

# THE DEBATE ABOUT HOUSEHOLD HEADSHIP<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

*“The term head of household is used to cover a number of different concepts referring to the chief economic provider, the chief decision maker, the person designated by other members as the head, etc. The focus changes depending on the specific circumstances of the country. Generally, the definition of head of household reflects the stereotype of the man in the household as the person in authority and the bread winner. And even where the definition is adequate, criteria used by interviewers are often vague and leave room for subjective interpretation (Hedman et al, 1996:64).*

An INSTRAW publication refers to a 1973 United Nations review of national population censuses which found that there were:

- “...essentially three different types of headship definition:*
- a) Self-definition, that is classifying as the head of the household the person who nominates himself or herself as the head, or who is designated by other household members;*
  - b) Identification of the person in authority, that is, the person who controls the maintenance of the household and exercises the authority to run the households;*
  - c) Identification of the economic supporter of the household, that is, the chief earner or the main supporter of the household’s economy” (DIESA, 1988:53).*

The review went on to note that “more countries reported data on household heads than provided definitions of the head of the household” (DIESA, 1988:53).

INSTRAW notes the ambiguity of each of the three definitions, and the necessity for rules to avoid such ambiguity if the concept is to be useful. Their suggestion is to take the oldest adult resident male as the head, or, in the absence of an adult male, the oldest adult female. They do not explain the reason for this explicit gender bias. They do, however, acknowledge that the term ‘household head’ “may not be the ideal term to use for this individual” and suggest ‘household reference person’ as a more “appropriate” nomenclature (DIESA, 1988:54). INSTRAW’s rather timid line on the subject is surprising given their acknowledgement that the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women advocated the elimination of the term ‘head of household’ (DIESA, 1988:57).

A World Bank publication is more forthright in its criticism of the concept of household head:

*“The most serious problem with the use of the concept of headship ... has to do with the assumptions it carries. The term assumes that a*

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*hierarchical relationship exists between household members and that the head is the most important member; that the head is a regular presence in the home; has overriding authority in important household decision matters; and, provides a consistent and central economic support... The common practice among survey researchers and analysts to impute the characteristics of the head to the household only serves to aggravate the problem. In doing this, researchers tacitly assume that the head's information is the most important..."* (Rosenhouse, 1989:4).

Hedman *et al* make the further point that the use of the household head as household classifier ignores the fact that "(m)embers of the same household may have different socio-economic characteristics and may not equally share resources and responsibilities" (Hedman *et al*, 1996:72).

Most of the above quotes focus on conceptual aspects - the question of what one is trying to measure. But in practice there is often a further disjuncture between what one is attempting to measure and the way in which the definition is operationalised. There is further confusion when analysts assume that a certain thing is being measured, while it is interpreted in a different way by respondents, interviewers, other analysts, readers of the analysis, and those who make policy on the basis of the analysis.

### **Why the concern with woman-headed households?**

Much of the interest in household headship arises because of perceived differences between households headed by women and those headed by men. Worldwide woman-headed households have become a cause for concern, and are perceived as a category which is 'vulnerable'. Thus Buijs and Atherfold write that "(i)nterest in and concern about households and families largely or solely supported by women is not only theoretically significant but is directly related to some of the major economic and policy issues confronting developing countries today" (1995: 1). O'Laughlin makes a similar point, but somewhat more cynically, when she remarks that woman-headed households "became one of the elements of the much repeated litany of the 'structural poor' - the aged, the inform, women-headed households - considered to be appropriate objects of targeted welfare assistance under programmes concerned with the social dimensions of adjustment" (1996:2).

Further, from the point of view of analysis, the focus on woman-headed households has, at least in part, arisen because of the interest in gender disaggregation combined with the difficulty in individualising most household data. Woman-headed households have been used as a proxy for the missing gender breakdowns.

The quotations in the introduction raise some conceptual questions about the concept of household head and, by extension, the concept of a woman-headed household. In recent years there has also been some debate over the unquestioning use of the concept as an indicator of vulnerability on empirical ground. In Jamaica, for example, Caroline Moser found that woman-headed households were less poor than the average household (personal communication). Kennedy and Haddad found that in Ghana and Kenya, while woman-headed households were poorer in income terms, malnutrition was sometimes more severe among pre-schoolers in male-headed households (1994:693-4). Even nearer home, research in both Malawi and Lesotho has revealed

that *de facto* woman-headed households where a husband is a migrant worker in South Africa are better off than the average male-headed household (O'Laughlin, 1996:10).

Nevertheless, overall woman-headed households *are* often poorer than other households. In South Africa, in particular, analysis of the data from South Africa's Income and Expenditure Survey of October 1995 confirms that the expected pattern holds here. A simple calculation of mean monthly earned income from wages, salaries and self-employment reveals that households said to be headed by women earned less than a third (R1 178) of the amount earned by those headed by men (R3 767). The disparity is explained by fewer earners per household despite similar household size, a greater proportion of earners in self-employment rather than earning wages or salaries, and the generally lower earnings of those women fortunate enough to have an income.

Further, many people claim that the 'problem' is on the increase in South Africa. The Bureau of Market Research recorded an increase in the percentage of woman-headed households in the Witwatersrand from 14% in 1962 to 29% in 1985. In 1985, they said, 25% of all children and 20% of adults were living in such households (Buijs & Atherfold, 1995: 2). Using the 1993 PSLSD data, Pieter le Roux calculated that 12% of African families had the mother as only adult (Le Roux, 1994). And in 1996 Market Research Africa reported that women 'living on their own' [more precisely, those without a male partner in the home] accounted for more than half of all urban township households, up from 36% in 1975. They said this was "due almost entirely to an increase in women who have never married" (*Financial Mail*, 15.03.96:89). It must be noted, however, that in this survey the women to be interviewed in each household was chosen by random selection, and therefore, even if she was without a male partner, this did not mean that she was head of the household as a whole.

One can, perhaps, question some of these figures as Varley has done with high reported incidence in other countries (1996: 508). More importantly, one must question the homogeneity implied by the blanket use of the term 'woman-headed'. As with the grouping 'women', the category needs to be unpacked if one is to understand the patterns of vulnerability and their causes, so as to design appropriate policies to address them.

Several South African analyses have attempted such breakdowns and found interesting differences between sub-groups. So, for example, using PSLSD data Dori Posel found significant differences between (a) households headed by women who were partnered and where both partners were in the household; (b) woman-headed households where the partner was absent; (c) woman-headed households where the woman was not married (the largest group, at 54%); and (d) woman-headed households where the woman head was absent.

Libby Ardington and Francie Lund, with a 1992 KwaZulu sample of 5 293 households, distinguished between rural and urban households, and those headed by older and younger women. They found few of the expected differences between woman-headed households and others, and significant differences between different sub-groups of woman-headed. They conclude that treating woman-headed households as homogeneous was "unhelpful" in that it concealed these important intra-group differences (Ardington & Lund, 1995: 8-9).

Further it seems that this type of disaggregation cannot always be carried over from one context to another, as it is not always the same types of female-headed household which are vulnerable in different regions, countries, or even perhaps within a single country. At the inter-regional level Lockwood and Baden note, for example, that it is those with dependent children who are poorest in Latin America, while widows seem more at risk in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia ( Lockwood and Baden, 1995:1).

### **Practice at Central Statistical Service**

At present the enumerator's manual for the October Household Survey (OHS), like the manual for the 1996 census, states that a "head of household can either be male or female, and is the person who assumes responsibility for the household". The manual does not specify responsibility *in respect of what*. In conversation it appears that many people within Central Statistical Service (CSS) understand that it will be interpreted as economic responsibility.

The enumerator is told to let the respondent decide who is the household head. CSS staff argue that, as in the case of 'race', the concept may be fuzzy or 'unscientific', but most respondents will 'know' what one is talking about. It is, however, not clear that the enumerators and respondents make the same assumptions as CSS researchers and analysts.

The CSS approach does not take into account how different sociological, cultural and other groupings within a society might understand household head, even less how different individuals within such groupings might understand it, or how individuals within different household forms might understand it. Often there might well be a link between the respondent's understanding and economics, but this is not guaranteed. To give but one example, in many African cultures the household head will be the oldest male. In a multi-generational household, he will often not be the highest income-earner, or even control the resources of the household. Ideologically, and in terms of respect, he is the 'head'. But to say he is the economic head would be incorrect.

The 'race' analogy is also weak. While 'race' might have no basis in natural science, it had a very real legal and practical meaning in apartheid South Africa. For better or worse (and the latter for the majority!), everyone was placed in a racial category. Before the reform to the marital laws one could argue that within married couples the law also distinguished a (male) household head. The problem here is that (a) marital power was abolished some time before racial classification; (b) its effects were less noticeable (although arguably as disempowering) in day to day activities; and (c) we cannot assume that the majority of households will contain a single married couple to be used in classification.

### **The approach in other countries**

The UN review referred to above was conducted in 1972. In order to find out whether there had been any changes - in particular given the recommendation of the Nairobi Forward-looking strategies - I initiated an email discussion as to the approach adopted in other countries. Given the bias in email usage, the responses reflect the situation in the more developed rather than developing countries. One could argue, however, that

if these countries - where a single nuclear family is far more common than in third world countries, and where culture is often relatively homogeneous - have found it necessary to institute changes, it should be even more pressing in countries like South Africa.

### **United States of America**

Before 1980 the US census automatically designated the man in a married couple as head, regardless of his relative earnings or the desire or perceptions of the respondents. In 1980, after two decades of campaigning by the women's movement, the concept of 'household head' was discarded.

Professor Barbara Bergmann, of American University in Washington, was a member of the American Economic Association's advisory committee to the Census Bureau in the period leading up to the 1980 census. Prior to the 1970 census, and as a result of agitation by the National Organisation for Women, the Census Bureau conducted a survey about people's ideas on head of household. They found that the majority did not designate the husband. Many said that both the wife and husband were the head.

The AEA advisory committee included what Bergman terms 'conservatives', but was nevertheless willing to pass a resolution to make the change. The Census Bureau was, however, very upset and far less willing. One of their top officials accused Bergmann at a committee meeting of 'wrecking' the 1980 census!

Further pressure from organisations such as Social Scientists in Population Research, including pressure on representatives who were members of the Budget Committee, eventually resulted in a change. The Bureau still wanted to have one person designated in each household, so that the household as a whole could be classified according to that person's age, gender, education, etc. What they came up with to solve this problem is the concept of the 'householder' - the person, or one of the persons, in whose name the dwelling unit is owned or rented. This approach is discussed in more detail below.

On a cautionary note, it must be added that Bergman has observed that many social scientists are still using the term 'head of household', despite its official 'demise'.

### **New Zealand**

In the New Zealand census one person fills in the dwelling form. The 1996 form stated that: "In every dwelling, one person must take responsibility for this form. An adult who lives here would be best, but any person can be the one...." The form then asks how many people live in the dwelling, and the relationship of each individual to the person filling out the dwelling form. Later on it asks if any person living in the dwelling owns it. It does not, however, ask which individual is the owner.

The New Zealand approach will generate a 'reference person'. It will not generate a 'household head' nor a 'householder' and is much more explicit than most approaches that it is not generating such a person.

The 'reference person' allows for the elaboration of some family relationships and forms, and there is reportedly great interest in New Zealand in analysing the workings

of families and households. Nevertheless, their approach does not cater for those households where certain individuals are related to one or more people in the household, but *not* related to the person completing the form. It will also not uncover extended families (again a term which implicitly assumes the nuclear family as a norm) who live in more than one dwelling. The census form does, however, ask that respondents add the names of people who usually live in the household but are away on census night, as well as their relationship to the person filling in the dwelling form. Household and family form are also discussed in more detail below.

### **Australia**

Australia is currently reviewing the use of the term head of household. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) feels it is “not really socially relevant” (personally communication). The term is also reported to be unpopular with both respondents and interviewers. The Bureau will replace the concept if they can find an alternative way to identify a suitable household reference person for the collection of “good quality relationship data” as, like in New Zealand, there is great interest in the issue of family form.

At present, where ABS uses head of household, the interviewers’ manual read as follows:

*“The head of the household must be a member of the household and is, in order of precedence, the person who:*

- owns the household accommodation, or*
- is responsible for the rent of the household accommodation, or*
- has the household accommodation as an allowance (entitlement) etc,*  
*or*
- has the household accommodation by virtue of some relationship to the owner, lessee, etc who is not a member of the household.*
- If two or more persons have equal claim to be head of the household, or if people state that they are joint heads or that the household has no head, then denote the eldest as head.”*

The definition is thus of the ‘householder’ type. However, the form does not allow for the recording of which of the five definitions is applicable in a particular household. Perhaps partly as a result of this omission, and despite the formal and clear instructions, an ABS informant said that in practice they “suspect the respondent simply chooses someone and the interviewer accepts this”.

As in other countries, the typical Australian survey goes on to ask about the relationship of each individual member to the household head. In addition, to cater for members who have no relationship to the household head, but are related to another member of the household, ABS has a second relationship column. The interviewers’ manual instructs as follows:

*“In the right hand part of the column [second column] relationships should be shown which indicate the family structure within the household, unless it is quite clear from the relationships shown in the left part of the column [first column]. Show marriage relationships, relate children directly to their parents, and so on. No more than one relationship*

*usually need be shown in this part of the column for any one person, and it should be as direct as possible. In cases such as the head's wife, children or mother, for example, it is not necessary to make an entry in the right hand part of the column."*

Having the second column as optional rather than compulsory must almost certainly result in some loss of potential information. The fact that the ABS does not define a hierarchy of relationships could also mean that different relationships are specified in the second column in respect of similarly placed individuals - for example one might be described as a spouse and another as a child or parent of a non-reference person member. Nevertheless, the ABS approach should minimise the number of seemingly 'unrelated' individuals within a household.

While Australia still frequently uses 'head of household' in survey operations, the concept is rarely used in reporting. The ABS's *Standards for Statistics on the Family* notes explicitly that "the term head of household should only be used at the data collection phase and not in statistical output as it is sometimes considered to be inappropriately value-laden" (McLennan, 1995:15). In reports the more commonly used concepts and variables are relationship within the household at the individual level, and family type at the family level. *Standards for Statistics on the Family* provides detailed instructions as to how the different relationships and types are defined, and the possible levels of classification and detail.

### **United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom, like the United States and Australia, bases the definition of household head (or 'householder) on ownership or control of the dwelling. In the United Kingdom, however, the definition has a sexist sting in its tail, as the head is described as the person who exercises such control or ownership "or her husband"!

### **Why do we need the concept of household head?**

#### **Household head as household classifier**

As noted above in the case of the United States, in some cases the need for a household head or 'reference' person is justified by the need to classify households by personal characteristics. Thus, for example, analysts might want to classify households on the basis of the age or educational status of the head or reference person.

As also noted in the quotations in the introduction, however, there are a range of problems with the idea that such classification is either possible or sensible. In practice, the classification is not generally undertaken in South Africa, except on the basis of whether the household is headed by a woman or man. The argument is thus not a strong one here.

To further complicate matters - and render the justification for reporting on the basis of household head even weaker - the OHS allows for cases in which the named head of the household is "an absentee head i.e. he/she does not reside at the visiting point for at least 4 nights a week". In such cases, the enumerator is instructed to record the 'acting head' as person 1. The fact that the 'real' head is absent is recorded on the

questionnaire. The personal characteristics (gender, age, etc) of the 'real' head are, however, not recorded. In such cases classification on the basis of the characteristics of the 'acting head', and conflation with cases where there is a 'real' head present, would make any analysis ambiguous.

### **The 'household'**

The concept of household head begs the question as to what a 'household' is in the first place. Is household a proxy for family unit? If so, what is a 'family' i.e. does it imply blood or kin relationships of some sort? Alternatively, is it defined on common living quarters or shared shelter? Or by sharing a 'common (food) pot'? Or by sharing child-rearing activities? Or by sharing economic resources through income pooling? *Australia's Standards for Statistics on the Family* elaborates at length on the differences between households and families. In South Africa the interview and analysis focuses in on the household level.

The OHS survey allows for multiple households in one 'dwelling' or 'visiting point'. The manual for OHS 1996 defines a household as consisting:

- "of a person or a group of persons who:*
- I. eat together and share resources; and*
  - II. normally resides at least four nights a week at the specific visiting point;*
  - III. for the purposes of this survey, a live-in domestic worker is considered to belong to a separate household."*

All definitions of household (and family) are messy. One problem with this definition is the possibility of multiple household membership by a person who shares the pot in more than one unit. This would include, for example, a polygynous situation when one male shares one wife's pot the one night, another wife's pot the following, and so on.

A second variation is partial membership by a person in a given unit, for example people who work in an urban area, send part of their income ('resources') to a rural area but use the rest to support themselves and perhaps their 'urban family', and have some sort of property rights in either or both of these areas. These people might qualify in one place in terms of the second criterion (residence), but qualify only partially in terms of the first (sharing resources).

Then there is the problem referred to above that the person designated household 'head' is not a member of the household as defined. This would happen in South Africa where, for example, the 'head' is a migrant worker who is not present four days a week, but is named by the respondent. In the literature this phenomenon has been captured by the distinction between 'de jure' and 'de facto' headship. The current OHS copes with the situation by recording details of the head or 'acting head' and, in the latter case, noting that there is an 'absent head'.

In the PSLSD a household was defined as consisting of people (a) who lived under that 'roof' or within the same compound or homestead or stand for at least 15 days out of the past year, *and* (b) who shared food from a common source when they were together, *and* (c) who contributed to, or shared in, a common resource pool.

By taking a longer time period than the OHS, the PSLSD would have captured full demographic and other details of migrant labourers. This approach then also allows for interesting analysis like that done by Dori Posel looking at differences between *de jure* and *de facto* 'female headed' households (Posel, 1994).

The PSLSD approach did not, however, circumvent the central definitional problem of 'household head'. In the PSLSD, as in OHS, the household head was listed as person 1, and - also as in OHS - was definition was left completely to the household. The coding of person 1 did, however, differentiate between those who were resident heads and those who were absent heads. *If* the data were analysed carefully, this would have avoided some of the double counting caused by those people who had spent at least 15 days in several places during the past year.

Finally, on the topic of households, one needs to be careful in any analysis not to assume that individual members benefit equally from household assets. The difficulties of attributing characteristics of a head to the household as a whole were noted above. Per capita and similar calculations as to the benefits enjoyed by individual household members are also potentially misleading. As anthropologists and development practitioners repeatedly note, analysis of individual well-being cannot assume that sharing - either of the contents of the pot and of power more generally - is equal within any given household.

### **Relationships, family and household form**

One of the justifications offered for naming a household head or other reference person is so as to be able to distinguish different family relationships and family forms by asking about every other household member's relationship to the head or reference person.

The South African OHS and census include the question as to the relationship of each individual to the household head. Since 1995 the OHS has followed the PSLSD and gone a step further to also ask whether the mother, father and spouse of each individual is a member of the same household and - if so, which individual this is. Neither the simple relationship questions nor the extended ones appear to have been analysed for the CSS studies. In the case of the PSLSD, however, there has been some further analysis.

Elizabeth Morris-Hughes of the World Bank came up with five types of households in analysing the PSLSD data. In conducting the South African analysis Morris-Hughes found it necessary to depart from the five categories commonly used elsewhere in Africa to capture the range of household structure and marital/common law status i.e. monogamous maleheaded, polygamous, single maleheaded, femaleheaded 'de jure' and femaleheaded 'de facto'. Instead, the five types used in South Africa were:

- Both parties resident (BPR);
- Partner absent (PA);
- Unmarried (U);
- Female head absent (FHA); and
- Male head absent (MHA).

What is noteworthy about this classification is that it still seems to assume a single married couple as the 'normal' household. What is unsatisfactory is that the classification does not reflect households in which there are more than one couple, multiple generations, or other constellations of multiple adults.

Le Roux's calculations using PSLSD data on the prevalence of different family forms suggest that analysis (and policy) in South Africa must cater for a wide multiplicity of forms. His analysis used the questions as to presence of spouse and parents to distinguish between biological groupings and the total 'household'. A (biological) 'family' was defined to include any child who was reported to be living with at least one parent. Those where both parents were present were nuclear, those with only the mother 'female', and those with only the father 'male'. 'Couples' indicated the presence of both spouses, but no children.

Le Roux's summary of household composition by 'families' shown in the table below, with + indicating the presence of one or more of the given type within a household.

**Household composition by families**

Groupings in household	Total	African
No couples or parents	17,5%	19,3%
One+ couple	9,9%	7,4%
One+ male 'family'	1,6%	1,6%
Female 'family'	10,7%	11,5%
Two+ female 'families'	8,2%	10,2%
Fem and male 'families'	1,7%	2,1%
One nuclear	35,2%	30,1%
1 nuclear and 1 female 'family'	8,2%	9,3%
1 nuclear and female+ and male+	4,5%	5,5%
2+ nuclear 'families'	1,5%	1,5%
2+nuclear and female+ and male+	1,0%	1,4%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Le Roux, 1994: 14-5

While the table is complicated, one thing is clear - the simple single nuclear family is far from being the South African norm!

The additional questions as to presence of parents and spouse clearly strengthen possibilities for analysis and understanding of forms. They do not, however, cater for the common situation in South Africa where the relationship is grandparent and grandchild, with the middle generation absent. In OHS 1995 nearly three-quarters (73%) of all children under seven years said to be living with neither parent were reported to be the grandchild of the household head. In those cases where the grandparent was not chosen as household head, this important relationship would have gone unrecorded. In similar fashion, the current questions do not cater for situations where children are fostered with aunts. The possible permutations are endless, both in theory and in practice.

The European harmonised time use study's solution to the relationship question is a grid where each household member's relationship to every other household member is captured. The grid is more extensive and will clearly be more time-consuming to fill in than the current OHS approach because for each member one will have to specify the relationship to every other member. Fortunately, the grid is triangular rather than square, in that it is assumed that specifying the relationship of A to B implicitly provides the relationship of B to A.

What is not tackled even with the grid is different conceptions of relationships. Analysts of marital status are well aware of the pitfalls in trying to determine whether people are married, and if so under civil, customary, or religious law or some mixture of these; of different understandings of 'living together' and 'common law' marriages; and of the difficulty of determining a point in time when marriage can be said to have occurred where marriage is perceived as a drawn-out process rather than a single event.

There are further terminological difficulties. When, for example, is a cousin-brother a cousin and when a brother? Further, to add to the complication, cultural, linguistic and other differences in interpretation are not necessarily symmetrical. For example, it is possible that the term 'mother' may be understood in a narrower biological sense than the apparent obverse 'child'. Responses in OHS 1995 to the questions as to whether the mother of an individual was present in a household, and the relationship of that individual to the household head, lend some weight to this possibility. In that survey 12% of children under seven years who were recorded as living with neither their mother or father were nevertheless recorded to be the child of the household head. The number of individuals in this seemingly anomalous position is significant, given that 12% of all children under seven years were not living with either parent.

Russel, in her study of Swaziland, notes that some scholars are doubtful as to either the possibility or usefulness of compacting the diversity of "African experience and structure into one simple paradigm" (1993). While the point about diversity is true, it is nevertheless important to find some practical way of implementing meaningful surveys, interpreting them, and allowing those interpretations to inform social policy.

### **The dominant approaches to household headship**

This section looks at the main approaches identified above in more detail. It focuses on problems that might be encountered in using the approaches in South Africa, and in particular households that would not fit easily into the categorisation.

#### **The 'householder'**

The householder - the person in whose name the dwelling is rented or owned - is one that is used in several of the developed countries. It is an interesting approach, perhaps particularly for somewhat poorer countries, in that the dwelling will be the most important single asset for the majority of households.

Nevertheless, there are a number of situations where the householder approach might present difficulties. In particular, there are several situations where the householder might not be a member of the household:

- polygyny - with one man who is householder in several households;

- migrant labour - where the male householder is not a member of the household because he is absent much of the time;
- situations - for example with streetless people or nomads - where there is no dwelling;
- a situation where students are living in a dwelling which is owned by the father of one of them;
- other situations where the dwelling belongs to a person, not living in the dwelling, but who allows the household to use it because of kinship or other ties;
- a farmworker household which has access to housing on the farm because they work there, but where the householder is the farmer employer (This will not be as much of a problem if the contract is signed with one member - usually the man - in the household);
- a wealthier household, where the house is registered in the wife's name to protect the household against bankruptcy of the husband's business, rather than because the wife has greater control over resources; and
- joint, or even communal, ownership

Australia provides a way out in providing that where there is no dwelling-defined householder, the oldest member of the household becomes the reference person. Of concern is that one cannot determine in how many cases - or which cases - the fall-back position was adopted. A more useful variation would be for the response to specify not only who the householder is, but also at which level (on the basis of which classification) the person was designated. This variation would also provide a test as to whether the approach was useful or whether too many householders had to be designated by the fall-back position.

### **Economic definitions**

Given the suspicion that woman-headed households are often poorer than other households, many investigations focus on the economic. As noted above in respect of CSS, even where the focus is not specifically woman-headed households, headship is often assumed to imply economic dominance.

Within the broad ambit of economic dominance, there are a range of different measurements. For example, head of household could be defined on the basis of:

- property ownership (more or less analogous to the 'householder');
- primary income provider within the household unit; and
- control or decision-making power on income and resource use and distribution.

Classifications based on the above three definitions or approaches would almost certainly overlap, but would not be identical.

Rosenhouse's (1995) paper for the World Bank, in line with the Bank's concern about poverty, attempts to develop an alternative 'economic' definition of household head to the self-definition generally used in the Bank's Living Standards Measurements Studies.

Rosenhouse notes that although the conventional definition of headship usually finds that woman-headed households are at an economic disadvantage, this is primarily

because the women who head them are widowed, separated or divorced and unable to provide significant economic support to their households.

Rosenhouse's alternative of 'working head' is defined as the person within the household who, over the previous twelve month period, worked the greatest proportion of hours. She argues that the 'working head' definition is more useful in terms of policy in that it "helps investigators identify more clearly women supporting households in extreme circumstances than does the idea of the reported head, because it draws attention to the overall disadvantage of female heads: the lower return on their market hours of work and the overall work burden they carry to attain a given level of consumption for their household" (Rosenhouse, 1989:v). Taking the policy point further, she argues that: "Given the target-group strategy adopted by international donors in the late 1970s to combat poverty in a more direct manner, it is crucial that the target groups identified be in fact those which are most vulnerable to economic hardship, and that the household member(s) selected to be recipients of interventions be those who will bring most benefit to the household" (Rosenhouse, 1989:1).

Several problems with the application of Rosenhouse's concept in the South African context are immediately apparent, even if one accepts the purely economic focus. Firstly, in applying the concept to Peruvian data she was forced to exclude a number of households where there were no workers, or where there was incomplete work information. In her case the numbers did not seem substantial. In the South African context, in the 1993 PSLSD over a quarter (26%) of all households reported that none of their members were in wage work or self-employed. Half of all households in the bottom quintile and close on a third (32%) of all African households were in this position and would have to be excluded in Rosenhouse-type classification (Calculations by Ingrid Woolard).

Secondly, and related, Rosenhouse explicitly concentrates on income derived as a result of effort. Her definition would exclude from headship those who bring in income through other means, for example a pension or remittances. While these people might not be seen as having 'earned' income in the same way, these other forms of income might well give them significant control and power within households. In the PSLSD 29% of households in the bottom quintile had social pensions as their primary source of income, while remittances were the primary source for a further 18% (RDP, 1995:15).

Thirdly, and conversely, Rosenhouse explicitly excludes unpaid domestic work, although she observes that in "the case of households maintained by women's work, it is also important to account for hours of housework in order to have a more realistic measure of the dual burden borne by the female worker" (Rosenhouse, 1989:7). (She also does not mention unpaid - or subsistence - agricultural work.) It is unclear why this burden is not taken into account in households which are not 'maintained' by women's work, and where the housework burden could, in fact, well be restricting the extent to which women contribute to the (cash) maintenance.

Finally, Rosenhouse herself notes that analysis only on the basis of working headship excludes the contributions by other members of the household. She therefore takes her Peruvian analysis further by categorising households into single, joint and multiple

earner households. Similarly, researchers in Botswana remarked “that it was not so much the gender of the head that mattered for poverty concerns, but how many adults of prime working age contributed to household income” (O’Laughlin, 1996:10). This type of analysis will, in most cases, not require additional questions in a survey. To take gender discrimination and disparities in earnings into account, a simple counting of the number of earners in a household could be extended to differentiate the number of male and female adult contributors to household income.

Other economic analyses avoid some of these pitfalls by adopting a wider definition of income than only that from wage work or self employment. These analyses are based, instead, on the amount of money brought into the household by different individuals, whatever the source of that income. So, for example, Varley describes ‘woman-maintained’ households as those where the woman is the main ‘supporter’ or chief earner (Varley, 1996:506;508). At the more practical level, Buvinic and Gupta argue that targeting based on a ‘woman-maintained’ definition can avoid some of the pitfalls encountered when using a simpler ‘woman-headed’ definition. In particular, it will allow programmes to reach poor woman-maintained households, which are classified as male-headed on the basis of male authority, rather than male income (quoted in O’Laughlin, 1996:3).

### **Presence of adult men**

Several analysts remark on the asymmetry in the concept of woman-headed households in that according to many definitions a woman-headed household is one without adult men, while a man-headed household may contain adult women (see, for example, Rogers, 1995:2034). This asymmetry extends beyond analysis to policy. So, for example, the Departments of Land Affairs and Housing are developing gender indicators of the impact of their subsidy and other policies. In practice, the Departments end up recording beneficiary households as woman-headed only where there is no adult male.

Presence of adult males is, arguably, a simpler and more objective measure than most other definitions of woman-headed. The categorisation can be achieved in most surveys without any additional questions. What then, is the overlap between this measure and others?

In OHS 1995 one sixth (17%) of all households, but over half (53%) of the households reported to be headed by women contained no adult men. Conversely, virtually all households without adult men were reported to be woman-headed. There is thus a clear relationship between the two measures, but they are far from identical. While *over* half of woman-headed households contained no adult men, it is equally true that *nearly* half *did* contain adult men!

The number of adult men has implications in terms of potential income earners, but extends beyond this. The absence of men in and of itself can affect the opportunities and constraints faced by a household. For example, research in Botswana found that, despite the abolition of the customary law which said that a woman only had rights to land through her husband, father or brother, women-headed households still “have difficulty maintaining inheritance rights to land” (O’Laughlin, 1996:22).

## **Primary decision-maker**

Several discussions refer to the locus of decision-making as a determinant of household headship. The United Nations review listed this as the second of its three common conceptions found in international practice. Some discussions draw the connection with economic definitions, and note that even though an individual may bring in the highest income in the household, she might not necessarily exercise control over what happens to that income. Nevertheless, despite recognition of the disparity, attempts to measure household headship on the basis of decision-making are rare.

In the early 1990s a research project on youth for the Joint Enrichment Project by the Community Agency for Social Enquiry (C A S E) attempted, for other purposes, to investigate decision-making. In the national survey each youth respondent was asked: 'Who was mainly in charge and took decisions in your childhood?', with childhood understood as the period when they were under six years of age. The survey did not specify further as to whether these decisions related to money, daily activities, activities of the child, or something else. Nevertheless, it is interesting that 45% of the youth named both parents as the main decision-makers, 38% named their mother, 10% their grandmother, and only 6% their father. Yet 68% had previously responded that they grew up in the home of both parents, and only 16% that they grew up in their mother's home. C A S E concluded that "it seems clear that for a great many African youth, their fathers are either absent or distant figures".

To be useful in reaching an understanding of headship in its multiple forms, this type of question would need to differentiate different areas in which decisions are made.

## **Conclusion**

One of the problems with official statistics is that they are meant to serve a range of users with different needs. Even among policy makers, different sectors and different people within sectors will have very different sets of questions and issues, and want to investigate or understand the impact of different aspects of 'headship' on what they are doing. CSS thus has a more difficult problem than those researchers doing specific research, driven by a particular theory, or asking a specific question. An additional problem for CSS is that some of these outside researchers will want to use CSS data to answer their questions - and might well not bother enquiring as to whether the CSS definition and concept are the same as the ones they are using.

Instead of insisting on one definition, one could several questions so as to get at multiple definitions of household and multiple axes of household headship, and then leave it to users/analysts of the data to pick up the particular definitions they find useful in addressing a specific question. Multiple questions would also allow for cross-tabulation and comparison of the definitions, to see where they differ, why they differ and by how much. These questions are not only of academic interest. They are also of interest to policy-makers who are eager to target their programmes where they will be most effective, and at those most in need, while avoiding the allocation of scarce resources to less 'appropriate' beneficiaries.

If the survey questions are well thought out, there need not to be too many. But to produce simple and easily understandable questions which cover the range of situations in South Africa will probably require quite a bit of thought, consultation, piloting and

maybe qualitative research. Such preliminary work would include asking significant users how they would want to use the measures. The debate could inform not only CSS, but all others who do surveys. There is also interest from other countries.

The motivation for abolishing the concept of 'household head' is not motivated by a desire to get away from a situation where the majority of heads are men. With the new definitions one might well find that the number of woman-headed households drops. The motivation is, firstly, to avoid fuzzy thinking, ambiguity and the resultant miscommunication and misunderstanding, and, secondly, to get a better measure of what our society looks like. On the second count, one would expect it to look pretty patriarchal! But one wants to know in what way that male power and control plays out.

CSS's primary function is to serve the country in the provision of statistics. Within this, the provision of statistics to inform policy ranks high. Both common-sense and the limited analysis at our disposal indicate that policy must cater for a wide multiplicity of household and family forms. It must also go beyond woman-headed households to consider needy women (and men) who may not be heads. In particular, there are many young women, perhaps with children, who would like to head their own household but are unable to do so because of lack of resources and a shortage of available housing. In Botswana, at least, it has been argued that these "women-headed households integrated into larger domestic groups" are among the most vulnerable (O'Laughlin, 1996:13).

Current government policy favours the 'preservation of the family'. Policy must, however, allow for a range of family types. It must consider the possibility that in some cases women living in households with men may be poorer, for example in the sense of being less able to make decisions freely, than those in 'woman-headed' households. Also in economic terms, an in-depth study in the Bushbuckridge district of Mpumalanga found that some younger women "felt that singleness was an indicator of success ... pointing out that men seldom support their wives and often represent a drain on the household incomes. Moreover they do not always allow their wives to find employment thus undermining the potential income of the household" (Gear *et al*, 1996:137). This finding is not necessarily an atypical phenomenon, and is not restricted to South Africa (See, for example, Sweetman, 1997:2; O'Laughlin, 1996:3).

Some might argue that the household head debate has been carried out of proportion, and involves a quibble about insignificant differences. Rogers' analysis engages with this critique when she compares the profiles of women-headed households in the Dominican Republic defined by (a) the household's own self-definition; (b) absence of adult males; (c) women as major earner (earning over 50% of wage income) and (d) major income contributor (earning over 50% of total income). She concluded that the "overlap among definitions is very imperfect" even though "households female-headed by one definition is (sic) far more likely to be female-headed by another than are households in general". Households defined as woman-headed under the four definitions tended to share some characteristics, but differed on others (Rogers, 1995:2037). In policy terms these characteristics might well be the salient ones.

Ideally, given the confusions, one would like to move away from a concept of household headship completely. In the short run, however, this might be unwise as there is, as yet, nothing with which to replace it. Instead this paper argues for an initial stage of research in which the next OHS has a range of questions. These would include the present one where the respondent chooses who is head, but also have further ones on relationships between all members, common cooking pot, primary decisions on different issues, property ownership, etc. This would allow for analysis as to how often the definitions on any particular axes diverge and/or converge, and how these di/convergences differ by rural/urban, population group, household structure, or whatever. Armed with this knowledge, CSS would be better informed as to what a woman-headed household is, and whether and how it might be vulnerable.

Debbie Budlender  
Central Statistical Service  
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