Female Headed households and Feminisation of Poverty

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Introduction: This paper aims to discuss the assertion that the overemphasis on ‘female-headed households’ in the ‘feminization of poverty’ is somewhat paradoxical not only on account of tenuous data, but on conceptual grounds as well (S Chant 2006:205). The paper relies greatly on the writings of Sylvia Chant in general and on the original sources identified and the arguments delineated in Chant (2003), in particular. Clarifying the term ‘feminization of poverty’, Chant (2006:202) elaborates

“Although people often refer to a ‘Feminization of Poverty’ without any elaboration, three of its most common tenets are that women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor, that this trend is deepening, and that women’s increasing share of poverty is linked with a rising incidence of female household headship”

These tenets are part of the development discourse in recent decades effectively identifying female-headed households as ‘poorest of the poor’. This logic however, has also been challenged by research in various countries and situations. Clarifying also the term ‘Female household headship’ as per Chant (2003:Note 2), this refers to situations where an adult woman (usually with children) resides without a male partner (or, in some cases, another adult male such as a father or brother) (Chant 1997a:5; also Wartenburg, 1999:77). Even though standardized definitions have limitations as headship is not a politically neutral concept and female headship is likely to be underreported through male bias (Buvinic and Gupta, 1997:260; Feijóo, 1999:162; Folbre, 1991; Harris, 1981), an estimated 20-25% households are reported to be headed by women (Moghadam, 1997 as cited in Chant, 2003: Note 2).

The Logic of Women Headed Households as Poorest of the Poor: A lot of development oriented literature in the last few decades including that emanating from the international development agencies has stressed that as much as two thirds of the poor people in the world are females and that tendencies to greater poverty among women are deepening. Chant (2003:1) cites for example (UNDP, 1995:4; UN, 1996:6; UNIFEM, 1995:4 cited in Marcoux, 1997; and ADB, 2000:16). A large number of factors have been identified in literature as contributing to a greater burden of poverty on women. However our concern in this paper essentially is on linkage between ‘female household headship’ and ‘feminization of poverty’. This linkage and the mounting incidence of female household headship have frequently found mention in the literature as identified in Chant (2003) that is. (Bridge, 2001; Budowski et. al., 2002; Chant, 1997a, 2001; Marcoux, 1997 and Moghadam, 1997). An example of this pattern of argument is, ‘One continuing concern of both the developing and advanced capitalist economies is the increasing amount of women’s poverty worldwide, associated with the rise of female headed households’ (Acosta-Belen and Bose, 1995:25 as cited in Chant, 2003:Box1).

Income terms poverty of women headed households as compared to male-headed units has also been reported in a number of research findings. Chant (2003:17) identifies some of these as (Bibars, 2001:68; van Driel, 1994:216; González de la Rocha, 1994:6-7; Paolisso and Gammage, 1996:18-21; Todes and Walker, 1993:48). In fact based on the indicators of poverty like total and/or per capita household income and consumption, mean income per adult equivalence, expenditure, access to services and ownership of land and assets, an ambitious comparative review, based on over 60 studies from Latin America, Africa and Asia concluded that in two-thirds of cases women-headed households were poorer than male headed households (Buvinic and Gupta, 1993, 1997 as cited in Chant, 2003). A large number of reasons have contributed to firming up of this logic. These stem from extrapolating women’s disadvantages to women headed households, historical reasons, continued reliance on quantitative indicators of poverty and political agendas of various hues (Chant, 2003). The principle ones among these however are ‘visibility of female-headed households in conventional poverty statistics’ and ‘endorsement of greater incidence and degrees of poverty among female-headed households by mainstream development institutions’ (Chant, 2003: Box 2).

Questioning the Logic- the Quantitative Dimension: In spite of its widely held currency, the assertion that women headed households are ‘poorest of the poor’ has also been contested on various grounds. Data on poverty in general and gender specific poverty in particular continues to remain inconsistent and unreliable. Rodenberg (2004:1, as cited in Chant 2006:203) has argued ‘…a large proportion of the 1.3 billion people living in absolute poverty are women, though there is too little gender-specific data to substantiate the oft quoted figure of 70%’. Further as per United Nations Development Fund [UNIFEM], (2002:60 as cited in Chant, 2006:203), ‘there is still no international database that provides a breakdown of the incidence of women’s monetary poverty in comparison with men’s’. This poses limitations on quantitative precision of assertions about ‘feminization of poverty’ (Marcoux, 1997; Moghadam, 1997:3 cited in Chant, 2003).

Further macro level quantitative data compiled by international agencies like World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and the Economic Commission for Latin America does not hold up the notion that female household headship is related with an above

‘…in the findings of a number of sub regional and national studies…there would not appear to be any consistent relationship between levels of poverty at national or regional scales and proportions of female heads, nor between trends in poverty and in the incidence of female headship over time’.

Relying on (CEPAL, 2001; Cuadro V3), Chant (2003:15) further exemplifies by Latin America, where ‘upwards trends in female household headship in urban areas (where the incidence of women-headed households is generally higher) occurred in every single country for which data exists for 1990 to 1999, whereas the regional proportion of urban households in poverty declined from 35% to 29.8% between 1990 to 1999, and indigent households from 17.7% to 13.9%’.

Chant (2003:16) also identifies a large number of micro level studies supporting the fact that there does not appear to be any specific relationship between incomes and the headship of the households and ‘women headed households’ are not a phenomenon exclusively or overwhelmingly present in poor income groups to the relative exclusion of middle or higher income groups e.g. (Moser, 1996:50; Appleton, 1996 on Uganda; Goldstein, 1994,1997 on Argentina; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1999:31; Williss, 2000:33 on Mexico; Hackenberg et al, 1981:20 on the Philippines; Kumari, 1989:31 on India; Lewis, 1993:23 on Bangladesh; Wartenburg, 1999:78 on Colombia; Weekes-Vagliani, 1992:42 on the Cote d’Ivoire). Relying on studies in varying contexts, like (Blumberg’ 1995; Chant, 1997a; Engle, 1995; Hoddinott and Haddad, 1991; Moore and Vaughan, 1994; Oppong, 1997), Chant (2003: 17) further contests arguments about contribution of female-headed households to inter-generational transmission of disadvantage

“It is by no means clear that female household headship is responsible for the ‘inter-generational transmission of disadvantage’…children in female-headed households may actually be better off than their counterparts in male-headed units in terms of educational attainment, nutrition and health”.

Accordingly in view of evidence on both sides of the debate, an exclusive emphasis on identifying female-headed households as poorest of the poor is not sustainable (Chant 2003: 17).

Questioning the Logic- the Conceptual Dimension: The general classification of women headed households as poorest of the poor also merits qualification on a number of conceptual grounds. The first is that the contexts of women headed households are heterogeneous and different social, cultural, economic or demographic contexts may have a significant impact on their negotiating capacity and fall back positions (Sen, 1990 as cited in Chant, 2003).

Further female-headed households can be highly heterogeneous. Relying on (Baylies, 1996; Chant 1997a; Feijóo, 1999; Safa, 2002; Varley, 2002; Whitehead and Lockwood, 1999), Chant (2003:18) identifies a number of grounds for differentiation such as

“…routes into the status (whether by ‘choice’ or involuntary, and/or through non marriage, separation, divorce, widowhood and so on), by rural or urban residence, by ‘race’, by composition, by stage in the life course (including age and relative dependency of offspring), and by access to resources from beyond the household unit (from absent fathers, kinship networks, state assistance and the like)”.

These differences have a bearing to a great extent on the choices available to so called women headed households and preclude their general categorization as ‘poorest of the poor’. Age for example may have differing implications for women dealing with disadvantages in different contexts. (Bibars, 2001: 67, as cited in Chant, 2003: 18) points out in context of Egypt that many female heads are poor because they are ‘old and illiterate and unable to work’. Paradoxically in Latin America ‘they tend to be better off than their younger counterparts, especially where they continue to co-reside with family members. One reason is that they may have fewer dependent children’ (Chant, 2003 with reference to Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1994:8). Marenco et. al. (1998:11 as cited in Chant, 2003) illustrates with the help of National Household Survey from Costa Rica that the risk of poverty is 55% greater in households with children under 12 years old, than in those without. Further older females are also likely to have the advantage of children of working age who may be able to contribute financially. Chant (2003) cites a large number of studies in support of the argument that ‘female heads are likely to receive larger and more frequent remittance from non-resident offspring’. These are (Appleton, 1966 on Uganda; Brydon and Legge, 1996:49 and 69 and Llyod and Gage-Brandon, 1993:121 and 123 on Ghana; Chant, 1997a:210-1 on Mexico; Chant and Pellmaine, 1995 on the Philippines and Kusakabe, 2002:6 on Combodia).

This indicates that ‘female- headed households can function quite adequately as long as the consanguineous ties that provide crucial financial, domestic, and emotional support are maintained’, as concluded by Safa (2002:13, cited in Chant, 2003) in the context of Dominican Republic. Hence a coping strategy for female-headed units is to contain extended kin members as a security and well being enhancing measure. Chant (2003:21) has supported this by evidence of higher percentage of extended households in case of female-headed units as compared to male-headed units (Chant, 1997a in case of Mexico; Bradshaw, 2002:16 in case of Nicaragua and Wartenburg, 1999:88 in case of Colombia). While this may be one of the strategies adopted by female-headed households to compensate potential
shortfalls in the income and assets, in general, diversity of female headed households by way of socio economic status, age, composition, dependency of offspring, access to resources from beyond the household and so on, precludes their categorical labeling as concluded by Chant (2003: 21) on the basis of (Chant, 1997a,b; Feijóo, 1999; Kusakabe, 2002; Oliver, 2002; Varley, 2002; Whitehead and Lockwood, 1999).

Another coping strategy available to female-headed households is to adopt ways to have multiple earnings from other household members. ‘In fact even if female heads of household may be disadvantaged by gender inequalities in earnings, we can not assume that they are the sole breadwinners in households’ (Chant, 2003 with reference to Varley, 1996). Chant (2003:21) citing a number of studies especially from Latin America suggests that ‘relative to household size, female-headed households may have more earners (and earnings) than their male-headed counterparts who, for various reasons (for example, pride, honor, sexual jealousy) fail to mobilize their full potential labour supply…although female-headed households may clearly need more workers…maximizing the use of female labour supply can add to the effects of household extension and/or multiple earning strategies in reducing dependency ratios and enhancing per capita incomes’.

Wartenburg (1999:95 as cited by Chant 2003:22) summarizes with reference to Colombia that such organizing strategies by female headed households can optimize the positive elements of such arrangements and neutralize to a great extent the negative effects of gender bias. Besides raising earning capacity and reducing vulnerability, ‘earnings also seem to have a greater chance of being translated into disposable income for household use’.

Another factor that is important within the context of feminization of poverty and female household headship is the distribution of earnings within the household (Folbre, 1991:110). Referring to (Blumberg, 1995:215 et seq; Chant 1997a:227-8; Engle, 1995; Kabeer, 1996:13, 2003:165 et seq). Chant, (2003:23) suggests that ‘more money, in relative terms may be available for common expenditure within households headed by women, with positive effects for members’ nutritional intake, health care and education’. This is explained by different manners of allocation of expenditure between men and women, with men usually retaining a higher proportion of income for their personal use including on items such as alcohol and tobacco. This imposes ‘secondary poverty’ upon women and children in the household (Chant 1997b; and Muthwa, 1993 as cited in Chant, 2003:24). This leads us to question the traditional models of household economics based on altruistic principles and conceptualize alternative models “‘characterized by competing claims, rights, powers, interests and resources…this perspective requires us to look inside households rather than leaving them as unproblematised, undeconstructed ‘black boxes’ or conceptualizing them as entities governed by ‘natural’ proclivities to benevolence, consensus and joint welfare maximization” (Chant 2003).

González de la Rocha and Grinspun (2001:59-60 as cited in Chant, 2003) summarize it as ‘Analysing vulnerability requires opening up the household so as to assess how resources are generated and used, how they are converted into assets, and how the returns from these assets are distributed among household members’.

Chant, (2003: 25) further cites evidence, (Blanc-Szanton 1990:93 ) in case of Thailand and Bradshaw (2002:29) in case of Nicaragua) to support Folbre’s (1991:108) argument that due to their privileged bargaining position, male household heads may appropriiate a larger share of revenue than they actually bring to the household. Accordingly citing Chant (1997a,b), Chant (2003:25) suggests that, ‘…instead of resulting in destitution, men’s demise or departure may well enhance the economic security and well being of other household members. In Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines, for example, low-income women often stress that they actually feel more secure financially without men, even when their own earnings are low and/or prone to fluctuation. They also claim to feel better able to cope with hardship when they are not at the mercy of male dictat and are freer to make their own decisions’.

Therefore, even with lesser incomes, as heads of their own household, women may feel they are better off and relatively less vulnerable. Thus ‘single parenthood can represent not only a different but a preferable kind of poverty for lone mothers’ (Graham, 1987: 59 as cited in Chant, 2003:26).

The foregoing discussion leads to a conceptualization normally known as ‘social deprivation’ thinking about poverty, whereby ‘command’ over resources may be considered more important than ‘level’ of resources in subjective definitions of poverty. Making a reference to Bradshaw ( 2002:12), Chant (2003:26) emphasizes that this calls for multidimensional conceptualizations of poverty, which extend beyond a narrow focus on incomes and consumption and do not ‘stop at the front door’ of domestic units. This conceptualization will require recognition of “importance of ‘assets’, which are not only financial or physical in nature (labour, savings, tools, shelter, for instance), but include ‘human capital’ such as education and skills, and ‘social capital’ such as kin and friendship networks and community organizations…On the other hand, through the greater use of participatory methodologies in poverty evaluations, concepts of vulnerability, well-being, self esteem, respect, agency, and power are brought into the frame” (Chant, 2003:26 et seq).
This broader conceptualization of poverty moving beyond household income levels allows a more comprehensive understanding of gender disadvantage ‘such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect one’s life’ Razavi (1999:417 as cited in Chant, 2003:27). Such conceptualization also helps explain as to why in some situations women may forsake financial support from absent fathers or forfeit assets such as their houses in order to avoid on going contact and/or sexual relations or evade a generally abusive relationship (Chant, 1997b as cited in Chant, 2003:27 et seq). This also explains as to how in some situations women may prefer to live without partners not through lack of opportunity but by choice and/or older women may prefer to co-reside with sons rather than spouses (Fonseca, 1951:156, 157 as cited in Chant, 2003:27 et seq). Chant (2003:28 with reference to Bradshaw 2002:31 and Chant, 2001) summarizes that, ‘men’s incomes, though potentially beneficial, can carry too many conditions to make them worthwhile. While the perceived benefits of being without a male partner often centre on non-economic aspects of well-being, women’s deliberate rejection of men’s support and/or co-residence can diminish personal and family vulnerability in various ways, including materially’.

Conclusion: Foregoing discussion leads to a multi-faceted and multi causal conceptualization of poverty on account of a conceptual as well as emphasis on data points of view. It can be seen that while female headship is far from being a ‘panacea for poverty’ (Feijóo, 1999:162 as cited in Chant, 2003:28). Female household headship can also be positive and empowering (Chant, 2003:29). Baden (1999:13 as cited in Chant, 2006:206) reflects, ‘The processes which lead women to head households are many and in some cases this may represent a positive choice, so that…connotations of powerlessness and victim hood are inappropirate’. Referring to a comprehensive review of studies by Buvinic and Gupta (1997), Chant (2003:46) summarizes that ‘…studies…have been productive insofar as they have drawn attention to the problems of generalizing about women’s poverty, and of engaging in superficial dualistic comparisons between male and female headed households’. Accordingly it can be concluded that assertion under discussion, (Chant 2006:205), regarding overemphasis on ‘female-headed households’ in the ‘feminization of poverty’ being somewhat paradoxical on account of inconsistent and inadequate data, as well as on grounds of conceptual problems, is justified.

References


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