular elections until 1981 with governments changing through electoral process. The performance of the economy was cited as exemplary. Strong and consistent welfare orientation on the part of successive governments resulted in a better distribution of income and social services and a good performance according to the Human Development Index (HDI). For a poor country Sri Lanka’s record in providing a relatively high quality of life is known to be remarkable (Sen 1981). Governments were committed to gender empowerment and the improvement of the status and well-being of women. Outcomes here too were celebrated with the gender gap in physical well-being narrowing.

Sri Lanka is a paragon of development economics. But there is an underside to this success story as far as the empowerment of women is concerned, which if neglected, may imperil advances both in Sri Lanka and in other countries where gender equality is sought. To reveal this underside, the progress of Sri Lanka will be scrutinized from the standpoint of a doubly disadvantaged and neglected group, a group in jeopardy economically and geographically: female headed households in the war torn districts of eastern Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup>

For the last twenty years the eastern region of Sri Lanka has been the site of civil war. Since 1983 more than 60,000 people have died in the ethnic conflict (Rotberg 1999). What is the view from this less hospitable part of the country? The empirical evidence used to demonstrate Sri Lankan success has by and large excluded these war-torn districts. The paper suggests that sealing off the experience of the eastern province from the accounts of Sri Lankan development has resulted in too rosy a picture.

Many debates and discussions concerning the welfare of women both in advanced industrial countries and the in the developing world are misleading because they assume “male breadwinner family” structure. Many of the discussions of welfare policies, for example, are premised on the ideal of a family headed by an adult male. Similarly the current emphasis on intra-household allocation is misleading because it deflects attention from the high percentage of households with children but without adult males. A main contribution of feminist economists in recent years has been to draw attention to the high percentages of households headed by women in advanced industrial economies, in those same economies in the past, and in developing countries. In Sri Lanka a fifth of households are female-headed, a much higher percentage than in Bangladesh or Pakistan. This relatively high incidence may be caused by the political turmoil. But in 1981 the conflict was just beginning and it appears from recent evidence that female headship has been increasingly sharply in other more peaceful parts of the country. It is important to try to trace the origins of female-headed households as this will bear on the type of policy that is most efficacious in assisting them. Insistence that female headship is the product of war and turmoil, an aberration that will disappear when peace breaks out, should be mistrusted. It continues the long line of “pathological” interpretations of female-headship, which depict it as a social problem whose elimination is the correct policy goal.

<sup>1</sup> Female-headship has been on the increase in Sri Lanka, with the latest available figures, which excludes the Northern and Eastern provinces, estimating this at 20.0% (Census and Statistics 1995). Changing household structures, if ignored, is likely to affect gender equality gains in HDI achievements, and therefore is worthy of further exploration.

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Another important contribution of feminist economists in recent years has been the emphasis on differences within the female experience. By rejecting falsely homogenizing accounts of women's lives, feminist economists have unlocked the multiplicity of ways in which gendered relations of dominance and subordination are maintained. A source of difference with perhaps increasing importance in the modern world is ethnicity. With its co-existing Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala groups, eastern Sri Lanka provides a perfect context for the exploration of ethnicity as a source of variation in the origins of female headship and response to being left alone to raise children, look after parents, and get a living. The households included in this study share a common structure and face the same economic problems. They struggle for a better life in the same geographical area. Yet ethnic differences divide them. The combination of gender, ethnicity and regional variables provides the basis for a study of gender and identity.

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## 2. Female-headed households: Conceptual issues

There are a large number of conceptual problems in defining both the household and headship. Most national and international data report a “female” or “woman” headed household as a unit where an adult woman, usually with children, resides without a male partner (UN 1991). The very notion of headship, of one person in the household being responsible for other members, has been described as a construct of patriarchal thought and practice (Harris 1981). The patriarchal construction of households, the identification of the husband/father as the “natural” source of authority within the household was used by the state in western Europe for administrative and political purposes and exported around the world through colonialism (Folbre 1991). This hierarchical conceptualization masked a more complex reality in all societies, reducing the many dimensions of households to the characteristics of their male heads. Women within households became invisible “their characteristics and contributions being largely ignored” (INSTRAW 1992). Women were hidden from society.

Various strategies have been used to rescue women from this invisibility and illuminate their unappreciated responsibility for household survival and functioning. Basing the concept of headship more explicitly on economic criteria would foreground the extent to which women are responsible for the maintenance of households. This also recognizes the many cases where women are the economic mainstays even when an adult male is present (Buvinic, Valenzuela Molina and Gonzalez 1992, Buvinic and Gupta 1993). Inevitably this forces recognition that headship is often shared among two or more adults. Alternatively a focus on households without men forces women from the shadows. But this leads to further conceptual problems for there are many different types of female-headed household. Chant (1997) has provided a useful typology. Female-headed households include: lone mother households within which category there are various types depending on the marital status of the female head and the legal and actual relationship with the father(s) of the children; female-headed extended households; and female-singleton households. In theory and in empirical work most attention has been on lone mothers who constitute the single largest category of female heads in most countries. But the establishment of a typology forms an important theme of recent feminist research: the varied nature of women’s experience. For example, therefore, some female-heads are better-off while others are economically poor and vulnerable.

While registering the difficulties of conceptualizing households, let alone female-headed households, there has been convergence in the explanations adopted for the existence of female-headed households, and indeed in most places for their increasing frequency. These explanations involve both global forces, emphasized by Folbre (1991), in terms of demographic patterns and the legacies of colonialism as well as the pressures of economic development and urbanization, and local factors that produce regional variations and incidences (Chant 1997). More generally Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards (1994, 1997) have identified four main interpretations of lone motherhood that characterize governmental, political, religious and academic literatures. Lone motherhood is seen as (1) a social threat; (2) a social problem; (3) a “lifestyle” choice; and (4) an escape from patriarchy. These interpretations are lenses through which lone motherhood is seen and so policies about lone motherhood developed. Evidence on the origins and meaning of lone motherhood and female-headed households in Sri Lanka can be usefully related to these discourses.

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### 3. Female-headed households: Global and regional incidence

As already suggested, there are major problems involved in developing universally applicable definitions of household types and/or household headship. The lack of standardization hinders comparative analysis of female headship. Even the most serious scholar of the subject insists that her conclusions on “the macro-level dynamics of female-headship” and inter- and intra-regional comparisons are “accordingly tentative” (Chant 1997:69). Similarly Folbre, in her earlier (1991) survey prioritized the need for detailed household surveys in order to uncover the extent of women’s support for households and so gauge the frequency of female-maintained households.

Nonetheless some conclusions are possible. Female-headed households in many countries of the developed and developing world appear to be on the rise. Various factors operating on a global scale have contributed. And they include the globalization of economic production, the spread of neo-liberal economic strategies under the aegis of the financial institutions of the advanced industrial economies, population growth, and the growing awareness of gender inequality promoted in part by the new interest and initiatives of international agencies. The increased attention afforded women’s status and well-being and policy initiatives to advance them have had some effect on relaxing divorce legislation and making it slightly easier for women to remain outside marriage worldwide.

These global forces are not so strong that they cannot be overcome by local and regional conditions. The incidence and meaning of female headship varies widely between regions. In South Asia, rates of female headship are relatively low. In the early 1980s, for example, women-headed households were only 9.5 per cent of households in Bangladesh and as few as 1.8 per cent in Pakistan (Folbre, 1991: Table 3.1). Sri Lanka in 1981 was an outlier for the region with 17.4 per cent of households headed by women.<sup>2</sup>

The high rate was perhaps caused by political turmoil. Nancy Folbre’s 1991 survey of global influences noted the importance of armed conflict with female headship tending to be higher in the aftermath of war and civil strife. But in 1981 the conflict in Sri Lanka was just beginning. Moreover it appears that female-headship has been increasing sharply in peaceful parts of the country (Aturupone, Rodrigo and Perera 1997). By 1990, the Department of Statistics reported that women headed 20 per cent of households and this figure excluded the Northern and Eastern Provinces. What factors other than the political and civil unrest contributed to this incidence?

Another variable associated with female-headship is the out-migration of men. Mothers appear less affected than are fathers by the increasing economic incentives to default on the traditional explicit and implicit contracts of parenthood. Thus migration becomes a male survival strategy that is often synonymous with the desertion of women and children (Elson 1992). The incentives to leave women and children behind are compounded by economic problems such as unemployment and famine. In Sri Lanka this may well have influenced regional migrations as well as out-migration from the country.

Feminist development economists have recently emphasized women’s command of property as an important underlying determinant of their status and well-being (Agarwal

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we have not been able to obtain trends on female-headship for the 1990s period, partially reasoned by the fact that the study of female-headship is sporadic and under-researched in South Asia.

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1997, Deere 1990). Command over rural resources is particularly important in determining women's ability to remain outside marriage (Deere 2001). Formally the traditional legal code adhered to by the majority Sinhala community in Sri Lanka is relatively favorable to women (Rasanayagam 1993). Women in Sri Lanka have traditionally enjoyed rights to keep their own income, to keep their natal family name, and to represent themselves in a court of law without men's guardianship (World Bank 1995). On the other hand, other research suggested that if status was measured in terms of access to income generating resources, the status of Sri Lankan women was low. They made up a smaller percentage of the labour force than of the population and experienced higher unemployment rates (Samarasinghe 1993). Many worked in the subsistence sector and so were not measured in the national statistics.

Within the national aggregates, distinct groups of Sri Lankan women are known to display non-standard characteristics often associated with ethnicity (Samarasinghe 1993). Consider Tamil plantation workers, who were originally brought to the island from poverty stricken areas of India by their British colonial rulers to work in the newly opened tea plantations from poverty stricken areas on India. Now representing about 8 per cent of the total population this group is mainly Hindu and speaks Tamil. Three quarters of this Tamil population live in plantations in the central highlands. After the nationalization of the estates in 1975 more than 80 per cent of Tamil plantation workers were employed by two semi-governmental organizations – which have been privatized since the 1990s. As a group for historical and political reasons they have been left out of the state sponsored welfare programs. Their immigrant status and “separateness” has left them generally disadvantaged in terms of housing, nutrition and access to education (Jayawardena 1984).

Women of this group have fared particularly poorly. Despite higher access to wage employment in a sector that has been the main export earner they have the lowest literacy rates for women and the highest maternal mortality (Samarasinghe 1993). The gender disparities that are disappearing in Sri Lanka remain firmly in evidence for this group. Their political and economic experience has mixed with their cultural inheritance to block any gains in terms of status and well-being that women might have achieved as a result of their proletarianization. The separateness of the group and the low status of Tamil men in the broader society have reinforced the patriarchal Hindu cultural norms. Thus the men of the community express no sympathy with women's double shift and insist that they go out to work (Kurian 1982). Yet the women's arduous employment as tea pluckers has had no effect on the intra-family distribution of even the most basic resources. Men, for example, retain their traditional preferential access to food. More generally, Ruwanpura has shown that the civil conflict has promoted gender standards within both Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups that by emphasizing motherhood as a role for women and sacrifice as the archetypal feminine virtue have retarded women's struggle for equality (Ruwanpura 2001).

Thus there is strong evidence suggesting that the female experience is fragmented by ethnicity and that ethnic differences can achieve new resilience and power in maintaining women's subjugation in post-colonial and conflictual situations. Yet ethnicity remains a neglected category in feminist economics. Deconstruction of the female-headed household by ethnicity in Sri Lanka may help illuminate the sources of continued gender inequality as well as providing a case study of the interaction of gender and ethnicity that will have implications for other studies in other times and places. Table 1 summarizes the factors promoting and inhibiting female headship differentiated according to the ethnic groups of eastern Sri Lanka.

**Table 1: Factors influencing the formation of female-headed households in the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities of Eastern Sri Lanka**

<b>Major Precipitating Factors</b>	<b>Major Inhibiting Factors</b>
Tamils Feminised sex ratio of population as a result of civil conflict Rising gap between male and female life expectancy Male migration Upheaval leading to disguised desertion Age gap between brides and grooms Sexual double standard	Social ideas of marriage and motherhood Restricted gender roles for women Male-female earnings gap Increased household extension during economic crises
Muslims Rising gap between male and female life expectancy Age gap between brides and grooms Sexual double standard Male migration	Islam Social ideas of marriage and motherhood Restricted gender roles for women Increased household extension during economic crises
Sinhala Kandyan legal code (women traditionally enjoyed rights to own land, to obtain and dispose of income, to keep their natal family name, and to represent themselves in a law court without a man's guardianship) Rising gap between male and female life expectancy Age gap between brides and grooms Sexual double standard Male migration	Social ideas of marriage and motherhood Restricted gender roles for women Male-female earnings gap

The differing situations of women in the ethnic groups as portrayed in the above figure suggest that the routes into female headship might vary by ethnicity. Varying reasons for adopting the responsibilities of headship will mean that the households will be differently placed in terms of feasible survival strategies. Policies to help female-heads should be sensitive to this diversity as effective assistance to widows with resident adolescent children for example may mean different kinds of intervention than would optimal aid to deserted women with dependent babies. At the same time, ethnicity can be expected to influence the feasible strategies available to the women and their households. The war and unrest has probably created particularly difficult conditions for Tamil female-heads especially if they have been widowed or left alone as young women with dependent infants and if their wider kinship ties have been disrupted. Sinhala female-heads might be expected to benefit from the Sinhalese relatively woman-friendly legal code and relaxed social attitudes as well as their majority status in the country as a whole. Muslim women may be burdened by the proscriptions on their activities especially if these lead to their exclusion from certain income earning opportunities.

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## 4. The economic background

The economic base of eastern Sri Lanka can be characterized as rural with primary dependence upon irrigated rice cultivation. Deep sea and lagoon fishing are other common occupations, with lagoons shaping the natural geographical terrain of the coastal belt. However, there is also a reliance on plantation crops, mercantile trade, and the informal economy. While these occupations are the mainstay of the people in the region, the level of economic development in each district is very different.

All three districts belong to the dry zone region of Sri Lanka, and are heavily dependent upon irrigation for paddy cultivation. However, accessibility to irrigation facilities varies, and the on-going ethnic conflict has had a negative impact on the level and quality of irrigation programs in the region. There are no systematic data available on per capita income, or gross domestic production, or employment levels for eastern Sri Lanka. The intensity of the conflict at different points in time during the past 17 years allows for only a sketchy outline of the level of economic development.

Ampara district has been the least affected by the conflict, which is probably partially attributable to its geographic location in the southernmost part of the Eastern Province. Trincomalee, after many years of severe fighting, at the time when the fieldwork was undertaken was facing a period of relative lull. This, however, did not hold true for Batticaloa where only a mere 25% of the landmass was under state direction, the remaining 75% being occupied by the Liberation Tamil Tigers for Eelam (LTTE), with continued conflict, battle, and skirmishes between the State Forces and the LTTE taking place.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Batticaloa has a low level of economic development with its infrastructure particularly battered. While a sense of economic “normalcy” has returned to Trincomalee, Ampara contains the highest level of economic activity in the region. Following the course of events in the region, it would not be far-fetched to note the relative prosperity of Ampara when compared with the poverty of Batticaloa, with Trincomalee’s economic activity falling in between. To put these impressionistic judgements of relative status in the Eastern Province in perspective, note that the region as a whole is impoverished, with high levels of unemployment and low levels of formal economic activity.<sup>4</sup> Given the conflict-ridden state of affairs in eastern Sri Lanka and the lack of detailed economic data, a comprehensive analysis is difficult. This limitation, however, should not devalue findings about the survival strategies and levels of economic well-being of female-heads in the region. The lack of accurate official statistical economic information drives the need for a qualitative analysis of female-headship.

<sup>3</sup> Like all situations of conflict, the case in Sri Lanka is no different in being in a continuous state of flux. It should be pointed out that the summary here is the impressionistic judgements and understanding of circumstances in Sri Lanka for 1998-9 during fieldwork in the region.

<sup>4</sup> These statements are based not only based on the lead-author’s field-experience and knowledge of eastern Sri Lanka but also on personal communication from people working, usually through NGOs, in the region. Here thanks are due to Simon Harris (OXFAM), Daniel Sinnathamby (CARE), P. Senthurajah (SWOAD) for sharing their information and understandings of the region. Furthermore, Batticaloa was noted as one the poorest districts in Sri Lanka even prior to the rise of hostilities in the district, with the state of conflict impoverishing the district further. Ampara, on the other hand, is noted as a district with the highest level of agricultural productivity in Sri Lanka. Chithra Maunaguru (SURIYA) gave this information and a thanks to her for doing so is noted. While there is no recent statistical data on economic indicators for eastern Sri Lanka, the Census and Statistics information from the 1981 period attest to these economic conditions. After nearly two decades of intense conflict in the region, the likelihood of economic conditions deteriorating further is probable and, therefore, is likely to continue on a downward spiral rather than lead to unexpected improvements.

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## 5. Methodology

The paper is based on evidence collected in Eastern Sri Lanka by one of the authors during 1998 and 1999. We also draw on parallel studies undertaken in other provinces of Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the world and on national level data. The fieldwork involved the administration of a customized questionnaire designed to capture the origins, circumstances and survival strategies of female-headed households in the three ethnic communities in the three principal districts of the Eastern Province, Ampara, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. A copy of the questionnaire is attached as Appendix 1. 298 questionnaires were administered. The aim was not to construct a sample from which inferences about the prevalence of female headship in the population could be made. There was no parallel sampling of male-headed households and so the evidence gathered does not allow estimation of the proportions of households headed by women in the population. Such work is desperately needed in most countries of the developing world. Censuses inevitably structure their data collection within patriarchal categories and so undercount married women workers and female support for households. But such a survey would have required a much greater commitment of resources than we could mount.

The aim was to construct a sample from which inferences could be made about the paths into female headship and the survival strategies adopted. The questionnaires were designed to capture the economic situation of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim women heads of household. The regional variation was also the subject of investigation but this work is not reported here (Ruwanpura 2001). There was no attempt to sample households randomly and the sizes of the samples especially when subdivided by district or ethnicity are sometimes too small to test hypotheses statistically. Moreover since households were identified and contacted through local NGOs it is likely that their female heads are not representative of all female heads. They are probably more energetic and aware than most of their peers. Interest was not only or even mainly in establishing poverty levels, though these are discussed. Information was also gathered on demographic, kinship, social, educational and religious variables.

Recent feminist scholarship has applauded the use of questionnaires to uncover evidence that is usually buried behind the implicit and unconscious assumptions of formal data collection machinery (Macdonald 1995:175-91). This is in contrast to the normal depreciation of such subject-originating evidence by mainstream economics. But feminist authors have argued that questionnaires are usefully supplemented by open-ended interviews that often capture evidence that would remain hidden even in gender sensitive probing via questionnaires. One hundred in-depth interviews were conducted simultaneously with the administration of the questionnaires. Some of the interviews convey an astonishing level of feminist awareness and understanding, reinforcing our suspicion that our subjects may be a self-selected sample. But if the individuals are exceptional, the circumstances they face are not. The questionnaires and interviews provide both quantitative and qualitative accounts of the households and their circumstances. They allow us to go back and forth from statistical descriptions of the households' situations to the nuanced backgrounds and responses conveyed in the conversations. Through these our aim is to understand the structure and functioning of these households and their survival strategies, to try to look at the world from their point of view, and to explore how they became heads of households and survive as such.



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A particular interest is the nature and reliability of kinship support for female heads and the cost extracted in terms of what is reciprocally demanded in terms of female propriety and conventional conduct. More generally we were interested in deconstructing the idea of a “family strategy” in terms of probing how a family’s collective interest was understood and family decisions made. In particular we asked to what extent were the female-heads aware of conflicts between their own interests and those of the family collectively. Another issue is when and why mothers call on the help of children, sending them out to work to keep the family together. While the quantifiable evidence from the questionnaires provided an essential starting point, the interviews filled in the missing links and provided a deeper understanding. Ultimately the objective is to design policies, which can be successfully targeted and maximally helpful to these heroines of everyday life.

## 6. Household incomes

Analysis of poverty among households in Sri Lanka is often conducted in terms of household incomes rather than per capita incomes (Aturupane et al. 1997). This is because the government's poverty alleviation measures, such as the *Samurdhi* Program, use household incomes and not per capita incomes as benchmarks. In most surveys household incomes are typically understated. It is argued that poor households have an incentive to understate income levels in order to appear eligible for benefits provided through poverty assistance programs. Aturupane et al (1997) in their survey of households in low-income areas excluding the Eastern and Northern Province found that average monthly income of female-headed households was 2528.35Rs (US \$ 33.71) per month for poor households and 5567.00Rs (US \$74.22) per month for non-poor households. This compared with average incomes for poor households with male heads of 2897.88Rs (US \$ 38.64) per month and non-poor households with male heads of 6661.47Rs (US \$ 88.82) per month. Table 2 presents estimates of household incomes by ethnic group for the eastern districts.

**Table 2. Mean Household Income by Ethnic Group**

Ethnicity	Mean household income	Sample size	Std. deviation
Tamil	2159.7 (US \$28.80)	116	1782.1
Muslim	2592.8 (US \$34.57)	112	2145.8
Sinhala	1869.0 (US \$24.92)	69	988.4
Total	2256.6 (US \$30.08)	297	1808.7

As to be expected for an area long embroiled in civil conflict, our female-headed households are poorer than poor female-headed households elsewhere in the country but mean incomes are not dramatically different, reinforcing confidence in the information obtained from the questionnaires.

The Sinhala households are the poorest and the Muslim households the least poor. The analysis of variance reported in Table 3 suggests that we can reject the null hypothesis that the average incomes of the ethnic populations are the same. The evidence that household incomes do differ by ethnicity is statistically significant.

**Table 3. Analysis of Variance of Household Income for Ethnic Sample**

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean sum of squares	F	Significance
Between ethnicities	2.4E+07	2	1.2E+07	3.777	.024
Within ethnicities	9.5E+08	295	3211467		
Total	9.7E+08	297			

The relative poverty of the Sinhala households highlights the danger in assuming that ethnicity has simple links to economic and social status. Ironically the least "oppressed" group in terms of the conventional ranking of these ethnic identities is the poorest in terms of household incomes.

Socio-economic indicators of poverty such as housing quality, sources of drinking water, sanitation and lighting also, not surprisingly, suggest lagging infrastructural development in the Eastern Province. For example Aturupane et al (1997) found that some three-quarters of poor households had access to private sanitary facilities although a significant minority had only access to common facilities and about 15 per cent had no toilet at all. In the east however a bare majority of female-headed households had access to private facilities and almost 30 per cent had neither private nor common toilet facilities. Within the sample, socio-economic deprivation followed household income in that Muslim households appeared to have the best quality housing and the greatest access to sanitation, piped water and lighting. However, Tamils appeared less well off than Sinhala families in terms of these facilities, testimony to their political and historical exclusion.

Most female heads of households engaged in some income-generating activities though the extent of inactivity and unemployment varied by ethnicity, as did the type of activity undertaken. As can be seen from Table 4 no Sinhala female head did not work or was unemployed while 9 Muslim heads were in this position, 8 per cent of the total. Wage labor and self-employment were the two most common ways of earning for all ethnic groups but Tamil female heads were also engaged in a range of small-scale agricultural activities. Muslim and Sinhala female heads were primarily engaged in wage labor and self-employment with the former favoring self-employment and the latter wage labor. Chi square tests on the association of ethnicity with occupational and employment status suggests that the differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 87.0$ ).<sup>5</sup>

**Table 4. Employment and Occupational Status of Female Heads by Ethnic Group**

	Tamil	Muslim	Sinhala
Unemployed, not working	2 1.7%	9 8.0%	-
Wage labour	20 17.2%	35 31.0%	41 59.4%
Service/clerical/ Government worker	9 7.8%	3 2.7%	5 7.2%
Domestic worker	8 9.9%	15 13.3%	-
Agricultural laborer (unpaid family worker)	4 3.4%	4 3.5%	7 10.1%
Poultryrearing/goats rearing/cattle herding	13 11.2%	-	-
Home gardening	6 5.2%	-	-
Self employment	54 46.6%	47 41.6%	16 23.2%
Total	116 100%	113 100%	69 100%

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 87.00$ ; Sig. = .000)

<sup>5</sup> 10 cells have a count less than five, which might be held to invalidate conventional statistical judgements. However it is easy to combine categories, for example throwing the small-scale agricultural activities together. The ethnic differences in employment type emerge across the compressed categories. This is true in all cross tabulations where statistical significance is reported.

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Differences in household incomes per capita follow the differences in household incomes by ethnic group with again the Sinhala households being poorest and the Muslim households the least poor. However the larger size of the Muslim households and its tendency to harbor more children tends to reduce its per capita lead on households of other types, while the Sinhala households contain more children than Tamil households despite having lower total incomes. Closer scrutiny reveals that Sinhala households are more likely too to contain younger children. Thus while 68.1 per cent of Sinhala households have no children under 6, 82.3 per cent of Muslim households and 87.1 per cent of Tamil households have no children under 6. Not surprisingly Sinhala household heads are more likely to describe their own occupation and/or activities as being the main source of income in comparison with Tamil female heads. But it is surprising that Muslim women are the most likely of all to identify their own contributions as the mainstay. The different household compositions not only suggest how the constraints on family strategies may vary by ethnic group but also that the routes into female headship may have been different for women with different ethnic identities.

## 7. Routes into female headship

How did the women in our sample become heads of their households and did the route vary for Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese? Table 5 summarizes the types of female-headed household by ethnic group.

**Table 5. Types of Female-headed Household by Ethnic Group**

Ethnicity	Married	Divorced	Deserted	Separated	Widowed	Total
Tamil	15 28.3%	2 1.7%	9 7.8%	12 10.3%	78 67.2%	116
Muslim	23 20.4%	6 5.3%	7 6.2%	8 7.1%	69 61.1%	113
Sinhala	15 21.7%	2 2.9%	9 13.0%	7 10.1%	36 52.2%	69
Total	53 17.8%	10 3.3%	25 8.4%	27 9.1%	183 61.4%	298

\* Ethnic differences are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 9.69$ ; sig. = .287)

Widowhood was the prime cause of female household headship for all ethnic groups in Eastern Sri Lanka as it is for Asia as a whole (Momsen 1991). Male migration out of the districts may also have played a role as elsewhere in South East Asia (Kawar 1996). Factors may be inter-related. Mencher (1989) found in a study of the Muslim-dominated district of Malappuram in Kerala, India that increasing male migration to the Middle East was associated with increased numbers of divorced women in agricultural communities. Our data too reveals a surprising proportion of divorced Muslim women. Widowhood was an even more dominant source of female-headship in the east than in other areas of Sri Lanka. Thus Aturupane et al (1997) found that 48 per cent of poor and 59 per cent of non-poor female heads were widows. This is the grain of truth in the interpretation of female headship as an aberrant development associated with the pathology of civil conflict. But female headship is far from identical with war widowhood and should not be reduced to war widowhood.

One surprise in the findings is the large minority of married women heads of households: testimony to feminist claims that female economic and emotional maintenance of households is often disguised behind assumptions of the relationships of authority and responsibility within households. These households would not have appeared as female headed in many census enumerations or indeed in household surveys that did not probe behind the physical composition of units. Practically one third of Tamil and a fifth of Muslim and Sinhala female-headed households fall into this *de facto* category. Aturupane et al (1997) also found a significant minority of female-heads was married, 40 per cent of poor households and 31 per cent of non-poor although they did not separately identify deserted wives. In our sample the married category constitutes women whose husbands remain in the household but for physical or mental reasons are unable to take the burden of headship. It is vital to include this group not only because of its numerical importance and tendency to be missed in enumeration but also because of its particular problems. The presence of an adult male in the household makes additional demands on resources and often makes it more difficult for the *de facto* head to tap into support from kin or the state available to widows for example. Strangely Aturupane et al (1997, p. 11) read the importance of this group as testimony to the popularity of marriage! More reasonably it suggests the fragility of the male breadwinner family system and the general need to think about how resources can be channeled to families whose male head is sick, alcoholic, or

unemployed (Ruwanpura 2001). The differences in the routes into female-headship by ethnicity are not sufficiently large to appear as statistically significant.

Probing these categories further yields additional variance in experience. Table 6 looks behind the title of widow to the cause of the husband's death, which as might be expected, had important implications for how widowhood was experienced and survived.

**Table 6: Reasons for Partner's Death by Ethnic Group**

Ethnicity	Natural Causes	Suicide	Killed (state-sponsored)	Killed (para-military)	Killed (non-conflict)	Missing	Total
Tamil	15 19.2%	5 6.4%	50 64.1%	6 7.7%		2 2.6%	78 100%
Muslim	39 56.5%	1 1.5%		14 20.3%	1 1.5%	14 20.3%	69 100%
Sinhala	21 58.3%	4 11.1%		10 27.7%		1 2.8%	36 100%
Total	75	10	50	30	1	17	183

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 110.456$ ; sig. = .000)

Although the routes into female-headship did not differ statistically by ethnicity, the causes of widowhood did with conflict-related deaths being highest for Tamils. Husbands who died in the civil conflict were younger than were husbands who died of natural causes as were their widows. Aturupane et al (1997) found that younger widows were poorer on average. If a woman is widowed at a younger age her earnings may be low because she needs to devote time to child-care. If a husband dies young, the income accruing to his family through a pension is likely to be low. The importance of these factors is shown when we compare the incomes of households headed by widows and non-widows by ethnicity see Table 7.

**Table 7. Household Incomes of Widows and Non-Widows by Ethnic Group, Rs per month**

Ethnicity	Widows	Non-widows
Tamil	2286.22	1900.00
Muslim	2557.07	2648.86
Sinhala	1998.61	1727.57

Muslim widows were the least poor widows although their incomes were actually slightly lower than Muslim non-widows: a difference that was not statistically significant. Tamil and Sinhala widows do less well than Muslims although they actually do better than non-widows in the same ethnic group. The ethnic differences in household incomes of widows are not statistically significant whereas those for non-widows are. Perhaps the experiences of widowhood provide some cross-cultural constants in economic treatment whereas there is more cultural diversity in what befalls women who have had to assume headship of their households for other reasons, reasons that might be regarded as less honorable than the death of the spouse. The status of widow is more universally respected and there may be uniform pressures on kin and community to safeguard the position of widows and their families. These pressures may fracture and dissipate when their subjects are deserted women or divorcees.

This should not distract from the absolute poverty of Tamil and Sinhala widows or indeed their poverty relative to Muslim widows. The different circumstances of households

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headed by widows shows how misleading it can be to focus on routes into female headship in terms of superficial categories without probing the surface of general titles like “widow”. The needs of a young widow with several young children whose husband has been killed in ethnic violence may be very different from the needs of a middle aged widow with several children old enough to work and whose husband died of natural causes after an industrious and provident life.

I got married when I was 16 years old and was widowed by the time I was 38 years old – with my oldest daughter aged 21 years and my youngest son a baby. When my husband was alive we lived a comfortable and respectable life, and this has changed through the years, especially since my husband passed away through old age.

After my husband’s death, we were supported by my younger brother and my two older sons – my 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> children, respectively. They were doing their A/Level and O/Levels, but their education was disrupted as they had to take over the running of the business. So while we have gone through many rough patches, I always had several sources of income to support my family. And at present, the household income ranges at around Rs. 8,000.00, which is sufficient for all of us to eat properly – though not enough for me to save towards my daughters’ dowries.

*(Zainab, a 53-year old de jure Muslim female-head from Batticaloa, and mother of 8 children).*

I have several sources of income, and I consider my main occupation to be a tailor. Through this occupation and poultry farming I earn a monthly income of Rs. 800.00. We also get a monthly income of Rs. 200.00 from the saving deposit, which were obtained from the state after I was able to prove that my husband was abducted and killed. Additionally, I am undergoing a training session in carpentry organized by a Canadian funded non-governmental organization that provides a monthly stipend of Rs. 800.00. So in total I receive an income of Rs. 1,800.00 to spend on my two daughters and myself. The income I earn through the carpentry program is only for this year, since we are expected to use this training to seek employment in this field.

It may seem that Rs. 1,800.00 is sufficient for 3 people, the reality is that because Jivanthi, my daughter, is mentally handicapped – which happened after she got recurrent epileptic fits after learning that her father was killed – I spend about Rs. 1000.00 on her medication. Even though in theory hospitals here are supposed to be freely accessible, the pressures put on by the current conflict means that we don’t get priority treatment. Therefore, I have to buy medicine for Jivanthi through the open market, and these medicines are expensive. Consequently, we have only about Rs. 800.00 to spend on food, education and other related household expenses. And this means having to stretch my income in many ways and directions.

*(Mangalika, a 41-year old de jure – war widow – Tamil female-head from Batticaloa, and mother of two daughters).*

Moreover families in these different circumstances may have different non-state sources of support, help from kin and from the community.

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## 8. Non-widows and their needs

The relative poverty of non-widows in comparison with widows has been found in other studies (Humphries 1998). Aturupane et al (1997) found that 52 per cent of poor female heads were non-widows whereas only 41 per cent of non-poor female heads fell into this category. The reversal of this relationship in the case of Muslims refers back to the routes into female headship by ethnic group. Many Muslim non-widows take up the responsibilities of headship on divorce. Muslim wives may have the opportunity to bargain around the divorce table and may extract a better settlement than Tamil and Sinhala women who are more likely to simply be deserted. Proportionally more Tamils and Sinhala female heads are also supporting a sick, unemployed or alcoholic man.

Lurking behind these categories are notions of deservingness. Widows fall into the “deserving” category of female heads. Their status is not of their choosing. They are victims. In contrast non-widows are often viewed as “undeserving” female heads. They are construed as somehow culpable for their bad situation. If they had been better wives they would not have been deserted or their husbands would not have taken to drink. Married women are in a particularly treacherous situation. Their economic need may be hidden behind the presence of an adult male or their assumption of headship construed as emasculating and aggressive.

The family that helps me more than the others in the community looks at my family and me sympathetically. This is not so with others in the community, who help me but only in limited ways – usually by loaning money for short periods of time. People in the community think of me in two distinct ways. Some people look at me with respect because I look after my family well. Others not so, because I do not live with my husband. People think that I am being arrogant because now that I earn a living I do not want to take my husband back. But I feel that I do not need a husband who spends everything I earn, and pawns my jewelry too.

*(Kamalini, a de facto Tamil female-head from Trincomalee, and mother of two young sons).*

The in-depth interviews were invaluable for bringing into the open the dependence of many sources of help and support on the goodwill and friendly disposition of kin and community. Respectability in the eyes of relatives and friends emerged as key to assistance under many circumstances. Yet the quest to get and maintain respectability often involved not only sacrifices in terms of isolation and loneliness but constraints on economic activities. Women often found themselves treading a tightrope between self-help vital to the family exchequer and loss of status needed to secure kin solidarity and support. While these issues emerged as endless problems to be circumnavigated in the family survival strategy, they would not easily have been brought to the surface through the questionnaires alone. The open-ended discussions helped us to discover and explore vital issues about how female heads are perceived and perceive themselves, issues which rebounded to constrain and influence economic options and outcomes.

The importance of non-widows among female heads suggests that the civil unrest cannot be seen as the ultimate cause of the increasing number of such households. Their deep roots in the changing social and economic conditions must be understood. Even if the bellicose conditions have been partially responsible for an upsurge in female-headship this does not mean that such households will disappear if peace breaks out. The social and economic adjustments are non-reversible. The additional number of widows created as a result of the conflict put pressures on traditional support networks particularly on the



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smaller number of men, fathers, brothers, and sons, who remain to provide economic aid. This burden operates to unravel the traditional codes of conduct. Networks of economic support that would have coped with smaller calls upon them are stretched beyond their sustainable limits. To meet the demands upon them men migrate in search of better economic opportunities or move to the city to work. Repatriated income flows are important in sustaining households left behind but often too these disappear over time.

When the conflict began to escalate rapidly and economic conditions were becoming bad here in Trincomalee, we thought it was best that my husband go in search of wage labor to neighboring Polonnaruwa. It was not too far from our village and there were more opportunities there. This seemed like a good idea at the time, and for about 7-8 years it worked out fine. However, eventually this separation took its toll on our relationship, and now I am left to fend for the family – though fortunately, my older son's, now 20 years old, earnings go towards the household income too.

*(Gauthami, a 42-year old de facto Sinhala female-head from Trincomalee, and mother of three children).*

The initial shock caused by the increase in widowhood has cumulative repercussions as remaining men default on obligations that then become even more concentrated. The result undermines the patriarchal systems of support and forces female heads to look for other means to sustain their families. The survival of female-headed households outside the traditional networks then has demonstration effects that precipitate additional defaults and maybe even additional marital instability. The war may have been an original factor in the increase in female headship but this type of household is now founded in other social and economic processes – as the experience of Gauthami reveals.

Nor is the increasing incidence of female-headed households a product of hard times, something that will disappear with economic recovery. In fact female-headship in the eastern districts is partially caused by the prosperity elsewhere. The sample contained many women whose partners had migrated elsewhere to work in the face of the adverse effects of the unrest on the local economy and then deserted, thereby compounding the pressures on those men who remained in the region.

When I came to recognize that my husband had eventually abandoned me after leaving to work in Colombo, I initially had to rely on my brothers to help me economically. This was because my children were young and I had no steady source of income. So until I got my feet on the ground, my two brothers helped me – and this seemed like a normal option since my parents were dead by the time my husband left me for another woman.

*(Nayana, a 48 year old de facto Sinhala female-head from Ampara and mother of three children).*

Recognition that female-headed households are not a transient war time creation or even the result of hard times has important implications for a policy-oriented and longer run view. It denies the view that female headship is a social aberration of a temporary nature.

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It may appear as if women head more and more households because the conflict has killed men in great numbers. This is true for a great many of the households, but this should not mean that other forms of household formations should get ignored. Unfortunately, this is what keeps happening again and again, because the focus of NGO activity is only on war widows.

I had to assume headship because my husband abandoned me after two years of marriage. There are several female-headed households in the area, where women assume headship because their spouses are alcoholics, unemployed, physically maimed or disabled, and/or separated. We have difficult times too in supporting our households, and it would be good for people to recognize that such households are here to stay.

*(Siththi, a 35-year old **de facto** Muslim female-head from Batticalo and mother of one child – a daughter).*

If female-headship is not just the product of civil war and is here to stay, the strategy can no longer to be offer short-run subsidies. Policies need to have a longer time horizon and aim to make these households self-supporting.

## 9. Children in female-headed households

Children are known to be a vital resource in female-headed households whose survival often depends upon the residence of working-age children. Children's ages are crucial. Problems of poverty in these families are compounded by the presence of dependent children while escape to more comfortable circumstances often involves retaining children until they earn adult wages.

I think it will be fairly accurate to say that children play an important role in female-headed households. If I look around my village, children help their mothers in numerous ways. Younger children tend to help their mothers by doing the household chores, while teenage children do either household chores or engage in homework based occupations – as a way of supplementing the household incomes. Older children, invariably, may bring the primary source of income to the household, supplement household income or be one of the several sources of income-generation for female-headed households. The extent to which children support their mothers, invariably depend on their economic circumstances – and how crucial mothers and children think their income is vis-à-vis getting educated.

*(A women's activist from Batticaloa district, working for a local NGO).*

Tables 8, 9, 10 and 11 show how households in the ethnic groups differ according to numbers and ages of resident children.

**Table 8. Children under 6 in Households by Ethnic Group**

Number of Children	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhala
0	101 87.1%	93 82.3%	47 68.1%
1	12 10.3%	12 10.6%	18 26.1%
2	3 2.6%	6 5.3%	3 4.3%
3	-	2 1.8%	1 1.4%

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 14.11$ ; sig. = .028)

**Table 9. Children 6-10 in Households by Ethnic Group**

Number of Children	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhala
0	74 63.8%	70 62.5%	30 43.5%
1	24 20.7%	32 28.6%	23 33.3%
2	13 11.2%	8 7.1%	15 21.7%
3	5 4.3%	2 1.8%	1 1.4%

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 15.88$ ; sig. = .014)

**Table 10: Children 11-18 in Households by Ethnic Group**

Number of Children	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhala
0	42 36.2%	43 38.4%	22 31.9%
1	32 27.6%	24 21.4%	21 30.4%
2	30 25.9%	30 26.8%	17 24.6%
3	6 5.2%	12 10.7%	7 10.1%
4	6 5.2%	2 1.8%	2 2.9%
5	-	1 .9%	-

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 8.17$ ; sig. = .612)

**Table 11: Children > 18 in Households by Ethnic Group**

Number of Children	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhala
0	60 51.7%	41 36.6%	41 59.4%
1	19 16.4%	36 31.3%	16 23.2%
2	15 12.9%	13 11.6%	6 8.7%
3	15 12.9%	6 5.4	3 4.3%
4	4 3.4%	8 7.1%	3 4.3%
5	2 1.7%	5 4.5%	-
6	1 .9%	1 .9%	-
8	-	3 2.7%	-

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 28.00$ ; sig. = .014)

The Sinhala households are more likely to contain children under 6, which relates back to their lower likelihood of being a widow. Similarly Sinhala households are more likely to contain children aged between 6 and 10. Although older and needing less care, these children are unlikely to be contributing economically. The burden of dependent children in the Sinhala families coincides with a relatively high incidence of male desertion. The ethnic groups contain similar relative numbers of children aged 11-18. But the Sinhalese higher frequency of young children is not matched by a higher frequency of children over 18. The Sinhalese households are doubly disadvantaged, relatively burdened with dependent children but lacking those who are old enough to contribute economically. Children 18+ are much more likely to live in Tamil and Muslim households. The less oppressive poverty of Muslim households owes much to the number and ages of the children they contain.

While the numbers and ages of children in female-headed households in part relates back to the routes into female headship characteristic of the different groups, these findings suggest that ethnicity is also important in conditioning household composition. Muslim families are larger on average but their ability to retain grown children is especially important in fending off poverty.

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The economic reliance of female-headed households on children often results in their premature entry into the labor market. Early working often interrupts if not terminates schooling. The adverse effects on human capital formation of poverty and child labor in female-headed households are widely appreciated. Often when education and training have been disrupted by precocious employment, the gaps cannot be made good at a later date. Timely intervention becomes imperative (Horrell, Humphries and Voth 1998). The adverse effects of poverty on children's nutrition and health and the problems created for education when children are sent out to work create strong externality arguments for intervention to raise incomes in lone mother households. But the economic arguments do not convey the bitterness and heartbreak many women felt at feeling forced to withdraw a child from school either to have them substitute as a child-minder at home or to have them look for work themselves.

For me educating children is important, because otherwise they would suffer like me. I feel that I had very little choice with Shivanthi. My husband had died and not even a year after this I met with a motorbike accident, which led to my hospitalization for a couple of months. During this time Shivanthi's education got disrupted because she took over the responsibilities of looking after her siblings and caring for me. And after I was discharged and came back home, I had to make the hard choice that I needed Shivanthi's help – both in the household and in cash crop cultivation. Therefore, I had to discontinue her education – and to this day, I wish I could have had things differently because I do think educating children is important.

*(Durga, a 49 year old de jure Tamil female-head from Tricomalee and mother of four children).*

These decisions very often involved trading off one child's individual interests against those of another child and force mothers into invidious and painful comparisons. Mothers often think they have to represent "the collective interest". Not surprisingly, women often agonized over decisions and their reliving of some soul searching in the interviews shows the way interests were weighed and considered. Contrary to some feminist expectations, these choices do not appear to victimize girls. Boys and girls were both chosen as sacrifices according to family circumstances and local employment opportunities. There was no systematic gender preference.

After separating from Vijaya many times, I decided about 10 years ago that this separation had to be final. From then I took over the role of earning an income by growing cash crops in a land leased by a *mudalali* (landowner) close-by to our house. Of my six children, the oldest was a daughter followed by two sons – and these were the only children I thought who would be able to help me with my income-generating activities. I decided that I disrupt the education of my two sons and get them to help me with the cash crop schemes. This is because I thought they were better able to physically help me, which was what was necessary for growing cash crops.

*(Vasuki, a 44 year old de facto Tamil female-head from Batticaloa and mother of six children).*

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When my husband was killed, both my children were young – they were under 10 years old. So just after I was widowed, it was my sister who came to my help. She was educated and a clerical worker in the region, and therefore chose to financially help me. But by the time my oldest son was a teenager, he spoke with me and said that we should stop depending solely on *punchie* (younger-aged aunt) for financial help. He said that he had spoken with some fishermen in the neighborhood, and they had agreed to take him on their fishing trips. So from the time my son was about 13-14 years old, he started bringing home an income – and we have now come to depend on his financial help, with my daughter continuing to get her education.

*(Savithri, a 44 year old de jure Sinhala female-head from Trincomalee and mother of two children).*

With the ‘opening-up’ of the economy, my husband found that it was difficult to do business. So things became more and more difficult for us and by 1983 or so he had to wind down his business. Fortunately, by this time our oldest daughter was just finishing her A/Level education. She is quite an intelligent and enterprising young woman, so she is the one supporting our 6 children and us by taking-up a variety of income-generating activities. The activities she is involved ranges from teaching in Montessori in the mornings to working part-time in NGOs in the area to teaching sewing classes to young girls in the evening hours. So she is the person supporting our household – and more or less on her own.

*(Zeena, a 39 year old de facto Muslim female-head from Ampara and mother of seven children).*

To design policies to help these families we must probe behind these decisions and understand the reasoning. The unique information from the interviews shows how the different ethnic groups rationalized their choices in different ways. Muslim female heads often chose to withdraw boys from school and send them to work because it was culturally inconceivable to place girls in the labor market. But if home working was available then girls were chosen because this meant that the family did not then have to expend time chaperoning girls back and forth from school. Tamils and Muslims both were inclined to chose boys to work because the duration of their loyalty to their households of origin is limited by their allegiance on marriage to their wives and their wives’ families.<sup>6</sup>

Even though we depend on our older sons’ income to support the household, I know that this support will stop after they get married, because this is usually the practice here. As my husband died, it was my unmarried brother who supported us – but once he married, his responsibility shifted towards his wife and her family. Similarly, my sons will stop helping us, when they marry. In the mean time, they not only financially support our household expenses – but also make every effort to keep aside saving for their sisters dowries.

*(Kathija, a 55 year old de jure Muslim female-head from Batticalo and mother of eight children).*

The issue of family strategies in terms of child labour is explored further along with its policy implications in Ruwanpura (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Eastern Sri Lanka is characterized by matrilineal kin structures, which is well noted for both Muslim and Tamil communities (McGilvray 1982, 1989, Agarwal 1990, 1996). Therefore, partially the reasoning provided by female-heads on the potential limitations to the support of their sons is not surprising.

## 10. Support networks: Wider kin and community

Both the questionnaires and the interviews highlighted the importance to these households of wider support from the kin and community. But there were a few surprises in the sources of support, the way in which women valued different kinds of support, and, above all, in the identification of a “price” paid for the support. Table 12 shows clear ethnic differences in terms of the frequency with which households received remittances from outside. Muslims and Tamils are very similar with almost three-quarters of families in receipt of some outside financial support while Sinhalese families are much less likely to be helped in this way.

**Table 12: Frequency of Income Remittances from Outside Sources by Ethnic Group**

	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhala
Not known	-	1 .9%	-
<b>Yes</b>	84 72.4%	83 73.5%	32 46.4%
<b>No</b>	32 27.6%	29 29.6%	37 53.6%
<b>Total</b>	116 100%	113 100%	69 100%

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 19.05$ ; sig. = .001)

Table 13 provides evidence on the cash values of remittances. Not only are Sinhala female-heads less likely to get help from outside but its cash value on average is less.

**Table 13: Remittances from Outside Sources by Ethnic Group, Rs per month**

Ethnicity	Sample	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tamil	116	0	8900	713	1243
<b>Muslim</b>	113	0	10000	1609	1988
<b>Sinhala</b>	69	0	3500	605	944
<b>Total</b>	298	0	10000	1028	1582

\* Ethnic differences are statistically significant (From ANOVA,  $F = 13.72$ ; sig. = .000)

These ethnic differences in the extent to which households receive support are statistically significant and backed up by additional information from the questionnaires and interviews. For example, Tamil and Muslim female-heads are more likely to have relatives in foreign countries than are Sinhalese. In fact 40 per cent of Tamil women had relatives overseas. It might seem difficult to square this evidence with the view of Sinhala ethnic dominance. Perhaps the explanation ironically lies in the disadvantages that Tamils have endured forcing more mobile members of families overseas. Again the Muslim households appear to retain ties and to benefit from traditional sources of support more so than do other households in other ethnic groups. They have a lower incidence of relatives resident abroad, and slightly fewer Muslim households receive help than do Tamil households, but the pecuniary value of remittances was greater.

Another surprising finding involved the value female-heads attached to non-financial assistance from kin and community. There is an interesting tie-in here with historical work

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which has documented the value attached by women to non-financial help and the female networks through which such assistance was managed and channeled (Finch 1989). The appreciation for such support was especially strong on the part of Sinhala female heads whom we have seen are much more likely than women from other ethnic groups to participate in wage work and simultaneously much more likely to have cope with young children. Help with child-care is probably a priority for these women and indeed may be worth more than occasional and small-scale financial subsidies.

Looking after children on occasions and more importantly giving children food and meals is common practice amongst us. These practices are done of matter-of-fact and this support we provide is something I do not really think about. Besides this, my sisters and I help each other in pounding rice – which is important, since it helps me earn more income.

*(Ashanthi, a 38-year old de facto Tamil female-head from Trincomalee and mother of four children).*

On the other hand, childcare is probably of little help to many older Muslim female heads who have fewer young children and are less likely to work outside the home. Here we see women together creating packages of assistance customized to help with particular needs and particular family strategies.

Similarly too we found neighbors and friends a surprisingly important source of assistance, particularly when assistance is broadened to include the non-financial help many women found invaluable.

As a woman I must contribute to uplifting other women. Women need to perform traditional rights and duties because they are more dependent upon norms of reciprocity within community structures because they are potentially a more vulnerable group. Moreover, as my husband was killed it was partially because all the women in the neighborhood would spend time with me that it eased my emotional pain and difficulties. And to this day, we help each other in numerous ways – including doing grocery shopping, looking after my daughter when I am not home, lending me money during emergencies, etc., etc.

*(Ahila, a 41-year old de jure Tamil female-head from Ampara and mother of one child).*

These friends and neighbors are often better able than more distant kin to offer the kind of support many female-heads needed, such as childcare; help chaperoning children to school; help with cooking; and, emotional support. The in depth interviews caution against dismissing the value of friendship and conversation in the lives of our female heads.

I am light-hearted since my exposure and interaction with other female-heads. This happened with me seeking income-generating activities through a local NGO. Even though my own mother frowns at me for interacting with other female-heads so frequently, I think us talking with each other and sharing our experiences help us to feel more emotionally stable and secure. We all realize that it is the conflict that thrust us to this role, and talking to each other about our husbands disappearances or killings is in many ways therapeutic and is a way of cementing our relationships.

*(Thishanthi, a 40-year old de jure Tamil female-head from Batticalo and mother of three children).*

Female-heads in our sample did receive help from male relatives and did benefit from traditional systems of support. Muslim women in particular appear to be able to call on such support. Moreover male kin were the only possible sources of certain kinds of assistance, especially for women who were reluctant to appear in public space and engage with people outside their immediate circle. Muslim women, for example, relied on male



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relatives to represent them and their families in interactions with state support agencies and other formal economic institutions. But this help is public and visible. It is easy to overestimate it. In the same way it is easy to assume that the economic support from male relatives that would traditionally be forthcoming is still available. In the economic and social context of eastern Sri Lanka such help appears decreasingly reliable and often of reduced importance. The circumstances of the women in our sample suggest a varied picture, but within all ethnic groups, financial support from male relatives outside the immediate family paled into insignificance in comparison with the women's own efforts and the contributions of children.<sup>7</sup> Other factors also shade the importance we should attach to traditional sources and kinds of support. Non-pecuniary help, almost invariably provided by female relatives or friends and neighbours, appears to have been treasured by many women in the sample. Moreover a majority of women in all ethnic groups found female relatives to be more dependable than male relatives. That a large majority of Sinhalese expressed this view can be explained by the ethnic emphasis on the female lineage but Muslim women expressed the same view although less emphatically.

Men too support the family, especially when we have to travel and interact with working people in banks, offices and so forth. But women are more likely to help each other during difficulties because of cultural norms that require us to support each other. I think cultural norms of reciprocity are shaped in such a way that implicitly recognizes that women can be the more vulnerable members of the community.

*(Nishani, a 25-year old de facto Sinhala female-head from Trincomalee and mother of two children).*

Of course, as women we come to assist each other during difficult times. I suppose one can say that this is important for our well-being. But from my point of view the financial support we get from uncles, brothers and sons is much more important. If we didn't get this financial support, how will we survive?

*(Fayaza, a 37-year old de jure Muslim female-head from Ampara and mother of four children).*

Another feature of exogenous support that we would probably not have registered without the in depth interviews is the costs that female heads of all ethnic groups associated with it. These are not the expectation of relatively immediate reciprocation assumed by some economic interpretations of interactions among kin and community. It is more that access to support is conditional on the good opinion of key figures in the extended family or in the community. Thus to be able to benefit from traditional support women have to maintain their "deservingness" in the eyes of male and female kin who often bring conservative values to bear in judging conduct. Female heads faced with the exigencies of getting a living may simply be unable to both behave in a way that is approved and seize the economic opportunities available to them.

People are always on the watch about women whose husbands are not with them. If anyone sees me talking with another man, then it leads to speculation and gossip. In this context, we have to think about every step we take, the kind-of help we get and the work we do. Unfortunately, what people think does matter – because we always have to depend on the help we get from others in the community.

*(Sarala, a 45-year old de jure Sinhala female-head from Ampara and mother of three children).*

<sup>7</sup> Financial support from kin ranged from 13.3% for Muslim female heads to 1.5% and 1.6% for Sinhala and Tamil female heads respectively (Ruwanpura 2001).

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I make the final decisions, because I think my decisions are best. But I also ensure that my decisions are acceptable to the community as well. After all, I can not ignore that I live in a village, where what people think matter – and the help they give me will be largely based on their opinions of me.

*(Damayanthi, a 32-year old **de jure** Tamil female-head from Trincomalee and mother of two children).*

Nor is it only male kin who exercise judgements about conduct that open or close channels of support. Even the female-dominated local support systems might implicitly require certain conduct in order to include female heads as recipients of collective aid. While unrecognized in the literature our evidence suggests that the need to retain respectability and merit in the eyes of kin and community often place female heads in a painful double bind. Once these hidden costs of support are acknowledged it may be clearer why women may even chose not to avail them of such help.

While I am aware of what people think and say about me, I do not allow these perceptions to influence me. I think my first concern is looking after the welfare of my children and if I do this well, then what people think should not matter. This is difficult for women, but I think I have to change when my circumstances are changing. People may have difficulty accepting these changes, but precisely because of this I try to keep depending on my neighbors at a bare minimum.

*(Rani, a 37-year old **de facto** Tamil female-head from Batticaloa and mother of two children).*

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## 11. Conclusion

Our study of female-headed households in the eastern districts of Sri Lanka explodes some myths. These households are not temporary products of war whatever role the conflict may have played in an initial increase in female headship. Households headed by women are here to stay, created and recreated by the social and economic conditions.

Policies to help female-headed households cannot rely on temporary pensions but must aim to make such households able to help themselves and to do so without relying on the labor of the school age children.

These households are unable to rely on traditional sources of support from extended kin. The social and economic conditions, the background of conflict, and the proportion of female heads in the population weigh against this. But also times and views are changing. Women can no longer rely on traditional sources of support when they are widowed or deserted and so they struggle to cope in other ways and in so doing undermine the traditional networks even further. The women in our sample have been lone mothers and female heads at a terrible time, not only in a context of civil war but in a world of change where traditional help is crumbling but nothing as yet has been provided to take its place.

The economic case for assistance to households headed by women is strong. But our work suggests that remedial policies need to recognize the many and varied circumstances of the households. Female heads cannot be bundled together and seen as pathology, a social problem to be dealt with by a single social solution.

But if female headship is not a social problem in eastern Sri Lanka, nor is it a lifestyle choice. None of the women in the sample can be thought of as opting to head their own households. To think in such terms is to trivialize the tragedies, often-monstrous tragedies that have overtaken them. But many female heads in the face of misery and deprivation have struggled to make a life for themselves and their surviving family members. In so doing they have acquired a pride in their achievements and a sense of their own worth. Their autonomy was often unsought; an unintended consequence of tragedy, but it has left them feeling empowered nonetheless.

Islamic culture is resistant to change, even when material realities are changing. Islam remains Islam keeping women secluded. Just because there is no husband how long can we be inside the house? Only if we earn can we eat.

If Chandrikam a widow, can be the President of Sri Lanka, then all other women can aspire to similar heights. It is usually men that prevent women from realizing their abilities. I think of my present status as one where I am *free* and I will do all I can to help and uplift other women like me, in the community!

*(Hidaya, a 32-year old de facto Muslim female-head from Batticaloa and mother of one child).*

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