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‘The unbearable heaviness of being’: reflections on female altruism in Cambodia, Philippines, The Gambia and Costa Rica

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Abstract: Reviewing existing scholarship and drawing on our own experience of micro-level qualitative research on gender in countries in three regions of the Global South (Cambodia, the Philippines, Costa Rica and The Gambia), this article examines patterns of women’s altruistic behaviour within poor family-based households. As a quality and practice labeled as ‘feminine’, the article illuminates the motives, dimensions and dynamics that characterise this apparently enduring female trait. It also makes some tentative suggestions as to how the links between women and altruism might be more systematically examined, problematized and addressed in development, and gender and development (GAD) analysis and policy.

Key words: Altruism, gender, household, Asia, Africa, Central America

I Introduction
In Milan Kundera’s (1984) classic work of fiction, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’, the interconnected lives and sexual politics of two Czech couples are grittily revealed as they anguish over each other’s infidelities. While Kundera proposes that existence is marked by ‘unbearable lightness’ because each of us has only one life (and thus each and every decision we make does not ultimately matter), this article focuses instead on what we perceive to be an ‘unbearable heaviness of being’ that accompanies the altruism so often ascribed to women. Although to some degree our title is a play on words, we would argue that an ‘unbearable heaviness of being’ attaches to women through altruism, and that this does matter, not only for women themselves in...
their everyday lives, but also for subsequent generations of women who are socialized into altruistic behaviour. Not only can altruism deny women the full exercise of their personhood and human rights, but it can also prevent them from taking any decision in their own interests in the first place.

Our concerns about female altruism stem from a number of issues. The first is the way in which it is often used to justify (implicitly, if not explicitly) the incorporation of women into development and anti-poverty programmes: that women are more likely to seek to improve the well-being of others than themselves, and can frequently be recruited as ‘voluntary’, unpaid labour, assists in making such interventions more efficient in terms of implementation, coverage, and costs. Such scenarios, despite lip-service to their dual-purpose and/or potentially ‘empowering’ effects on women make it hard to see how prejudicial gender stereotypes and inequalities will be eradicated (see for example, Bradshaw, 2008; Chant, 2008; Jackson, 1998; Mayoux, 2006; Molyneux, 2006, 2007; Roy, 2002). In fact, a focus on women may even be justified on the grounds that their altruistic practices can be capitalised upon to further other agendas. Indeed as Maclean (2009) found in the context of microfinance projects in Bolivia, the use of social capital in policy and by development agencies may acknowledge women’s role in economic development, but continue to exploit it for its potential to be converted into capital rather to alleviate the burden of women’s altruistic load.

A second element is that women’s disproportionate share of the ‘altruistic burden’ within low-income households appears to be increasing rather than declining. For example, rising female labour force participation in most countries of the Global South does not seem to have replaced the centrality of domesticity or childcare in women’s lives, nor to have granted them extra rights and privileges, but instead simply involved them in an ‘ever-expanding portfolio of maternal obligations’ (Chant, 2002: 467; see also Kabeer, 2007). Third, and related to the above, we feel that female altruism as a concept needs greater unpacking in order to reveal the reasons for its persistence, its multidimensional nature, and as an entry point to changing one of the deepest, yet hitherto comparatively little-researched, bastions of gender inequality. Bearing in mind the risk of perpetuating dichotomous constructions of ‘female altruism’ versus ‘male egoism’, we accordingly set out the variety of dimensions that female altruism embodies; dynamics which can be, inter-alia, emotional, physical/corporeal, socio-cultural and/or economic.

In exploring the various causes, characteristics and consequences of female altruism, we focus on family-based households where a substantial amount of this is learned and enacted. In addition to reviewing existing scholarship on the subject, we draw on our own experience of micro-level qualitative research on gender in low-income communities in countries spanning three major regions of the Global South – Cambodia, the Philippines, Costa Rica and The Gambia (see for example, Brickell, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Chant, 1997, 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

The article is organised into three main sections. First, and in conjunction with a review of theoretical perspectives on female altruism and household models, we outline some general points about the factors shaping altruism among women in a range of countries and cultures. Second, we flag up the multiple and interconnected forms that female altruism takes, reviewing existing literature and weaving in our own empirical insights. Here we distinguish, where data and analysis permit, between women in different age groups and family positions (principally as wives, mothers and daughters). Third, in our concluding thoughts, we stress the importance of identifying female altruism as an issue within GAD policy initiatives, and make some
tentative suggestions as to how this might be more systematically examined, problematized and addressed.

II From ‘benevolent dictators’ and ‘maternal altruists’ to gendered persons and power: conceptual perspectives on families and households

Since the 1970s, a key development that has changed the way that families and households are conceptualized in feminist analysis and beyond, has been the move from a ‘benevolent dictator’ or ‘altruism’ model to one that acknowledges the significance of negotiation, bargaining and even conflict in household affairs. Originally cast as ‘stylised assumptions’ (Badgett and Folbre, 1999: 314), altruism and co-operation of varying degrees, were seen to characterise all family members’ behaviours, shaped as these were by the same preferences, and most commonly deferring to a single (most likely male) decision-maker who nominally acted for the good of the entire household. This ‘unitary household’ ideal had been popularised through conceptual models such as Gary Becker’s (1974) ‘New Household Economics’ and could often be witnessed in popular practices such as women and children eating last and least (as discussed in the context of northern Tanzania by Swantz, 1985), or in development interventions in which resource transfers to male household heads were anticipated to benefit households as a whole (see for example, Harris, 1981; Koopman, 1991).

What is now established, however, is that the family ‘is a far cry from that implicit in much of standard economic theory, namely of the family as an undifferentiated unit governed primarily or solely by altruism’ (Agarwal, 1997: 3). As Kabeer (1994: xv) comments in relation to discussions of the ‘benevolent dictator’, economists have had ‘a very odd view of altruism, attributing it most strongly to the household member most likely to monopolize assets, food, prestigious goods and leisure time’. Galvanised, inter alia, by Amartya Sen’s (1990) conceptual work on households as loci of ‘cooperative conflict’, Deniz Kandiyoti’s (1991) concept of the ‘patrarchal bargain’, and New Institutional Economics, this ‘odd’ idea is now largely discounted. In fact, this representation of the household is now cast as erroneous and ignorant of the gender power imbalances and conflicts inherent within domestic relationships. Indeed, the more plausible hypothesis according to Kabeer (1999: 30) is that selfishness within the household is much more likely to ‘reveal’ power just as apparent ‘selflessness’ is more intuitively indicative of powerlessness.

At the same time as these theoretical advances have occurred, the notion of female altruism within the family seems to have remained steadfast. As Hart (1997) explains, just as there was an adjacent move in development studies from viewing women as ‘rotten wives’ to ‘good mothers’, so too is there now an overarching focus on the altruistic mother who, in contrast to male parents, spends her income on children and family (see also Dwyer and Bruce, eds, 1993; Kabeer, 1999). As Quisumbing and Maluccio (2003: 12) elaborate, ‘…across countries, the most consistent effect is that relative resources controlled by women tend to increase expenditure shares on education, but the mechanisms through which men and women’s resources affect individual outcomes differ substantially’ (see also Quisumbing and McClafferty, 2006).

In this process also, what has emerged is something that Kabeer (1999: 41) defines as a ‘virtuous model of empowerment’ endowing women with a number of different traits ‘that form the basis of advocacy claims on their behalf: altruism, of course, and the dedication to the collective family welfare; thrift and risk-aversion; industriousness in the form of long hours of work and in little need for leisure.’ As a systematic feature of gender analysis in development studies then, our article sets out to critically and comprehensively to review existing scholarship on female
altruism and combining our own empirical research, illuminate the motives, dimensions and dynamics that characterise this apparently enduring female trait.

III Factors shaping female altruism

That altruism ‘appears to be generally more associated with one parent, rather than both, and with maternal, rather than paternal, preferences’ (Kabeer, 1994: 103) can be understood from a number of interconnected standpoints, each of which relate to embedded gender regimes, ‘cultural values’ and resultant constraints on women’s behaviour. The first factor shaping female altruism in circumstances of household deprivation is that women may have no alternative other than to take on the double load of working for income as well as on an unpaid basis in the home. In these instances, ‘the greater amount of time women spend in childcare can be attributed to their choice, reflecting greater maternal altruism, or to the absence of choice, a reflection of greater paternal irresponsibility’ (Kabeer, 1994: 113). Indeed, this need for women to compensate for men’s lack of household participation or contribution, resonates with what Chant (2007a: 336) has coined as a ‘feminisation of responsibility and obligation’ whereby rising numbers of poor women of all ages are not only working outside the home but continuing to perform the bulk of unpaid reproductive tasks for husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. Coming at the cost of an excessive drain on women’s time, labour and resources, and with no obvious increase in women’s rights to match their mounting responsibilities – or any obvious diminution in men’s prerogatives and privileges – this conceivably adds up to greater levels of exploitation (ibid). As echoed by UN/UNIFEM (2003:19):

one might even argue that the economic and social reproductive realms which women are expected to tread, overextend the range of roles and responsibilities of women compared to men, which does not necessarily enlarge their life choices, but may even limit them.

Indeed, men’s use of women’s earnings to subsidise or substitute use of their own wages to fund discretionary extra-domestic expenditure on alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and extramarital liaisons, pose additional injustices here (Chant, 2007a: see also Benería and Roldan, 1987; Brickell, 2008b; Dwyer and Bruce, 1993; Hart, 1997). Moreover, women’s hard-won gains in wage labour participation may mean that demands upon them intensify rather than diminish as the resilience of altruism as a social and cultural norm becomes further ingrained in practice (see Chant, 2007a).

Leading on from the above, a lack of alternatives may also be fuelled by patriarchal social relations that constrain women’s opportunities to spend the income they that bring into the household (Bolt and Bird, 2003) and thus result in ‘maternal altruism’ whereby women invest more in their children because their scope to invest elsewhere is limited (Devereux, 2001). As Kabeer (1999: 41) comments in this regard: ‘it is important to recognise that such altruism is often a manifestation of their disempowerment, a response to their restricted options rather than a “natural” female attribute.’ Indeed, just as much as it is often difficult to draw a line between personal and collective interests (an issue we elaborate upon later), it is also difficult to infer from people’s behaviour ‘whether they are conforming to an unequal order because they fully accept its legitimacy, or accept it partially, or out of fear, or because they believe they have no other options’ (Agarwal, 1997: 23). What is clear, however, according to Sen (1990: 126) is that

[1]Insofar as intrafamily divisions involve significant inequalities in the allotment of food, medical attention, health care, and the like (often unfavourable to the well-being – even survival – of women), the lack of perception of personal interest combined with a great concern for family welfare is, of course, just the kind of attitude that helps to sustain the traditional inequalities.
In respect of lack of alternative options, however, women’s recourse to ‘other-oriented’
behaviour does not necessarily stem from a lack of awareness of personal preferences
but to the existence of external constraints – namely men’s relative disregard for household
well-being – which inhibits women acting in overt self-interest.

A second factor encouraging altruistic
behaviour is the importance of this elemental moral ‘drive’ for legitimising female identity.
Gender norms dictating appropriate behaviour for women and men are closely linked
with socially constructed concepts of familial altruism and individual self-interest respectively
(Badgett and Folbre, 1999: 311). As Chant
(2006: 207) comments, women who do not follow culturally endorsed expectations of female altruism but more self-orientated paths, may find themselves accused of not being ‘feminine’. Some of the consequences may include non-marriageability, divorce, or other forms of social isolation. In light of this, it may also be difficult for women to speak up and (re-) negotiate their altruism. A number of authors explain such actions in terms of women being socialised into acting more responsibly or more altruistically than men and being therefore less willing to drive hard bargains (England, 1989; Papanek, 1990). Likewise, for some women who ‘encroach’ upon the ‘male terrain’ of paid work, many seem to re-double their efforts to live up to altruistic ideals attached to norms of ‘good wives’ and ‘dutiful daughters’ so as to counteract any potential stigma (Chant, 2006: 207–08). As Folbre (1986: 261) surmises, this is a likely result of ‘altruism as action’ being in some sense ‘produced, or at the very least, reinforced, by altruism as ideal’.

A third potential factor, which is also related to social expectations, is what Seglow
(2004: 1) interprets as a central philosophical issue in relation to altruism – how to reconcile the freedom of the individual to live as she wishes with model duties to other people of equal worth. That women are more oriented toward fulfilling collective (especially children’s) needs and men more oriented towards personal goods (Benéria and Roldan, 1987) is commonly driven by a notion of female obligation to familial duties. In the Eastern hemisphere, this is often attributed to ‘Asian values’ which reflect societal interests over narrow, individual self-interest, order and harmony over personal freedom, and the valuing of respect for strong leadership with sustained attachment to family and conventional patterns of authority and loyalty (Stivens, 2006). In the Philippines, for instance, it is not only the absence of legal divorce or Roman Catholic edicts on ‘marriage for life’ which discourage even informal conjugal dissolution, but the cultural importance of duty to family and children that keeps many couples residing with one another (Chant and McIlwaine, 1995). Women are often under more social pressure than men to subordinate their basic needs (Bolt and Bird, 2003), and, as such, rights to dignity and worth may not necessarily be grounded in prior or automatically ordained human rights, but rights which have to be earned and may potentially be lost through the discharge of family duties (Donnelly, 1999). In these instances, as Scott and Seglow (2007: 25) comment, ‘reasons (as motives) for altruism can in principle override emotion and desire’ with a duty to behave altruistically meaning that one has powerful reasons to do so. Migration, for example, may not just be facilitated by purely other-interested motivations. As stated by Vanwey, (2004: 740): ‘it is indeed possible that altruistic behaviours stem not from any positive feelings of the individuals involved but, rather, from a coercive social milieu. It is also possible that the observed behaviours stem from ingrained social norms, not from choices by the migrants.’

A fourth factor inducing altruism is its potential spin-offs or ‘return benefits’ for women. In other words, female altruism could conceivably be construed as a reflection of self-interest insofar as utility is derived through acts of giving which simultaneously enhance the wellbeing of other family members.
As Whitehead (1981) Sen (1990) and Kabeer (1999) highlight, powerful incentives drive women’s investment in time, effort and resources for the benefit of the household collectivity. Women may behave altruistically as a means to defuse gender conflict, or as a tactical move to improve their long-term fallback position and interests (even if it reduces their immediate well-being). For example, in Mexico, Gates (2002) reveals how one bargaining tool used by women in attempts to get their menfolk’s permission to take a job, is the offer of doing more domestic labour. In the short term this may well be punitive, but can clearly open the doors to greater negotiating power and independence. In a related vein, as Agarwal (1997: 26) observes for South Asia, ‘a woman investing more in sons than in daughters...appears to be acting more out of self-interest than altruism’ because of women’s needs for male mediation in the community, and of their dependence on sons in widowhood or old age. The latter underscores Elson’s (1998: 165) point that ‘...one of the few sources of power and advantage that women have in many countries is privileged access to their children, especially sons. Women invest in their children to gain and maintain access to their resource.’

While in circumstances such as these, women may well have, or believe they have, no other option than favouring some household members over themselves, it is clear that women’s lives are not solely driven by altruistic agendas. Women’s employment, for example is often not just motivated by family need but also by personal pride and identity (Brickell, 2007; Chant and Mcllwaine, 1995; Chant, 1997; García and de Oliveira, 1997; Safa, 1995). As Hirai (2002) has shown in the context of Thai factory women, women often use their income on the house and subsequently throw housewarming parties to demonstrate their successes in being good homemakers and makers, as well as to express pride in the fact that, thanks to waged employment, they have had the power and autonomy to achieve these aims. Examples such as these challenge an essentializing vision of the ‘female altruist’, whose motives are not necessarily clear-cut and whose behaviours and practices (which we later turn to), are often immensely complex.

Part of this complexity, as already intimated, is reflected in the difficulties of distinguishing between self and collective interests. Despite the widely acknowledged centrality of household and family in their lives, women may have ‘self-interests other than the collective interest of the domestic group’ (Papanek, 1990: 181). Likewise, as Molyneux (1998: 81) comments, ‘while the embedded character of women’s position might make it most difficult to separate affect from interest, it does not mean that women’s commitment to family and kin is purely moral and entirely without self-interest.’ As concluded by Richard Dawkins (1999: 4) when applying the term ‘altruism’ to real behaviour, this must be qualified with the word ‘apparently’. An ‘apparently’ altruistic act is ‘one that looks, superficially, as if it must tend to make the altruist more likely (however slightly) to die, and the recipient more likely to survive’ (ibid.). Despite the possibility of simultaneously fulfilling self and collective interests, however, scholarly work in development studies has tended to narrowly focus on female altruism as the complete denial of self-interest with less attention given to the potential (and even strategic) synergies between the two.

IV Dimensions of female altruism
This section elaborates on some of key dimensions of female altruism, bearing in mind a high degree of interrelatedness and that our review is by no means exhaustive. Under the auspices of each dimension selected, we complement existing literature, where possible, by weaving in our own case study information generated through interviews and focus group discussions with women in a range of geographical contexts.² A major justification for concentrating on poor women is driven by our empirically-informed belief
that, in the absence of any other major sources of support, investments in family as a form of ‘social capital’ become of heightened significance. Moreover, poorer women are far more likely than women from better off households to experience conflicting demands on their time (Kabeer, 2003) – a situation that is compounded by enduring expectations of female altruism by male partners, fathers and other household and family members.

1 Emotional labour and care work as altruistic behaviour

One highly important dimension of female altruism relates to the emotional labour involved in the care and nurturance of children and other family members, such as the elderly and infirm. As Bradshaw and Linneker (2003: 9) explain, this supposed altruism is commonly associated with women’s purportedly ‘natural’ attributes as mothers and carers. Whilst this kind of altruism is usually directed towards prioritising the emotional needs of one’s own family, women from the Global South also migrate to work as nurses and nannies in the Global North, devoting their emotional energies to richer parents’ children (Perrons, 2004). In turn, instances such as these, point to the multiple dimensions of just one type of female altruism, which can at the same time be economic (to create a better life via remittances to children left behind) as well as emotional (by providing care to those other than one’s own).

In our case study countries of Cambodia and Costa Rica, women’s promotion of children’s interests over their own tends to owe largely to circumstances borne out of necessity rather than out of adherence to traditions that emphasise the importance of female altruism. In Cambodia, as elsewhere, women gain important public value through domesticity and it is they who, in light of male partners’ characteristically lesser concern for child-rearing, must take on the burden of household responsibility. As feminist analyses of caring labour assert, for example, family work may sometimes be coerced rather than voluntary. As Badgett and Folbre (1999: 316) comment, social norms ‘assign women greater responsibility for the care of dependents, an assignment that almost literally requires altruism’. Consonant with this, research based on 165 oral histories, discussion groups and semi-structured interviews in Siem Reap – home to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Angkor – reveals that women are consistently deemed more ‘caring’ (kang val) than men (by men and women alike) (Brickell, 2007: 118). In fact, expressions of ‘care’ are defined in a uniform fashion as ‘thinking about the family a lot’ (ibid.). Furthermore, this sentiment is reflected in a popular Khmer proverb which both men and women refer to: ‘Better to lose one’s father, than one’s mother; it’s better to lose one’s goods when the boat sinks in the middle of river, than one’s goods when the house burns down’ (cited in Fisher-Nguyen, 1994: 101). According to Guillou (1993: 17), this proverb emphasises ‘the importance of mothers being seen as stable, like a home, while fathers are represented by a (unstable) canoe [or boat] on a river’.

Cambodian men’s and women’s interpretations of this proverb diverge, however, in regard to causation and provide some interesting insights into female altruism. On the one hand, men deem women ‘closer’ to home because of their roles as wives and mothers. In men’s explanation of the proverb, naturalized assumptions concerning women’s ‘biological rootedness’ in the household are drawn upon to explain, almost exclusively, that it is better for a father to die, as only women can look after children. On the other hand, and in contrast to men’s very literal and unitary interpretations, women tend to be less categorical in their discussions and commonly deem the ritual association between a father and a canoe as the result of men’s failure to act responsibly. Two premises underpin this. First, women say that a father cannot look after children, as men are normally not at home enough to do so. It is therefore men’s disregard for household
wellbeing that forces women to deal with home-based childcare and housework. As Srei Mom, a married 47-year-old basket weaver, contends: ‘A canoe is like a father – when he gets to shore – he will never come back. But a house is like a mother – she will always be with her children.’ Second, men do not fulfill their marital obligations and often remarry, paying more attention to their new wives than to their children as 49-year-old divorcée Leakhthina explains:

If one has to die then it is better for the father to do so, because he cannot look after the children well. It is different from a mother who can look after her children well even if she has nothing in the house. She will try and borrow food to feed her children and not allow them to die. A man without a wife will not stay at home and will instead go everywhere taking no care of his children – eating only for himself and finding a new wife.

In these examples therefore, it is women who are systematically viewed as altruistic towards their children’s needs where men’s commitment to family life is far from guaranteed.

In terms of the consequences of women’s emotional labour, research in Cambodia shows the adverse strains placed on women on account of such altruistic loads. This includes women continuing to live within violent households ‘for the sake of the children’. As argued more generally, mothers feel ‘so much emotional connection to and altruism toward their children that they would not consider withdrawing their mothering services as a bargaining ploy with the father’ (England and Folbre, 2002: 394). For Orm, a 39-year-old palm juice seller in Siem Reap, divorced as a result of her husband’s infidelity, this extended to daily efforts to deal with the ‘unbearable heaviness of being’ claiming:

I don’t want to live in this world. But I worried that if I commit suicide, who would my children live with? My eldest daughter could survive because she works, but my smallest, I just don’t know. I always ask my neighbours that if pass I away, could they please take my small child to the orphanage centre.

In Cambodia, not belonging to a nuclear family is deemed equivalent to a person missing a limb (Ovesen et al., 1996). As such, despite Orm’s emotional pain, and vulnerability to stigmatisation as a female headed household, her suicide would, according to Durkheim (1951), be an ‘egoistic’ one. As it is, out of altruism and a sense of duty to her offspring, Orm struggles on.

In Costa Rica, similar lived experiences of self-sacrifice prevail, which again owe in part to the persistence of feminine norms of altruism and servility. Mothers often go to extreme lengths to fulfil their children’s needs, as exemplified by a comment from 67-year-old Juanita from Santa Cruz (see Chant, 2007a: 318): ‘we don’t let the kids die of hunger’. And, if food is particularly short, as 27 year old María Ester from Filadelfia, pointed out: ‘you’d rather have the children eat than eat yourself’ (ibid.). In male-headed households, the expectation that women should be servicing husbands as well as offspring also translates into greater altruistic loads. Indeed, although nominally benefitting from having co-resident partners, women in this position may be more exploited on account of men’s lack of assistance in housework and childcare and therefore shoulder the burden of survival as ‘shock absorbers’ and carers (Chant, 2007a; see also Elson, 2002). It is this female altruism in Costa Rica (as well as Cambodia) that sees women assuming responsibility as 40 year old Ixi fittingly explains:

A poor women doesn’t only think of herself; she thinks about her family, her children, in getting ahead. In contrast, men are more selfish, only concerned with their own needs, unlike women who are thinking not only about their own necessities but those of her family. When men see a situation getting difficult, they tend to go off and leave the woman alone to assume responsibility (Chant, 2007a: 318).
In respect of the emotional labour related to altruistic behaviour then, a major point in need of emphasis is that women’s analysis of their own life situations appears as much about men’s egoism in contrast to women’s altruism, an issue that we turn to again in our concluding thoughts.

2 Physical/corporeal altruism

The second related dimension of women’s altruism falls in the physical and corporeal arena. This may relate, as we have seen, to women’s provision of food to household members with positive effects on others members’ nutritional intake and health more widely. As in Tanzania, as noted earlier, peasant women in north India and Bangladesh often eat last and least while serving the best food to their sons and husbands (see Agarwal, 1986; Drèze and Sen, 1989; Kabeer, 1994). In the Philippines and Costa Rica, women also frequently report that they agonise about their children going hungry, and, as noted earlier, when resources are particularly scarce, do not think twice about going without themselves. Indeed, in 2005 concerns about malnutrition among poor Filipina mothers were enough to warrant a number of alarmist articles in the national press (see Chant, 2007a: 220 & 262n). However, this may not always be the case, especially in ‘blended’ or ‘re-constituted’ households, which comprise stepsons and/or stepdaughters. In Cambodia, for example, where men remarry, new wives do not appear so altruistic towards children who are not their own. According to many young people, new wives purportedly give little attention or care to their stepchildren and typically do not put salt in the children’s soup, despite ensuring that the dishes they serve to their husbands taste delicious. While female self-denial of food is thus commonly influenced by concern for collective household welfare, this is not always the case, with self-interest amongst second wives even acting to the potential detriment of girls and boys present in such households.

Another major aspect of ‘corporeal altruism’ is the sacrifices women make to satisfy their husbands’ (or husbands’ families’) desire for many children and/or male offspring. As noted by Kabeer (1999: 7), for example, women’s ‘willingness to bear children to the detriment of their own health and survival in order to satisfy their own or their husband’s preference for sons, are examples of behaviour by women that undermine their own well-being’. Among our case study countries this is perhaps particularly marked in The Gambia, where fertility rates continue to be among the highest in the world (at 4.7 per women), and where great store is set on producing at least one male child (Chant, 2007a: 131; see also Bledsoe, 2002). Indeed in some farming communities the female Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is 6.8, and on account of polygamy, men’s is up to 12 (Shaw and Jawo, 2000: 73; see also Sear et al., 2008). Despite the fact that a good 60 per cent of the adult female population are circumcised, which is often associated with obstructed labour (see for example, Touray, 2006), the majority of women perceive the benefits of frequent and abundant reproduction as essential to their social legitimacy, and to the favours they are likely to receive over co-wives in polygamous marriages.

A related aspect of ‘corporeal altruism’, and of particular importance to low-income women in the Global South, is their lengthy working days spent not only in income-generating work (see below), but also in fulfilling the expectations of housekeeping and motherhood in conditions of often precarious and/or squalid slum housing, and a lack of basic community services and infrastructure. The demands on women’s time and energy in putting meals on the table, looking after children, washing, ironing and cleaning in such straitened circumstances has major implications for their health and physical and mental well-being (see for example, Chant, 2007b; COHRE, 2008).
Last but not least is the fact that in many contexts, such as The Gambia and Ghana, young girls are expected to labour in the paid and unpaid economy at the expense of their education (see for example, Chant and Jones, 2005). And, in the few cases where young women succeed in progressing beyond primary school, and in securing jobs, the demands of parents and other natal kin often result in their carrying an immense economic, as well as time obligations, which tends to eclipse any personal benefits which might accrue as a result of their hard-earned social capital (see Chant, 2007a: Chapters 4 and 7).

3 Economic altruism

The third, and interrelated, element of altruism is economic. It is commonly asserted for example that women devote the bulk (if not all) of their earnings to household expenditure, often with positive effects on other members. As Agarwal summarises (1997: 25), ‘developing-country evidence shows that poor women spend the income they control largely on family needs rather than on personal needs.’ Indeed, it is often found than mothers devote a significantly larger share of their income and earnings to family needs than fathers (Badgett and Folbre, 1999; Benetia and Roldan, 1987; Chant 1997; Dwyer and Bruce, eds, 1993; Nelson, 1997; Quisumbing and McClafferty, 2006). As Malhotra and Mather (1997: 623) observe in relation to Sri Lanka, and corresponding with findings in many other societies, women demonstrate a high level of altruism, with the welfare of their husbands, children, and natal families ranking uppermost in their efforts. Thus, most married women who work for pay and hold on to their wages tend to utilise the money for the benefit of the family, particularly when children are involved (ibid.). Women in Cambodia, likewise, are often deemed by men as indispensable actors in saving: were it not for women’s thriftiness, men would simply go out and dissipate the money. As a 24-year-old married Cambodian motorbike driver, Seang, explains (and recalling the previously discussed proverb): ‘A man without a wife is a man that cannot save money for the future. In my opinion, living without a wife would be like living like a canoe in the middle of a river’. This assertion is made despite evidence which suggests that while it is women’s responsibility to manage household finances in Cambodia (Gorman, 1999: 48), their control over major assets and decision-making remains quite limited (Brickell, 2007; NIS, 2001; see also Chant and McIlwaine, 1995 on the Philippines). In respect of demographic mobility and economic altruism, ‘migration may even be undertaken for the good of the family collective, reflecting a household economic strategy that spatially extends economic production, diversifies risk, generates wage income and remittances, and produces benefits for older adults that could not be achieved in local, rural economies’ (Zimmer et al., 2008: 586 discussing migrant interactions with elderly parents in rural Cambodia and Thailand). In terms of gendered dimensions of this, many studies have found that women are more likely to remit at higher rates and/or levels than do men (Osaki, 1999). In the case of Thailand for example, Buddhist traditions in which religious merit accrues to women who financially or materially support their families is particularly marked (Osaki, 1999; Vanwey, 2004). In the context of Filipino national and international migration, a number of factors beyond religion are often invoked, including notions of ‘filial piety’ which place particular emphasis on the duties of daughters to support their parents and siblings, and among wives and mothers to play the fullest role possible in safeguarding the well-being of their families, even at the cost of being away from husbands and children for several years, and often at great distances (see Chant and McIlwaine, 1995; Tacoli, 1996). As Vanwey (2004: 745) argues, ‘because women have a motivation to remit to their families that men do not, women will follow a more altruistic pattern of behaviour.’
3 Socio-cultural altruism

A fourth set of factors shaping female altruism comprise socio-cultural and/or religiously-ordained imperatives related variously to the family, community and wider nation. In many Islamic cultures, and minority communities propped up by orthodox and conservative values, women often subjugate their own desires to uphold family ‘honour’ and thereby avoid ‘shame’ (Siddiqui, 2005). The ‘loss of honour’ or reputation is commonly associated with adultery, premarital relationships (which may or may not include sexual relations), rape, and falling in love with ‘inappropriate’ persons (Coomaraswamy, 2005: xi). That altruism is cast as a moral basis for women’s everyday interactions within and beyond household and family is something strongly present in Cambodia where traditional didactic codes and proverbs emphasise altruism much more strongly for women than men (see Brickell, forthcoming). As one of several codes designed for men, children, monks and other categories of people, the Chbap Srei (Code for Women) forms part of the normative Cambodian poems (in the form of verses), which combine popular custom with Buddhist principles to offer practical advice concerning acceptable behavior and company (Luco, 2002; Oveson et al., 1996). Unlike women’s codes of conduct, which deal predominantly with obeying and respecting spouses, in the rules for men, wives are mentioned directly only once, in relation to men’s responsibility to provide for their families. In comparison to the Chbap Srei therefore, ‘a strong individualistic vein exists in texts containing directives for men that deal predominantly with specific behaviours rather than relations’ (PADV, 2003: 77). This historical and literary promotion of female altruism also has contemporary dimensions with Ing Kantha Phavi, Minister of Women’s Affairs, remarking that the rules’ continued teaching in schools remains more a matter of national identity, rather than a factual subject to be analysed or discussed in class (Camnews, 2006). It is thus potentially the case that a new generation of Cambodians are growing up with ‘acceptable’ notions of femaleness – including altruism – being at least in part, restated through notions of Khmer culture.

Similar patterns are observable in our other case study countries, and perhaps particularly in the Philippines. Here, for instance, although there appears to be greater social acceptance of lone motherhood over time (see Chant, 2007a: Chapter 5), traditionally young unmarried mothers have moved far from natal kin, or if they have remained with them have effectively given up the right to acknowledge their children as their own in order to protect family ‘honour’ (Chant and McIlwaine, 1995).

V Concluding thoughts

In this article we have sought to critically review existing scholarship on female altruism and to draw on our research on gender in low-income communities in different geographical contexts to examine the complex nature of women’s altruistic behaviour within family-based households. While the literature, and indeed our own research, is predominantly oriented towards women as ‘providers’ of altruism, we suggest that female altruism may be more systematically examined by looking also at men’s perspectives and opinions as ‘receivers’ and ‘beneficiaries’ of women’s altruistic acts. This is because women’s analysis of their own life situations appears to be as much about men’s egoism and thus to understand women’s altruism more fully, both women’s and men’s perspectives should be explored (see for example, Brickell, 2007, forthcoming; Chant, 2000; Chant and Gutmann, 2000; Cornwall, 2000). Also important in the interests of moving towards greater balance in the gender and development agenda is to consider in a more dedicated fashion the whys, wherefores and parameters of men’s altruism, how this relates to gender roles and relations, and how it impacts upon household well-being.

While developmental understandings of altruism have remained largely concentrated on the individual and/or household (principally in relation to husbands and wives, and mothers and children), we argue that understanding of
female altruism will remain limited if gender and development (GAD) analysis fails to pay attention to the role of other individuals (for example, grandparents), wider social collectivities, institutions and norms in the shaping of people’s wellbeing and construction and maintenance of altruistic values. As a corollary of this, an important element of future work will be to consider the parameters of altruism as experienced by different groups of women and men, and how these manifest themselves in the inter-generational transfer of altruistic behaviour and practices.

In respect of policy, the timeliness of addressing the situation in which women’s altruism is not so much problematized and addressed, as capitalized upon, also requires serious attention. As pointed out in the introduction to this article, a host of evidence, past and present, reveals that women are frequently used a ‘conditio of policy’ in poverty reduction programmes (see Molyneux, 2006, 2007), or as expressed by Chant (2008), there has been a ‘feminisation of anti-poverty programmes’ (see also Roy, 2002). One aspect of this is where women are used as ‘volunteers’ and/or implementers of policy directives wherein their reproductive labour is ‘naturalised’, and/or thought to come ‘free’ (Molyneux, 2006), and ‘...policymakers often assume that there is a limitless supply – that they can have as much as they want’ (Budlender, 2004: 3). A second aspect is that women are often regarded as more reliable clients in microfinance programmes (Mayoux, 2006; also Chant, 2008). This kind of attitude, as evidenced in the reliance on women in conditional cash transfer programmes (CCTs) (Molyneux, 2006, 2007 on PROGRESA/Oportunidades in Mexico; also Bradshaw, 2008 on the Red de Protección Social [Social Protection Network] in Nicaragua), act mainly to intensify gender-differentiated altruism rather than redress it (Chant, 2008). As pointed out by Elson (1999: 13): ‘Women’s time burdens are an important constraint on growth and development – women are an over-utilised not an under-utilised resource. The benefits of reducing this gender-based constraint can be considerable’ (our emphasis). This is to some extent echoed by Jackson (1998: 53), who also warns, that while ‘a real improvement in the position of women may indeed involve a shift to less altruism’, this could ‘paradoxically...undermine the support of development agencies for GAD’. In this regard, addressing the ‘unbearable heaviness of being’ experienced by women in many households across the Global South must be accompanied by a concern for the altruistic demands increasingly placed on women by development endeavours at large.

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Notes
1. While households often consist of individuals related by blood or marriage, ‘families’ and ‘households’ are not coterminous, as the latter may also comprise of unrelated persons such as colleagues, friends and lodgers, an especially common trend in the wake of large-scale migration, urbanisation and globalisation in recent decades.
2. For other publications where women’s views on these themes are further articulated in our case study countries see Brickell (2007; forthcoming) and Chant (2007a).

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