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Journal of Policy Modeling 37 (2015) 668–692

*Journal of
Policy
Modeling*

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Heterogeneity of household structures and income: Evidence from Zimbabwe and South Africa[☆]

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Received 20 August 2014; received in revised form 2 October 2014; accepted 3 November 2014
Available online 9 April 2015

Abstract

The use of female-headship to identify vulnerable subgroups and to direct poverty-alleviation policies is a contentious issue. We demonstrate the importance of heterogeneity in household structures for establishing clearer links between female-headship and household income. Using data from Zimbabwe and South Africa, we find that female-headed households, as a whole, do not have lower incomes than male-headed households. Income differentials across female-headed households are significantly related to the amount of adult male presence, and its complementarity with children living in the households. Even after accounting for these sources of observed heterogeneity, we still find significant unexplained heterogeneity across female-headed households.

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Keywords: Heterogeneity; Female-headed households; Random parameters; Child labor

1. Introduction

Female-headed households are frequently regarded by policy makers and donors as being more vulnerable to poverty than male-headed households. Moreover, if female heads cannot adequately invest in human capital, their impoverishment can be transmitted, inter-generationally, to their

[☆] Author names are arranged alphabetically; Financial support from the International development Research Centre (IDRC) is gratefully acknowledged. The authors thank the entire team in the IDRC South Africa project for their various contributions to this paper.

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children (Chant, 1997; Cheng, 1999; Mehra, Esim, & Simms, 2000). Because of their vulnerability, female-headed households are often the focus of poverty alleviation programs (e.g. Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Japan Social Development Fund, 2011). But the empirical link between female headship and poverty remains a contentious issue (Fuwa, 2000; Chant, 2003; Shaffer, 1998). Some scholars have found evidence supporting the hypothesis that female-headed households are poorer than male-headed households (e.g. Buvinic & Gupta, 1997) while others have not found a significant link (e.g. Appleton, 1996; Quisumbing, Haddad, & Pena, 2001). The ambiguity in the relationship between household headship and poverty has been attributed to the fact that headship is only one aspect of household structure (Handa, 1994; Fuwa, 2000). For example, within female and male-headed households, there is frequently considerable heterogeneity in terms of the gender and ages of other family members, which can potentially influence the productive capacity of a household.

Despite the policy importance of understanding links between heterogeneity in household structures and income generation, few studies have gone beyond designations of female- vs. male-headedness¹. In this paper, our overall goal is to contribute to the poverty debate by investigation three key sources of heterogeneity among household structures.

First, we account for heterogeneity among household headship types. These differences may imply distinctly different constraints, both outside and inside the household, for the use of productive resources. For example, female-headed households with no adult males may face *external gendered constraints*, which originate from outside the household. Examples of such constraints include limited property rights that restrict a household's access to resources such as land and irrigation water (e.g. Kevane & Gray, 1999; Lele, 1986; Meinzen-Dick, Brown, Feldstein, & Quisumbing, 1997; Deininger, Songqing, & Nagarajan, 2006) and limited employment opportunities in the formal wage sector (e.g. Fortin, 2005; Brown & Haddad, 1995; Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 1999). These limitations may be alleviated by the presence of a male spouse, or other adult males in the household. Inside the household, there may be *internal gendered constraints* that limit women's intra-household bargaining power. For example, male spouses, or other adult males may reinforce social norms by imposing restrictions that limit the participation of women in some income generating activities, including their engagement in local activities such as livestock production, and in formal and informal labor markets (Pant, 2000; Agarwal, 1989). Conversely, in the absence of a male spouse, female heads may be less constrained in seeking off-farm work (Institute of Development Studies, 2001). In order to address this type of heterogeneity, we create a scale for differentiating household headship types. We rank the households in our sample on the basis of the degree to which there is adult male presence. We assume that this classification is correlated with the differing internal and external gender constraints that households face with varying headship types, but these constraints are unobserved in our data.

Second, we consider heterogeneity in the productive roles played by children in households with differing headship types. The role of children in income generation is well documented and the child labor literature has identified linkages between adult and child labor. For example, in some economies, children and women are found to be substitute sources of labor, while children and men are found to be complements in production (Grant & Hamermesh, 1981). But such investigations have not explored whether and how the productive role of children may vary among household headship types. By extending the child labor literature, we account for differences in

¹ See, for example, Shaffer (1998) and Horrell and Krishnan (2007). Notable exceptions that consider more nuanced considerations of household headship are Fuwa (2000) and Appleton (1996).

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