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**The survival strategies of Sinhala female-heads in conflict-affected
eastern Sri Lanka**

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Preface

Women's concerns and other gender issues are critical in all crisis situations and responses. It is important to study very carefully how women cope with crisis situations, often as sole breadwinners in the family and we need to understand this within a framework of gender analysis. As the InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction (IFP/CRISIS) regards both gender issues and coping strategies to be important research issues in the context of crises, I am particularly happy that this working paper, by Kanchana Ruwanpura, contributes to a better understanding of both these issues. It may be noted that IFP/CRISIS has already published several working papers on gender issues as well as a study on coping strategies of tribal populations.¹

Through an examination of the coping strategies of female-headed households in the Sinhala community on eastern Sri Lanka, this paper highlights the multiple outcomes of ethnic conflict. Different ethnic groups bear the impact of conflict in different ways. The paper shows how the participation in the labour force as a coping strategy of Sinhala female heads depends on kin and community support, and how this imposes further limitations and constraints upon them. It also makes the important point that the impact of conflict has to be examined taking into account the long-term factors that pre-date the conflict itself.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by two of my colleagues, J Krishnamurty and J Rodgers, who were responsible for providing comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of the paper.

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¹ See E. Enarson: Gender and Natural Disasters, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 1, Geneva 2000; E. Date-Bah et. al. Gender and Armed Conflicts, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 2, Geneva 2001; Selected Issues Papers: Crises, Women and Other Gender Concerns, Working Paper No. 7, Geneva, 2002; Tamara Tutnjevic: Gender and Financial/Economic Downturns, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 9, Geneva, 2002; K.N. Ruwanpura and J. Humphries: Female-headship in eastern Sri Lanka: A comparative study of ethnic communities in the context of conflict, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 9, Geneva, 2003, as well as Report on the Coping Strategies of Tribal Populations in India in the Context of Natural Disasters, ILO New Delhi Office, New Delhi 2002.

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Executive Summary

Sri Lanka has generally been regarded as an exemplar of human and social development in the developing world. Achievements at a general level, however, may not reflect the situation of marginal social groups, with conflict situations more likely to exacerbate their precarious position – especially in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. Therefore, the need to pay close scrutiny to emerging social problems in these regions is demonstrably clear, especially with conflicts having a direct and indirect impact on communities. Similarly, all three ethnic communities, the Muslims, Sinhala and Tamils, have borne the impact of the conflict in multiple and different ways, making it necessary to decipher through the apparent and non-apparent impacts.

This paper focuses on the emerging social group of female-headed households among the Sinhalese in eastern Sri Lanka. The rationale for making the Sinhala community the focal point of this analysis is to highlight the indirect costs of the conflict, which needs close scrutiny too – as all three communities have endured the social, economic, political, psychological and emotional cost of the conflict in diverse ways. Besides this, there is also a need to examine the impact of the dynamic interplay between conflict and non-conflict (i.e. institutional) factors leading to the emergence of female-headship in the region as well as on female-headed households itself.

In order to understand the institutional attributes impinging on the welfare of Sinhala female-headed households, the paper begins by outlining perceptions on ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Often notions of ethnicity are based on misconceptions of imagined homogeneity of particular social groups upheld by fundamental nationalists, usually downplaying inherent contradictions of class, gender, caste and other interests within each group. Using anthropological work, the paper shows that ethnicity in Sri Lanka is not closely linked to either religion or language. However, political and social circumstances uphold particular aspects to identity at different historical junctures, indicating the fluidity of social identities. These identities, as fluid as they may be, have a real and concrete impact on the lives of people – with nationalists re-enforcing patriarchal conceptions of gender identities and roles that circumscribe the women’s access to resources and social emancipation.

Using data and case study evidence gathered from fieldwork in eastern Sri Lanka during 1998-99, this paper flushes out the coping strategies and inherent contradictions faced by Sinhala female-heads. Economic opportunities, where they prevail in the region, are exploited by female-heads to maintain the well-being of their households. And this is particularly the case where there are fewer social and cultural restrictions placed upon them. However, there is also a social cost to this. Female-heads’ entrance, participation and dependence on the labour market is critically linked to the support they receive from kin and community structures. They perceive that, ironically, while enabling them to exercise wide choices of employment, such reliance brings with them another set of limitations and constraints – such networks require certain gendered standards of behaviour, if assistance is to be forthcoming.

Through an examination of the coping strategies of female-headed households in the Sinhala community in eastern Sri Lanka, this paper highlights the multiple outcomes of the ethnic conflict. Different ethnic groups bear the cost of the conflict in diverse ways. For the Sinhalese female-heads the detrimental effect of conflict is indirect and complex, with conflict and non-conflict factors interacting with each other and leading to outcomes that may not easily be directly traced to the ethnic conflict.

Conflict situations usually place stress on “oppressive” social institutions that increase the pressure on vulnerable groups, with processes and outcomes manifesting in subtle ways. This highlights both the paradox of conflict situations and the need for a nuanced analysis of the processes at play.

1. Introduction*

Present day Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. According to the more recent census results, which relate to 1981, Sinhalese are the majority, accounting for 74.0% of the population. Tamils comprise 18.2%, of which Sri Lankan Tamils make up 12.6% and Tamils of recent Indian origin the remaining 5.6%. Muslims form 7.4%, with the remaining 0.4% of the population, made up by Malays, Burghers (Eurasians) and others. According to the same census, the religious affiliations given indicate that 67.0% are Buddhists, 18.0% Hindus, 7.0% Muslims and 8.0% Christians (Jayawardena 1992:163).

Sri Lanka, however, is also a country that has been beset with an internal ethnic conflict during the past two decades. While 1983 is a watershed in this bloodied conflict, the roots of discontent between the ethnic communities is traceable to the colonial period – with the immediate pre- and post-independence periods marred by outbreaks of religious and/or ethnic violence (Jayawardena 1986a).² The critical difference is that the ethnic violence in 1983 exhibited characteristics of an ethnic pogrom against Tamils, rather than a simple outbreak of ethnic violence. Since then the political trajectory in Sri Lanka has taken a violent and bloody turn, with the conflict extracting a high cost in terms of the loss of human and physical resources. More than 60,000 lives have been lost during the 1983-1998 period, with an enormous economic cost to the country as well (Rotberg 1999:10). The direct estimated cost of the conflict include defense expenditure of GDP, which has grown from 3.5% in 1985 to 5.4% in 1995, and damage to physical capital and infrastructure is estimated at \$1billion. Moreover the displacement and dislocation of people has cost the Sri Lankan economy \$0.5billion, which has been spent towards rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts (*ibid*:10-11).

Sri Lanka has generally been regarded as a country where human resources and overall development are much higher than what it might appear on the basis of per capita income. Its Human Development Indices touted as particularly noteworthy achievement (Sen 1981:301-9). Achievements at a general level, however, may not reflect the situation of marginal social groups, especially women. Moreover, conflict situations are likely to exacerbate the precarious position of marginal social groups, as their ability to access and/or control resources is further curtailed. Indeed in the case of Sri Lanka this may be the case since current socio-economic indicators do not adequately cover the conflict-related reality of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka.

With these elements missing from the national picture, the need to pay close scrutiny to emerging social issues in these regions is demonstrably clear. This is particularly the case as conflict situations have different degrees of impact, with its effect being not only direct but also indirect – with a larger proportion of women usually bearing the brunt of direct and indirect outcomes.

* The fieldwork for this paper was carried out in 1998-99, during which time the conflict was ongoing. As I finalize this paper (end-2002), there is a process working towards peace talks and negotiations. The fundamental realities brought about by the ethnic conflict for female-headed households in eastern Sri Lanka, remain relevant to even to the process of peace-building.

² I refrain from speaking about the root causes of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, since this would require crude (and perhaps erroneous) simplification of complex political and historical dynamics that has led to the present crisis in Sri Lanka. I refer the interested reader to Jayawardena (1986a), Gunasinghe (1988) and Thambiah (1992) for a discussion of Sri Lanka's political history on the ethnic conflict and violence.

The irony of Sri Lanka's conflict has been that many of its institutional structures have not witnessed the wide-scale destruction that many other conflict-affected countries have undergone. Yet, there has been displacement and dislocation of all ethnic communities in conflict-affected areas, making the need to decipher through second-order effects imperative.

In considering the emergence of female-headed households it is necessary to distinguish between the direct and indirect causal links, especially since different ethnic groups are likely to bear the burden of conflict in multiple ways and forms. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has affected in very different ways the Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities. The direct impact is more likely to have been borne by the Tamil community, while the cost of the conflict for the Muslim and Sinhala communities is likely to be more indirect. Yet, in a multitude of ways all three communities have endured the social, economic, political, psychological and emotional cost of the conflict.

Besides the need to consider the second-order effects of a conflict situation, there is also a need to examine the complex and dynamic relationship between conflict and non-conflict factors. In other words, institutional factors placing pressure on marginal social groups are likely to be exacerbated during conflict situations. The importance of such an exercise is that there are underlying mechanisms that may persist, should peace return to Sri Lanka, for the simple reason that these processes exist independently of the conflict. Also, should peace come, these will need to be addressed in post-conflict economic and social restructuring. For example, the prevalence of poverty and female-headed households will continue even after the conflict, unless efforts are put in place to eradicate poverty and economic vulnerability. Moreover, for this paper it is important to emphasize that in the South Asian context some incidence of female-headship is well-noted, with an active debate on the factors leading to female-headship (Visaria and Visaria 1985, Kumari 1989, Islam 1991, Hamid 1995). Female-headship in eastern Sri Lanka similarly is not simply an outcome of the ethnic conflict, with interlinks between conflict and non-conflict factors intensifying an emerging trend.

To understand the situation of Sinhala female heads of households³ (henceforth referred to in this paper as 'female-heads') in eastern Sri Lanka requires understanding the construction of ethnic and gender formations, which influence the coping strategies adopted by different social groups. However, recent anthropological literature has highlighted the contentious nature of ethnic categorization. I utilize recent work on Sri Lanka's social, religious and ethnic formations, to look at the complex dynamics between ethnicity, religion and gender relations. This overview will provide the necessary institutional and cultural context, within which the situations faced by Sinhala female household heads can be analyzed.

³ In the appendix, I provide: a) the categories of female-headship used in this study, and b) a brief overview for choosing Ampara and Trincomalee districts in eastern Sri Lanka as the focus of this study, the methodology, the fieldwork and primary data sources.

2. Ethnic formation, Sinhala-buddhist nationalism and the position of women

Perceptions on ethnicity in Sri Lanka are often based on misconceptions of imagined homogeneity of particular groups. Nationalist discourse on ethnic formation tends to project a picture of homogeneity, thereby downplaying the inherent contradictions of class, gender, caste and other interests within each group. Moreover, recent anthropological work suggests that the roots of Sri Lanka's population across ethnic groups are primarily in Southern India (Guneratne 2001).⁴ Various historical processes have contributed to the formation of ethnic identities in the region (*ibid*:22). Which aspect of identity become prominent at any historical juncture is a result of the prevailing social and political circumstances, indicating the fluidity of ethnic, caste, cultural, and religious constructs (*ibid*:22-5).⁵

Ethnicity in Sri Lanka is not closely linked to either religion or language. Muslims and Tamils are identified as the Tamil-speaking community in Sri Lanka, but have distinct religious identities. Muslims practice Islam and Tamils largely identify with Hinduism. Language separates Sinhalese and Tamils, groups that also have distinct religious affiliations, with the Sinhalese being primarily Buddhist and Tamils primarily Hindus. However, some Sinhalese and Tamils are Christians. In addition, of course, there is an array of religious practices that "Sinhala-Buddhists" have adopted whose roots can be traced to the Hindu tradition, clouding distinct ethno-religious and ethno-linguistic identities even further.

In this multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, how has the state of intense ethnic conflict increased women's vulnerability? Sri Lankan women are surely not constrained by classical patriarchy. Feminists have also claimed that Sri Lankan women are relatively well positioned in the South Asian region, with matrilineal practices in eastern Sri Lanka distracting feminists from analyzing other aspects of women's status and position (Agarwal 1990, 1996). I would argue that this should not preclude a feminist analysis of the patriarchal institutions and ideologies within the Sri Lankan context, and especially the ways in which patriarchal interests are promoted through religious practices in the Sri Lankan context of ethno-nationalism and conflict. My focus in this paper is on Sinhala women.⁶

Buddhism, the main religion in the country, has played a crucial role in forming Sri Lankan culture. Despite claims of feminist liberation it sends dual messages to women in the Sri Lankan context (Jayawardena 1986b:110). Women are able to move out of patriarchal society by joining the clergy and they did not face other oppressive social

4 The system of cross-cousin marriage shared by the Sinhalese, Eastern Muslims and Tamils as well as Jaffna Tamils is an important signpost of shared kinship structures across these communities (*ibid*:34).

5 For an excellent collection of essays on the intrinsic instabilities of ethnic formation in Sri Lanka see Jeganathan and Ismail (1995), on Sinhala people see Scott (1995), Tamil nationalism and women see Maunaguru (1995) and Ismail (2000), and on Muslim identity formation see Ismail (1995) and Samaraweera (1997).

6 In previous work, I have positioned Sri Lankan women within gradations of patriarchy by providing an overview of the main religious traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and the ways in which patriarchal interests are promoted through religious practices in the Sri Lankan context of ethno-nationalism (Ruwanpura 2001). It is sufficient to note here that it is not only Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that is culpable of promoting patriarchal interests through nationalism. Muslim and Tamil nationalism is found to be operating in a similar vein.

practices (*ibid*:111). But Buddhism has been constructed for Sinhala nationalist ideological purposes. The Sinhala-Buddhist movements at the turn of the twentieth century revived fifteenth century poetry, such as *Kavyasekeraya* and *Salalihini Sandesaya*, to promote patriarchal notions of the ideal woman and mother (*ibid*:113-4). Promoting an ethnic-based nationalist ideology requires a particular construction of womanhood, since women are perceived as vehicles to reproduce and socialize ethnic identities (Jayawardena 1992:162). So while Buddhism offers some freedom to women, the patriarchal structures within which Sri Lankan women live were not challenged and women's subordination remained a pervasive feature of the social structure (*ibid*:178).⁷ Such dual messages are also translated at this current juncture of ethnic conflict into ideals of moral motherhood and women warriors, translating ethno-nationalist patriarchal interest into everyday practices (de Alwis 1998).

7 Not only Sinhala-Buddhist ideology but also Buddhism itself sends dual messages to women, with a patriarchal notion on the role of womanhood well inscribed through the Sigalovada Sutra – which is a Buddhist script on the rightful behavior for men and women in their lay-life.

3. Transitional kinship structures, class and gender relations

It is important to consider the historical processes, social customs and kinship patterns to show the contradictory pulls that Sinhala female-heads may face. “Traditionally” social customs and kin patterns appear to have positioned women favorably (Agarwal 1996). Yet historical and legislative reforms together with ethno-nationalist discourse curtail the possibility of women’s economic independence as well as their social space. As Lalani, a 23-year old female-head mentions, concerted efforts are necessary to hear the voices of female-heads and remove their economic dependency from patriarchal structures:

When female-heads have independent access to income, land or property, and/or have parents and siblings who support them, the women do not rush to remarry. It is only when female-heads face severe economic deprivation that they remarry to avoid hardship... I am fortunate because I do get support from my parents, sibling, kin and neighbors, and feel no need to remarry. But there should be better protective mechanisms that will free us from economic dependency on kin and community – and having constantly to be concerned about adhering to “proper” behavior. Men never worry themselves with *charithra-varithra* (proper behavior), so why should we?

(Lalani, a 23-year old *de facto* female-head from Trincomalee whose husband was abducted by the L.T.T.E., and a mother of 2 children aged 1 ½ and 6 years.).

Lalani’s incisive comments on the links between social norms, gender relations, and access to economic resources locates the structures within which Sinhala female-heads support themselves and their households in eastern Sri Lanka. These links are examined in this section of the paper.

A common misconception held by Sinhala people is that they are ethnically distinct from Tamils and Muslims, that they are a separate people with different roots in India (Guneratne 2001:20). Ideological tools are utilized to bring about the process of exclusion, where the supposed differences are inscribed through the perpetuation of dogma on “them” and “us”. However, anthropologists have noted similarities in kinship structures across these ethnic groups as well as regional-based variations in kin rules and patterns among Sinhalese (Yalman 1971, Guneratne 2001). Aside from disparities in regionally-specific kin systems, traditional Sinhala laws of inheritance were based on bilateral transfer of property – though an important distinction for women was based on whether she was married uxorilocally, *binna*, or virilocally, *diga* (Agarwal 1996:122).⁸ Despite common bilateral inheritance patterns, which work favorably for propertied women, there are distinct kin rituals that shape women’s position in their communities. Decoding the key

⁸ An uxorilocal or binna marriage takes place when the husband comes to live with his wife and in-laws, jointly manages the property of his wife and their children take the wife’s ancestral name. Under virilocal or diga marriage the woman moves to the husband’s village and their children take on his ancestral name (Agarwal 1996:122).

attributes of the kin structures for Kandyan and low-country Sinhalese⁹ helps us understand the significance of these structures for women – and female-heads in particular.¹⁰

While matrilineal inheritance patterns are largely absent for Sinhalese in all regions, Kandyan people exhibit kin structure characteristics more akin to matrilineal kin practices (Yalman 1971:189-224). For low-country Sinhalese, the kin system is set at an intermediate stage between patriliney and matriliney (*ibid*:281). Nevertheless, cross-cousin marriage, a common attribute of matrilineal kin structures, is common practice for the Sinhalese all over Sri Lanka (Guneratne 2001:29-34). Local patterns and variations are noteworthy since gender relations are partially patterned through kinship systems, presenting gender specialists with the ability to discuss the position of women vis-à-vis kin structures. Focusing on female-heads in this particular instance, the task is to understand the hybrid aspects of the low-country Sinhala kin system and the shaping of support structures for them. An amalgam of kin structures may offer opportunities to women not available to those living under strict patriarchal and patrilineal structures. Furthermore, Sinhala women, who are predominantly Buddhist, have less repressive social restrictions placed on them through religious structures (Jayawardena 1986b:113).¹¹ Altogether, then, Sinhalese female-heads may have in place relatively “liberating” social spaces that should allow them to realize their capabilities. Narratives by female-heads and socio-economic data, however, suggest a more complicated picture, where hybrid kin/community structures convey patriarchal prejudices that adversely affect female-heads. The experiences of Sinhala female-heads in confronting patriarchal ideologies and structures are, at another level, unsurprising. Given the particular political situation in Sri Lanka, Sinhala women too are called on to preserve and nurture “Sinhala-Buddhist” culture – which, as mentioned before, is embedded in a patriarchal discourse (Section 1). This convergence of separate dynamics, therefore, requires a closer examination of the specifics of hybrid kin relations, over-determined by class structures and ethno-nationalist discourse, that affect Sinhalese women too.

9 The Kandyan region is located centrally in the interior of Sri Lanka, and has had a distinct social and political history (Gunasinghe 1996:77-110). Since the Kandyan region is located in the hill country region of Sri Lanka, the social system of other areas in Sri Lanka is uniformly labeled as being in the low country. Consequently, Sinhala people categorize themselves as either into up-country or low-country Sinhalese, which is largely a description of their geographical origins – though there are differences in the respective social systems too.

10 Variations in kinship patterns and regional-specificity are germane to Muslims and Tamils too. The distinctive feature for low-country Sinhalese is the hybrid nature of their kin structures, which is likely to be further compounded for Sinhalese living in the Eastern Province where matrilineal systems pervade the social structure. My argument is not simply focused on the need to look at possible common attributes between the ethnic groups in eastern Sri Lanka, but also to uncover the class dynamics of kin support structures – and the ramifications for female-heads.

11 Lack of oppressive restrictions on women in Buddhism is not to dismiss the existence of patriarchal social structures in Sri Lanka. As Jayawardena (1986b) rightly articulates, “Buddhism was also instrumental in reducing the rigors of the caste system, but also some of the glaring injustices practiced against women such as sati and the ban on widow remarriage.” But Sinhala-Buddhist revivalism did send dual messages on the position of women as good mothers and wives. So as far as the generality of women were concerned, patriarchal structures “gave women a subordinate role” (*ibid*:113).

Customary bilateral and matrilineal inheritance patterns have been linked positively to the enhancement of the position and status of women, with illustrations taken from the Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities pressing this point (Agarwal 1990, 1996). Propertied women obviously benefit greatly where inheritance patterns favor them. But in what other ways do kin structures favour women and, particularly, how in the event of female-headship do these structures enable them to use this opportunity to improve their welfare? How do female-heads who have limited or no access to resources, property and land, gain from structures that benefit propertied female-heads? Equally, if there were kin and community structures that have been favorable to women in the past do they persist or

are they increasingly imbued with patriarchal values?¹² The latter, of course, is possibly detrimental to female-heads. They will have more restrictions placed upon them as both sole economic providers and bearers of cultural values. In so far as economic decisions are made within the contours of cultural and social values, then an increasing infusion of patriarchal values, which is a key attribute of ethnic conflicts, is unlikely to make life easier for female-heads. But social changes also imply opportunities that can be progressively used by female-heads to challenge restrictive practices. To explore the possibility of the latter, both the socio-economic context and the economic profiles of female-heads need to be sketched.

The Sinhalese community in eastern Sri Lanka primarily depends upon fishing or farming. Agriculture for the Sinhalese can be either settled paddy cultivation or chena (slash-and-burn) cultivation, with the former linked to rural development and settlement schemes initiated during the post-colonial period. Nuclear villages located in the interior of Ampara and Trincomalee were engaged primarily in settled paddy cultivation, though in certain instances chena cultivation was also the occupation of some communities. Sinhalese coastal settlements, on the other hand, have extended links to the region since deep sea fishing is linked to monsoon weather patterns, with migration between the South-West and North-East areas being commonplace in the fishing community.¹³ Another similarity linking Sinhalese and Tamils is the existence of a caste system among the two communities. Since the caste system for Sinhalese is based on a Rajakariya (secular ideology of kingly honor and a division of labor) system, here too notions of sexual purity and pollution are largely absent (Yalman 1971).¹⁴ Absence of matrilineal descent systems among low-country Sinhalese however does not preclude the importance of daughters in their households: daughters provide insurance and socio-economic security for parents in old age. Consequently, maintaining good relations and ensuring the well-being of daughters, through inheritance or dowry, is commonplace among higher-income classes. For women in low-income and socially-excluded groups, dowry, where it exists, usually takes the form of cash and movable wealth, and is considered a symbolic device through which social relations are cemented between kin groups. The emphasis was less on the economic dimensions to dowry transactions and more on building social relations between kin groups (ibid:274). Since inheritance is equally divided between sons and daughters,

12 Posing this question is appropriate in that ethnic identities are frequently expressed in terms of gender relations where women are perceived as bearers of cultural values (de Alwis 2000:53). Sinhala nationalism in Sri Lanka too has articulated the ideal role of women and womanhood, which interacts and transforms social structures that may formerly have benefited women (Jayawardena 1992). For feminist economists the essential purpose here is to uncover these dynamics as they impinge upon women's well-being – and in this project on female-heads' levels of well-being.

13 Sinhala settlements in eastern Sri Lanka are partly the focus of ethnic demographics in the region. Many of the Sinhala settlement schemes are perceived as attempts by the Sri Lankan (read: Sinhala) post-colonial state to change the demographic composition in the area. There is little doubt that this was a motivation for the Sri Lankan state to pursue settlement schemes in eastern Sri Lanka (Hoole et al. 1990:340). Moreover, population pressures in urban and semi-urban areas of Sri Lanka also required rural development and regeneration – with this providing a sound economic rationale for pursuing settlement policies that would change the demographic composition of eastern Sri Lanka. This aside, however, some proportion of Sinhalese would have populated the region, if simply because 450 years of colonial rule and migration of fishing communities between North-East and South-West Sri Lanka necessarily entails interaction and co-existence of the different ethnic communities in these regions.

14 Furthermore, recent work on class composition and transformations in colonial Ceylon notes the disintegration of the caste system as a mode of labor organization (Jayawardena 2000:xi-ii). This did not, however, lead to the disappearance of the caste system as an ideology. Instead it now withdrew to the private domain, where caste became linked to the marriage patterns of women (ibid:xiii).

women are relatively well positioned – and cash dowry is emphasized only in the absence of land or property for the family unit.

The presence of customs favorable to women does not negate the formulation of patriarchal ideals among the low-country Sinhalese or indeed the rapid commercialization of dowries in marriages (Goonasekere 1996:314). Marriage rituals emphasize the “high” status of the groom, and hypergamous unions are commonplace. With marriage systems emulating patrilineal ideals along with hypergamous unions, social elements through which women’s sexual behavior is controlled are very much present among low-country Sinhalese (Yalman 1971:279).¹⁵ Additionally, colonial legislation that instituted monogamous marriages and a preference for virilocal/patrilineal residence, has been furthered through post-colonial practices that instituted patrilineal inheritance through land reform and settlement schemes (Risseuw 1992:48). Complex rules of inheritance and kinship systems were gradually eroded, and as Risseuw notes:

The woman’s relatively independent position in marriage, provided by her life-long access to land and property and the right to divorce, was to shift to the position of a legal and economic dependent, with limited divorce rights, to be protected by her husband, and on his default, by the state. Her position became one, which was at best secure but lacked economic potential, because even as a widow her rights to land and property were finally curtailed. (1992:48, added emphasis mine).

Historical considerations have obviated any progressive legislative steps that could have promoted and protected women’s rights and interests. Legislative changes that promoted patriarchal interests transformed gender relations not merely for women in the landed and upper-income classes, but also for working class, low-income and marginalized women. Women of these social groups had increasingly to turn to labor and trade as sources of income, where the gender division of occupations confined them in low-skill and poorly paid work (*ibid*: 51).

15 Contrast this with the Kandyan pattern of endogamous marriages and open (marital) unions, where there is less social compulsion on women to remain in marriages. Here women are free to enter and depart from sexual unions with men with little (or no) social stigma attached to their decisions not to remain within an unsatisfactory union (*ibid*:279). [NOTE: Feminists have criticized Yalman’s work for romanticizing the position and status of women in Sri Lanka. Malathi de Alwis and Kumari Jayawardena drew my attention to this criticism, by highlighting cases of village practices and folklore that contravene the favorable picture painted by Yalman. A helpful example to press this feminist concern is where young women raped (usually by a man) are married-off/required to cohabit with the rapists! A Sri Lankan film, *Baddegama*, based on Leonard Woolf’s book *The Village in the Jungle*, is based on a similar incident in a rural village – albeit the location is Southern Sri Lanka].

4. Sinhala female-headship, conflict and poverty

The aim of this study, which is based on a limited sample survey, is to understand the processes rather than claim statistical representation or valid estimates. Bearing this particular point in mind, there are many interesting points that can be made about what is happening to female-heads in the Sinhala community. Of particular interest to this paper is where the complex relationship between conflict and non-conflict factors shape particular outcomes in the livelihood options and coping strategies of this social group. The following sections investigate these issues in more detail.

Is Sinhala female-headship a new phenomena?

Tabulating and studying female-headship in Sri Lanka is relatively new (Aturupone, Rodrigo and Perera 1997). Yet there is incidental evidence suggesting that the female-headed household is not a recent phenomenon, with as many as 25.0% of Sinhala female-heads in my study noting their own mothers as having headed such households. While female-headship may not be new for the Sinhalese, the current ethnic conflict has exacerbated an emerging pattern. Sinhala female-heads have also lost men owing to the conflict – in revenge killings and abductions by the L.T.T.E. and other para-military organizations. But there are also many instances of desertion, separation and/or divorce.¹⁶

Analysis of the particularities of Sinhalese female-heads shows that (Table B) and to sources of spousal death (Table C).

Table A: Marital status of Sinhala female-heads*¹⁷

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Deserted	2.9% (1)	22.9% (8)	12.9% (9)
Divorced	5.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (2)
Married	28.6% (10)	14.3% (5)	21.4% (15)
Separated	14.2% (5)	5.7% (2)	10.0% (7)
Widowed	48.6% (17)	57.1% (20)	52.8% (37)
Sample Size	35	35	70

* District differences are statistically significant (sig. = 0.031)

16 This is a common feature of Tamil and Sinhala female-headed households, which distinguishes them from their Muslim counterparts.

17 The purpose of the statistical evidence is to understand the processes of female-headship among the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka rather than to claim statistical representation or argue that these are valid estimates.

Female-headship due to widowhood is significant – 48.6% in Ampara and 57.1% in Trincomalee – but the apparent patterns are complicated for the Sinhala community. A high proportion of married women assumes headship – 28.6% and 14.3% in Ampara and Trincomalee, respectively. But the numbers for desertion, separation, and divorce as factors leading to female-headship are also significant, which may be attributed to a complex interplay between the stresses brought about by the conflict as well as poverty and economic deprivation in the region. For the category of *de jure* female-headship, i.e. widowhood and divorce, this varies between 54.3%-57.1% in both districts, with just Ampara noting a 5.7% divorce rate. While divorce is non-existent in my sample for Trincomalee, this is negated by a higher prevalence of desertion, which is 22.9% for the district. *De facto* female-headship due to desertion and separation rises to 28.6% in Trincomalee, with separation accounting for 5.7%. Also, *de facto* includes married women where the husband does not play the usual role as head of household – of either breadwinner or decision-maker (Chant 1997).

By contrast, in Ampara desertion is only 2.9% but separation is much higher, 14.3%, than in Trincomalee. Stresses that pull apart marriages exist in both districts but the mechanisms through which break-ups take place are different. Greater levels of economic deprivation, as in Trincomalee, strain traditional household structures, with a greater incidence of men absconding. In Ampara, where favorable economic conditions prevail, the possibility of women initiating separation from their spouses should not be discounted, and indeed could indicate a relatively strong position for women in marital breakdown (Jackson 1998:46). Whether female-heads separate or are deserted matters for the well-being of their households. Specifically, deserted female-heads' tendency to poverty is likely, given the suddenness of the break-ups of their marital unions. It is not simply this factor that exposes their vulnerability, but most female-heads whose spouses abandon them live in the hope of their husbands' return. An emotional inability to accept a break-up and the reality of their situation can of course hinder the economic well-being of their households too, since such female-heads are unlikely to put much effort in devising efficient survival strategies for their households.¹⁸ In the case of separation, female-heads are aware of the crumbling nature of their unions and possibly, therefore, can take precautionary steps towards finding alternative and supplementary sources of income. A 22-year old *de facto* female-head, Gayani, recapitulates her separation as follows.

I married when I was 17 years old. After the birth of my first daughter I found that my husband was involved with another women. Whenever I confronted him, he would deny this affair. Though I had three children by Ajith, I was always aware that he was taking minimal economic responsibility for our household. I ignored it for a while. When things were getting difficult I found employment as a laborer. Since the birth of my youngest daughter, 4 months old, Ajith has separated from me. Because I took steps towards finding my own income to support my household, our separation did not jeopardize the welfare of my family. While I have been fortunate to have my own family in close proximity, and my mother helps me caring for my children.... Yes, it is difficult to be a young working mother, but at least I have my mother and sisters to help me.

(Gayani, a 22-year old *de facto* female-head from Ampara. A laborer and mother of 3 children).

18 Indeed, studies in Sri Lanka that have focused on the psycho-social dimensions of female-headship in eastern Sri Lanka reaffirm such attitudes for Tamil and Muslim female-heads who have missing spouses (Thiruchandran 1999). Comparable attitudes are also likely for Sinhalese female-heads who have been deserted, though the psycho-emotional impact of desertion is likely to be less severe than for female-heads whose spouses have been abducted by the military or state-sponsored paramilitary forces.

Unraveling the dynamics of such trends is important: household structures are changing and it is well to consider these shifts since they help articulate development policies that move beyond the patriarchal household models. Furthermore, for eastern Sri Lanka it challenges the conventional wisdom that links female-headship simplistically and directly to the ethnic conflict. In other words, it is important to decipher the different dimensions of the conflict, which may result in female-headship, as not a direct one – with the possibility that pressures placed by the conflict leading to do increasing numbers of desertion, separation and divorce. Therefore, widowhood directly linked to conflict-related factors, i.e. death by military or para-military forces is low among the Sinhala community, closer to that experienced by Muslims than by Tamils (Ruwanpura 2001). But this does not mean that indirect factors are negligible. So there are many factors leading Sinhala women to assume headship, which also supports the contention of altering household structures in eastern Sri Lanka. The following table works out the different patterns for the Sinhalese community:

Table B: Reasons for spousal death

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Killed (state sponsored)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Killed (paramilitary)	23.6% (4)	30.0% (6)	27.0% (10)
Killed (non-conflict related)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Missing	0.0% (0)	5.0% (1)	2.7% (1)
Natural causes	58.8% (10)	60.0% (12)	59.5% (22)
Suicide	17.6% (3)	5.0% (1)	10.8% (4)
Sample Size	17	20	37

*District differences are not statistically significant

The number of spouses who have been killed as a result of the conflict is higher in Trincomalee, probably because the conflict here has been more intense than in Ampara. But the incidence of husbands dying of natural causes is also higher in Trincomalee, though the difference is marginal between the two districts. While *de jure* female-headship is increased by the conflict, among Sinhalese female-heads it is not simply linked to the conflict. A fairly high rate of suicides is also notable for Ampara.¹⁹ Greater economic stability, as in Ampara, does not preclude other social pressures that lead to changing household structures, where women have to fend for themselves and their households.

Considering *de jure* Sinhala female-heads shows the many possible ways in which female-headship can be linked to the conflict. From this perspective there is an absence of strong direct links between headship and the conflict, since only 27.0% of deaths are caused by para-military forces – in contrast to Tamil female-heads, estimated at 64.1% (Ruwanpura 2001:77). Yet there are indirect associations between the rise in Sinhala

¹⁹ It is markedly higher than for any of the other ethnic groups (Ruwanpura 2001). Sri Lanka is also noted for one of the highest incidence of suicides in the world, which has been linked to the increasing pressures that social conflict brings about (Biyawila 1997:141-52).

female-headship to the ethnic conflict, where the view that suicide – often a sign of crisis conditions – may hold ground. Conflict situations, therefore, may lead to female-headship through both direct and indirect ways – none of which should be discounted. For these reasons, it also necessary to account for *de facto* female-heads.

Table C: Causes of *de facto* headship*

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Alcoholic	45.4% (5)	42.8% (3)	44.4% (8)
<i>Mentally unfit to work</i>	18.2% (2)	14.3% (1)	16.7% (3)
<i>Physically disabled</i>	0.0% (0)	28.6% (2)	11.1% (2)
<i>Terminal/Major illness</i>	9.1% (1)	14.3% (1)	11.1% (2)
Unemployed	27.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (3)
Sample Size	11	7	18

* District differences are not statistically significant

Another interesting difference emerges for Sinhalese female-heads – alcoholism is the leading factor causing women to assume headship. Alcoholism contributes to nearly half of *de facto* headship with similar figures for both Ampara (45.4%) and Trincomalee (42.8%). *De facto* female-heads here have alcoholic spouses, who may be a drain on family resources rather than contributing to the household income. The high incidence of alcoholism may be considered a symptom of societal crisis, which is aggravated by conflict conditions.

Other notable factors leading to *de facto* female-headship are unemployment (27.3% in Ampara), physical disability (28.6% in Trincomalee), and mental unfitness – at 18.2% in Ampara and 14.3% in Trincomalee. It is not possible to decode the dynamics between physical and mental disability and unemployment. Prolonged unemployment may throw men into depression and despair, rendering them unfit to seek other employment opportunities, or do mental disabilities make them unemployable? Furthermore, does the presence of intense conflict bring with it despair and depression, which leads to unemployment? Making clear-cut links is not possible. But the data suggest that household structures in eastern Sri Lanka are changing due to direct and indirect conflict-related issues in ways that promotes female-headship even among the Sinhala community. Demographic patterns for Sinhala female-heads will surely help us make more sense of the evidence, and this is the theme for the next sub-section.

Demographics of Sinhala female-heads

Ethnographic studies for Sinhalese have not noted wide age gaps in the marital ages of spouses. However, wide age gaps must exist for Sinhala marital unions too, with most young women married by the time they reach 20 years (Table E).²⁰ Such micro-evidence for Sinhalese women suggests that there are greater similarities across ethnic divides, and accommodating attitudes towards women in the community need not always imply older

20 This assertion is made on the basis that age-based marriage patterns indicate similar trends to those of Muslims and Tamils (Ruwanpura 2001).

marriage ages – even where the educational levels of women are higher. Where there is an open attitude towards women, the full potential of relatively “liberal” norms is unlikely to be reached with severe economic pressures – and women view marriage as an escape mechanism from the poverty of their families. Here, poverty can disrupt the education of women, especially of siblings, and in such instances marriage at an early age is very likely. Specific to the region, however, is the possible conjunction of economic stress and patriarchal norms that prefer young marriage ages for women. Under these circumstances, the convergent practices of Muslims and Tamils permeate the Sinhala community. Indeed, when queried about their marriage at young ages, many female-heads responded with: “This is the custom in the area, where everyone, irrespective of whether we are Muslim, Sinhala or Tamil, marries at an early age.” And in other instances with: “My parents were very poor. Since I was the oldest in the family getting married at a young age was a means of extending financial help to my family. Also there are very limited opportunities for us to earn an independent income here, so just staying at home after a point makes little sense.” So Table E verifies anecdotal evidence for the early marriage patterns of female-heads.

Table D: Age groups of women at marriage

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Age: <16 years	14.3% (5)	11.4% (4)	12.9% (9)
Age: 16-20 years	68.4% (24)	68.5% (24)	68.2% (48)
Age: 21-25 years	14.4% (5)	17.2% (6)	15.8% (11)
Age: 26-30 years	2.9% (1)	2.9% (1)	2.9% (2)
Sample Size	35	35	70

While widowhood is the primary factor leading to female-headship, tabulated evidence illustrated the significance of *de facto* headship in the community (Table C). Since *de facto* headship is as notable as headship due to widowhood, variations in the age-cohorts of female-heads exist. Women assume headship at a young age, with the average age for assuming headship at 30 years. Though widowhood due to natural causes is the main factor leading to female-headship, the prevalence of conflict-related deaths and the high incidence of *de facto* headship push the age structure of female-heads downwards. But there are district-wise differences, since the age group of women assuming headship in Trincomalee is younger than that in Ampara, which is not surprising given the higher incidence of deaths. The higher incidence of female-headship among younger women could limit the human capital development of their households, with adverse general development consequences too.

Closer analysis of district-level data, therefore, highlights the increase in female-headship due to the conflict (Table F). More than half the female-heads have assumed headship below 30 years of age in Trincomalee, which is obviously caused by the conflict. Yet recalling the high frequency of desertion in Trincomalee also elucidates other factors contributing to young female-headship among Sinhalese. The prevalence of a high proportion of *de facto* female-headship helps account for trends towards younger female-heads, with the Sinhalese exhibiting characteristics very different from those for female-headship in other South Asian countries.

Table E: Age structure for women assuming headship

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
< 21 year age group	0.0% (0)	8.6% (3)	4.3% (3)
21-25 year age group	8.5% (3)	28.6% (10)	18.6% (13)
26-30 year age group	28.6% (10)	28.6% (10)	28.6% (20)
31-35 year age group	31.4% (11)	14.1% (5)	22.9% (16)
36-40 year age group	20.1% (7)	17.2% (6)	18.7% (13)
41-45 year age group	5.7% (2)	2.9% (1)	4.2% (3)
> 50 year age group	5.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.7% (2)
Sample Size	35	35	70

“Liberal” social mores: More survival options?

While escaping poverty through early marriage may seem an attractive solution to poverty-ridden families, its benefits may be short-term. Where women are thrust into headship with low educational achievements, their employment opportunities become limited. The only saving grace for Sinhala female-heads is that, since there are less social restrictions on their seeking employment outside the domestic sphere, their ability to become daily laborers and wage workers is greater. But such options will, of course, be curtailed in conflict situations and where young children are present – unless female-heads have the ability to draw upon their (women) kin and community to provide care. Such structures, however, do not necessarily provide unequivocal support. Various reasons restrain female-heads from undue reliance on their kin and community. The most frequently voiced disquiet was as follows. *“It is unfair to depend upon others who were often not more wealthy than us”*, or *“they have their own families and worries, can we add to their problems?”* Or, when it came to depending upon kin, *“my parents are too old to look after my young children... it is I who should be caring for my parents – and not them looking after my family.”* Female-heads also noted that depending on networks could compromise their independence, since *“depending on others means having to be on constant guard with the way we behave. We have to win others ‘hearts’ if we are to get their support – and this usually entails abiding by conventional conduct.”* On many occasions, therefore, female-heads attempted to juggle caring for their children and supporting their households through home-based income-generating activities. Nevertheless, female-heads in this community frequently have varied opportunities to enter the labor market. So while “accommodating” cultural norms will not refute the reality of divergent constraints on female-heads, it certainly may ease their pressures. Both income levels²¹ and occupational patterns will show up the favorable effects of cultures “tolerant” towards its women.

21 Income was measured by including contributions of all family members, excluding remittances.

Table F: Income levels and Patterns*

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Mean	Rs. 2,345.71	Rs. 1,438.86	Rs. 1,892.29
Minimum income	Rs. 1,000.00	Rs. 420.00	Rs. 420.00
Maximum income	Rs. 4,000.00	Rs. 5,000.00	Rs. 5,000.00
Sample Size	35	35	70

Income group (in Rs)	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
> 500.00	0.0% (0)	5.7% (2)	2.8% (2)
500.00 – 1,000.00	5.7% (2)	40.0% (14)	22.9% (16)
1,100.00 – 2,000.00	40.1% (14)	37.1% (13)	38.6% (27)
2,100.00 – 3,000.00	40.2% (14)	8.6% (3)	24.4% (17)
3,100.00 – 4,000.00	14.0% (5)	5.7% (2)	9.9% (7)
4,100.00 – 5,000.00	0.0% (0)	2.9% (1)	1.4% (1)

*District differences of mean income are statistically significant (sig. = 0.000)

Dispersion of income levels for Sinhala female-heads in both districts is low, but female-heads in Trincomalee are markedly worse-off. Even though the household size for this district is smaller, at 2.89, than for Ampara, which is 3.37, per capita income of these households, at Rs. 497.86, fall much below the comparable national mean, at Rs. 755.05. Conflict conditions and lack of economic progress seems to hit Sinhala female-heads in this district particularly hard, since their average income is below comparable figures for Muslim and Tamil female-heads in the district (Ruwanpura 2001). A partial explanation may be found in the fact that Sinhalese in this district depend for their livelihoods upon fishing and settled agriculture. The former is a livelihood option not available to women. While certain agricultural tasks are open to women, the low levels of economic activity noted in the district could also mean low laboring wages for women. Another reason could be that even Tamil female-heads would have been as badly or worse off than Sinhala female-heads had there been no grass-root level activities aimed at raising their incomes. Here, since the Sinhalese have usually not been a target group for income-generating activities sponsored by non-governmental groups, their economic situation remains quite precarious.

A better story can be told for Sinhala female-heads in Ampara, whose per capita income – at Rs. 696.06 – and mean income are closer to the national averages of the same categories. With nearly 80.0% of the sample falling into the middle range of low-income groups, female-heads here sustain themselves better. Indeed, only a mere 5.7% of the sample falls below the Rs. 1000.00 income group, and there is little evidence of female-heads risking the same level of poverty as in Trincomalee. Healthier economic conditions certainly benefit female-heads, and while this is a reason for optimism – hope should be tempered with caution. While it is possible that accommodating cultural norms enable female-heads to turn economic progress to their benefit, this should not deflect attention from the patriarchal values inherent in the capitalist system. It is quite possible, in fact, that economic progress simultaneously both facilitates and limits female-heads' abilities to be economic providers. Economic progress enables female-heads merely by the variety of opportunities opening up in such circumstances. But this does not necessarily release them from the performance of domestic chores and care-giving activities, and the limitations these responsibilities place on them could explain their lack of movement into upper income bands. Undoubtedly, however, female-heads do exploit economic conditions when

there are fewer social and cultural restrictions placed upon them, since 91.4% of female-heads in Ampara noted themselves as primary income providers – the largest proportion across all districts and ethnic groups.²² Variations such as these can be further clarified by looking at the occupational patterns of Sinhala female-heads, where their visible presence in the labor market substantiates a premise of the thesis: that the economic options, i.e. survival strategies, chosen by female-heads will be shaped by their socio-cultural context. Table G below provides the available data for the two districts.

Table G: Occupation patterns of female-heads*

Occupations	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Service/Clerical/ Government worker	8.6% (3)	5.8% (2)	7.1% (5)
Wage laborer	62.9% (22)	57.1% (20)	60.0% (42)
Domestic worker	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Agricultural laborer (unpaid family workers)	11.4% (4)	8.5% (3)	10.0% (7)
Animal husbandry	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Small-scale farmer/Home gardening	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Home-based worker	17.1% (6)	28.6% (10)	22.9% (16)
Not employed	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
	35	35	70

*District differences are NOT statistically significant.

Employment patterns of Sinhala female-heads do not exhibit great variations. More remarkably, a major percentage of female-heads have noted their occupations as wage laborers, with Ampara recording a slightly larger share than Trincomalee. Sole dependence on wage labor for household income does not occur, since 22.9% and 17.1%, in Trincomalee and Ampara, respectively supplemented their income through self-employment as well. Female-heads in this community possibly choose laboring as their occupation not simply because they face fewer social restrictions, but also their ease of mobility is minimally hampered for security reasons – an impediment that Tamil female-heads encounter (Ruwanpura 2001). Another advantage Sinhala female-heads possibly hold is the improbability of facing discriminatory practices in public work schemes implemented by (Sinhala) state officials. Not facing ethnic-based discrimination in the labor market works to their benefit in finding employment as wage laborers. Ethnic-based discriminatory labor market practices, however, must be faced by every group – including the Sinhalese – since the prevailing level of ethno-nationalist discourse does have its corollary in labor market practices too.

It appears that though the average female-head is young, and therefore likely to have young children needing care, more female-heads are willing to enter the labor market. This, of course, implies the importance of kin and community support structures for care-giving activities in female-heads' households as well as their possible dependence on their

22 Corresponding figure for female-heads in Trincomalee is 82.9%, with 14.3% noting their children and 2.9% noting kin member as providing the primary source of support.

own older children to provide care in their absence.²³ Female-heads in my sample recognize the implications of their reliance on networks to release them from wage labor. They perceive that, ironically, while enabling them to exercise wide choice of employment, such reliance brings with it another set of limitations and constraints in that such networks require certain standards of behavior if help and assistance are to be forthcoming.

Female-heads obviously here face a double-edged sword: networks are critical for households' welfare, but may be detrimental to their individual well-being,²⁴ and this makes home-based work an obvious occupational choice. While it occurs in both districts, it is more prominent in Trincomalee, where 28.6% are home-based workers. Where economic deprivation is higher, however, home-work may be even more desirable: lack of formal labor market employment and low-wages in the formal sector serve only as some examples. Furthermore, given the age structure of female-heads, choosing home-based work is not surprising since they are able to combine childcare with economic activities. Hence, the presence of fewer socio-cultural restrictions does not necessarily mean that more female-heads can enter the formal labor market, since this does not free them from childcare. Unless support networks are well in place and female-heads can rely upon them extensively, they still have to juggle between childcare and income-generation. So though Sinhala female-heads may have greater opportunities to enter the formal labor market, the gender division of labor within the household may hinder their ability to take advantage of prevailing social norms.

Female-heads' eagerness to find jobs that allow them simultaneously to engage in income generation and childcare and domestic work is prevalent across all ethnic groups in eastern Sri Lanka (Ruwanpura 2001). Nonetheless, there is a considerable difference in occupational trends for the three ethnic groups, with more Sinhala female-heads employed in the formal labor market. Construing such variations within the socio-cultural context of each ethnic group helps us to ascertain the central import of social and cultural norms in shaping economic outcomes. At the same time, the evidence also points to the pervasive presence of patriarchal values in household dynamics, where gender relations limit the openings that some social groups may offer to women. Contradictions abound, therefore, in the way social and patriarchal norms operate – and the ability of female-heads to realize their potential capabilities will indeed need more than mere “accommodating” social values.

23 The importance of non-financial support of children for female-heads' ability to access resources is discussed through the case studies (Section 5).

24 If indeed this is a partial explanation – and it seems to be from the views echoed by female-heads – then these are rare instances in which women are able to separate their interest from that of the household. Such outcomes are more probable in communities where women feel they are “better” placed than where women face more socio-cultural restrictions.

Table H: Gender make-up and Sources of support

Sources of Support	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Children	8.6% (3)	14.3% (5)	11.5% (8)
Kin	0.0% (0)	2.9% (1)	1.5% (1)
Female-heads' own income	91.4% (32)	82.8% (29)	87.0% (61)
Sample Size	35	35	70
Gender of children (primary & secondary earners)			
Boys	27.8% (5)	66.7% (8)	47.3% (13)
Girls	55.6% (10)	16.65% (2)	36.1% (12)
Both	16.6% (3)	16.65% (2)	16.6% (5)
Sample Size	18	12	30

The positive effects of high participation rates are low dependence on children for generating household incomes, and this observation holds for Sinhalese female-heads, with only 8.6% and 14.3% of children providing the primary support to their mothers in Ampara and Trincomalee, respectively. But on average, 43.5% of children do supplement their households' incomes.²⁵ Are there discernible trends on the gender of children providing income for the household? Clear patterns of higher dependence on boys do not emerge for both districts. Boys play a key role in Trincomalee in providing income to their households:²⁸ 66.7% are boys, with 16.65% girls and 16.65% both children.²⁹ Trends for female-heads in Ampara in the Sinhala community, however, are different. Here, girls have the edge over boys in their economic support for their mothers, with 55.6% of girls supporting their households. This is followed by 27.8% of boys and 16.6% of both children providing main support towards their households. While there is a consistent gender pattern in female-heads' dependence on their children, variations are of course possible –

25 This figure, however, is much lower than for Muslim female-heads but it is comparable to Tamil female-heads' experience (Ruwanpura 2001).

26 Younger age cohorts of Sinhalese female-heads imply both small household sizes and young children.

27 The type of work undertaken by children depended on their age, though their occupational structures were not a focus of this study.

28 For the Sinhala community, joining the military forces is increasingly becoming an effortless option, given the recruitment drives of the Sri Lankan armed forces as well as the increasingly low educational requirements – which is 10th grade education and 17 years of age – placed on lower-level military cadres. Joining the military forces, therefore, provides households with an assured monthly income and even the high risks of being killed in the ethnic war is weighed against the monetary compensation that households receive from the State. Furthermore, de Alwis (1998b) notes the ideological and gender images the State, via the media, deploys in calling on both mothers and sons to protect the nation-state. However, this seems to be an occupational choice for Southern-Sinhalese youth rather than Eastern-Sinhalese. This is partially explained by the ambivalence about children joining the military forces, where protecting their lives was more important than defending the country. Moreover, female-heads explained that by getting their sons to work from an early age, they were instilling economic and social responsibility in them. This attitude of female-heads could be motivated by the need to have a “responsible” male present in these households.

29 Similar patterns for Muslims and Tamils (for all districts in the eastern Province) are noted in Chapters Four and Six, respectively, of my earlier work (Ruwanpura 2001).

and this is an instance of such a deviation. Daughters' non-economic support for their households is well recognized but, where socio-economic conditions permit, the probability of their economic support for households should not be discounted. A consideration of the specific dynamics of Trincomalee, however, is necessary here. Of the two districts, it is the more impoverished and lower labor-force participation rates for female-heads and a higher level of home-based work were noted. Such circumstances facilitate several readings of this unusual trend of more girls providing economic support in the district. Firstly, of course, girls are more likely to share home-based work with their mothers – consequently more female-heads may report their daughters as the primary income earner. Secondly, since there are less social restrictions on women's mobility, girls have more options to take over the primary role of income earners, with female-heads doing the domestic chores. Thirdly, where there are multiple sources of income flowing to households and the daughter's income constitutes the largest portion, she will be identified as the main income earner. Finally, the lower participation rates of female-heads must place more pressure on daughters to become economically active. One or all of these factors together can act upon households to thrust daughters into roles as primary income earners, but this is still not to negate female-heads' supplementing their daughters' income from diverse sources to make their survival possible. The views of female-heads presented before serves to highlight some of the details discussed here. Primarily, they show the importance of networks for female-heads. But they also show the contradictions between social and patriarchal values that nevertheless determine their survival strategies. Sinhala female-heads may occupy more "liberal" social spaces, but this does not negate the gender division of labor within the household, nor the patriarchal values that trickle through in this as in the other ethnic communities.

Women occupy multiple positions and roles, which are structured by social relations. Sinhalese people generally pride themselves on their tolerant attitude towards women, usually citing local customs and norms that have benefited women. Early anthropological surveys have validated the veracity of such social norms and customs, and indeed at a cursory level this does hold true (Yalman 1971). However, the economic profiles of female-heads sketched above show clearly the limits of this supposedly favorable positioning of women: most Sinhala female-heads face a level of economic deprivation similar to Muslim and Tamil female-heads and deal with it through similar options (Ruwanpura 2001). Evidently, female-heads' ability to realize their capabilities and gain economic independence is dependent on much more than relatively "liberal" kin structures. Conditions of ethnic conflict together with the complex interplay of economic factors determine welfare outcomes of female-headed households. Furthermore, the narratives of female-heads press the point, again and again that community structures play a critical role in raising their welfare – and yet that at the same time they remain trapped within these structures (Section 5). The very structures that support them are also the mechanisms through which patriarchal values are perpetuated, with clearly defined roles and positions for women. In short, these kin structures themselves are simultaneously both supportive and oppressive.

5. Concluding thoughts and juggling acts: The worth of networks for female-heads – Case study evidence

This conclusion pulls together some key themes of this paper, before going presenting case study evidence on female-headed households. The importance of the latter is that attempts to capture the complexities and nuances of the lives of female-heads, thus bringing home vividly their social situation and reality. I begin, however, with some of the main points of this paper.

The purpose of this paper, which is an overview of the coping strategies of female-headed households in the Sinhala community in eastern Sri Lanka, has been to highlight the multiple outcomes of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Different ethnic groups bear the cost of conflict in diverse ways. For female-heads in the Sinhala community the detrimental impact of the conflict is indirect and complex, with conflict and non-conflict factors interacting with each other and leading to outcomes that may not easily be directly traced to the ethnic conflict. Conflict situations usually place stress on “oppressive” social institutions that increase the pressure on vulnerable groups, with the processes and outcomes manifesting in subtle ways. This highlights both the paradox of conflict situations and the need for a nuance analysis of the processes at play. Moreover, there are different degrees of impact, with some communities, Tamils in Sri Lanka, bearing a larger burden than the other communities – Muslims and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless all communities do pay a price in conflicts and it is equally important to examine and document the second-order effects on those communities that are relatively speaking “better-off”. Equally, however, there is also a need to uncover the dynamics between the conflict *per se* and other institutional factors that increase the vulnerability of marginal social groups – the importance of this is that it emphasizes the need to pay attention to the latter, which may persist even in the absence of conflict. All these factors combined together shape the survival options and coping mechanisms chosen by female-headed households of the Sinhala community.

These particular issues are highlighted through the case studies of female-headed households presented below, which shows the subtle processes at work in the life-stories of female-heads. The constraints placed by conflict, displacement and related social pressures do bear upon the ways in which this social group gets by on a daily basis. Their stories also reveal the many paradoxes to conflict situations, where the on-going conflict may be instrumental in precipitating splits in fragile social relations – especially where the social fabric is susceptible and sensitive to additional pressures. I leave readers with the narratives of three female-heads that illustrate the harshness of their experiences and the contradictions of conflict situations.

Case study: Limited options - Overcoming poverty through marriage?

Jayanthi is 28 years old, and is a mother of 3 young children. She lives in a neighborhood in Trincomalee town. Her husband went missing nearly 2 years ago, suspected of having been abducted by the Liberation Tamil Tigers for Eelam (LTTE).

Jayanthi's husband was a vegetable seller, but 2 weeks before his disappearance he had begun high-sea fishing. On this fatal journey, which took place in November '97, three people had gone on this fishing trip. While on this journey a contingency of armed group had seized their boat, taken the engine and oil, and then abducted two of the men on the ship. The third person, who had a swollen leg, was allowed to go and was informed of LTTE's responsibility. Jayanthi has since not heard from her husband or obtained any information on his whereabouts – and yet lives in the hope of his return.³⁰

Married at 14, Jayanthi is the oldest of 5 sisters. Her father is a fisherman, and her family was very poor, she said. She was taken out of school when she was 12 years to provide a helping hand to her mother. Since they were poor, her mother contributed to the family income by making *kadayapam*³¹ – and Jayanthi's task was to help her mother in preparing food. When she was 14 years her husband, 4 years older than her, had been visiting his older brother, met her, and then proposed of his intention to marry to her parents. Lakshman, Jayanthi's husband, was already established as a vegetable seller, and Jayanthi's marriage to him would help ease the family burden. Her mother, however, did not think it wise to marry off her daughter at 14 years, but she did get married so that she could help her family. After marriage, she helped her family by providing finances for younger sister's education, where the youngest sisters studied up to their O/Ls.

Jayanthi mothered three children. Her oldest son, Nipun is 12 years old, the second son, an 11-year-old, and her youngest daughter is Anuok, who is 8 years old.³² While her husband was with the family, she simply cared for the household and carried out all domestic chores. It was only after her husband disappeared that she started working. Since her family lives in the same neighborhood, initially her parents and sisters supported her. Her parents financially by giving her a daily allowance of Rs. 50.00, and her sisters would give food. She eventually took to earning her own independent income, since *"I could not live off my parents and sisters. My sisters have young children too, and it is not right for me to depend on them indefinitely."* She went on to say, *"When my husband was alive, I didn't work. Only after his disappearance did I start working. I took to cooking and selling kadayapam, since I had done so in the past too. I do this on a small-scale, because I do not have enough start-up capital. If I had more start-up capital then it can be more profitable."*³³ Her mother had helped her to prepare the *kadayapam*, but she attends to all tasks on her own now³⁴ – though her older son does the delivery of food to the shops in the neighborhood, and daughter helps with some of the domestic chores. Preparing and selling *kadayapam* earns a daily income of Rs 125.00 for her, and for a month she earns

30 Abductions of fishermen in the high seas is common, and particularly so in Trincomalee. The rationale for doing so by the L.T.T.E. is because it sees abduction as a means of retaliation for any casualties suffered by L.T.T.E. cadres or because of Tamil villages attacked by the Sri Lankan forces. Usually, however, abducted men are not necessarily killed by the L.T.T.E., and are instead imprisoned with communication between its prisoners and their families taking place. This communication is done directly or through the intervention of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

31 These are Sri Lankan fast food items, such as pittu, stringhoppers, and hoppers that are made with rice-flour. They are usually served as a substitute for rice and eaten during breakfast and dinner.

32 All three children are studying, and indeed Jayanthi noted that she would like to see all three children studying and doing their higher education. So she had no intention of disrupting their education.

33 When I queried why she did not take up to wage labor, her response was that her father thought it was more suitable to work from home. "Working for wage labor can lead to gossip, and why allow for *lajja* (embarrassing) situations?" This response was interesting, since it reveals the constraints on mobility female-heads do face from male kin, and the importance of these perceptions on the occupations that female-heads end-up choosing.

34 At present her mother is unwell and bedridden, and therefore, does not support her any longer.

approximately Rs 2,500.00. They do have three meals per day, with bread and tea for dinner, and rice and one vegetable curry for lunch and dinner.³⁵ This income is spent mostly on food, kerosene oil, woodfuel, books, land tax, and electricity, and if she is short of money – which is usually for her children’s needs – then her father advances her money. Jayanthi, however, has a long day. She wakes up at 6.30 a.m., sweeps the house and garden, washes clothes, prepares breakfast, and get the children ready for school. By 8.00 a.m. the children leave home, unaccompanied by their mother, to school. After the children depart, she begins cooking lunch and dinner – which takes approximately 1 and ½ hours. Then she heads to the cooperative to make daily purchases for the kadayapam she prepares for sale, and after making her daily purchases she then goes over to her mother’s to spend time with her. Since her mother is ill and bedridden, she spends 2 hours daily with her mother and looks into her needs and cares for her. She returns in time for her children’s arrival at 2.00 p.m. from school gives them lunch and gets them working on their homework. At 4.00 p.m., she begins preparing the food – which begins with frying the flour. Between 5.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. she is cooking the food, with her older son making the deliveries or people picking the food from her house. Then at around 9.00 p.m. she begins winding down, cleaning up the utensils, and getting her children ready for bed. And by about 10.30 p.m., she herself is back in bed. So Jayanthi’s typical day is 14hour day, with little leisure time and where there is leisure it overlaps with childcare or care of the elderly.

Though Jayanthi does not save from her earnings, she has not to date sold or pawned the few valuables that she accumulated while her husband was with her. She has some jewelry, savings of Rs 15,000.00, and a television set. She is intent on making ends meet with her income, since she mentioned that she is “*bayyayai*” (scared) to take loans since moneylenders charge as much as 10% for a month. The house she resides in is built on squatter land, where they have been living on for the past 10 years. Jayanthi mentioned that though they do not own the land, “*we have petitioned to the government to transfer legal ownership to the squatters from the State. Since most people in the neighborhood have lived in their respective houses for at least 10 years, I feel that we should get this land from the State.*” Most of the people in this neighborhood are fishermen, but the neighborhood is on the landside (and not seaside) and therefore, houses are not built back-to-back. There is garden space for most houses, though the quality of the housing structures varies significantly. Jayanthi’s house is built on 10 perches (the equivalent of 1/8th of an acre) of land, and her house is built with *matti* (mud-based clay material) and *takaran* (low-quality roofing made with tin) is used for the roofing structure. The house is of average quality, with a space for a kitchen, sitting area, and a living area – which also serves as the bedroom space for all four family members. While they have electricity, they do not have tap water, a bathroom, or a private well. Therefore, they use their neighbor’s facilities, which generously allow the family to do so.

Jayanthi’s parents and sisters continue to help, her immediate neighbor’s support is much more important to the well-being of her family. Not only do they allow Jayanthi and her children use their facilities, but also extend their help in many other ways. “*My neighbor is sometimes, I think, more dear to me than my sisters. She is always there for my children and me. When I am working and attending to different chores, she keeps me company by chatting with me. When I not at home or I am ill, she will cook for my children, care for them, and sometimes even give food from her own house. When I am short of money, she is the first person I seek help from, as she knows that it is for an immediate need and I will return the money. Whenever, I have to make urgent or important trips I go with her.*” Jayanthi reciprocates her neighbor’s generosity by helping whenever

³⁵ When there is not enough food to go around, however, Jayanthi foregoes one meal but does ensure that all her children do have three meals for the day.

the need may arise, and trust that her neighbor will always help her. She does not, however, get much support from her husband's family because they do not live in the same town. She mentioned that she has not given much thought to the support structures that she relies on for her well-being, but did note that it was mostly women (rather than men) that helped each other. This is because *"it is a woman's yuthukama (duty) to help each other, since they are more likely to face economic difficulties."*

Despite the fact that Jayanthi has economically contributed to her natal family's well-being since her younger days, she considered "working" to be a more recent experience. *"When my husband was here, I did not even go into town. I always depended on my husband's help and support. Since he is gone, I have the motivation and determination to do things on my own 'like a man'. And this is so for everything. Like 'a man' I make decisions, and even my son says that I take much more interest in improving the family well-being than when father was here."* Clearly Jayanthi unexpectedly assuming headship has led to positive perceptions of self-worth and her family's well-being. She noted that though her family faced plenty of economic difficulties with her husband's death, they have overcome these difficulties. Yet she noted that she did not think the rise of female-heads in the region has led to a marked difference in gender relationships, *"Even in my life, major changes have not occurred with my spouse's abduction. There has been no big change in accepting female-heads nor has there been any change in what people expect of us. I am not saying that women are not pushed aside either. People do encourage and respect my efforts, but not everyone thinks this way. There are those who continue to cast us in a negative light, and commendation comes only from certain quarters."* Interestingly, though the community's praise is also linked to Jayanthi not remarriage. *"People praise the fact that I am not remarried and look after my children on my own. The other woman, whose husband disappeared in the same fishing trip, remarried within 2 months. So invariably people speak ill of her and not of me."* Such comments point out the links between community perceptions and "proper behavior" female-heads need to abide by. Though remarriage is not taboo in Sinhalese communities, clearly an unmarried female-head is looked upon vis-à-vis remarried female-head showing the peculiar ways in which women are expected to abide by norms that ultimately do control women's sexuality and behavior. But it isn't that Jayanthi is oblivious to norms that attempt to control her either. She said, *"I have never been a person who likes to socialize too much. Even when my husband was at home, I was a 'home-bird'. This is just as well, since being too familiar with men arouses suspicion. And it is men who dig into our behavior and life-style (opa-dupa hoyanne) and then gossip (kata-katha haddanne) about it."*

Jayanthi is not active in community-level organizations, and this she attributed to her lack of knowledge. But she went to state that after her children are bigger she hopes to take to politics. This was because she said that being politically active may be of material benefit to her family.³⁶

Since Jayanthi is only 28-years old, I was interested in getting her own thoughts on remarriage. Talking with her revealed that she had given thought to remarriage, but more on her parent's insistence than her own volition. *"My parents say that I can not go on forever, because I should have a companion. They say that that they will not live forever to provide emotional support, and since I am young I should think of remarriage. My mother, particularly, keeps at me about this."* But then she says, *"My children are small. I don't know how a stepfather will treat my children, and they are my primary concern. I don't know if another man will ill-treat my children. Another man can be good or bad, and wondering about how they may treat my children prevents me from making decisions about remarriage."* So here, discussing with Jayanthi on the issue of remarriage indicated the primacy of the links between children's well-being and their mother. This is a link that

36 Which needless to state reveals the sorry-state of politics and democracy in Sri Lanka.

very few women appear willing to break out of, and where, in most instances, their individual needs are subordinated to those of the family.

Case study: The “other” consequences of the ethnic conflict - Jeevaka’s story

Jeevaka is a 40-year old female-head, from a rural village adjoining Akaraipattu town in Ampara. She had to assume headship from 11 years back, when she was a 29-year old. Jeevaka is a *de facto* female-head, who had to assume headship due to the torture and violence suffered by her husband, Ravi, at the hands of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

According to Jeevaka a neighboring family misinformed the IPKF of his alleged links to terrorist activity as an informer. Jeevaka reasoned that since her family was doing fairly well, some families in the community were envious of their success – and therefore, used troubled conditions in the area to destroy the sound economic base of their family. She also went on to mention that even though they are Sinhala, Ravi’s mother is a Tamil and his mixed background provided sufficient reason for people to use against her husband. She reasoned that there was no truth to these allegations, and it is people who wanted to see ill-will fall to their family that spread rumors and then took action by sending the IPKF after them.

Generating an income for the household became Jeevaka’s responsibility in 1987 – and since then she had begun to identify herself as the household head. Her transition into being the sole economic provider was a gradual process, and was “made easier” because she had played an important role in agricultural activities. Prior to her husband becoming mentally unstable, her family earned their income through agricultural cultivation – particularly in paddy (rice) cultivation and related activities.

Ravi and Jeevaka had married when they were in their early 20s. She was 20 years old and he was 25, and they had been childhood sweethearts. Their individual family backgrounds were economically secure. When they married Jeevaka had been given a dowry of a piece of land, and so they had started by cultivating and expanding rice-farming on this land. Given the favorable climactic and irrigation conditions in Ampara and their hard work, Jeevaka mentioned that they started doing better than either she or husband anticipated. Consequently, they made the decision that they could also pound, pack and sell rice-flour, and this was an activity that Jeevaka went into primarily on her own. So even before her husband became incapable of being the primary breadwinner, Jeevaka played a role in income-generating activities of the household. During the same time they also began raising a family, and now have four children whose ages range from 15 to 7 years old. It is against this background their particular economic and social circumstances will be traced.

Even though Jeevaka and Ravi were economically sufficient, neither of them have had an education beyond secondary education – grade 8 and 9, respectively. Jeevaka’s views on educating her children are worthy to note: *“I had very different ideas about educating children, prior to Ravi’s brush with bad karma (fate). Ravi and I were doing reasonably well and this even though we were not educated. We knew educating our children was increasingly important in today’s context, but I think my real eye-opening experience came after Ravi was taken into custody by the IPKF. During this time, I realized that my limited education was a real impediment to getting access to his whereabouts as well as other information. I had to depend on others during this time*

period – and usually those who had an education seemed much more aware of the procedures and loopholes of getting things done. It was during this time, I made the decision that educating my children was very important – if not to achieve better things, then certainly to get by with the basics of life.” Their children, whose ages range from 15 years to 7 years, are still in school. The oldest son (Sandeep) has had a disruptive education, because he has had to act as caretaker, when his father was arrested by the IPKF, and play an active role in supporting the agricultural activities of his mother.

When Ravi was released by the IPKF, the torture he had been subject to was severe enough that he had to be hospitalized for a couple of months. When he was discharged from the hospital, the doctors advised Jeevaka that Ravi had become mentally unstable – and was unlikely to recuperate back to “normalcy” for a prolonged period of time. So initially not only did Jeevaka have to continue with their agricultural activities, but also care for Ravi and their children. She said that this was a difficult period for her, since she was pulled in different directions to keep the family unit and their welfare in tact. But since she has managed this particular phase of her life, she feels that a low period of her and her family’s life is over.

During the time Ravi was in prison and then in hospital, the family income fell considerably. This is partially because they were unable to engage in rice cultivation in a consistent manner, with Sandeep – their older son – playing a critical role in supporting in the agricultural activities and tasks. Jeevaka’s main source of income during this phase was from a home-based activity of pounding, packing, and selling rice flour – and their total monthly income was Rs. 2,000.00. But once Ravi was brought home from the hospital, Jeevaka said that she was able to organize the income-generating activities of the household in a better way – with her son continuing to play a crucial supporting role in the agricultural tasks.

At present their monthly income is around Rs. 4,000.00, which she notes as sufficient and a marked improvement from the prior period. She said that their paddy cultivation is carried out better than immediately after her husband was taken in by the IPKF. Still she has been unable to go back to the harvesting levels of the prior period: before her husband was taken in by the IPKF. This she partially said is because they cultivate less land at present – and partially this is because she lacks the ability to garner labor support from male kin during harvesting times.³⁷ She said, therefore, she supplements their income through dairy production: selling the milk of two cows they own, and the eggs of three chickens. These tasks she said, *“is easier to do, with limited support from Sandeep.”*

The income is kept aside for the food and education expenses of her four children, which she considers critical to their well being. Their house is on the same compound as where the paddy cultivation is taking place, and it is a modest house – both of which were dowries inherited through her mother. Besides the land and the house, the only other assets she has are a few items of jewelry and the cows and chickens that were purchased through her savings. She obtained the start-up capital for these activities, through the limited monetary compensation they received from the state for Ravi’s ill treatment by IPKF authorities. *“We didn’t get much compensation for what they did to Ravi. But we got Rs. 5,000 for everything he had to go through. I don’t think this is the usual amount they give. Or, if there is an usual amount, then we were not able to get the precise details. The important thing is that we got some cash compensation for the degrading treatment – and illness caused to Ravi. And I thought it was enough to use towards activities to supplement*

³⁷ This is not surprising, because there is no older male kin in Jeevaka’s family to reciprocate the regular help she will need for medium-scale agricultural harvesting activities. Moreover, Jeevaka is insistent that Sandeep, her oldest son, does not give up his education in supporting their family – but rather helps her during his after school hours.

my current income-generating activities – of pounding, packing and selling rice flour.” She was proud of the fact that she had used these monies prudently, and that it made it possible for her to purchase the cows, which she thinks has guaranteed income solely towards educating her children.

The laboring day of Jeevaka is long, and is usually a twelve-hour day. Her day begins around 5.30 a.m., and approximately seven hours of this day is spent on activities related to paddy cultivation and rice-flour production. She spends a further two hours on poultry and dairy production, with the remaining time allocated to caring for her husband, domestic chores and childcare activities. All her children contribute towards various tasks before-and-after going to school. Jeevaka’s oldest son, Sandeep, plays an important role in supporting the income generating activities, with an observable gender division of labor. Her sons help in paddy cultivating tasks and marketing her rice flour produce, while her two daughters attend to the domestic chores, cook and help care for their father. The only instance of her girls helping “directly” towards income-generation is through the pounding of rice and sifting of flour.³⁸

Since Jeevaka is from the rural village, all her siblings support her in many ways. She, however, feels that the particular precarious conditions in the area limit that the help that she can get from her family-members. According to her, *“I may be having to support my family, because my husband has been incapacitated from playing his role. But I think the uncertainty the conflict has brought about also means that people are not doing as well as they could be doing – if there were better may be people will feel financially secure. But the current conditions mean that we don’t know when we may come under attack or be displaced.”* She thinks that under these circumstances her financial dependence on her family members need to be kept at a minimum, but went onto note that her siblings support her family in non-financial ways – especially looking after her children, giving left-over food and meals, and so forth.

Women assuming headship in the Sinhala community seemed to bring about mixed reactions, and Jeevaka’s case was no more different in this respect. She makes most of the decisions affecting the welfare the household, which is not unexpected given the mental state of her spouse. Moreover, she acknowledges that engaging in economic activities primarily on her own has led to receiving respect from family members. But she says, *“I always felt that I played an important role in maintaining the family welfare from the time I married Ravi – and this is because I worked together with Ravi to improve our economic standing. So in many ways I don’t think that my role in generating an income for the family is novel, but I think the society seems to think this way. They always mention how well I look after the family welfare, and I think to myself that I always used to do this. May be, people are more willing to recognize a woman supporting her family on her own, than a woman working side-by-side with her husband. To my mind this does not make much sense – because the woman is earning an income and helping establish an economically secure base for the family in both cases.”* She does stress that her well-being will always be intricately connected to the welfare of the family, and according to her this is partially because society does always see a woman’s role closely connected to the family. She went on to say, *“I suppose, it is because we, women, are always seen as part and parcel of family welfare, that people don’t recognize the important role most women tend to play in any family. And this is so even when a man is present.”*

38 Interestingly, therefore, when girl-children do contribute towards income generation of households their activities are at best relegated to the home front, invisible from the public sphere. Not surprisingly in spite of female-headship taking place at rapid pace, the socialization processes of children remain within the bounds of a traditional gender division of labor.

The relationship between women and family welfare does shape and influence Jeevaka's own behavior. She said that it was important to her that people did think positively of her, and she did not think women could act and behave in any way they pleased. She mentioned that even though she feels economically independent, she is very aware of the opinions of other people. This is partially linked to her thinking that their neighbors were instrumental in the downfall of the family's security at one point in time. But more generally too, she thinks that even though female-heads (and women) may be economically independent and have access to resources this does not allow them to be socially independent.

Jeevaka viewed her role in the family – both before and after assuming headship – in positive ways, but she simply linked the particular vulnerabilities her family faced to the state of conflict in the region. There is some validity in this perspective, since ethnic conflicts do create social havoc of all sorts. But such a viewpoint fails to recognize the different manifestation of patriarchal interests, where as I pointed out in the early sections, section 2, to this paper ethno-nationalism and ethnic conflict are particularly insidious symptoms of a patriarchal status-quo gone awry.

Case Study: Shanthi's story: Ambiguous tolerance – Liberal social structures and patriarchal values: a path to emancipation?

Shanthi is a 41-year old widowed Sinhala-Buddhist woman residing in Trinco-town. Her husband was killed when she was 29 years old, when she was left to care for her two children – a 6 year old son and 1 year old daughter. After the death of her husband, she took to income generating activities for a brief time period, but it was primarily her sister and young son that began supporting the family economically. Shanthi, therefore, is not a laboring person but did identify herself as the head of the household.

In October 1987, according to Shanthi, the IPKF killed her husband.³⁹ Shanthi's husband was a fisherman and few weeks before he was killed he had found a cache of weapons and arms – which was alleged to be used towards carrying an assault at their village. He reported this finding to the Police and Sri Lankan forces and therefore, in retaliation the LTTE persons in the area got him killed by the IPKF – by charging him of smuggling goods from India to Sri Lanka.

As her husband was killed, it was her sister who provided economic support. Her sister is a civil servant working for the Divisional Secretariat, and though now in Kurunagela (in the North West of Sri Lanka) was at the time based in Trincomalee. Shanthi's sister was married at the point her husband was killed. But since both she and her husband – himself a fisherman – were income-earners, Shanthi noted that her younger sister, who had her own young children, did not hesitate in providing monthly support. She went on to say "*There is only me and my sister in our family. So we have to stand by each other. And my sister has faithfully and unhesitatingly done so to me and my family.*" She

³⁹ In the protracted ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, there have been many perpetrators of violence and killing of innocent civilians – the main groups remain the Sri Lankan Armed Forces, the LTTE and the IPKF. For an excellent account of the violation of human rights and violence on civilians by these groups, albeit for Jaffna (the North) see Hoole, Thirangama, et al. (1988). Though such a comprehensive and unbiased account remains to be done for other parts of Sri Lanka affected by the conflict, one can safely assert that the Sri Lankan Forces, LTTE, and IPKF remain guilty of the charge of killing thousands of innocent civilians.

said that her husband's family did not live in Trincomalee, and therefore they did not provide any support after his death. But she noted that she had not been particularly close to his family even before his death, so she did not particularly expect any support from them after his death either. While her sister provided a monthly income of Rs. 1,500.00 per month, she also received Rs. 50,000.00 from the state as compensation for her husband's death by the IPKF. Of this Rs. 50,000.00, she divided Rs. 25,000.00 in equal proportion between her two children. The remaining half she used towards upgrading her house⁴⁰ and in purchasing an *oruwa* – a sailboat. The latter purchase, she said was so that she could lease it out to fishermen in the area, and have an additional income source. However, the income she gets from renting the *oruwa* is seasonal⁴¹ but she did receive an income of Rs. 100.00 on a daily basis for the days the sailboat was out at sea. She, therefore, also tried her hand at processing and packaging dry and maldivian fish – which she did through a loan obtained from a local NGO. While this was a successful avenue of income generation, she was not able to carry on with this task for a prolonged time period because the support she received from the NGO was not consistent. She had to eventually abandon this self-employment activity. Her son, who was 12 years old by now, decided to give-up school and go into fishing – so that he could support his mother and sister. Shanthi noted that she regrets her son's decision to give-up school, since he was a good student and she does think his disrupted education will impede his future well-being. However, given the circumstance of their family she said that one of her children did have to stay back and start supporting the family. And this had to be the son, since he was more able to support the mother from a younger age.

Her son now an 18-year old, is the sole income provider, and he earns a monthly income of Rs. 4,000.00 during the fishing season. Since fishing is seasonal, she said on average the monthly income for a year is about Rs. 3,000.00, which though sufficient towards their monthly expenses does not allow any money to be saved. On this she said, *“Though my son earns the income, I am the person who makes all decisions regarding the running of the house, and on issues that has an impact on the well-being of all of us. So when I take the income that my son earns, and spends it accordingly.”* Her sister no longer provides monthly support and this because her son does earn a sufficient income. But she said that in case of emergency that it is her sister who still comes forth with any financial support. They do have three meals for the day, with bread and *sambol* for breakfast, and rice and two vegetable curries for lunch – and the same leftovers for dinner. From her son's income they do not have any savings, and the only savings that her children do have is the Rs. 12,500.00 each that has been put aside from the state compensation she received. She and her daughter have a pair of earrings each, and she said that though she did have a few more items of jewelry before she had to sell them between the time her husband was killed and her son began to work. Whenever she faced any financial distress, she said that she had to sell different pieces of jewelry to support her family.

Though economically Shanthi's life is not easy, she noted that she would take all necessary steps to ensure that her daughter's education is not disrupted. While her daughter

40 I will later provide descriptive details of the housing conditions and her property.

41 Fishing in Sri Lanka is seasonal, and is more or less linked to the Monsoon rain patterns. Therefore, there are different fishing seasons for each of the coastal belts. In the North-East the fishing season is between March-October, while in the South-West the fishing season is between October-February. In each of the coastal belts, the remaining months is not suitable for fishing because of severe rain and rough sea. Linked with this seasonal fishing is the other interesting trend of fishermen migrating between the North-East and South-West – with intermarriage between Tamil and Sinhala being common, and also some of these fishermen maintaining two wives and households in the different regions of the country! [It should be noted, that it is usually only the fishermen that move from the North-East to the South-West – with families remaining rooted in their usual habitation areas].

helps her with domestic chores, she has never considered taking her out of school. She was keen that her daughter follows through with her education, particularly since her son's education was disrupted. *“Educating children is important, and not providing an education will only impede their future. Therefore, I will ensure that my daughter is educated, and will make sure that her education is not disrupted.”* Since Shanthi does not engage in any income-generating activities, all household chores are carried out by her – which she said takes about 5-6 hours for a day. Consequently, she does have free time on daily basis, which she spends watching T.V.-dramas, chatting with neighbors, and not much else. But she said, *“I would like to engage in an income-generating activity that I can do from home. This is not because my son's income is insufficient, but because I would find additional sources of income to better myself and my family – and perhaps save money for my daughter.”* So should the opportunity avail itself, she appeared keen on finding sources of income-generation that she could carry out from home.

Shanthi's house is located in the town of Trincomalee. Though the land and house has been the property of her husband and father-in-law, it is built on the coastal belt and is state property. Their house, therefore, is on squatter land, and is surrounded by similar squatter houses. Though not a shantytown, the area in which she resides comes close to a shantytown. The houses are built back-to-back with just enough walking space from one house to another, and questions of hygiene and space abound. Though they do have lighting and a toilet, there is no running water in the house. Consequently, there is a well and tap water for common usage for all households in that neighborhood. Their house was small with 2 bedrooms, but built with brick, cement, and color washed. There was also a common area and a kitchen. They had few pieces of furniture and had a television, but no radio. Though Shanthi's house was clean and compact, the density of households in the neighborhood did raise serious questions of hygiene and its impact on the people in the neighborhood.

Female-heads, she said, existed even before the conflict. But the conflict had greatly increased the number of female-heads in the community. Her own father died when her mother was 54 years, when she was pregnant with her son. Her mother, who now lives with her younger sister, was visiting Shanthi during my time there. So I got to meet her as well. Shanthi's mother, who is now a 72-year old, said that when her husband passed away both her daughters were married. Since her husband owned paddy land, she was not thrown into destitution. But keeping up the paddy fields on her own proved difficult, so she sold the land and went to her younger daughter – who has been caring for her during the past 18 years or so. Both Shanthi and her mother noted that extended kin really did not come to their support when their respective spouses passed away. They noted that this was simply because the social fabric was changing, and there is less compulsion for relatives to provide economic support.

I next queried her on the importance of kin structures for Shanthi's own well-being, a relevant issue since she receives economic support from her sister. She said that it was not just her sister, but even women in the neighborhood helped and supported her with cooking, cleaning, going to marketing, etc., when she is sick or when she has an urgent need. And she similarly reciprocated this support with her time. *“Men too support the family well-being by ensuring that my son is keeping well and doing his tasks in the fishing trade well. But women are more likely to help each other during difficulties because of cultural norms that require us to support kin. However, cultural norms of reciprocity are shaped such because of the realization that women need to support each other.”* *“But depending on these networks also mean that I can not go against norms, since women usually will tell each other what is “proper” and what is not. So my behavior is restricted on this respect. And it is because I abide by charithra-varithra (cultural norms) that people support me.”* This is obviously an important pointer, since it had particular ramifications on the decisions that she made – or, rather could not make. Shanthi noted that she did consider remarriage, both because she and her children were young when her husband was

killed. However, she was not able to follow-through with this decision because her sister objected to her remarrying. *“My sister said that if I remarry she will stop helping me. Since my sister and my relationship with her was more important to me, than a relationship I may build with another man – which can go wrong, I listened to her. Since my sister was supporting me at that point, I had to overlook the option of remarriage. Even now, I will always take my sister’s advice into account, and never dismiss it because she has been an important source of support to me.”* Her comments here is important, since it shows the many instances – and in some cases on important issues – where female-heads subsume their own interest so as to keep the peace with the kin, and ensure that other support structures, equally important for their well-being, are not broken. Since she had noted that there has been an increase in female-headed households in the community, I queried her on her views on possible changes this social phenomenon had brought about. She said, *“Society has not pushed female-heads aside. But female-heads do not have a platform through which they can voice their concerns. They simply exist as if our interest was similar to that of other households. So our voices do not get heard.”* She continued saying, *“Female-headship has not brought any real change in gender relationships, or in the way female-heads are perceived. I have not faced any real economic deprivation. Life was difficult initially, and consequently my son’s education was disrupted. But now life is good, and the initial economic difficulties have been overcome.”* Shanthi’s comments on female-heads in the Sinhala community are indicative of the general position and status of women in this ethnic group. Sinhala women are not marginalized and do not face the severe cultural restrictions that women from Hindu and Muslim communities face, but this lax space has also led to a situation in which they are much less aware and assertive of their rights. Sinhala culture works in curiously contradictory ways: it provides sufficient space for much realizing the basic rights of women, such as education, accesses to income, and so forth. But real autonomy and emancipation of these women has not happened, since their well-being is critically linked to community structures – so they continue to remain trapped in community structures that perpetuate patriarchal practices of “proper” behavior for women.

APPENDIX

Categories of Female-headed Households

Initial research on developing a coherent and comprehensive typology of female-headship was done by Youssef and Hetler (1981, 1983). They categorize female-heads into *de jure* and *de facto*, a distinction that has been the basis for much of the subsequent research by others (Youssef and Hetler 1981). *De jure* headship occurs when women are pushed into assuming headship because of death, divorce, or legal separation from the male partner. The law implicitly recognizes such women as possibly heading their households. The absence of an adult male here results in female-headship arising “of law”, as the term *de jure* implies (*ibid*:40). Traditionally, death or marital dissolution did not necessarily lead to female-headship, since the social organization of family structures led to social and economic support within a framework of absorption. Even now, whether *de jure* female-heads become the main economic provider depends on the interaction between the legal position accorded to women and their social and cultural situation, which may or may not be compounded by economic factors (*ibid*:41).

What factors lead to *de facto* female-headship? According to Youssef and Hetler (1981) *de facto* female-headship exists where there is a temporary absence of a “real” male head (1981:40-2). This is usually due to migration, desertion and/or civil conflict. *De facto* headship also occurs when men are present in the household but relinquish their economic responsibilities because they are alcoholic, physically disabled, underemployed and/or unemployed (*ibid*:48-9). But male absenteeism need not necessarily produce a change in the household structure, especially where women have to depend on male kin for household decision-making, even where remittances are insufficient to maintain the household unit.

No one factor, whether male mortality, male absenteeism or male incapacity, necessarily leads to female-headship. Families can be broken up and/or folded into wider kin. But it is clear that these circumstances can give rise to women heading their own households, and recognition of the diverse origins of female-headship is important in understanding their particular problems and survival strategies. These typologies, therefore, have been constructive in developing more nuanced types of female-headship appropriate to the particular country studies, as it has been for this study.

Overview of methodology, fieldwork and primary data sources

The traditional method used to gather information has been the survey/questionnaire. I interviewed numbers in each ethnic group roughly in proportion to their importance in the provincial population. In this way I attempt to represent the ethnic composition of each district, which is presented in the table below.

Ethnic Composition for the Eastern Province

	Ampara	Batticaloa	Trincomalee
Muslim	42.0%	24.0%	30.0%
Sinhala	38.0%	4.0%	33.0%
Tamil	20.0%	72.0%	37.0%

(Source: Department of Census and Statistics 1981)

My total sample consisted of 298 female-headed households selected for interviewing. This total number of female-headed households can be broken-down into 113 Muslim, 70 Sinhala, and 115 Tamil ethnic groups for the entire region. So for example, 34 Muslim, 35 Sinhala and 30 Tamil female-heads were interviewed from Ampara in an attempt to capture the 42.0%, 38.0%, and 20.0% demographic presence of the Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil communities, respectively, in the district. A similar exercise was followed in Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts, too, although it should be noted that no Sinhala female-heads were interviewed in Batticaloa which has few, if any, Sinhala residents.⁴² In Batticaloa, therefore, the questionnaire was conducted with 49 Muslim and 50 Tamil female-heads to represent the 24.0% Muslim and 72.0% Tamil groups. Finally in Trincomalee, the sample size was 30 Muslim, 35 Sinhala and 35 Tamil female-heads to reflect the 30.0% Muslim, 33.0% Sinhala and 37.0% Tamil ethnic composition in the district.

There was, however, no sophisticated means of selecting my sample. Many of the female-heads interviewed were either those who were willing and able to be interviewed or were linked to grass-roots organizations. A sample selection bias towards more involved female-heads in the community is likely, though not all organizations operate via a politicized feminist base.

The fieldwork was carried out during 1998-9, at which time eastern Sri Lanka was/as it still is engaged in a protracted ethnic conflict. To enter the region I needed to establish contact with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in each district, and I did so through the Social Scientists Association (SSA), an NGO focusing on research and advocacy on gender, ethnic, and political rights, based in Colombo. SSA was the base in Colombo through which I worked and made contact with NGOs in each district. Through the project activities of NGOs in these districts, I found research assistants from each ethnic community. Together with research assistants, village locations for conducting surveys were identified – with three villages specific to each ethnic community from every district selected. The survey was conducted in a total of 24 locations, comprising 3 towns and 21 villages.⁴³

In the absence of comprehensive household listings, female-headed households were selected randomly through the direction of villagers and NGOs. Then through informal discussions and word-of-mouth, the purpose of the survey was explained. The enthusiasm with which it was received facilitated the subsequent work. The research assistants, some 10 young women, undertook the survey more or less simultaneously. Initial surveys by the research assistants were conducted under my supervision, with subsequent questionnaires individually canvassed by the assistants. During the one-year period in Sri Lanka, I traveled frequently between the three districts, and all the in-depth dialogues and informal discussions with female-heads and the other community members (mostly women) were carried out by me.

42 According to the 1981 census, 4.0% of the population in Batticaloa district were Sinhalese. During my time there, however, I never came across any Sinhala families – and was subsequently informed through various local sources that most Sinhala households were either forcibly removed from the area and/or had to flee because of LTTE-led terrorist activities. The only exception was Sinhala women married to Tamil and/or Muslim men, in which case these women identified themselves as Muslims or Tamils.

43 I preserve the anonymity of these villages as well as the female-heads interviewed. This is primarily because these villages were small where everyone knows everyone else, and I do not want my case studies to be identified with specific female-heads.

While questionnaires can be useful, their limitations are many. Anthropologists raised similar concerns when feminists pointed to the androcentric assumptions that are at the core of the empirical tradition (Leach 1967, Harding 1986:24-6, 162). Feminist economists, too, have increasingly documented their reservations about relying on the questionnaire method, and have called for a broadening of the methods used in conducting research in economics (MacDonald 1995, Berik 1997, Esim 1997, Olmsted 1997, Pujol 1997, and van Stavern 1997). So while I began with collecting and analyzing quantitative data, another phase of my fieldwork focused on unstructured dialogues, conversations and interviews as a means of gathering information critical for putting some flesh on the bones of the statistical account. The case studies presented in this paper are based on the ethnographic techniques of conducting research.

Tabulated evidence of the research

Table A: Marital status of Sinhala female-heads^{*44}

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Deserted	2.9% (1)	22.9% (8)	12.9% (9)
Divorced	5.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (2)
Married	28.6% (10)	14.3% (5)	21.4% (15)
Separated	14.2% (5)	5.7% (2)	10.0% (7)
Widowed	48.6% (17)	57.1% (20)	52.8% (37)
Sample Size	35	35	70

* District differences are statistically significant (sig. = 0.031)

Table B: Reasons for spousal death

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Killed (state sponsored)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Killed (paramilitary)	23.6% (4)	30.0% (6)	27.0% (10)
Killed (non-conflict related)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Missing	0.0% (0)	5.0% (1)	2.7% (1)
Natural causes	58.8% (10)	60.0% (12)	59.5% (22)
Suicide	17.6% (3)	5.0% (1)	10.8% (4)
Sample Size	17	20	37

* District differences are not statistically significant

44 The purpose of the statistical evidence is to understand the processes of female-headship among the Sinhala community in Sri Lanka rather than to claim statistical representation or argue that these are valid estimates.

Table C: Causes of *de facto* headship*

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Alcoholic	45.4% (5)	42.8% (3)	44.4% (8)
Mentally unfit to work	18.2% (2)	14.3% (1)	16.7% (3)
Physically disabled	0.0% (0)	28.6% (2)	11.1% (2)
Terminal/Major illness	9.1% (1)	14.3% (1)	11.1% (2)
Unemployed	27.3% (3)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (3)
Sample Size	11	7	18

* District differences are not statistically significant.

Table D: Age groups of women at marriage

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
Age: <16 years	14.3% (5)	11.4% (4)	12.9% (9)
Age: 16-20 years	68.4% (24)	68.5% (24)	68.2% (48)
Age: 21-25 years	14.4% (5)	17.2% (6)	15.8% (11)
Age: 26-30 years	2.9% (1)	2.9% (1)	2.9% (2)
Sample Size	35	35	70

Table E: Age structure for women assuming headship

	Ampara	Trincomalee	All Districts
< 21 year age group	0.0% (0)	8.6% (3)	4.3% (3)
21-25 year age group	8.5% (3)	28.6% (10)	18.6% (13)
26-30 year age group	28.6% (10)	28.6% (10)	28.6% (20)
31-35 year age group	31.4% (11)	14.1% (5)	22.9% (16)
36-40 year age group	20.1% (7)	17.2% (6)	18.7% (13)
41-45 year age group	5.7% (2)	2.9% (1)	4.2% (3)
> 50 year age group	5.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	2.7% (2)
Sample Size	35	35	70

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Annex: Selected outputs of the IFP/CRISIS since September 1999

Barakat, S.; Wardell, G.: *Capitalizing on capacities of Afghan women*, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 4 (Geneva, Dec. 2001).

Cohen, D.: *HIV epidemic and ILO response to other crises in sub-Saharan Africa*, IFP/CRISIS Working Paper No. 6 (Geneva, April 2002).

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