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# Rethinking Household Headship among Eritrean Refugees and Returnees

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most common generalizations concerning refugee populations is that they are dominated by female heads of households and children. It is claimed that men are either killed in the wars that prompt displacement or are left behind to fight. This assumption has continued to determine the policies of relief and development agencies, as well as governments in countries of asylum and return. On the basis of empirical data from UNHCR and household data from Eritrea, this article questions the validity of such a dominant assumption. The article also problematizes the concept of household headship by showing that it is a cultural construction whose meaning varies from one cultural context to another. There is, thus, no definition of headship that can apply cross-culturally. It also argues that since female heads of households (FHHs) are not socially and economically homogeneous, household headship is not an appropriate method of identifying the poorest of the poor for targeting or provision of emergency relief or for productive inputs in development programmes.

## DISCOURSES ON REFUGEE AND RETURNEE HEADSHIP STRUCTURES

Knowledge about returnee populations, including their demographic structures, is very much influenced by the discourses that have influenced research and practice relating to refugees and other displaced populations. Generally, any mention of refugee populations in developing countries tends to evoke a number of stereotypical assumptions. One of these is the alleged preponderance of female headship (see, for example, UNESCO, 1991). Statements which postulate that women and children under five years typically represent up to 70 to 80 per cent of refugee populations permeate the literature. Up to 75 per cent of the total refugee population in the world is estimated to consist of women and girls, and 60 to 80 per cent of all refugee heads of households worldwide are thought to be women (Cohen, 1995;

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Cole et al., 1992; Forbes Martin, 1991; Forbes Martin and Mendes-Cole, 1992; van Overhagen, 1990; Refugee Women and Health, 1994: 2). Others claim that over 80 per cent of the adult refugee population in developing countries are women (Cole et al., 1992); Apeadu (1997: 171) also argues, 'it has been estimated that up to 80 per cent [of African refugees] are women and children'.

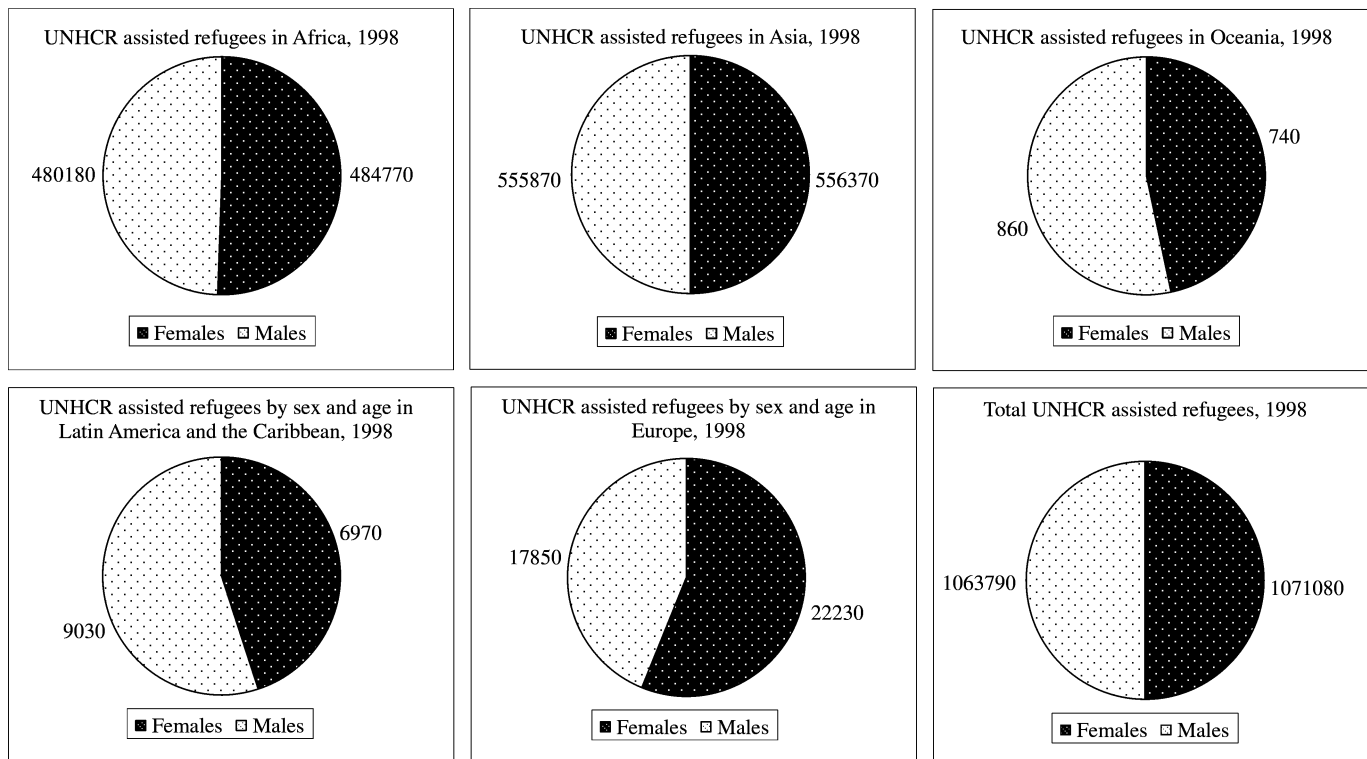
Underlying these assumptions is the belief that adult men are either left behind to fight against the 'enemy' or are killed in the armed conflicts that prompt population displacements (Forbes Martin and Mendes-Cole, 1992; Holborn, 1975; Karadawi, 1977). In April 2002, it was stated in the UNHCR's *Refugee Magazine* that of the total uprooted people 'around the world — refugees who have sought safety in another country and people displaced within their countries — between 75–80 percent are women and children' (UNHCR, 2002).

These data are inconsistent even with UNHCR's own statistics (see Figures 1 to 6). The data in Figures 1 to 3 show that of the total number of refugees over the age of 18 assisted by UNHCR in Africa and Asia, women and men are equally distributed. Women over 18 years represent 50 per cent of the refugee population. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are actually more men than women among the refugees (see Figure 3). The same is also true of refugees in camps in all three regions (see Figures 4 to 6). In 1998, UNHCR assisted a total of 2,093,190 refugees 18 years of age and over in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Of these, women represented only 50.07 per cent. The corresponding figure for refugees in camps in the three regions was 51 per cent.<sup>1</sup> If women represented a majority of refugee populations, this would have been reflected in the number of people receiving assistance from UNHCR and its operational partners. Since UNHCR often targets households without adult male members in its assistance programmes, one would expect female adults (in the age groups 18–59 years and 60 and over) to be over-represented. The data in Figures 1 to 6 show that this is not the case.

This is not only true for 1998. The same trend is discernible for all the years for which there are statistics.<sup>2</sup> According to government figures, in 1990 there were a total of 3,280,959 Afghan refugees in the four refugee-hosting provinces in Pakistan — namely, NWFP (2,239,290), Baluchistan (841,964), Punjab (179,644) and Sind (20,061) (Zahidi, 1990). Women and men aged 15 and over constituted 50 per cent, and the remaining 50 per cent were children under 15 years. Among those who were over 15 years, men accounted for 47 per cent and women for 53 per cent (*ibid.*). Although the proportion of women among the Afghan refugees was slightly higher than

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1. Among the refugees assisted by UNHCR in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania, women in the 18–59 years age group constitute 50 per cent, 51 per cent, 53 per cent, 43 per cent, and 46 per cent, respectively.
  2. See the UNHCR website on [www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch) for more statistics.

Figures. 1–6 Refugee Populations (by sex composition), 1998



Source: <http://www.unhcr.ch/statist/980oview/tab3>

that of men, the demographic structure of the refugee population is not significantly different from any other societies in the developing countries. A UNHCR report on women, children and older refugees for the year 2000 also states, 'In general... the percentage of women is close to that of men in all age groups, except for elderly refugees. Women tend to be over-represented in the age category of 60 and over, reflecting a longer life expectancy of women compared with men' (UNHCR, 2001).

The data in Figures 1 to 6 do not include the 3,737,494 Palestinian refugees in Jordan, West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria. As the data in Table 1 show, the demographic structure of the Palestinian refugees is similar to that of the refugees in the developing societies of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. In fact contrary to the general assumption, the proportion of the female population among the Palestinian refugees is slightly less than 50 per cent.

It is also interesting to note that, again contrary to common assumptions, women are not over-represented among the Eritrean refugees in Sudan. For example, the results of a study recently commissioned by the UNHCR in five refugee camps and settlements (namely, Wad Sherife, Girba, Fau V, Abuda, and Karkora/Umgurgur) show that adult males (15 years and over) represent 30 per cent of the total refugee population, whilst the corresponding figure for women is only 27 per cent (Bayoumi et al., 2002).

Inflation of statistics on proportions of females and children among refugees may be motivated by a number of considerations. Firstly, by exaggerating the number of female-headed households and children without male 'breadwinners', host governments in poor countries may want to maximize the flow of resources from donors. Secondly, by placing undue emphasis on the preponderance of female headship and malnourished children, international and national NGOs may want to play upon the sympathies of donors and their constituencies in order to generate positive

*Table 1. Palestinian Refugees in Jordan, West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon and Syria (by sex composition)*

Year	Total refugee population	Number of females	Females as percentage
1953	870,158	430,483	49.5
1955	812,425	n.a	n.a.
1960	1,136,487	n.a	n.a.
1965	1,300,117	n.a	n.a.
1970	1,445,022	n.a	n.a.
1975	1,652,436	803,030	48.6
1980	1,863,162	905,606	48.6
1985	2,119,862	1,033,054	48.7
1990	2,466,616	1,204,644	48.8
1995	3,246,044	1,588,505	48.9
2000	3,737,494	1,831,806	49.0

Source: <http://www.un.org/unrwa/pr/pdf/figures.pdf>

responses to fundraising appeals. Most refugee movements involve large numbers and are often unpredictable. Thus, at the initial stage of a crisis, the saving of lives is the major pre-occupation of those concerned. Appeals for assistance are more effective when accompanied by numbers and preferably by statistics showing starving women and children, without able-bodied male adults. At the early stages, host governments have no means of knowing the number of refugees or the composition of the households, but this does not stop them from manufacturing figures because they fear that failure to do so would impact negatively on fundraising. Over time, these statistics assume the status of 'truth' through repetition.

The personnel of international and national humanitarian and development agencies may be aware of the unreliability of host governments' statistics, but they are reluctant to challenge them for a number of reasons, not least wanting to avoid being thrown out of the countries concerned. In fact, humanitarian agencies may have no incentive to challenge unreliable statistics provided they facilitate their efforts of fundraising. The alleged preponderance of female-headed households among refugee communities can only be understood if one takes account of these concerns and vested interests on the part of governments, NGOs and to some extent the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The situation of ethnic Somalis who fled from the Ogaden to Somalia as a result of the 1978 Ethio-Somali war is one of many cases in point. In the early 1980s, the 'refugee sector' was the only booming 'industry' in the stagnant Somali national economy (Kibreab, 1990a; Tucker, 1982). According to Waldron and Waldron (1994), the influx of refugees was highly profitable to Somalia, suggesting that in 1981, as much as US\$ 100 m entered Somalia, directly or indirectly connected with the refugee effort. This represented nearly 40 per cent of the country's GNP (Tucker, 1982). The total needs of the refugees were estimated at US\$ 120 m in 1981 (*ibid.*). As the result of the emergency aid efforts:

Thousands of Somalis found work in the camps as logistics officers, storekeepers, interpreters, and porters, or other jobs unloading ships, driving trucks, repairing roads, managing relief programmes, and serving the hordes of expatriate relief workers in the hotels, clubs, restaurants and taxis. *All these benefits created a strong constituency within the Somali establishment interested in maintaining the status quo and keeping the aid pipeline open.* (*ibid.*: 23, emphasis added)

Although the exact number of the refugees in the country was unknown, Siad Barre's government estimated the total to be in the range of 1.7 million (National Refugee Commission, 1978). The UNHCR insisted that the total figure was less than half a million. After prolonged negotiations, the deadlock was overcome by adopting a fictional 'planning figure' of 700,000 (Kibreab, 1993; Waldron and Waldron, 1984).

Not only did the Somali government and UNHCR agree on a 'planning figure' but they also stated without any empirical evidence that the

overwhelming majority of the refugee households were female-headed without male 'breadwinners'. According to UNHCR and National Refugee Commission (NRC) sources, the refugees comprised 60 per cent children (up to 15 years old), 30 per cent female adults and 10 per cent male adults (NRC, 1980, 1986, 1987; UNHCR 1979, 1983, 1987) — figures echoed by Hitchcock (1983: 2), in his comprehensive review of the socio-economic research literature on refugees in Somalia. Once the dispute about numbers was overcome, the two agencies had an incentive to raise funds using the images of emaciated children and the so-called large number of hungry mothers without male breadwinners. Though these figures were presented as constituting the true demographic features of the refugee populations, they were as fictional as the so-called 'planning figure'. Although they were challenged by a number of empirical research findings, over time they became 'truth' through repetition in reports and later in academic research (see, for example, Christensen, 1982; Hitchcock, 1983; Kibreab, 1990a, 1993; Lewis, 1982).

As early as 1982, Lewis — who conducted a study in the central region of Somalia — wrote: 'We encountered lots of men, many of whom seemed to be in their twenties to fifties. I would thus seriously question the percentage as usually given 60 per cent children, 30 per cent women and 10 per cent men' (Lewis, 1982). A comparative study of refugees and local populations in the surroundings of the Qoryole and Jalalaqsi refugee camps conducted at the end of the 1980s also showed no significant differences in sex distribution and household composition between the two populations (Kibreab, 1990a). Household compositions of the two populations were almost identical. Of the 8,605 refugees in the sample households, 60 per cent were children (up to 15 years), 21 per cent were adult females (over 15 years) and 19 per cent were adult males (over 15 years).<sup>3</sup> The corresponding figures for 2,692 people in the sample households from the local population were 53.4 per cent children, 26 per cent adult females and 21 per cent adult males (Kibreab, 1990b: Table 4.2). The number of males over 15 years were less than females in the same age group in both the populations, simply because a considerable number of men were working in Mogadishu, mainly in the informal sector and in the construction industry (Kibreab, 1990a). Their families were benefiting from remittances sent by the absent male members. The higher proportion of children among the refugee households was also due to the presence of dependants who came from the Ogaden to take advantage of the better social service facilities (health care, education and nutrition) provided by UNHCR and NGOs in the refugee camps.<sup>4</sup>

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3. In Rural Africa in view of the fact that children over the age of 15 participate in all forms of income-generating activities and *ceteris paribus* their productivity is the same as male adults, 15 is often considered as the age of maturity.
  4. The Ogaden was a neglected region in Ethiopia and it was common for parents across the border to send their young children to stay with relatives in the refugee camps.

The stereotypical assumption of higher frequency of female headship among refugee populations is by no means unique to Somalia.<sup>5</sup> In many refugee situations, this has detrimental policy implications. The assumptions of disproportionate female headship, on the one hand, and the gendered perception of policy-makers and aid agencies' staff concerning the role of the male spouse as breadwinner, on the other, often result in a policy that places undue emphasis on emergency relief, neglecting long-term development programmes aimed at promoting self-sufficiency. This is because a community with such a high degree of 'demographic deformities', as reflected in 'disproportionate dependency ratio', is often said to have no possibility of attaining self-sufficiency. This in turn is based on the wrong and gendered assumption that productive work is the exclusive domain of men — in spite of plentiful empirical evidence that women are the major contributors in agricultural labour (Bonfiglioli, 1998; El Din, 1998; Grawert, 1998; Kibreab, 1995; National Union of Eritrean Women, 1999; Quisumbing et al., 1995). The consequence is that sustaining lives, rather than creating an enabling environment which helps people to meet their own needs, becomes the goal of international assistance.

It is also interesting to note that because of the widely-held view that refugees are dominated by female-headed households (FHHs), the latter are also assumed to be over-represented among returnee communities, even when this is contradicted by empirical studies. Though it is not possible to show empirically how far the statistics on the returnee population in Eritrea are influenced by the stereotypical assumptions permeating the discourses on refugees and returnees, the fact that neither academics nor aid agencies have hitherto challenged the data which are presented below may suggest that they are considered consistent with other refugee/returnee situations and hence pose no cause for concern.

The remaining part of this article has three main purposes. Firstly, it questions the reliability of the statistics derived from the registers at the reception centres. Secondly, it problematizes and deconstructs the concept of female headship among the returnee population. Thirdly, it questions the appropriateness of classifying female-headed households as being vulnerable and poor regardless of socio-economic position, access to family and non-family labour time, social support network, age and physical condition of the female household head.

#### **NUMBER OF FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS AMONG RETURNEES IN ERITREA**

It is generally assumed that post-conflict (post-1991) Eritrean society has a higher than usual share of households headed by women. For example,

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5. For similar assumptions on other refugee groups see Cohen (1995); Cole et al. (1992); Forbes Martin (1991); Forbes Martin and Mendes-Cole (1992); Holborn (1975); Karadawi (1977); van Overhagen (1990); Refugee Women and Health (1994: 2).

a World Bank report states that the proportion of female-headed households in post-conflict Eritrea is up to 45 per cent of the total number of households (World Bank, 1996). The report blames this situation on the war, which allegedly killed able-bodied men among combatants and civilians. Given the unstable political situation in the country over the last fifty years, there has never been a census on which to base a reasonable estimate of female headship. Thus, the figure given by the World Bank is a product of guesswork. The war did not affect only men: the majority of the 200,000 casualties of the war were civilians and there is nothing to suggest that more men than women among the civilian population died during the war. Women also represented about one-third of the combat forces in the liberation army (Issayas, 1990) and since women participated in all forms of combat, it can be assured that one-third of the 65,000 fighters who died during the war were women.<sup>6</sup>

It is not only the World Bank which asserts that FHHs are over-represented in post-conflict Eritrea. According to government sources, a large proportion of the returnee households are female-headed. The statistics published by the Eritrean Rehabilitation and Refugee Commission (ERREC) suggest that 39 per cent of the 49,092 households who self-returned<sup>7</sup> between 1989 and 1995 are female-headed (ERREC, 1996). Among the 24,220 households who returned under the Pilot Programme for Refugee Re-integration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea (PROFERI) between November 1994 and June 1995, 30 per cent are female-headed (ERREC, 1997). Among those who self-repatriated in 1996, 30 per cent are female-headed (ERREC, 1997), while the corresponding figure for 1997 is 38 per cent (ERREC, 1998). All these households are automatically classified as being vulnerable and deserving special attention both in emergency relief and rehabilitation assistance.

Though the concept of female headship is widely used in the primary and secondary sources dealing with Eritrean returnee populations, there has never been any attempt to define what is meant by female headship. ERREC's statistical data are derived from interviews conducted with returnees at the

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6. It should be pointed out, however, that after the May 1998 border war against Ethiopia in which nearly all Eritrean males between the ages of 18 and 40 were mobilized to fight, tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of Eritrean households became female-headed. Even though the border war was brought to an end after the signing of the peace agreement between the two countries in December 2000, the promised demobilization has not yet taken place. In fact, more people are being mobilized to participate in the so-called Warsay/Yikaalo campaign declared by the Head of the State in May 2002. As a result, it may be true that in the post-1998 period, Eritrea has had the highest proportion of female-headed households in the developing world. It is important to state here, however, that the data discussed in this article do not refer to the situation that has prevailed since mid-1998.
  7. This refers to self-sponsored returnees, that is, those who organized their return without external assistance



port of entry on the Eritrea–Sudanese border. All returning refugees are required to report at the reception centres, so consequently, every returning individual or household is registered. No returning refugee can skip this procedure because without a returnee identity card, which is issued on registration, the returnees cannot be accepted anywhere, even in their old villages. A returnee ID card is the *sine qua non* for acquisition of entitlements such as assistance for rehabilitation, including food, cultivable land, farm equipment, seeds and other inputs that are essential for the (re-)construction of livelihoods. ERREC's statistics are thus compiled from the registers of the reception centres. There is no doubt that these statistics truly reflect the sex composition of the households as reported at the port of entry. However, I argue here that these data cannot be used as a basis for estimating, let alone for understanding, the socio-economic and cultural implications of female headship among the returnee population. The literature on returnees in Eritrea takes these statistics for granted and it is repeatedly stated that nearly half of the returnee households are female-headed. An in-depth empirical look, however, indicates that there are good reasons to question whether the current sex composition of households in the areas of return corresponds with what was recorded at the point of entry.

### **Household Composition of the Returnees prior to Repatriation**

An earlier survey of 294 randomly selected heads of households among Eritrean refugees conducted when they were in Sudan in the six land settlements of Qala en Nahal (Adingarar, Umzurzur, Dehema, Umbrush, Umsagata and Salmin), Aburakham and Wad Awad, showed that only 15 per cent of the refugee households were female-headed (Kibreab, 1987: Table 4.7). A large proportion of the returnees are from these sites, especially from four of the settlements in Qala en Nahal, namely, Umsagata, Adingarar, Dehema and Umzurzur. A study based on 213 randomly selected heads of households in the five wage-earning settlements in Eastern and Central Sudan (Kashm el Girba, Kilo 26, Fatah el Rahman, Kilo 7 and Awad es Sid) similarly showed that the proportion of FHHs was 15.2 per cent (Kibreab, 1990b: Table 8.1). The results of another study based on 713 randomly selected heads of households undertaken in 1994/95 amongst the refugees in Kassala town, Shegarab I, II and III as well as in the settlements in Qala en Nahal, also showed a proportion of FHHs of 15.3 per cent (Kibreab, 1996a: Table 11.4). The proportion of FHHs among the refugees was similar to the proportion among the population of rural Sudan, where the settlements were located (see Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 1983). It is important to note, however, that the aggregate averages conceal the differences that exist in sex composition of the families in the rural and urban areas. In the urban areas, the proportion of FHHs is greater than in the rural camps or settlements. For example, in Kassala

town, nearly 21 per cent of the sample households were female-headed (Kibreab, 1996a: Table 11.4).

These statistics are, however, too general and from a policy point of view of little value because they do not contain information on the processes that gave rise to female headship. The fact that 21 per cent of the respondent sample households reported being female-headed without stating the processes that led to the formation of such household structures says very little about the socio-economic position of such households. Further probing among the reported FHHs in Kassala town showed that some of the male members of the households were away earning incomes elsewhere within the Sudan. Some had migrated abroad, including to the Gulf States, in search of employment opportunities. It was common among male Eritrean refugees to leave their families in Kassala town when they migrated to Saudi Arabia or to the other states in the Gulf.

Another study conducted among the refugees in Khartoum also showed that the male spouses of some of the FHHs were working either in the Gulf States or in one of the countries in Western Europe and/or North America, or in Australia or New Zealand (Kibreab, 1996b). Among a sample of 432 household heads, 50 per cent of the females were married and were living together with their husbands, 29 per cent were single, 2 per cent cohabiting without being married (*semur ginbar*),<sup>8</sup> 5 per cent divorced and separated, 4 per cent widowed, and the spouses of another 10 per cent lived outside Sudan (Kibreab, 1996b). The family structure of Eritrean refugees in Khartoum also exhibited some unusual forms in the sense that a large proportion (20 per cent) of the 'households' comprised groups of bachelors who in order to make ends meet, shared incomes, expenditures and housing (Kibreab, 1996b). Though these households comprised adults of the same sex without any sexual relationship, the arrangements involved common residence and economic co-operation and therefore fit the standard definition of households. This suggests that different forms of households are constructed under different circumstances to overcome particular constraints.

### **Questioning the Reliability of the Data on Household Headship among Returnees**

The question that arises is whether the high proportion of FHHs reported among the returnees reflects the structure that existed prior to their return.

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8. *Semur ginbar* refers to a social arrangement between unmarried couples who agree to share residence and income to overcome the problem of subsistence insecurity. The arrangement invariably favours the male partner because it is the woman who earns the income. *Semur ginbar* literally means united front against subsistence insecurity (read insecurity of the male partner; the female partner supports the male by working, for instance as a domestic servant, regardless of her pre-displacement socio-economic status). For more on this see Kibreab (1995).

With the exception of Kassala, where 21 per cent of the refugee households were female-headed, the average proportion of FHHs among the refugees in Sudan was less than 15 per cent. The proportion of FHHs reported among the returnees, however, is nearly double that even of Kassala town. Whether the sex composition of the returnee households reported in the statistics corresponds with the reality that existed prior to their return cannot be determined without knowing the proportion of the families who returned from Kassala town and those who returned from the camps and settlements. The results of a study conducted among the returnees show that even though a considerable number of refugees have returned from the urban centres, the majority were from camps and settlements.<sup>9</sup> Among the PROFERI returnees, about 40 per cent were self-settled, while the remaining 60 per cent were from the camps and settlements. Among the refugees who sponsored their own return from Sudan to Eritrea, 29 per cent were self-settled and 71 per cent lived in refugee camps and settlements prior to their return. These figures clearly suggest that the large majority of the returnee families are from camps and settlements where the proportion of FHHs was about 15 per cent.

The proportion of FHHs reported in ERREC statistics concerning headship among the returnee population does not reflect the reality that existed prior to repatriation. The proportion of FHHs among the returnees according to ERREC statistics is 24 per cent higher than had been the case in Sudan among the same population. How can such a difference be explained? Inasmuch as they refer to the composition of the households as reported at the points of entry, ERREC's statistics can be assumed to be correct — that is, what the returnees reported was accurately recorded. But it might not be safe to assume that what was reported at the points of entry represents the actual household composition in the reintegration sites or areas of destination. After the fundamental political changes that took place in Eritrea in 1991, many male refugee household heads went back to their country of origin to assess the conditions at home, leaving their families behind in Sudan. Most of these men later returned to Sudan, either to bring their families to Eritrea or to stay with them. When they arrived at the point of entry, the male members did not need to report at the reception centres because they were already registered and had been issued returnee ID cards: their wives and children were thus registered independently, as if they did not have a male household head. Many families also split and registered separately as if they were independent families. There are many examples to demonstrate this. The total number of refugees that were expected to

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9. The data in this and the following sections are drawn from an ongoing research project conducted by the author in the Gash Barka region of Eritrea. The main aim of the research is to examine the reintegration of displaced populations in post-conflict Eritrea, particularly of refugees returning from Sudan, and the extent to which the social and economic changes they had undergone in exile affect the reintegration process (see also Kibreab, 2002).

repatriate under the PROFERI Pilot Project (PPP) was about 25,000 individuals. These were estimated to constitute 4,500 households (ERREC, 1997). At the end of the operation, there were 24,220 individuals rather than 25,000, but 6,386 households instead of 4,500 (*ibid.*). The number of returning households was thus nearly 42 per cent more than had been anticipated. This was because there were a large number of families who had only one or two members. The average family size of the Eritrean refugees in the Sudan was 5.2 persons (Kibreab, 1987, 1990b, 1996a), similar to the working figure adopted in the Operational Plan of the PPP (ERREC, 1997). The average family size amongst the PPP returnees is 3.8 persons (*ibid.*). The corresponding figure for self-repatriating households was 2.9 (*ibid.*). These figures are, by any African rural standard, too low to be considered reliable. This suggests that family members might have separated, registering as independent families upon entry, or that they arrived at different times, or that some members were left behind. There were some gains to be made by adopting such return strategies, given that all types of entitlements were distributed to returnee ID card-holders, regardless of whether other members of the same family were in possession of such cards. Since families that held more than one or two ID cards got a greater share of assistance, there may have been some who resorted to fraudulent practices to maximize access to benefits. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that the returnees split their families in order to grab benefits by resorting to dishonest practices. The existence of an incentive *per se* is insufficient evidence — dishonest intention needs to be proved rather than assumed.

There are other more important reasons why returning households split their members. For people living near or below the subsistence margin, return after several decades of life in exile is potentially a risky undertaking. This is not to say that their lives in exile were necessarily secure, but people who live on the razor's edge of survival are generally risk-averse and consequently reluctant to relinquish the little they have in favour of the unknown and the uncertain. It is only after weighing or testing the costs and benefits of the two options (returning or staying) that some of the remaining family members joined the pioneers at home. For example, my ongoing research shows that about 15 per cent of the male family heads of the PROFERI returnees were already in Eritrea prior to their families' arrival. About 38 per cent of the heads of self-repatriating families first returned on their own and then went back to Sudan to fetch their families after assessing the situation at home. Another risk-minimizing strategy was for some family members to return, while others stayed behind, which enabled the household as a whole to test or take advantage of the return option without losing the benefits they derived from being refugees in Sudan. For example, about 46 per cent of those who self-returned to Eritrea reported having members of their households still in Sudan. The corresponding figure for the PROFERI returnees is 54 per cent.

The following example may further demonstrate the need to question the data on the returnee households' sex ratio. In designing my research, I used the register at the reintegration sites as a sample frame for drawing at random the household heads to be included in the sample. There were a number of cases in which a husband and wife were selected as independent households because they were listed as such in the register — a mistake which was uncovered during the actual interview when I returned to the same house believing that the second household on the list was a different one. When asked for an explanation, the persons concerned said that they returned at different times and were consequently registered as separate households. They never reported the truth to the authorities. Why should they? There are also a considerable number of households whose male heads were still working in the Sudan. For example, a study by the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW, 1994) showed that of 360 women who were interviewed in Gash Barka, 36 per cent were returnees. Of these, 60 per cent reported that their husbands were still in Sudan. There were also some families whose male heads were working in the Gulf States.

#### **AMBIGUOUS HEADSHIP IDENTITIES**

According to the statistics published by ERREC,<sup>10</sup> a female-headed household is one in which the male spouse was absent at the port of entry. There are no data on the causes of female headship (or male absence). Not only do the statistics fail to reflect the changes that might have occurred subsequent to the households' return, but no distinction is made between the various types of female-headed households. The reasons for this are obvious. Finding out about subsequent changes in household composition would have required an expensive follow-up survey. Not only is this beyond the means of ERREC but even with a careful follow-up survey, it would still have been difficult to establish with an acceptable degree of certainty the real structure of the households' headship. The concept of household headship is a cultural construction. The returnees constitute disparate culture groups and the definition of headship varies from one culture group to another. Among some of the groups, an absent male family member may continue to be regarded as a household head regardless of the duration of his absence, either because he continues to play his breadwinner role or due to the existing cultural norm. An absent male family head may also be replaced by one of his senior male relatives in extended households. An unmarried single mother may continue to be a member of her parent's family and may not be regarded as a female household head. A divorcee may return to her parents' home and become re-absorbed as a fully-fledged member of the

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10. See ERREC (1996, 1997, 1998).

household. A widow may also be absorbed by her ex-husband's kin. Among some of the Eritrean culture groups, a widow could also be inherited by one of her brothers-in-law. Among Christians, mainly the Bilen, the brother-in-law must be single but among some Moslem groups, a widow can be married to her brother-in-law as a second or third wife. Some women with children may also continue to live with their in-laws, especially if the husband has emigrated elsewhere and has not remarried officially. Within some of the culture groups amongst the returnees, all the above categories may form female-headed households. This clearly suggests that female headship is a social and cultural construction, with no universally applicable standard definition. In view of this complexity, it is difficult to identify the extent of female headship among the returnee families. These complexities are not reflected in the register from which the data on headship are extracted.

The extent of the ambiguity in definition and meaning ascribed to female headship by the different culture groups is reflected in the results of the survey and in-depth interviews<sup>11</sup> conducted with women in households where there were no resident adult male members. Among some of the culture groups, households which would be regarded under different cultural settings as *de jure* female-headed households, reported being male-headed. Such respondents included some single mothers, divorcees, widows and separated women. Some women who would be considered typical cases of *de facto* female heads also reported that their households were headed either by their absent male heads or by their relatives. There were also women who reported that their adult sons headed their families. The sons who were reported by their mothers as being heads of households were either with or without families of their own. Yet there were also some females who reported that they were the heads of their families notwithstanding the fact that the male members of their households were present.

Some aspects of the results of this study suggest not only that female headship means different things to different respondents, but also that the answers of some females to the question 'who is the household head?' were influenced by what they wanted or expected to achieve. This was in spite of the fact that it was made absolutely clear to them that they would derive no benefits from the results of the survey. One reason for this could be the fact that some of them had already acquired entitlements by claiming that their households were female-headed. Such households are reluctant to reveal the real identity of their heads. Another possible explanation is that the male member's contribution to the household's incomes was either negligible or non-existent due to unemployment, illness or physical or mental disability: Youssef and Hetler (1983) refer to such families as *de facto* female-headed households. This explanation is unlikely in the Eritrean cultural setting,

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11. These in-depth interviews took place in Tessenei, Goluj and Barentu in November 1997, February 1998 and January 2000.

however, where the male spouse is in most cases regarded as the household head, regardless of his contribution to the household's income. With a few exceptions (such as that mentioned above), headship is defined in cultural rather than in economic terms. According to the dominant sex role ideology among the returnees, headship is defined in terms of earning (breadwinning), authority, power, knowledge and prestige.

However, though household headship is not necessarily a function of economic contribution to household maintenance, an in-depth discussion with market women in Souq al Shaibi (people's market) in Tessenei town showed that increased earning by women means greater bargaining power and direct participation in decision-making concerning use and allocation of household resources and household labour time.<sup>12</sup> Many of the female interviewees, for example, stated that in most cases, they were able to control and dispose of their incomes as they wished. Most of the interviewees participated in rotating credit schemes known as *uquub*. Since the arrival of the returnees in Tessenei, *uquub* societies have been mushrooming. There are between ten and twenty members in each revolving credit scheme; members contribute a certain amount to the scheme weekly, depending on the financial capability of their members. Each member has a designated turn to draw from the contributions or pool. Some women reported membership in more than one *uquub* society.

The rotating credit schemes provide important sources of capital for expansion of the self-employed women's current economic activities. There were some who used their share to diversify their income bases. Most of the women also met a major part of their families' subsistence needs. Though the majority of the women interviewed were without spouses, we identified five women who were married and who met their households' subsistence needs without any contribution from their spouses, who were either too old or too ill to be able to engage in income-generating activities. In spite of this, none of them identified themselves as being the head of their household. The male spouse's failure or inability to contribute to his household's subsistence needs notwithstanding, he was still regarded as the figurehead of the household. The women referred to such men as *abo gezana* (Tigrinya) or *abuna* (Tigre) meaning literally the 'father of our home' or 'the head of our household'. Asked how could a person who lacks the means and the ability to sustain himself and his family be considered as a household head, the women responded stating: '*medri b'tebaitai derho iya tiwegih*': 'It is the cock, not the hen that ushers in the dawn'.

This proverb reflects the sex role ideology which, *inter alia*, defines the gender-based division of labour and power relations between the two sexes. It may keep people, including women, blind to certain realities, processes or

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12. Personal interviews with market women in Souq al Shaibi, Tessenei town, November 1997, March 1998 and January 2000.

relations, or make them see other processes or relations as natural. However, it may be wrong to assume that the women who recounted this proverb are blind to their realities. Because of the dominant gender ideology, some of the interviewees may take as 'natural' the culturally constructed relations of inequality between women and men. As a result, they may regard their male spouses, including those who are absent, feeble, ill, handicapped or drunkards, as heads regardless of whether they are able or willing to contribute to their household members' subsistence needs. This may be a reflection of internalized oppression. As Sen (1990: 127) argued — in a different but not dissimilar context — 'Deprived groups may be habituated to inequality, may be unaware of possibilities of social change, may be hopeless about upliftment of objective circumstances of misery, may be resigned to fate, and may well be willing to accept the legitimacy of the established order'.

Women may also recount such a proverb not because of internalized oppression but because they are reluctant to reveal to outsiders that their husbands are unable to fulfil their breadwinning role. By not revealing that they fulfil this role themselves, the women may avoid presenting themselves as a threat to the established social order, and at the same time they may protect their husbands from being embarrassed and humiliated in public. It may thus be unreasonable to expect them to admit to strangers that their husbands are unable to play the single most important socially constructed role — all the more so because of my position as not only an outsider but also a male. If this is true, the interviewees might have given what Schrijvers describes as 'orthodox answers', 'the upper layer' (pers. comm., 10 March 2000) which conform to the culturally constructed gender roles.<sup>13</sup>

None of the interviewed market women handed over her income to a male household head. Only 30 per cent stated that they informed their spouses of how they used or intended to use their incomes; one of them said that she did as she wished without consulting her husband. Though the interviewees said their husbands have competing priorities besides the well-being of their household members (such as going out to eat and to drink with friends and spending on clothes), generally they did not see major conflicts between their own and their husbands' interests. Both were,

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13. For example, in rural Sri Lanka, when Schrijvers — a female researcher — conducted interviews with women in the presence of men, it was suggested that men were the heads of households and the 'owners' of their wives. Ploughing was the exclusive domain of men and women did not know how to plough. However, when Schrijvers approached a woman informally where no men were present, the latter told her 'men were like dogs, they walk off, piss everywhere and come home only when hungry' (pers. comm. Joke Schrijvers, 10 March 2000). In this study, the interviews were conducted in settings where no men were present and by a person who is known to the interviewees (I have been working among the refugee population, both in exile and after their return) for nearly two decades. This might have minimized but not necessarily eliminated the risk of eliciting 'orthodox answers'.



according to the interviewees, preoccupied with the well-being of the members of their households.<sup>14</sup> One of the reasons why none of the market women handed over their incomes to the male heads was probably to protect the interests of their household members, especially children and other dependent members. The data suggest that, generally, involvement in income-earning activities seems to augment the status and autonomy of women within their households. The results show that the interviewees exercised full control over their earnings, although none of the partnered women went as far as regarding themselves as heads of their households. However, in the households where women were breadwinners, male headship was not accompanied by sole control over powers of decision-making and household resources.

## POVERTY AND FEMALE HEADSHIP

An important question in the context of this research is whether female-headed households should be considered poverty-stricken *per se*. Since FHHs are as heterogeneous as male-headed households, as we shall see below, this question is inextricably linked to the question of whether women constitute a distinct social category in development planning and policy research. Though development planning is permeated with a number of stereotypes, there is no doubt that the gendered roles which women play, the lower values and meanings societies give to such roles, and the need to eliminate these conditions, call for gender-focused development planning (Moser, 1993). The goal of gender-focused development planning is to initiate a process that would free women from their position of subordination, for instance by meeting their practical and strategic needs (*ibid.*). Some aspects of the development process also exacerbate women's subordination (Benaria and Sen, 1982; Boserup, 1970; Kabeer, 1997). In many places, women play a key role in agricultural production,<sup>15</sup> yet they face social, institutional and legal barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against them (Agarwal, 1994; Kandiyoti, 1985). These barriers are manifested in a variety of ways and may vary from one cultural and social setting to another. However, there is evidence to suggest that in some developing countries, in comparison to men, women have weaker land rights, possess less farm equipment, have less access to technical assistance (extension

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14. This again may not reflect their true feeling because they clearly stated in another context that their husbands had competing demands on their incomes.

15. The main exceptions are some Moslem societies in which women are prohibited from participating in farm work outside the households' compounds. In fact my own research among such groups in rural Sudan show that even here, there is a socio-economic threshold beyond which these prohibitions lose their significance. Among the poorest of the poor, women's participation in farm work was a norm rather than an exception.

service) and to credit, and possess lower levels of education and skills (Moser, 1993; NUEW, 1999; Quisumbing et al., 1995; Rosenhouse, 1989). For example, in Kenya in 1989, the average plots of cultivated land held by male-headed and female-headed households were 2.6 and 1.7 ha, respectively. Other countries show a similar disparity: for Nigeria in 1989 the corresponding figures were 2.6 and 0.8 ha, respectively; for Zambia (1986), 2.7 and 1.2 ha, respectively. For El Salvador the figures for co-operative members (1988) were 0.78 and 0.49 ha, respectively; for tenant beneficiaries of land reform programmes, the corresponding figures were 1.91 and 1.81 ha, respectively (Quisumbing et al., 1995: Table 1). Available data on extension services also point in the same direction. For example, in Kenya (1989), among the families visited by extension workers, twelve were male-headed households and nine were female-headed. The corresponding figures for Nigeria (1989) were thirty-seven and twenty-two, respectively; for Tanzania (1984), forty and twenty-eight; and for Zambia (1986), sixty and nineteen (ibid.: Table 2). Among most of the Eritrean ethno-linguistic groups, ownership and control over farm equipment is gendered, and almost exclusively male. In societies where women participate in farm work, *ceteris paribus*, there may be fewer workers in female-headed households than male-headed households.

If women are generally disadvantaged by comparison with men, there may be sound rationales for targeting female-headed households in poverty-alleviation programmes. However, the reality on the ground is less clear-cut, and a number of studies have argued that female headship cannot be equated with poverty (Appleton, 1996; Chant, 1997; Kennedy, 1992; Kennedy and Haddad, 1994; Rogers, 1995; Varley, 1996). Since female-headed households are not homogeneous, it is important to adopt a differentiated approach in poverty-alleviation programmes. It is also important to recognize that in societies where generalized deprivation is a way of life, poverty may be gender-blind.

During the last two decades, studies on female headship have burgeoned (see Appleton, 1996; Buvinic and Youseff, 1978; Chant, 1997; Kennedy, 1992; Kennedy and Haddad, 1994; Moser, 1993; Rogers, 1995; Rosenhouse, 1989; Varley, 1996; Youssef and Hetler, 1983). This surge of interest in female-headship, has been prompted, *inter alia*, by a number of assumptions. One is that female-headed households are particularly vulnerable and that children belonging to such households may suffer deprivation and experience 'lower educational and health outcomes which may limit their future choices as adults' (Handa, 1994; see also Rogers, 1995). Consequently, policy-oriented research has been calling for anti-poverty interventions that target female headship (Buvinic and Gupta, 1993). A second assumption is that female-headed households manage their resources differently because they prioritize the well-being of their household members and are likely to allocate their resources to basic needs such as food and health care (Kennedy and Peters, 1992; Rogers, 1995).

Although the data elicited from market women in Tessenei suggest this to be the case among the returnee populations, this question is not examined further in the present study.

The relationship between female headship and poverty is, however, a contested field. Two trends are discernible in the literature. Some authors argue that FHHs are poorer than male headed households (MHHs), that they often belong to and are over-represented within the category of the 'poorest of the poor' (Acosta-Belen and Bose, 1995; Bunivic and Gupta, 1993; Buvinic and Youseff, 1978; Kumari, 1989; Merrick and Schmink, 1983; Moghadam, 1996; Paolisso and Gammage, 1996). Drawing on a case study from rural India, for instance, Kumari (1989: 3) states that FHHs 'form the last of the chains in the process of feminisation of poverty'. It is further argued that FHHs should be treated as a separate category and be given special attention in development plans. Failure to do so 'would deprive a sizeable section of the oppressed lot from the benefits of development. It would also frustrate any social aims of reducing social and income inequalities' (ibid.). Although the reality on the ground is more complicated, there is a tendency to assume that FHHs are more subject to economic stress than joint or MHHs (Rogers, 1995).

The assumption that female headship automatically implies poverty has been challenged by a number of empirical studies (for some of these studies see Appleton, 1996; Chant, 1997; Handa, 1994; Kennedy, 1992; Kennedy and Peters, 1992; Rogers, 1995). None of these studies denies the possible existence of a relationship between poverty and female-headship, but they do suggest that since female-headed households are not homogeneous; whether a particular female-headed household belongs to the 'poorest of the poor' is an empirical question, which cannot be determined *a priori*. The findings of our case study are consistent with this. The question of whether a given FHH is poor and hence worthy of being targeted in poverty-alleviation programmes cannot be determined in isolation from a number of other considerations. Though there may be regional variations,<sup>16</sup> these are essentially: (i) the socio-economic position, that is, ownership or possession of physical and financial assets and human capital (skills for employment or self-employment) prior to the change (if there has been any change) of headship; (ii) the processes that cause female headship;<sup>17</sup> and (iii) the

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16. The importance of recognizing regional variations was pointed out to me by an anonymous referee and I am grateful for her/his suggestion.

17. The causes of female headship are varied and may include marital breakdown, rural-urban migration of men, unmarried women bearing children (single mothers), death of spouse, separation, desertion; breakdown of tradition which formerly absorbed or re-absorbed widowed and divorced women. In some societies, the inability or unwillingness of male heads to contribute to their households' maintenance may result in change of headship. As described above, we came across a number of households in our case study that were maintained by female members, but as long as there were male members, the latter were still considered the heads of the households concerned.

availability (or lack) of social support networks or fallback positions. These issues are discussed below using the case study material.

The findings of the case study clearly indicate that gender of household head is not an appropriate method of identifying poor households among the returnees. Female headship is only one of many variables that need to be considered in the process of identifying poor households. However, it is common practice among well-meaning governments and aid agencies to assume that female-headed households constitute the 'poorest of the poor' and to target them in poverty-alleviation programmes. The response of donors and aid agencies to the repatriation programme in Eritrea was no exception. USAID, the British Government (ODA, now DFID), OXFAM UK and Ireland, and Christian Aid were among the major contributors to the Agriculture and Livestock programme of the PROFERI Pilot Project. One of the objectives of this programme was 'to provide tractor services to female-headed households settling in the lowlands and to cover a one year ploughing cost necessary to assist the female-headed households to be settled in the highlands' (Grant Agreement between the US Government and Government of Eritrea, 17 September 1994).<sup>18</sup> FHHs were the only category targeted for this special attention. Other disadvantaged groups, such as households headed by aged and disabled males without adult offspring were not targeted as people with special needs. Nor was any distinction made between FHHs: all were considered equally vulnerable.

The findings of this case study show that a differential approach to relief and development intervention is essential. As mentioned earlier, a considerable proportion of the reported female-headed households among the returnees had left their male members behind in Sudan. Is it appropriate to characterize these *de facto* female-headed households as poor? Although not true of all cases, many of these FHHs with male members in Sudan are better off — some are even better off than many MHHs in the areas of return — as a result of the regular remittances received from absent spouses. The male household members themselves often receive rations in the refugee camps in Sudan and at the same time participate in diverse income-generating activities, especially wage employment. In most cases, their subsistence need is met by the international refugee support system, enabling the men to send most of their incomes as remittances to their families across the border. Since some of these men are skilled, their earnings are relatively high and the remittances transferred to their families are also substantial. There were also a number of families whose male or female members were in one of the Gulf

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18. See also the understanding between the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (CERA) and the Ministry of Agriculture, on the one hand, and Christian Aid and OXFAM UK and Ireland on the other, for Financial Support for the Agriculture Component of the First Phase of PROFERI. Between November 1994 and June 1995, 24,386 refugees returned from Sudan under a PROFERI Pilot Project (see Kibreab, 1999).

States: some of these households received substantial remittances (measured by local standards). Having a household member in the Gulf States does not automatically mean access to remittances, of course: this depends on whether the migrants are employed, whether they have other competing demands on their incomes, and whether they choose to remit. But data elicited from key informants suggest that the better-off families, including FHHs, were the ones who had one or more of their members in such countries. There are also some female-headed households that are socially cushioned or protected by their own relatives or by their ex-husbands' kin.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the FHHs among the returnees have a number of older male children; their access to family labour and to diversified bases of incomes are often greater than those of MHHs without older children. In the semi-arid areas where the returnees are resettled, diversification of livelihood strategies is the foundation of economic security. Thus, such FHHs were more food secure than the other households. Clearly, then, it does not make sense to classify such FHHs as vulnerable simply because a male spouse is absent. In some households, the male head may be a liability rather than an asset to the households concerned. We came across a number of MHHs in which female members met the households' material needs either because the male spouse was too old,<sup>20</sup> too ill, disabled or unemployed. A few male spouses were also drunkards. In Tessenei town, a female key informant among the self-employed women said that on top of meeting her family's subsistence needs, she had to provide for her husband's alcohol consumption and had to put up with his abusive behaviour. There were also some MHHs in which neither the husband nor the wife engaged in income-generating activities because they were either too old or were physically disabled. Their vulnerability was caused by the conditions that rendered them unable to work, not by the identity of the household head.

Among groups where women are culturally prohibited from participating in agricultural labour, there is an economic threshold beyond which these cultural norms are ignored: households living on the edge of survival cannot afford to comply with such constraints at the cost of their subsistence security. Among the returnees, the only households that restrict female participation in income-earning activities are those with the means to compensate for the loss of their female members' labour time. However, for FHHs among the poor returnee households — unless there are mitigating circumstances such as the presence of older children (girls and boys), or access to non-household members' labour time, or remittances — being female-headed may imply having less access to family labour.

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19. Only widows with children could count on support from their ex-husbands' kin. In fact with the weakening of tradition that resulted from (among other things) displacement and poverty, this form of support is now available to only a few FHHs (Cole et al., 1992).

20. It is common among some of the returnee culture groups for old men to marry young girls, who end up becoming their carers.

### Communal Clearing of Land for Cultivation

The returnee populations' perception of their own vulnerability was different from that of the government and aid agencies. The former had a clear opinion of what constituted vulnerability, and female headship was only one of the many possible causes. The land on which many of the returning refugees were settled had been uninhabited for several decades and was covered with thick savannah vegetation such as acacia and other tree species. According to formal government policy, women are entitled to equal land rights with men (1994 Land Act). Each returnee household regardless of headship composition was allocated 2 ha of cultivable land. With female-headed households expected to face difficulties in clearing their holdings — based on the assumption that they lacked family labour or the means to hire labourers — Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), the implementing agency of the agricultural component of PROFERI, decided that all land should be cleared communally. As an incentive, the MoA in the local government in Gash Setit decided to abandon the targeting of the tractor service (mentioned above), making the tractor available to all households regardless of headship and socio-economic status.

The decision was welcomed by the representatives of the returnees, who were invariably men. Although the attraction for them was the tractor hire service, and not the communal clearing, the two came as an indivisible package which was accepted by the representatives as a means of gaining access to tractor services. In fact, the MHHs did not accept the idea of communal clearing, but opposing it openly would have meant losing access to tractor services. In reality, the response of the communities to communal land clearing was so sluggish that by the end of the third cultivation season, it was declared a complete failure and was consequently abandoned, except for one reintegration site (Ad Ibrahim). However, in another of the re-integration sites, Gergef, the villagers organized themselves into forty-eight units comprising fifteen households each, of which three households were from the most vulnerable groups selected according to the villagers' own criteria. Vulnerability was determined on the basis of need rather than headship. Each unit cleared 6 ha collectively, and the 288 ha were allocated to 144 households, which were identified by the villagers as being most vulnerable. Although some of those who received the cleared land were FHHs, recipients represented the most vulnerable families regardless of headship.

According to information elicited from representatives of the returnees in the reintegration sites,<sup>21</sup> the main reason for the failure of communal land clearing was that many of the FHHs who would have benefited from these efforts were not perceived to deserve it. Some of them (especially those

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21. These data were collected as part of the on-going research project mentioned above.

whose male spouses had stayed behind in Sudan either to work for wages or to look after their livestock) were considered better off than the rest of the returnees, including the MHHs. A number of male and female interviewees argued: 'it was quite unfair that the government expected us to clear land belonging to women who are in receipt of substantial remittances and who can afford to hire most of us'. It is interesting to note that though the fairness or the rationale underlying the decision of communal clearing was considered deeply unjust, the representatives of the communities did not bring this to the attention of the MoA field staff. They did not want to 'betray' members of their communities by passing on such information. This may suggest that, in identifying the poorest of the poor among the returnees, their representatives should be involved, but the decision should not necessarily be left entirely to them.

## CONCLUSION

This article has raised a number of points which have implications for some commonly-held assumptions. Firstly, the proportion of female-headed households among the returning refugee population cannot be determined on the basis of data derived from the registry at the reception centres. Many households which registered at the time of repatriation as female-headed are in reality male-headed or jointly headed in the areas of return. Although headship among the Eritrean returnees is a cultural construction and is thus variable, generally it is not the extent of economic contribution made by household members that determines headship. In most cases, the male spouse — or, in his absence, the eldest son — is regarded as the head. Married women and those with older male children who meet the material needs of their households are not formally regarded as household heads, although their involvement in income-generating activities has clearly enhanced their decision-making power with regard to household finances and other resources.

Secondly, among the returnees, household headship is not an appropriate method for identifying the poor. As the data presented here illustrate, there is an enormous degree of differentiation among FHHs, in terms of possession of assets, access to family labour, social support networks and remittances. In fact, some of the FHHs are better off than MHHs in the areas of return, especially those *de facto* FHHs whose male spouses stayed behind in Sudan. Similarly, the *de jure* FHHs are differentiated, for instance in terms of their access to family labour for productive and reproductive activities. Some of the female heads are elderly or disabled, breastfeeding or mothers of young children; others are strong and able-bodied without dependants, and their productivity may equal, or exceed, that of men. Even among the elderly, the disabled and the breastfeeding mothers, there may be differences in access to family labour — there might, for instance, be resident older

children who perform all or most of the work required for production and income-generation.

Not all female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households, yet at present all FHHs — regardless of their socio-economic position, composition, structure and so forth — are labelled vulnerable, automatically qualifying them for targeted relief and rehabilitation assistance. This leads to the third point, that targeting of emergency aid and/or development assistance on the basis of headship, at least in the case of the returnee population, is misguided. The approach that conceives all FHHs as being vulnerable and deserving special attention also has other negative implications: it makes no allowance for women to choose to be single mothers or to remain unpartnered during part or all of their lives, without being labelled ‘vulnerable’.

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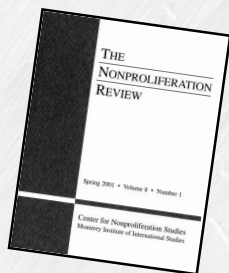
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