

# SHIFTING THEORIES: PARTIAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE HOUSEHOLD

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## 1. Introduction

One concern of feminist economists is with the appropriateness of mainstream methodology for understanding social reality (England, 1993; Folbre, 1993; Humphries, 1995; Lawsen, 1997). This concern arises because of the limitations of a categorical structure of analysis put in place by mainstream economists, and the partial orientation of this analytical structure. The dominant paradigm is absolutist in nature, mostly involving isolated individuals operating in conditions where an equilibrium outcome is the result, which is often fictitious and is a way of providing universalizing accounts.<sup>1</sup> Feminist economists point out that this feature is motivated by the reduction of human relationships to one dominant Western white male ideal as a stereotype (England, 1993; Folbre, 1993; Humphries, 1995). Others argue that this outcome is brought about by a desire to facilitate the universal application of analytic or formalistic methods within economics (Lawson, 1997, 1999). Certainly, to understand the complexities of the world, and household structures in particular, feminist economists need to move beyond the mainstream paradigm. There are however, projects already concerned with the broader features of the real world, which range from Marxism and (old) institutionalism to critical realism. Feminist economists already engage with the draw on these frameworks in important ways (Hartmann, 1981; Ferber and Nelson, 1993; Folbre, 1993; Mohan, 2003).

The realist social theory project, conceptualized as critical realism within economics, has self-consciously set out to derive, via ontological analysis, a categorical structure appropriate to the world in which we live, including in particular the social realm (Lawson, 1997; Bourdieu, 1998, 1999). The social ontology outlined by advocates of critical realism provides a conception of the social world as, at once, structured differentiated, emergent, process driven, polyvalent, value-laden, holistic and human-agency dependent. It is a framework that captures and systematizes the highly differentiated, evolving and interconnected world that feminists have uncovered in their empirically oriented research. Because critical realism concerns itself mostly with

ontological analysis, it provides a categorical framework merely of possibilities, where it cannot be determined in advance which of the developed categories provides greatest insight or how all the various aspects are able to interconnect (Lawson, 1997, 1999). Work by feminist economists, then, especially through case studies, can fill in the details and thus reciprocally enrich the critical realist framework, just as they draw on it. My aim here is to uncover the ways in which social ontology offers an effective way of recognizing diverse household structures that exist in our social world. In this paper I want to illustrate these claims by drawing on my own research on female-headship<sup>2</sup> in eastern Sri Lanka.

Orthodox economic readings of the household in some measure fail because the links between structure and agency are not included,<sup>3</sup> and the household is treated as an undifferentiated unit akin to methodical individualism that underpins the dominant economic perspective (Becker, 1965). Methodological individualism cannot accommodate the combination of human agency and social structures in dynamic interaction (Lawson, 1997, p.16; Humphries, 1998, p.224)

Others have provided (e.g., Sen, 1990; Agarwal, 1997) more progressive analyses of households and household relations. But I argue that, for all Sen's and Agarwal's strong points, households in their framework remain bounded, unitary and homogenous.<sup>4</sup> They assume a standard patriarchal household and work within a framework of methodological individualism. Consequently, their analysis either neglects or is unable to explain diverse forms of household relations, including female-headship, which are networked, contested and diverse. My evidence, along with that of numerous others, suggests that the transformation of households is best understood by paying attention to the differentiated patriarchal structures (Chant, 1997; Chen, 1998; Ruwanpura, 2001). In this respect, the ontological analysis advocated by critical realism is particularly useful to my research. At the same time, research such as my own serves to illustrate how the critical realist conception works out in particular contexts, highlighting some of its more salient features for feminist economists - especially from a development perspective.

## 2. Revising the household through feminist narrations

Intra-household analyses have traditionally sought to focus on gender relationships by looking at the bargaining power of men and women. Exit options available to men and women are held to determine negotiations over resources within the household. Since men have an advantage over women in gaining access to employment and income-generating activities, the bargaining position of men within the household, is strengthened by their economic position, while that of women is weakened. The economic basis of unequal power relations between men and women is depicted in these ways (Becker, 1965; Engels, 1978; Folbre, 1986A, 1986B).

Recent contributions provide the framework for a more complex analysis, by emphasizing the qualitative dimensions of bargaining relations (Sen, 1990; Agarwal, 1997). This literature has shown that economic relations not only have economic features, but are also tied up with cultural, religious, ideological and material factors. Although the conceptualization of the household provided by Sen (1990) and Agarwal (1997) does not stand for all feminist theory, they are powerful thinkers who have greatly influenced feminist economics - including my own thinking on the critical issue of the household. Thus it was these influential accounts of the household that formed the basis for my fieldwork research.<sup>5</sup>

Sen's (1990) writings on cooperative conflicts and Agarwal's (1990) contributions to bargaining and household relations are treated together in this paper. Agarwal (1997) is concerned with incorporating the qualitative dimensions of bargaining over social norms and perceptions into household relations. Her assessment is similar to Sen's: endowments, entitlements and entitlement relations are related to cultural factors, which have an impact on cooperative conflicts in intra-household dynamics. Likewise, Agarwal is concerned with two qualitative dimensions of bargaining relations. First, she investigates how social perceptions influence intra-household dynamics (echoing Sen in his cooperative conflict model). And second, she asks how these social factors are themselves bargained over, which can be considered an extension of earlier work on bargaining relations as well as gender cooperative conflict literature.<sup>6</sup>

The key point in analyzing cooperative conflicts is to extend entitlements in order to incorporate notions of perceived legitimacy in intra-household divisions (Sen, 1990, pp. 125, 145). It is these that enable an individual's capabilities to be fully realized. Sen recognizes that, in the case of women,

entitlements *per se* do not necessarily translate into minimum standards of welfare, because qualitative relations, namely the cultural and social dimensions, constitute the informational base of women's 'legitimate' status *vis-à-vis* men. These are factors that define views on propriety and norms, which in turn characterize acceptable gender roles in communities (Sen, 1990, p. 125). Therefore, it is not merely entitlements that matter in determining the welfare of women, but also the informational base, which is at best conceived as a lens through which entitlements are perceived (Sen, 1990, p.126).

Agarwal's concerns are twofold. Her first concern is similar to Sen's, and is about the role of social norms and perceptions in the bargaining process. Her view is that social norms affect the strength of a person's fall back position in bargaining relations. Second, she examines how social norms and expectations are themselves bargained over. This is an extension of Sen's analysis of cooperative conflict. Sen's concern with the informational base is similar to Agarwal's premise that social norms and perceptions determine the fallback position of individuals. However, Agarwal (1997, pp. 1-11) goes further by conjecturing that social norms, expectations and perceptions can themselves be bargained over. In Agarwal's analysis, Sen's informational base becomes endogenous. The implication is that factors such as state intervention, feminist political activity and awareness building, institutional reform and the like can lead to positive shifts in the informational base.

Agarwal is no doubt correct in arguing that there are possibilities for progressive transformation in social norms that can affect the welfare of women. However, the process of bargaining for social legitimacy need not be unidimensional. The complex twist to the analysis lies here. Social legitimacy has a variety of facets. While certain factors influence gender issues positively, others may be detrimental to progressive gender relations. Disentangling particular effects can be difficult. I draw attention to this not to make a case for a simpler framework, but rather to acknowledge the complexity of household relations. The important point of Agarwal's theme is that there is an explicit role for the state in influencing bargaining relations within the context of social norms and legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. Other household structures: the evidence

Feminists are increasingly paying attention to alternative household structures that deviate from the patriarchal norm, with the rise in female-headship being a particularly good

example of an emergent form of household structure (Chant, 1997; Chen, 1998). Like all household structures, however, female-headed households take many forms. Chant (1997) provides a selective typology, which includes lone-mother households, female-headed extended households, lone female households, single-sex/female-only households, and so on (Chant, 1997, pp. 10-26). The reasons for the emergence and increase in female-headship vary from economic and social transformation to conflict and displacement (Buvinic *et al.*, 1978; Youssef and Hetler, 1983; Buvinic and Gupta, 1997; Chant, 1997). This diversity in the types of female-headed households suggests that there is a case for the development of a framework that can be adapted to these different forms.

With this in mind, the following analysis draws on my previous study of female-headship in eastern Sri Lanka with the aim of moving beyond existing theoretical contributions (Ruwanpura, 2001). There are many creative ways in which the cooperative and bargaining relations' model can be extended when speaking about female-headship. But I conclude that, because it is embedded in individualist methodology, the limits of the model become apparent when applied to female-headship. Because of this, an open-ended theorizing of household structures is called for; that is, a form of theorizing that is not closed, isolated and atomistic is promoted. This supports feminist advocacy for methodologically shifting away from mainstream economics. The next section offers some possible ways in which cooperative conflict models can provide a backdrop for female-headship.

#### 4. Nearing the limits or pushing boundaries?

The cooperative conflict literature makes links between extended entitlements, the perceived legitimacy of women and their households' levels of welfare. In the case of female-headed households, how does this group transform these links into claims on the community and state resources in order to expand their entitlement base? In eastern Sri Lanka, the Muslim and Tamil communities are governed by matrilineal laws, customs and practices (Agarwal, 1996)<sup>8</sup> so have these practices legitimated the status of female-heads and widows so as to establish entitlement relations and sharpen extended entitlements? The evidence is ambiguous, since matrilineal practices do not mean the absence of patriarchal values and/or structures (Ruwanpura, 2001). Do matrilineal practices override other cultural constraints? There are ethnic and class-based variations (Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004), but the response here is straightforward. In eastern Sri Lanka, generally repressive cultural practices are not a pervasive

feature. But this does not negate the existence of patriarchal structures and patriarchal institutional laws and run counter to matrilineal inheritance, and which mostly work against the interests of women, and of female-heads in particular (Ruwanpura, 2001; de Alwis, 2002; Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004). Such divergences will not inform the informational base of female-heads positively, since they only serve to perpetuate patriarchal interests against which female-heads have no legal recourse.

The basic thrust of cooperative conflict theories is that women subsume their perceived self-interest in order to work together with their men in negotiation over resources, and that this helps maintain the welfare of families. So even where women's own interest is in conflict with the larger familial interest, women are more likely to cooperate with men to avoid a breakdown in marital relations. In my own case study, I found similarly that female-heads subordinated their own social, economic and emotional interests so as to obtain the support of their kin and/or community in maintaining the welfare of their households (Ruwanpura, 2001, 2003). Female-heads end up making difficult choices and forgo their own individual interest to ensure the welfare of their families (Ruwanpura, 2003, Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004).

Where the economic support available to women is crucially dependent upon the community's benevolence and the support systems for female-heads, women are likely to repress their own self-interest. In the absence of targeted welfare policies and institutional structures supporting female-heads, there is likely to be a multiplication of such incidents. But does this mean, in turn, that the community will provide resources indefinitely to 'honourable' female heads? This does not appear to happen, since community and kin support for most female-heads is intermittent and/or temporary. The lack of a patriarchal figure in their household may mean that female-heads do not participate in the bargaining over resources characteristic of two-person households. But nonetheless they often remain trapped in community and kin structures that perpetuate patriarchal values, and where women's individual self-interest continues to be pushed aside.

Two issues are pertinent here. First, where benevolent community or kin support is available, female-heads may be able to extend their entitlement base, thus sustain in the welfare of their households. But, second, such extensions of entitlement relations may do nothing to expand their capabilities because they place family welfare over their own personal welfare. Without this expansion female-heads'

economic vulnerability and susceptibility to poverty remains very real.

But even the conditional support of kin and community is not offered to all. Most female-heads do not get continuous economic support from their kin and neighbours. For most female-heads, the support received is largely non-monetary in nature, which brings to the debate the gender dimensions of network structures, and the theoretical implications for feminist methodology.

### 5. The need for undifferentiated households

It is possible to extend Sen and Agarwal's analysis of cooperative conflicts in household to the community. However, this makes the limitations of their discourse more apparent.<sup>9</sup> It is useful to consider two problems in detail here. First, the focus is on women suppressing their own interests. My previous study (Ruwanpura, 2001) has shown that female-heads do not simply deal with gender relations within the household, but have to negotiate with patriarchal structures in the shape of networks, labour markets and other institutions. These structures, whether represented by men or women, are imbued with patriarchal values.<sup>10</sup> Female-heads may have to repress their own interest to ensure community or kin support. Second, these structures in turn depend upon women (and men) to sustain, maintain and reciprocate them. Since most women take it for granted that it is their 'duty' to help each other, they rarely step back to analyse their role in perpetuating particular gender relationships. Even where female heads are strongly aware of the material and social changes that make them adopt a critical standpoint towards their new circumstances, they still constantly have to bargain with other women in the community to ensure that they do not face their wrath.

The very absence of any consideration of community structures in modern economics is revealing of the discipline's limitations. But does an incorporation of the relationship between the market, state and household suffice to comprehend social realities? The answer is in the negative, as social reality is more complex still. The basic cooperative conflict model assumes a patriarchal household, leaving little room for those alternative household structures within which women devise survival strategies. The female-headed household is an example of an alternative household structure that shapes the social and reproductive roles of children. Such alternative household structures, of course, point to the need for feminist economists to move beyond frameworks that

simply focus on patriarchal households. Hence, despite the several strengths of these feminist narrations of the household, because as a paradigm they are implicitly based on a methodologically individualist framework, their limitations become apparent when they are applied to household formations that are socially networked, contested and diverse.<sup>11</sup>

Perception, welfare and agency of women in cooperative conflict situations bring into the household debate social and personal parameters that lead to particular outcomes for household relationships. My assessment departs from Sen's and is closer to Agarwal's view that 'what is needed is less making women realize they deserve better, than having them believe they can do better' (1997,p.25). This is because through socially aware action (i.e., they can do better'), the possibility for transformation of social structures through intended and unintended consequences takes place, with the space for agency getting recognized. A few illustrations from my research serve to exemplify the numerous ways in which this can happen. At one level, the ethnic conflict in eastern Sri Lanka is opening up spaces for female-heads to question accepted patriarchal values and norms. However the extent of their willingness to challenge the status quo has links to ethnicity. Tamil female-heads are, in most instances, openly critical of the legitimacy and authority of social norms and values in their community that devalue their interests. Most Muslim female-heads limited their criticism of social and patriarchal norms to those that restrict their social mobility, public movements and welfare interests. Although Sinhala female-heads are aware of patriarchal values pervading their lives and options, they see no real reason to challenge such structures overtly. The rationale is that, as long as there was ease of movement and access to economic resources, there was little reason to confront the status quo.

Female-heads facing poverty or belonging to low-income classes across ethnic communities, however, are vociferous critics of those structures that make their economic survival difficult. But female-heads in all ethnic groups face barriers that prevent them from realizing their capabilities. Impediments are translated through community or kin networks which espouse the values of each ethnic community, and perpetuate patriarchal interests. The diverse groups of female-headed households in eastern Sri Lanka, therefore, are placed in particularly contradictory positions. Matrilineal inheritance patterns and community structures place female-heads in a favourable position, but this positioning was only relative.

I have previously shown that female-heads within this particular context in eastern Sri Lanka nevertheless have lives that remain shaped by ethnic dimensions and influenced by patriarchal relations (Ruwanpura, 2001, 2003; Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004). Patriarchal restraints sit together with structures that have traditionally favoured women, and manage to survive and mutate according to historically specific circumstances. For example, at the current juncture in Sri Lanka, ethno-nationalist discourse has become an effective medium through which patriarchal interests are promoted (Jayawardena and de Alwis, 1996; de Alwis, 2002). My research has revealed how these patriarchal interests also find their way into network structures in numerous ways. Since these structures are the very basis through which female-heads realize their economic interests, such women are particularly affected.

While most feminists working in development economics discuss the gradual erosion of traditional kin support to female-heads, I have shown that kin and networks continue to support them, although increasingly in non-monetary forms (Ruwanpura 2001). Rather than disappearing, kin and community support has shifted from monetary support to non-monetary activities, with obvious gender implications. Women mainly carry out care-giving tasks, which are both unpaid and unaccounted for in descriptions of development activities. This dimension of network support, a support that is important to female-heads for economic and social reasons, also illustrates women's roles in maintaining, reciprocating and sustaining these network structures. Women (and men) rarely reflect on the way they perpetuate gender roles and relationships: their day-to-day practical activities simply mean that, because they have little choice but to engage with these roles and relationships, the latter become the unintended consequence of these necessary day-to-day activities. In this way, actions reproduce structures as an unintended consequence. Since their very economic survival depends on these networks, the common sense in upholding them is apparent. More importantly; from a feminist methodological standpoint, a pushing aside of community structures in economic analysis serves to underscore the gender biases in the discipline. Both Sen and Agarwal, while cognizant of the social forces shaping the particular outcomes for women's entitlements and their capabilities base, limit their analysis to individual behaviour within the patriarchal households.<sup>12</sup> Yet the way households are networked with other institutions and the gender composition of social relations of the latter are not given enough consideration.

Gender outcomes are linked not simply to bargaining relations within patriarchal households, but also to a gender-biased community that generally espouses patriarchal values. Analysing communities, therefore, is necessary not simply to show the methodological limitations of the mainstream framework, but also because a critical feminist reading may make for better policy prescriptions.

The neglect of network and community structures within cooperative conflict models arises because of the assumption of a household structure that is headed by a patriarch, where women actively negotiate their interests and agency. While there is great validity in this particular reading, since, after all, a fair proportion of household are headed by men, it also implicitly assumes a particular type of household. Sen's (1990) elucidation of the cooperative conflict model never radically departs from the bargaining problem theorized by Nash (Ibid, p, 131-4). By resting cooperative conflict situations on the tenets of individual welfare and outcomes, the gender division problem is formulated in terms of the need to incorporate 'perceptions of interest' of individuals so as to consider their impact on welfare outcomes (Sen, 1990, p. 133). The call for recognizing the central import of a wider informational base for the bargaining problem as applied to gender divisions within the household is the basis of Agarwal's (1997) work. Her analysis of household models brings in social norms, community-based coalitions and identities, and the state so as to recognize the diversity of factors that affect perceptions of individual interests and challenges the methodological individualism upon which Nash builds his bargaining problem. Rather, they extend the basics of the model to household relations y including other variables, such as conceptions of legitimacy, desertion, social norms, perceived interests and so forth.

However, households are not the same everywhere: their structure is dependent upon social context, and they are a sub-system of wider social relations and realities. Understanding household requires us to study the varied contexts in which household are situated as well as the social relations of individuals within these institutions. In studying female-leadership, for example, there is a need to locate these household structures in their ethnic and class backgrounds, and it is this specific reading that is provided in the study. This analysis calls for consideration of the wider social structures in economic readings of female-headed households, since the welfare of these households is over-determined by an interplay of factors that are ignored when a uniform patriarchal household is assumed. Furthermore, the implied economically deterministic readings of household

are another limitation, since female heads' participation in economic activity has not necessarily increased the perception of the 'naturalness' of these women's households or their roles as primary income earners. Shaping values that are beneficial for women will require more than their having access to income, economic activity and land. While these may be crucial for female-heads; survival and the welfare of their households, their autonomy and emancipation are not guaranteed through improvements in economically determined fallback positions. To ensure the autonomy of female-heads requires considering the wider social structures which shape the parameters of their agency. The argument for incorporating social structures into the conceptualization of households, therefore, is also about broadening the methodological boundaries of household analysis. Put simply, accommodating the differentiated nature of households requires moving out of the *doxa*<sup>13</sup> of development economics, since it is within this *doxa* that the cooperative conflicts framework is located. To move out of requires borrowing from feminist and social theoretical contributions on economic methodology, and this will be done in the next section.

## 6. Realist social theory and re-conceptualising the household

Realist social theory contributes in important ways to understanding the social structures within which humans operate. The specific project of critical realism<sup>14</sup> on which I draw here shows in particular that event regularities-the backbone of mainstream economic theory-are a special case that occurs when stable structures are isolated under experimental conditions (Lawson, 1997).<sup>15</sup> Narratives of female-headed households accentuate again and again the inter-connections of social structures, which reveal that they cannot be isolated in the real world (Ruwanpura, 2001, 2003; Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004). Moreover, the case studies of female-heads' interactions with these social structures show that the latter are constantly being shaped and reshaped.

The difficult decisions made by female-heads to involve children in labouring activities to maintain the welfare of the household illustrates this point. Women, we witness, do not necessarily make black-and-white choices. Instead, they navigate a grey nebulous terrain when deciding between pulling their sons or daughters out of school to uplift or maintain family welfare (Ruwanpura, 2001, pp.88-104). Social theorists argue that this happens because of the social realm's 'dependency upon human agency' (Lawson, 1997,

p.157; Bourdieu, 1998, p.25). Here, social structures depend on human agency, and are intrinsically dynamic and internally related to each other. Two aspects are internally related when they are what they are and can do what they do in virtue of the relation in which they stand to one another. A focus on female-headship provides many instances of internally related social positions and interactions, including those of mothers and daughters, sisters and sisters-in-law, mothers and children, women and maternal uncles, women and their in-laws, and so on. The emphasis on social position rather than on people is an essential feature of this particular perspective. Focusing on social position also opens up the possibility of each individual occupying a multitude of positions simultaneously. According to the conception, then, social reality is a network of positioned practices, where social structures are not reducible to people but consists of relations, rules and positions which are dynamically linked and facilitate the possibility of complexly structured human practices (Lawson, 1997, p.159).

The position of female-heads in eastern Sri Lanka is indeed linked to rules and relations emerging from ethnic, religious, class and gender structures that interact with each other dynamically multifaceted ways. Such a conception of social reality helps highlight the fact that neither these structures nor the positions of female-heads are static or unchanging, but are constantly being reconstituted in the very interactions they facilitate. However, routine and regular behaviour patterns do follow from the generalized procedures of actions, which are an outcome of the relational practices and positions of people (Lawson, 1997, pp. 160-3). But disparities across individuals regarding these practices are obvious and likely, since social positions themselves usually imply hierarchy and segmentation. It is also the case that such a differentiated ascription of rule-governed practices<sup>1</sup> is connected to class, gender, ethnic and other such relations: social positions exist only in relation to these institutional modes.<sup>16</sup> Female-heads, therefore, occupy a particular position, one which, though in most instances they are thrust into it, is shaped and constituted by their relations with other social positions as well as by other relations and structures. The analysis of these facets of considering households as open, dynamic and heterogeneous entities that are related to other social institutions and, at the same time, may be constituted by each other too.

The ability of people to exercise their agency is connected with social position, relations and structures. Like social positions and relations, social structures too are constituted and connected to each other. The experiences of female-heads in eastern Sri Lanka show the interconnections between

ethnicity, the economy, religion, culture and gender identities and how these connect with each other in a myriad of alternative ways. And this, of course, includes the household and network structures too. The household always exists as a sub-system, a structured process of interaction, which is internally related to other sub-systems: the local and wider culture, religion, education system, the economic system, the market, the state, etc. Consequently, variations in household structures are inevitable, and certainly systematic differences between social groups, i.e., Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils, reveal patterns and tendencies towards one particular formation of the household rather than another. This reading of structures allows leeway for identifying the particularities of the ways in which structures operate in different contexts. Put differently, from this perspective it would indeed be surprising if culture, education, the market and other structures were the same everywhere. Similarly, households, female-headed households, nuclear households, extended households, and so on, are all likely to exist and coexist, with some others. In this perspective, female-headship need not be perceived as an aberration, but rather one way of forming kin relationships among many possibilities, one that needless to say is context-dependent.

### 7. Shifting theories: partial perspectives on the household

To consider female-headed households as an alternative form of kin relationship, of course, implies that economic theory needs to shift its focus from bounded readings of the household. And development policies, in particular, should recognize that even the more progressive readings of household structures and relations (e.g., Sen and Agarwal) provide only partial perspectives on the social reality of these structures. Similarly, community and kin structures are shaped by individual interactions with other institutions: Muslim female-heads note more support from older children and kin, which is an expression of their links to ethnic, religious and kin formations (Ruwanpura and Humphries, 2004). Sinhala female-heads, in contrast, note their dependence upon neighbors and friends, as less emphasis is placed on kin structures to support vulnerable households (Ruwanpura, 2003). Likewise, most households in all ethnic groups experienced a shifting from monetary to non-monetary support from community and kin as a consequence of altering material realities and the ethnic conflict in these communities. Such cases illustrate the inter-connections between different structures, and how both household and network structures exist as sub-systems related to other structures. In addition, variations in community and/or kin support in each ethnic group also typify the specificity of

structures in different situations. For instance, even within a similar economic environment, community and kin agents organise and reorganize themselves very differently because of their relationships with other structures, such as ethnic, class and/or gender identities.

Additionally, there are two related points relevant to households and-networks that warrant deliberation in this study of structures. First, human intentional agency presupposes the existence of social structures, so that the latter cannot simply be viewed as a creation of individuals. Second, since social structures depend upon humans, and there is willful intention on the part of all individuals to exercise their agency, these structures cannot be regarded as static (Lawson, 1997, p. 167). So the emphasis is on reproduction and transformation rather than on creation or determination: by drawing upon social structure as a condition of acting and, through the sum total of their actions, social structures are either reproduced or transformed (ibid, pp. 168-9). Household structures and networks here maintain the social order as well as reproduce and transform the structure of social space and social relations (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 69). Household structures, then, whether patriarchal, female-headed, or of any other formation, essentially serve very similar functions in the social system.

But the ability of agents within these household structures to realize their social and economic capabilities will depend very much upon interconnections with other social structures. The analysis of structure and agency, then, allows us to note their distinct and yet interdependent nature so that space for conflict of interests between agents - whether based on class, age, gender or ethnicity - as well as for collective action, is made possible. Thus, individual female-heads may have conflicting interests in relation to their mothers, older female kin and/or sisters that will bear upon the ways in which their households are created and re-created. Yet, at the same time female-headed households as a group may have similar interests that need championing so that they are able to realize their capabilities through cooperative efforts, which in turn of course may lead to changing perceptions and formations of households. Equally, individuals, mostly women, by exercising their agency configure networks; and yet the ability of women (agents) to transform network structures is shaped by the prevalent social order. This dual feature of social structure, where it is both a condition and a consequence of action, is termed the *duality of structure*, while the dual feature of action, where motivated and unmotivated reproduction take place, is called the *duality of praxis*.

Interpreting action and structure as a duality allows structure and its action to be viewed from two distinct perspectives. First, it ensures that neither is reduced to the other. Second, it makes certain that as social scientists we do not ignore the fact that structure and human action presuppose each other (Lawson, 1997, pp. 169-70). Certainly, much of this study has accentuated the multitude of ways in which such a perspective is relevant for understanding the economic welfare of female-headed households. Female-heads, in most cases, try to achieve economic self-reliance, but this is critically contingent upon their interaction, as agents, with other social structures and relations. Obviously, this standpoint also sees the social sciences, and specifically economics, as intrinsically dynamic areas of study, with human action leading to social reproduction and transformation (p. 170). While some structures may be more enduring than others, there is nothing normal or natural about either endurance or change. Equally, this continued existence of structures does not imply stagnation, since the existence of matrilineal kinship and inheritance systems for Muslims and Tamils is known to take very new shapes and forms at this particular political-historical juncture (McGilvray, 2001; Ruwanpura, 2001). Social structures are therefore, fluid and dynamic entities, and household and network structures are no exception. This contributes to an understanding of the household and networks in a particular and changing context, and thus to the recognition of the opportunities its participants have in transforming relations.

## 8. Closing comments

The central thrust of this discussion has been to show that cooperative conflict models do not pay adequate attention to ontological structures, and they implicitly assume a homogeneous, unitary and static household unit. Consequently, these models have much ambiguity in explaining social reality, and the inadequacy of their explanatory power is revealed when theorizing female-headship. Hence, by engaging in substantive research and analysis, this paper argues that paying attention to ontology allows us to trace out social structures, social positions and agency of female-headship, which better encapsulates their realities than do cooperative conflict models. This particular account has more explanatory power, which is not the same thing as saying that cooperative conflict models are inaccurate, but rather to contend that they provide a partial perspective. Conceptualising households in a manner that is consistent with the broader social ontology framework associated with critical realism permits the recognition that there could be other accounts of households that are equally

consistent with social ontological structures. Thus extending the analysis in different directions as well as focusing on diverse aspects can only help explain the diversity of social reality in household formation and relations.

From a feminist realist perspective, then, it is essential to recognize that a diversity of outcomes remains consistent with a degree of uniformity at the level of underlying structures. This is the importance of ontology for a feminist economic methodology. Thus, while social structures depend upon the intentions and agency of humans, they are also rooted in distinctive historical, political and cultural conditions. Household formations and relations are simply not the same everywhere, and contending claims on the theorizing of household bargaining relations provide a partial perspective on these manifest differences. Consequently, cooperative conflict models reflect particular dimensions of social reality. But by not giving explicit consideration to ontological issues, their applications are limited in explaining alternative household formations.

Feminist economics should pay attention to ontology. This paper, with its focus on the social realities of female-headship, has shown that ontology helps us recognize that the diversity within these household structures is very real. Paying particular attention to distinct ethnic groups of female-heads in Sri Lanka is an attempt to illustrate differences that get played out according to differing social, cultural, political and economic spaces. Yet regardless of this diversity, there is a sameness of structured ontology, where social structures, positions and spaces are structured similarly. Such a methodological perspective allows feminist economists the possibility of recognizing diversity and yet, at the same time, of advocating gender-sensitive development policies.

## End Notes

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1 In the neoclassical paradigm, the use of fictitious units implies that other kinds of units, which are likely to be more reflective of the real world, are neglected. (My thanks to the second referee of this paper for making me aware of the need to emphasise this point.)

2 The phrases 'female-headship' and 'female-headed household' are used in keeping with the convention in the development and



economics literature. I do so with the full awareness of the debates surrounding biological and social categorization of the constructs 'female' and 'woman'. Therefore, the importance of recognizing the social construction of gender identities, roles and relationships is fully noted. My point, however, is not to be biological deterministic about gender identities, but to simply keep with the terms used in the development literature.

3 There are other failings of orthodox economic readings of the household too, and these are pointed to in the discussion that follows.

4 Using contributions from critical realist thinking, by 'bounded, unitary and homogenous' I refer to that economic theory that emerges from within the corpus of methodological individualism, where the units are treated in atomistic and isolated ways, which therefore leads to closure in the systems analysed (Lawson, 1997, 1999).

5 I owe my appreciation here to a couple of people. First, to the anonymous first referee for ensuring that this issue is highlighted. And second, equally to the late Dr Sue Benson (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge) for pointing to the particular caveats of the cooperative conflicts models in the first place, and suggesting that I develop this particular argument further.

6 In the following paragraphs, the essential elements of Sen (1990) and Agarwal's (1997) frameworks are summarized, which for my purposes provides an entry-point to develop my arguments on the networked, contested and diverse nature of households.

7 Agarwal does not expand on her notion of the state, but there is little doubt that her reading of this institution is not simplistic either. It has been a site through which oppressive gender, class and ethnic relations have been perpetuated in the past (Chatterjee, 1993, pp.116-34; Jayawardena and de Alwis, 1996, pp. ix-xxiv).

8 Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils are the three primary ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. Ethnic identities in the country, however, are linked neither to religion nor to language – and historically there has been much overlap and fluidity between these groups. However, the post-colonial Sri Lanka has been marked by ethno-nationalist positions and identity politics that have attempted clear demarcations between various social groups.

9 In order to develop the methodological critique of the work of Sen (1990) and Agarwal (1997), this section begins with the empirical limitations of their conceptualization of the household before the ensuing paragraphs develop the theoretical and methodological criticisms.

10 While Agarwal (1997) does incorporate the process through which social norms and perceptions are bargained over, her analysis still implicitly focuses on patriarchal households.

11 Below, I have elaborate in detail the ways in which the cooperative conflicts approach is individualist, and from this critique build up the usefulness of an open-ended ontology.

12 Analysing this bias is important not merely from a feminist perspective. From a policy position, also, its central import should not be missed: if women are at the core of network structures, shaping and influencing gender aware policies has to be directed at many levels and at many groups. 'Social capital' of networks, therefore, should not be ignored either in formulating or in

promoting gender-sensitive policies. (The concept of social capital is put within quotes to denote the awareness of the problematic aspects to the usual uncritical application of the same within development circles (see Fine, 1999, for more).

13 *Doxa* is a particular perspective that is generally accepted as a self-evident consensus. This consensus is in many ways arguably a mere principle of construction that we socialize into our *habitus*, which has often been struggled over in the past (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 56-7, 67).

14 Realist social theory is acknowledged for its relevance in the social sciences (Bourdieu, 1998, 1999, 2000), but is rarely used in economics (Lawson, 1997, 1999). Though the use of theoretical contributions I have illustrated the interdependence of social structures and social relations in my work on female-headship. Unfortunately, most economic methodology ignores social relations and structures in its analysis of the social world. Lawson's use of realism, particularly critical realism, serves as an example of the relevance of this methodology to economics (Lawson, 1997). His use of realism finds inspiration specifically from critical realism (*à la* Bhaskar), I find areas of overlap between Bourdieu and Lawson useful to feminist economic methodology, and my feminist economic project uses theoretical contributions from those scholars I find useful for this study.

15 While I am in sympathy with Lawson (1997, 1999) in this particular reading of economics, I am not in total agreement with his rationale for economics' proclivity to formalistic modeling. Yes, mainstream economic theory does rely upon formalistic models, but why it does is left out of his discussion on the relationship between feminism and realism (Lawson, 1999). Here I am more in agreement with feminists who perceive that this practice is linked to gender values embedded in scientific thought that economists constantly attempt to emulate (Ferber and Nelson, 1993, p.10; Harding, 1995). However, there are many insights that Lawson offers feminists, which I employ, but when in disagreement with him I point this out accordingly.

16 Lawson's reading of social positions asserts that agents are slotted into these numerous positions (1997, p. 165). I complicate this particular reading by claiming that agents do not simply slot themselves into positions but actively exercise their agency in choosing particular social positions, although shaped by social structures and relations, over others. Since their individual agency may be limited by social conditions, the need for social action is thus incorporated into this perspective.

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## *International McCarthyism: The Case of Rhoda Miller de Silva*

by Judy Waters Pasqualge



In 1954 Rhoda Miller (married to Sri Lankan Joe de Silva) was labelled as a subversive and deported from Sri Lanka (Ceylon). A journalist born in New York state who had already published books on post-war Poland and the Rosenberg case, Rhoda, with the assistance of friends in New York, would successfully challenge the United States-inspired deportation and return to Sri Lanka. There she became noted for her hard-hitting weekly column in the *Ceylon Daily News* on current affairs. This book contains forty of these articles, as well as excerpts from several of her books. It also contains an examination of her 'life and times,' a story that weaves in and out of the US during the New Deal and Cold War, the Russia of her Jewish immigrant parents (and those of her first cousin, writer and activist Howard Fast), and Sri Lanka in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

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