

MATRILINEAL COMMUNITIES AND PATRIARCHAL REALITIES

Cynthia Caron

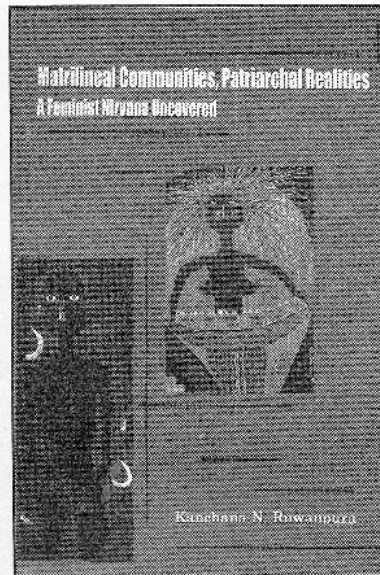
Kanchana N. Ruwanpura. *Matrilineal Communities, Patriarchal Realities: A feminist nirvana uncovered*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2006.

Kanchana Ruwanpura has given us an ethnographically rich, feminist economist's analysis of female-headed households in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. Within the context of Sri Lanka's socio-economic development, the Eastern Province is often thought of in broad terms as a conflict-affected area or more recently as a tsunami-affected area. But the content, analysis and reflection about the Eastern Province that Kanchana Ruwanpura provides the reader, while taking the conflict into account¹ transcends such a narrow focus and its consequent interpretation of a place and its people. As such, her text is important for academics living in and scholars concerned about Sri Lanka as well as for individuals working in policy making and social programming through government or non-governmental organizations.

Ruwanpura challenges the dominant discourse that Sri Lankan women have achieved a favorable position in society compared to many women elsewhere because they have achieved high scores in human development indices and other global statistical studies, as well as the fact that Sri Lankan women can own and inherit property (through matrilineal and bilateral inheritance patterns). The nirvana. The author takes us inside hundreds of households run by women in the Eastern Province to see the extent to which their lived realities reflect these scores. Even with high levels of literacy, free education, access to healthcare and matrilineal practices, women in the eastern province live within a larger social world and are constantly negotiating patriarchal structures and ideologies about women, work, and respectability. Ruwanpura demonstrates how the negotiation of patriarchy in general and its convergence with class structure in

particular is not a phenomena restricted to female heads of any one particular ethnic group. Her ability to show the shared experience of Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala female heads with regards to negotiating ethno-nationalist discourse and class structures is an important intervention to a society that tends to focus on ethnic difference (71-73)

A reader might think the Eastern Province a logical choice for a study about female-headed households, as the probability of female headship would be high as a result of the war. However, Ruwanpura's selection of the Eastern Province is a move to elucidate how the creation of female-headed households is not only war related. This is not a book about war widows. While widows and other types of *de jure* female-headed households are part of her sample of 298 such households, she makes a decisive move to open up the conceptualization of female head to include *de facto* female heads as well. *De facto* female heads include married women who have been abandoned by their husbands, are separated from them or women married to husbands who are disabled, mentally ill, suffering a terminal illness, alcoholic and cannot work or husbands who are otherwise unemployed (Chapter 3).



The presentation of demographic data and its analysis can often make for rather dry reading. That is hardly the case here. Ruwanpura's investigation of how a woman comes to assume headship provides a starting point for the reader to establish a relationship with the women who will be introduced throughout the book. The author disaggregates types of female headship by ethnicity and district giving the reader a feel for the life for particular women in particular places (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). For example, *de facto* headship in the Muslim community in the sample is due mostly to terminal illness followed by alcoholism and unemployment (61), whereas it is primarily due to physical disability and unemployment in the Tamil community and to alcoholism

and unemployment in the Sinhala community (82). With respect to widowhood in the province's three districts (Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara), 56% of Muslim female heads became widows as the result of death by natural causes, with 20.3% by war-related killing (58). These figures are markedly different for the Tamil community in the same areas where 25% of widows became such due to death by natural causes or suicide and 72% due to a husband's death by the army or paramilitary forces. In the case of Sinhala widows in the sample, 70% lost their husbands to natural causes or suicide and 27% to death by paramilitary forces (81). These are only a few examples of the differential impact of war for women in the Eastern Province.

Another interesting demographic point she makes is to indicate the age at which women assumed headship. Approximately 41% of the female heads in her study assumed this role between the ages of 21 and 30. When women lose a husband at such a young age, the likelihood that there are young children is high. In such a case, the resource mobilization strategies and opportunities available to a young female head, which are culturally and socially contingent, influence the life chances of the children in the household.

In Chapter 7, Kanchana discusses and elaborates the role of children in female-headed households. Working may entail withdrawing a child from school or else diverting time away from after-school studies. In either case, a female head does not consider the abandonment of education with ease. She knows the importance of education, how her own education has shaped her own opportunities, she might even know that every child has the right to be educated, however, due to her own social positioning and other structural factors such as a female child's employability in the future, she might withdraw a child from school. Below I cite two of the author's illustrative examples. First, is a consensus from a group discussion of Tamil and Sinhala female heads:

Those of us who did have to terminate the education of some daughters will only feel regret for making this decision. And while a variety of circumstance may have brought this about, not for one minute did we delude ourselves into thinking that this was the best decision from the point of view of our daughters' welfare (124-25).

Second is the reflection of a 49-year old Muslim widow from Ampara:

I had never been allowed to move in public spaces ... so when my husband died I felt helpless.... while a relative put me in touch with an NGO (to buy and sell short eats)... I still needed additional help in buying and selling the goods. I spoke with my older children (oldest was 16) about all this, and we decided that my eldest son would stay back and work with me. So ten years later, I have a fairly successful business and have managed to educate my other seven children as well (131).

Thus while some daughters and sons are sacrificed, female heads also noted that moving about in public spaces, buying and selling, working in their mother's agricultural fields, negotiating with shopkeepers and government officials were real world experiences that while not replacing formal education did involve the development of its own particular kind of skills set. But as Ruwanpura notes, "the key point is that not all boys benefit from patriarchal structures. Some boys do have a price to pay, at least in the short run, and feminists should pay attention to these contradictions so as to comprehend the complexity of patriarchy itself" (133).

The sacrificing son is one of many examples of a resource mobilization strategy, how female heads draw upon networks for monetary and non-monetary support, and the reciprocity involved in sustaining them. Ruwanpura demonstrates how female heads in different ethnic communities differentially rely on networks with Muslim women, for example, relying more on older children and kin, Sinhala female heads more dependent on members of the community rather than on their relations (193) and how female heads are "constantly involved in maintaining and renewing network contracts, as a crucial aspect of their household's well-being" (208). In listening to these oft-marginalized women discuss the challenges that they face running a household, as they try to abide by social norms or in some cases suffer the social stigma attached to flouting traditional conventions, the book moves beyond traditional economic analyses of the household as static, homogenous economic unit, while also complementing the scholarship on war and poverty, and children and poverty. Ruwanpura has opened up the lives of female heads in a theoretically exciting way that extends beyond an academic agenda. She makes the reader care about who these women are.

In providing robust examples and succinct quotations with their interpretations from the female head's point of view about who they are, the choices that they make, and the social orders that they negotiate (Chapter 8), Ruwanpura creates a

solid platform from which she calls for gender-sensitive programming and planning that also takes a woman's ethnicity into account (113-16) as well as for development planners to move from "realizing practical gender needs to strategic gender needs" (209) that will allow women to expand their resource base and thereby exercise their individual agency (Chapters 9 and 10).

Kanchana Ruwanpura has crafted an intellectually rigorous, thoughtful account of female-headed families that exposes the gender biases embedded in economic analyses of 'the household' and highlights the contradictions of patriarchy, which should force feminist scholars to complicate their own analyses. One point that is driven home is that unless patriarchal structures and ideologies are tackled head on (to expand a female heads' resource base), female heads and their children will continue to live in poverty. Individuals and institutions that focus on issues of women and children must start to direct some of their intellectual and financial resources, their policy and programming more strategically to the transformation of wider social structures and giving women some "room to maneuver" (172). The business-as-

usual approach to development policy and planning might only serve to reproduce the very structures that keep female heads in their disadvantageous social position in the first place.

For readers interested in other gendered accounts of development in Sri Lanka written by Kanchana Ruwanpura, please see:

- De Mcl, N. & K. Ruwanpura. 2006. "Gendering the Tsunami: A Report of Women's Experiences" Report Series, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.
- Ruwanpura, Kanchana N. 2007. "Awareness and Action: The ethno-gender dynamics of a Sri Lankan NGO." *Gender, Place, and Culture* 14(3): 317-33. ■

Notes

1. The research was completed before the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami hit Sri Lanka.

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