Women-Headed Households: Diversity and Dynamics in Post-Conflict Settings in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Women-headed households have been reported to be emerging more than ever before in both developing and developed countries due to many reasons, from different factors affecting households in a country to regional and global determinants. This paper unpacks the diversity and dynamics of women-headed households in post-conflict contexts in South Asian countries, with a focus on Sri Lanka and Nepal using a feminist approach. Women-headed households have been reported to face higher levels of poverty than male-headed households in South Asia. There are compelling reasons to anticipate that a group of people who already experience social inequality because of their gender might also experience economic hardship. This paper discusses the challenges women face when heading households, their vulnerabilities, as well as their methods of overcoming the challenges as they take up household responsibilities in the absence of men. This paper also gives accounts of women heading households from their perspectives on how they manage the day-to-day running of the household and the challenges they face in a post-conflict setting. It concludes that the emergence of women-headed households are not only the result of conflict and that they are not a temporary aberration. The paper highlights the need to understand women-headed households in their unique settings, considering many factors that could influence their socioeconomic behaviour. Many of the household surveys fall short of analyzing the complexities associated with women-headed households and fail to identify uniqueness. Therefore, this paper argues the need for qualitative ethnographic data to understand the complexities of women-headed households. Ethnicity and cultural backgrounds need to be considered when analysing data on women-headed households as their dealings and experiences differ in the way these factors play in. This paper also emphasises the need for development practitioners to pay attention to the prevailing understandings of household headship and agency when devising policies to assist women-headed households.

Keywords – Women-headed household, South Asia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Post-conflict

INTRODUCTION

This paper unpacks the diversity and dynamics of women-headed households in post-conflict contexts in South Asian using a feminist approach. I do so by asking the research question: what are the challenges women face when heading household, what are their vulnerabilities, as well as their methods of overcoming the challenges as they take up household responsibilities in the absence of men in post-conflict contexts? The findings from my scoping review are significant in three ways. This paper first discusses the challenges women face when heading household, their vulnerabilities, as well as their methods of overcoming the challenges as they take up household responsibilities in the absence of men (Jacobson, 1999). Second, this paper discusses why it is important to do a closer examination of the unique coping strategies of WHHs and the ways in which they are or are not able to exercise agency in the aftermath of war and provides valuable

information from the perspective of both development policy and economic theory of the household. Through this analysis, important details of the household, such as its development and economy, can be discovered.

Third, this paper gives accounts of women heading households from their perspectives on how they manage the day-to-day running of the household and the challenges they face in a post-conflict setting. Such an approach would give more space to discuss about conflict, being a widow, gender stereotypes, women's vulnerabilities and agency. Feminist scholars such as Hartsock (1983) and Ramnarain (2016) highlight the importance of giving priority to women's perspectives when discussing such themes as it would give a better understanding and informed analysis of the realities faced by women. Ahmed (2017) and Kabeer & Khan (2014) urge to include women's narratives from their own perspectives on the household and how they navigate the challenges when heading households. This approach is key to understanding agency in women heading households due to loss of their husbands in post-conflict setting that has more economic challenges than in a peaceful environment. This paper emphasizes that agency occurs during women's struggles to run their households while dealing with external factors such as cultural norms and practices that give less space for women's agency. However, women's agency is not consistent and often regarded as something that can be negotiated. As Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) highlight, ethnicity is not discussed sufficiently when discussing women's contributions to the economy, and this needs to be factored in. Therefore, this paper takes on the discussion of how ethnicity and caste, as well as gender, have become factors when women who are heading households in Nepal and Sri Lanka struggle with economic challenges.

For the rest of this paper, I highlight the need to understand women-headed households in their unique settings, considering many factors that could influence their socioeconomic behaviour. Many of the household surveys fall short of analyzing the complexities associated with women-headed households and fail to identify uniqueness. Therefore, this paper argues the need of ethnographic data to understand the complexities of women-headed households. This paper argues that although women heads in post-conflict households have to deal with a many challenges for survival and maintaining their families, there is also evidence of emancipation from such women who have displayed resistance to social norms and created opportunities for them and their children for the wellbeing of their families.

While each civil war has a unique set of causational factors and distinct actors, two of these wars, in Sri Lanka from 1983-2009 and in Nepal from 1996-2006, are particularly interesting as countries which, despite sharing many characteristics from region to population to relative size, experienced a dramatic deviation in civil war outcome. To compare and contrast the status of women-headed households in these two distinct post-conflict contexts, this paper focuses mainly on Sri Lanka and Nepal in South Asia.

Gender Relations, Power in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings

It was in the late 1980s that scholars began analyzing gender as a social construct and the interrelation between gender and power. Connell (2011) has highlighted in their research that such analysis is relevant to post-conflict recovery and disasters, which puts women in at a disadvantaged position economically, socially and emotionally, giving them less opportunity to exercise power and decision-making in their households and communities. But such situations can also given women more power in decision-making. The effect of power in gender roles on women has been a topic of discussion within the feminist and security scholarship. Scholars such as Arostegui (2013) and Moosa et al., (2013) discuss how women have been victimized and how their relations within and outside the domestic have been affected due to gender practices and power relations in post-conflict settings. Connell (2011) points out that the roles of men and women are different and they deal with conflict in different ways. Furthermore, Connell (2011) argues that analyzing power within gender relations helps to seek answers to gender constructions and how the relations between men and women in political and social interactions form narrations about the gender roles.

Crenshaw (1989) points out that caste, class and religion can play important roles in defining gender roles and power. Therefore, gender needs to be analyzed considering all these aspects, looking at how roles change when intersected with other elements. As such, this paper considers all these aspects and attempts to give a multi-layered analysis on gender relations in conflict-affected areas, using the approaches in gender and feminist studies. This way, the paper discusses the day today lives of women in conflict-affected areas in South Asia with emphasis on Nepal and Sri Lanka.

This paper takes into account the definitions of Connell (1987) on gender and power to discuss how gender roles, their interactions and relationships as well as power and labour are formed socially and historically. According to Connell, gender roles and relationships depend on gender division of labour, which is how labour is distributed among men and women and how much they are valued. This could mean in both the private and public spheres. Connell also states that gender division of power that affects everyday lives also shape gender roles and relationships. This theory is used in this paper to analyze gender and power are interrelated in conflict and post-conflict settings and the way women are required to change their roles considering security and livelihood responsibilities in a changing or changed environment.

WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

The household is the essential social and economic component of society. And it can take very different forms depending on culture and context. Globalization and social changes have an impact on the household structure. One of these changes is the single-head or female-head family (Yoosefi Lebni et al, 2020). Globally, the number of FHHs has dramatically increased in the last half-century, especially in developing countries. Numerous trajectories lead to households being headed by women (Chant, 2004). Married women may get separated from their husbands, or they may become widows and take responsibility for the household without re-marrying. Single women may go on to live alone, to be independent or for occupational reasons; single mothers may have to raise children alone. Married women may regard themselves as heads even with their husbands is present, who may earn less or be disabled. Migration push factors such as climate change and its effects on livelihood, low agricultural income, lack of skills, young people not wanting to engage in the primary livelihood activities their families traditionally engaged with, and civil unrest cause labour migration or rural-urban migration of males in many cases and in some cases, females, are leaving the families female-headed (Ariyabandu, 2006). The conflict as well as its consequences, domestic violence, and sexual harm are other factors for the emergence of more women-headed households, especially in developing countries (Ariyabandu, 2006). The way women in such leadership roles deal with the obstacles thrown at them may differ from household to household, societies and cultures. Social norms, their environment and other factors within the household determine how they deal with the disadvantages (Chant, 2004).

Chant (1997) has highlighted the problems with defining the household and headship in developing countries in her research on women-headed households (see also Varley, 1996; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2020). In general, households can be described as shared shelters and places where meals are taken care of. But it is more than that since households also include families bonded by blood and marriage. This refers to households which have family members living together. Even though they live together, they are also supported by relatives living outside the household for their physical and emotional well-being.

Davis, 2004 argues that headship in itself is constructed by patriarchy – the concept of having power over others and being in control. In Western Europe, the fact that the husband or the father was considered the natural head of the household made it easier for the state to coordinate with the household for administrative and political purposes. This became the norm in other countries too due to the expansion of colonialism (Folbre, 1991). The idea of the male heading the household hid most of the dynamics and complexities within the household, overshadowing the role of women and their contributions in the household (Chant,

1997).

There have been many approaches or attempts to bring women's role to the fore and appreciate them for their contributions to the household. This is by giving less focus for men so that women's contributions begin to be seen. This has been a strategy where data is collected on women-headed households to obtain a better understanding of the women's roles. However, this does not enable insights into the complexities within women-headed households as each has its different challenges and coping mechanisms and feminist scholars are unable to give a general classification as there are different types of women-headed households. (Chant, 1997) argues that more factors need to be considered when analyzing women-headed households such as the marital status of the woman, relationship with the children's father(s), extended families, unmarried women-heading households.

Sometimes the strategy of collecting data only on women-headed households would not be the best approach to understand the roles of women. Another strategy is to consider income generation and link it with household headship, which would highlight women's role as carers and for being in charge of or sharing the maintenance of the household with a male partner (Buvini? & Gupta, 1997). Chant (1997) and Davis (2004) show another situation where women take headship temporarily in the case where their husbands are away for long period leaving their wives in charge until they return. However, the focus for analysis is mainly on mothers who head their households due to permanent absence of husbands. As such, there is a challenge when understanding and classifying women-headed households and in the requirement to accommodate all situations. At the same time, researchers need to find commonalities in the women's experiences to categorize them for analysis which puts them in a challenging position as they also need to recognize women's unique situations.

While female-headed households themselves have been increasingly recognized as complex and varied, explanations for their existence, and indeed almost ubiquitous rise, have converged. These explanations involve both global forces, such as demographic patterns and the legacies of colonialism (Folbre 1991), as well as the pressures of economic development and urbanization, with local factors linked to regional variations (Chant 1997). Duncan & Edwards (1997) recognize four main categories of women heads of households. This was generated by considering the context of the United Kingdom, and the factors considered can be applied to other countries as well. They categorize lone motherhood being perceived as (1) a social threat, (2) a social problem, (3) a ''lifestyle'' choice, and (4) an escape from patriarchy. This is the method used to discuss the challenges of women-headed households in post-conflict South Asia.

WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS: GLOBAL AND SOUTH ASIAN INCIDENCE

When discussing women-headed households, it is an enormous challenge to arrive at a definition which is accepted by all. On the other hand, it becomes difficult to carry out comparative analysis when there is a universally accepted definition. Chant (1997, p. 69) states that the arguments on ''the macro-level dynamics of female headship'' and comparing with regional scenarios are ''accordingly tentative.'' Folbre (1991) too highlighted the need to understand women's role in the household with better data from detailed surveys.

Women-headed households seem to be emerging more than ever before in both developing and developed countries due to many reasons, from different factors affecting households in a country to regional and global determinants. These include the globalization of economic production, the spread of neoliberal 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 (Chant, 1997). More focus on women and conversations surrounding inclusion and discrimination have become important for women's advancement and emancipation. Policy decisions taken by governments for women's advancement as well as making divorce more easier with

revised legislation enabled women to to have more options and choices (Chant, 1997).

Even though global influence is effective on changing discriminatory practices against women, they are not so strong to make drastic changes locally and regionally. Women-headed households may mean different things in different regions. Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) study on women-headed households in post-conflict Sri Lanka looks at households of the three main ethnicities – Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim and argues that the de facto[1] heads of households may have similar economic worries. Being of a particular ethnicity may have implications in the household headship and may use social resources differently. Ruwanpura (2006) argues that de jure[2] heads of households depend on their children's contribution on the running of the households and need their children to bring whatever income they could. The researcher adds that these households also need external support. Galvin (2005) who studied cases in Nepal about the way widows deal with restrictions on their mobility as well as issues they encounter in public settings, finds that their land rights and inheritance of property is violated due to being a widow. They are also more prone to sexual abuse since society perceives that widows are not protected in the absence of their husbands. Yadav (2016) also studies cultural norms regarding widows in Nepal in the post-Maoist conflict setting. Ramnarain (2016) on the other hand studies ethnographic data to analyze the situation of widows heading households in post-conflict Nepal and how they navigate the challenges from patriarchal oppression as well as discrimination encountered due to social institutions. Ramnarain (2016) explores why widow heads are keen on selling smaller assets such as jewellery and livestock to get by rather than demanding for land rights and opting to challenge their relatives. However, feminist development economists emphasize that it is important for women to have rights to properties to maintain their status as equal partners as well as for their general well-being (for example, see Jayasinghe & Smith, 2021; Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004). Ruwanpura (2006) states that de jure women heads of households have long-term plans for their families and direct their economies accordingly. However, Ruwanpura (2006) points out that the de facto female heads are unlikely to plan far into the future as their husbands could come back to take the household headship after a short absence. The researcher also adds that the livelihood opportunities and pathways are different for de jure women heads to than for de facto heads. The challenges could be more for de jure women due to social and cultural obstacles and the taboos on widowhood, abandonment, divorce, or separation. Although they have their unique challenges, de facto heads have less social and cultural burden since there is the possibility that their husbands could return home.

Researchers also need to consider women-headed households where the husbands have gone abroad for work and would return only after a few years. Even though wives are hesitant with the idea of taking care of the children and household duties on their own, they have no choice but to agree to the husband's migration due to the economic advantages it would bring. This social phenomena of leaving the family to earn a better income from foreign countries is prevalent in South Asia, especially due to war. Sri Lanka and Nepal are examples (Ruwanpura & Humphries, 2004).

Incidence, Status and Dynamic of Women-Headed Households in Nepal

The conflict between the Maoists and the monarchy lasted about a decade and ended in 2006. With the end of the conflict, Nepal moved away from the monarchy and became a multi-party democracy. There was an increase of women-headed households in the post-conflict period (Ramnarain, 2016; Yadav, 2016). According to statistics, one of four households in Nepal is headed by a woman (Ramnarain, 2016). Multiple reasons, such as the death of the husband due to war and migration of the husband looking for work aboard, can be highlighted. Women in Nepal had to undergo many challenges, especially rural women who had to live in fear that Maoists could rise and take up arms again. The risk of being sexually abused increased significantly among rural women who didn't have a male 'protector' in their household (Luna et al., 2017). On the other hand, women began to move out of their victimhood and take up more leadership roles in the household and society, which men traditionally held due to being the sole or main person to generate

income for the family (Ramnarain, 2016). According to Ruwanpura (2006), women-headed households are more prevalent in conflict-affected areas due to the death of the male due to war and migration of the male for employment. However, it cannot be established that in Nepal, de jure headship emerges only because of conflict since there is insufficient data to come to this conclusion. Although this is the case, stories from the conflict-affected areas show significant evidence that de jure female headship occurs mainly due to conflict (Yadav, 2016).

A significant number of de facto women heads have emerged in Nepal also due to migration of the male in the family. This has contributed largely to the Nepalese economy. According to sources, one out of every 11 Nepalese adults are employed abroad. In addition, more than half of the households obtain remittances. Migration is mainly prevalent among the males increasing women-headed households. In about 48.7 percent of households where a male has migrated, women take on the headship. This is higher than the non-migrant households which is 16.9 percent (Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain, 2020). Cohen et al (2008) argue that migration of men for employment could change the relations between genders and lead society to move away from traditional assumptions about the men's 'natural' headship of the household. Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain (2020) adds that there is evidence of the increase of demands in labour due to the migration of males enabling women to take up employment roles which had traditionally been perceived to belong with men. Sadiqi & Ennaji (2012) argue that women have been more empowered now that they don't have a male authority to be an obstacle to their mobility and they enjoy more freedom to participate in the workforce and have a voice. On the other hand, Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain (2020) argue that the fact that the husbands are away for employment might hinder women's mobility due to criticism that they are taking advantage of the situation. The absence of a male 'protector' could also make women more vulnerable to sexual abuse, which could be real fear or perceived by society, especially in the context of contemporary Nepal.

Incidence, Status and Dynamic of Women-Headed Households in Sri Lanka

In South Asia, Sri Lanka is the country with the highest prevalence of women-headed households, reporting the fourth-highest proportion. (Jayasinghe, 2019). Women-headed households in Sri Lanka in 1981 was about 17.4 percent of the total number of households. It was 9.5 percent in Bangladesh and 1.8 percent in Pakistan (Folbre, 1991). Sri Lanka's Department of Census and Statistics report published in 1993 shows that by 1990, women-headed households rose to 20 percent. The statistics did not consider the situation in the Northern and Eastern provinces where the conflict was ongoing at the time. In the 2015 report of the Department of Census and Statistics, it shows that 1.2 million households that amounts to 25 percent, were women-headed households. This was a sharp increase that showed statistics in the North and East provinces as well in the post-conflict setting. Among these, over 50 percent were widows, that comprised widows of soldiers, LTTE cadres and civilians. This data, however, does not include the reported and unreported cases where the husbands have disappeared or missing which was a prevalent issue, particularly in the North and East where the conflict centered in (Jayasinghe, 2019). Thus, it is assumed that the number of women-headed households in Sri Lanka could be higher.

Political turmoil resulted in the increase of women-headed households in Sri Lanka. Folbre (1991) highlighted that armed conflict corelated with women taking headship. However, women-headed households in Sri Lanka seemed to have begun emerging even before the conflict that just started in 1981, especially in areas not affected by the conflict ((Jayasinghe, 2019). According to the Department of Statistics, by 2016, women-headed households were 25 percent of all households in the country. Therefore, data indicates that reasons other than the conflict have led to the increase in women-headed households.

Researchers have adopted different methods to investigate women-headed households and correlation with poverty in Sri Lanka (for example, see Amirthalingam & Lakshman, 2013; Gunatilaka & Vithanagama, 2018; Jayasinghe, 2019; Jayathilaka, 2007; Ruwanpura, 2006). Their findings on poverty in women-headed

household show mixed results. (Jayathilaka, 2007)argues that there is not much difference to poverty in men-headed households to that of women-headed households indicating that poverty is experienced in both households in similar patterns.

However, Jayathilake points out that differences are prevalent when comparing the regions.

According to Samarasinge (1993), when comparing nationwide data on women headship, women show various features regarding their socioeconomic behaviour depending on their ethnicity. Ruwanpura & Humphries (2004) argues that the conflict has affected gender norms among Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities resulting in highlighting the importance of women's traditional roles. Researchers point out that Tamil women who are compelled to head their families find more difficulties due to taboos and social norms than Sinhalese women. Tamil women also face the repercussions of the war, losing their husbands to the war and displacement, making it harder for them as heads of the household. Sinhalese women have a more relaxed environment with better socio-economic prospects. Due to such different experiences of women belonging to different ethnic backgrounds, it is important to analyse women-headed households in the context of ethnicity.

Within the national aggregates, distinct groups of Sri Lankan women display nonstandard characteristics often associated with ethnicity (Samarasinghe 1993). Ruwanpura (2007) has shown that the civil conflict has promoted oppressive gender standards within both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups, and by emphasizing motherhood and sacrifice as the archetypal feminine path, have retarded women's struggle for equality (Ruwanpura 2007). Thus evidence suggests that the female experience is fragmented by ethnicity and that ethnic differences can achieve new resilience and power in maintaining women's subjugation in postcolonial and conflictual situations. Yet ethnicity remains an under-explored category in feminist economics. Deconstruction of the women-headed household by ethnicity in Sri Lanka may help illuminate the sources of continued gender inequality, as well as provide a case study of the interaction of gender and ethnicity with implications for other studies in other times and places. This would support to highlight gender inequality and be of relevance to my Ph.D. studies.

WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS AND POST-CONFLICT

Historical evidence shows women's struggles have increased due to conflict with more incidences of gender-based violence reported from conflict-affected areas. They are doubly discriminated from the general violence as well as social norms limiting women's freedom (Luna et al., 2017). According to Handrahan (2004) most of women's issues surround on their roles as wives, mothers and daughters and their place in the family and society. Their roles after a conflict mainly depends on what their role was during the conflict, which may be as a widow, an internally displaced person, head of the household, victims of gender-based violence that brought on with the war or an ex-combatant. Such situations determine women's situations in a post-conflict setting and the extent to which they are accepted and have a voice in society in reconstruction and development programs (Handrahan, 2004).

Globally, women-headed households have been reported to face higher levels of poverty than male-headed households (Chant, 2015). There are compelling reasons to anticipate that a group of people who already experience social inequality because of their gender might also experience economic hardship (Chant, 2014; Jayasinghe, 2019; Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain, 2020). Although women who head households may experience greater challenges in accessing income, employment, and social protection, a growing number of studies indicates that sweeping generalizations about drawbacks faced by such households can be misleading and counterproductive (Chant, 2014; Yoosefi Lebni et al., 2020). Several scholars have emphasized that women-headed households may emerge out of choice rather than necessity (Baruah, 2009; Bradshaw et al., 2017; Chant, 1997). Therefore, it is important not to assume the loss of male lives during

the civil war to be the sole reason for the recent increase in the number of households headed by women.

United Nations (2002) report note that there is more literature on the increase of women-headed households in a post-conflict setting with the loss of the husband to war, migration of the husband for employment and other reasons. In Eritrea, women who had been combatants had been compelled to live in the cities as they have been abandoned by their husbands and unable to return home in the villages (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004). Most of them are mothers. Ruwanpura (2006) also notes the increase of women-headed households in a post-conflict setting among both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups. Rozario (1997) notes that war would leave pre-existing women heading households in vulnerable situations being compelled to manage their households in more complex social and economic situations that resulted from war.

Studies on de jure female headship in post-conflict setting or in the aftermath of a major disaster show that women have to undergo special circumstances and limitations due to being a woman as well as the marital status. Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain (2020) discuss the circumstances of widows in post-conflict settings including their experiences with living in poverty, challenges in generating income, insecurity, and trauma. On the other hand, Zuckerman & Greenberg (2004) explore how larger economic policies that call for austerity have badly affected women-headed households who are already living below the poverty line and highlights the importance of providing them support. Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain (2020) explore how outdated laws that does not grant rights to women to their deceased husband's assets and creditTaboos, social norms and outdated laws have pushed women further into difficulty and women heading households have to grapple with all this to look after their families.

South Asia has been a region affected by prolonged conflict and women, especially those in rural areas, have been direct and indirect receipts of the violence. While living with the constant fear of death due to violence, many are victims of sexual and gender-based violence without husbands or a male to protect them. Women who have lost their husbands are even more vulnerable (Jayasinghe, 2019; Ramnarain, 2016). On the other hand, women have become more resilient and perseverant as a result, taking on more responsibility in their families and society and playing roles that were previously held by men (Joshi Rajkarnikar & Ramnarain, 2020). For women who were combatants during war, have a much harder time integrating into society and taking up civilian tasks of running a household. Maoist army and LTTE in Nepal and Sri Lanka both had a significant number of women combatants with 30–40 per cent of the combatants being women (Luna et al., 2017). However, with the war ending, these women had to undergo difficulties due to being stigmatized in society. Therefore, both men and women had to great difficulties to adapt to life in a post-conflict setting.

According to Ruwanpura (2006) there is data on women heads of households who have not been affected by the war and not widowed, which Ruwanpura says is evidence that the conflict alone is not the reason for the emergence of women-headed households. The researcher adds that it could also be a result of changes in the social and economic conditions that led women to take up headship in the household. If an assumption is made that the emergence of women-headed households is a result of the war, it leads to another assumption that these could disappear in times of peace – which is incorrect since such social and economic changes would not reverse. It is important to recognize that the emergence of women-headed households was also a result of difficult social and economic situations and not limited to war so that policies on women could consider such aspects and that the phenomena is not temporary. However, with the NGO sector focusing more on war widows and studies being conducted on the women's plight after the war, the fact that women-headed households emerge in the absence of war evades many analyses. This does not help when bringing out the actual facts.

Regarding the status of war widows in Sri Lanka, Hyndman (2008) notes that women fear for their children when they remarry, anticipating that their new husbands wouldn't care for them and even cause them harm. Such fear among widows also leads to a decision not to remarry even though their communities accept

remarriage. Ruwanpura (2008) finds in research on Sri Lankan and Nepali widows, that the trend was for younger widows to remarry which could throw light on the standards expected by society of women.

However, there are significant evidence to inform that women have challenged men and worked for their emancipation in the post-conflict setting (for example, see Jayasinghe, 2019; Manchanda, 2005; Ramnarain, 2016; Ruwanpura, 2008). In the absence of men, women have taken up roles which traditionally belonged to men such as ploughing, handicrafts, and production. Female headship in Sri Lanka and Nepal is neither a passing social problem nor a social pathology with its roots in civil conflict; nor is it a lifestyle choice. 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 personal misfortune or collective disaster, but it has left them feeling empowered, perhaps ambivalently and anxiously empowered, but empowered, nonetheless.

According to United Nations Women, 2020 (UN Women), many of the women who head households in Sri Lanka engage in informal employment, which makes them ineligible for employment benefits and other social protection mechanisms. UNWomen add that this results the loss of their livelihoods faster in a crisis period. Women heading households are burdened with difficulties of trying to find work which often requires them to meet people and find opportunities through networks since most employment is informal. While doing so, they have difficulty leaving their children unattended at home. They opt to take children with them which further hinders their employment opportunities. They are also stigmatized in society for not having a male protector and viewed with suspicion when they begin to have money, assuming that they have engaged in prostitution. Research also notes that women heading households have problems during pregnancy, after having children, maintaining the household and income generation to take care of their families.

According to UN Women, women heading households in Sri Lanka have trouble accessing livelihood assistance after the war. They are unable to generate a good income by engaging in lucrative employment and often opt for livelihoods in agriculture, fishing, garment, rice-flour production, beverage, and small-scale enterprise. Their self-employment ventures would have improved if they had the necessary marketing skills and a sound capital for start-ups. They face a myriad of issues that range from water shortage, fuel cost and costs incurred for raw materials. Lone women, therefore, have to obtain loans to start businesses which throws them in a vicious cycle of indebtedness. They usually borrow from the informal market which has high interest rates and short repayment periods causing women to fall into dept traps. A post-conflict consequent for the military in Sri Lanka is taking up work that usually was in the civilian domain. Since there was no war to fight, the military started opening and maintaining coffee shops and restaurants which pushed back opportunities for civilians, especially women. They are unable to compete with the military and have to find other livelihoods as a result.

According to Chant (2006, 2015, 2016) women heading households should not be stereotyped as the poorest segment of society. Chant says this could lead to misguided assumptions about women-headed households and sweeping generalizations that they are vulnerable and incapacitated. It could also lead policy makers and authorities to bypass other households where focus could be needed. Chant adds that this approach could assume that women belong at home and don't need to navigate the so-called difficult terrain that men used to traverse and continue to live under the protection of the males. Chant argues that according to global south studies show that there is not a great difference of gross earning, remittance and transfer payment per capita between male-headed households and women-headed households and drastic differences cannot be highlighted on poverty between the two household categories. Considering the median income of both these households, women heading households distribute their expenditure in a fair and positive manner, allocating more resources for health, food and education (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Far from the stereotypic assumptions

that women-headed households have children who are malnourished and perform less in education, it is found that women tend to allocate more funds for children resulting in better educational performance of their children with better nourishment This highlights that it is necessary to consider the evidence when analysing poverty and wellbeing in women-headed households and the need to consider the unique circumstances and backgrounds women are in, their social status ethnicity as well as histories of the region and country to understand how each of these factor in to their economic situations. This would avoid stereotyping and generalisations that associate with women heading households (Chant, 1997).

Women in South Asia, particularly Nepal and Sri Lanka, are usually limited to perform care giving roles as a mother, wife or daughter. However, this is not true in all cases and everywhere in the country. Women have been progressive in their beliefs and have realized their capacity can extend beyond the private space. They have challenged traditional norms and many have been successful in their careers taking leadership roles in the public sphere. The conflict proved to be both positive and negative for the advancement of women. While it brought about disastrous consequences for all, greatly impeding economic advancement and inculcating a fear psychosis, it was also a reason for women to move outside of the domestic space. On the other hand, for some women, war was a reason to push them further inwards, hindering advancement made in challenging patriarchal structures. Apart from infrastructure and property damage, war has caused the disruption of social ties and created divisions among communities. It has also disrupted connections within families that so far were psychological support in times of anxiety and trauma. In the post-conflict setting, women who have been confined to the domestic sphere, suddenly find themselves having to fend for themselves and their families in the absence of their husbands due to war. They find that they have to move from their comfort zones and venture out in society to generate an income. But often, they lack the necessary skills to do so. Therefore, they have to be content with lower wages for the same labour their male counterparts would obtain.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to throw light on the subject of women-headed households in post-conflict settings and break stereotypical assumptions surrounding them. These households are not temporary products of war, whatever role the conflict may have played in precipitating the increase in female headship. Households headed by women are here to stay, created and recreated by the social and economic conditions. But if common experiences bind these women together, ethnic distinctions are evident in the ways in which they became the heads of their households and the strategies they embrace in order to cope. These differences should not be forgotten in seeking to understand the situation in which lone mothers find themselves and in trying to develop policies to assist them.

In general, women-headed households are viewed to be at a disadvantage when it comes to land rights, income generation, and credit and insurance markets. They are also burdened by cultural norms especially with stigma being a widow after war. While taking on the responsibility of dependants, women heading households do not have many options for economic mobility. The recent United Nations report on joint action for the economic crisis in post-conflict Sri Lanka states that women-headed households as one of the five most economically vulnerable groups which need immediate assistance in Sri Lanka in terms of livelihood and food security. However, we cannot come to the conclusion that all women-headed households are in poverty. There is not much empirical evidence on the vulnerabilities of women-headed households to come to conclusions about their poverty status. In this paper, I analyse women-headed households against male-headed households in South Asia in the post-conflict setting while considering their vulnerabilities as a result of war and whether women have less capacity to overcome socioeconomic problems.

However, I argued in this paper that evidence does not show that women are at a significant disadvantage or

have less capacity to that of men and that their well-being is compromised for the reason that they are women.

The paper highlights the need to understand women-headed households in their unique settings, considering many factors that could influence their socioeconomic behaviour. Many of the household surveys fall short of analyzing the complexities associated with women-headed households and fail to identify uniqueness. Therefore, this paper argues the need of ethnographic data to understand the complexities of women-headed households. This paper's arguments align with (Ramnarain, 2016) analysis shows that although women heads in post-conflict households have to deal with a myriad of issues for survival and maintain their families, there is also evidence of emancipation from such women who have displayed resistance to social norms and created opportunities for them and their children for the wellbeing of their families.

The gendered aspects of post-conflict development are sometimes overlooked in the attempt to create policies that are universally applicable. Unfortunately, these strategies rarely succeed in helping women-headed households to overcome the many obstacles they encounter. Post-conflict development projects must include gender issues and how they intersect with other marginality vectors, such as class, ethnicity, caste, disability, etc., at their centre if they are to be relevant to the lived realities of women-headed households. A gender lens is vital for the reconstruction and reconciliation processes of a society that faced a violent conflict. This is because gender inequalities may bring negative impact to economic and social recovery and more women need to enter the workforce for income generation. This would require women to acquire land and other rights which would have been barred before the conflict, so that women have the necessary paths open for economic activity. Opportunities should open up for more human capital for which equity must be achieved in health and education.

Assumptions should not be made to correlate women-headed households with poverty since when such an assumption is made, little room is left to consider other factors about poverty. Such a correlation could lead to the assumption that children's future would be in dire straights when a woman takes headship in the household. Women-headed households should not be understood as a homogenous category. There are many different kinds of households with a female head, and the experiences of women in these roles are also very different. To be effective and inclusive, post-conflict development policies must take into account a variety of factors in this situation. First, they must refrain from generalising or essentializing the experiences of women in households headed by women. Given how gender interacts with class, education, employment status, race, disability, age, religious affiliations, and cultural environment to shape these experiences, this is extremely crucial. Furthermore, policymakers must take into account how these women serve as heads of homes in a variety of positions and how the particular effects of conflict affect these roles when organising development programmes.

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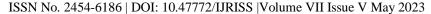
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FOOTNOTES

[1] De facto headship occurs when women manage the household on their own and make daily decisions since the husband or father has been absent for an extended period of time. It may also occur when a woman is the main person responsible for maintaining the home, even though an adult male may be present or make a small financial contribution (Buvini? & Gupta, 1997).

[2] De jure headship occurs when women assume the role of household heads as a result of their male spouses' abandonment, divorce, legal separation, or passing away (Buvini? & Gupta, 1997).