9 Whither Women-Headed Households? Directions for Theory, Research and Policy

INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to draw together the different threads of the book with a view to considering their theoretical and policy implications, and to suggest directions for future research on female household headship. These interlinked issues are important because in most parts of the world it looks not only as if women-headed households are here to stay, but are set for further increases. One of the crucial elements in the discussion is assessing the utility of comparative research in aiding our understanding of women-headed households and how we might enhance its feasibility. In a related vein, to what extent is it worthwhile to strengthen communication across the North–South divide for conceptual and pragmatic ends? The first section of the chapter summarises the major findings of the present analysis and their theoretical relevance. The discussion then proceeds to offer suggestions for future research and action.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR THEORISING FEMALE HOUSEHOLD HEADSHIP

In sifting out the key conclusions, it is important to bear in mind that the analysis has probably raised more questions than answers, and that I see this resumé mainly as a means of pointing us down particular pathways in studying female household headship. I also recognise that there are a number of positions from which summarisation might start: not only has the analysis moved through different scales of resolution – global, regional, national and local, but it has drawn on a variety of sources – micro-level, primary data such as interviews and life histories in relation to the case study discussions, and macro-level and/or secondary sources for the national accounts of Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines, and for the regional and global overviews. While I do not necessarily privilege the findings of my field research over arguments developed in the wider literature, it has been through my personal contact with individual women that I feel I have best come to learn (and care) about the formation, survival and implications of women-headed

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households. As such, and in light of the fairly lengthy summaries given at the end of each chapter, I will confine myself to picking out the most salient points from the case study discussions and to indicate how these relate (or not) to the broader picture. In the interests of clarity and in line with the treatment of topics in the case study chapters, it is helpful to divide the discussion into two main parts: first, conclusions concerning the formation of female-headed households, and second, their survival and implications.

**The formation of female-headed households**

Aside from the rather obvious fact that women-headed household differ in frequency within as well as among Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines, and that routes into female household headship also vary, the case studies suggest that some factors are more consistently associated with the emergence of female-headed households than others. Notwithstanding that ‘factors’ do not arise or operate in isolation and need always to be contextualised with reference to place and the persons involved, the three which seem to stand out as most important in affecting levels (and types) of female headship in the case study countries are: (i) that women have the means of surviving economically without male partners and/or can support children partly or wholly through their earnings; (ii) that women are able to some degree or in some way to cope with the social pressures to which they are frequently subjected for not residing with spouses (whether through long-distance migration, independence from kin, situating themselves in environments [places or occupational sectors, for example] where they are freer to act autonomously and/or have contact with women in like circumstances, and so on); (iii) that the financial and/or psychological gains of living with men do not outweigh those attached to living alone, with other women, and/or with their children.

Lest this summing-up comes over as instrumentalist and/or implies undue degrees of voluntarism on the part of women in processes of household formation, it should be stressed that the majority of women in the case study localities (as in many other parts of the world), tend not to choose to head households and/or to raise children alone with great willingness (or facility) unless they have actually lived with men previously. Only separated or widowed women (usually with negative experiences of male household headship), stand to more easily resist resuming such an arrangement (whether through returning to former spouses or taking up with a new one). Beyond this, the process of women establishing independent households before or from within marriage or cohabitation is often a response to, or result of, men’s actions. Aside from the ‘involuntary’ event of death (which may in some