



Struggles of Female Household Heads in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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Female Heads of Household; Struggles of Female Heads; Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the struggles faced by the female heads of households in Bangladesh. Data included the life stories of 22 purposively selected female household heads from two communities in northwest Bangladesh. Qualitative thematic analysis of the data revealed that the struggles of female heads differed in terms of their class position, place of living, and the route to headship. It indicated that the female heads from lower-class households used to face both financial and social constraints while the better-off heads faced social constraints like difficulties in child rearing and provoking male behavior. The study also explored that the female heads in urban areas were more vulnerable to male indecent behaviors than their rural counterparts. On the other hand, the de jure female heads were appeared to be more insecure and experienced the social stigma compared to the de facto heads. The study suggests that appropriate welfare policies/interventions are needed to create income-earning opportunities for the female heads as well as to create a positive social environment where these women can work and move freely.

Introduction

The given consideration of society on the male-headship of households as a normal phenomenon renders female-headed households an unusual, isolated and underprivileged category in many low-income countries (Chant, 1997). Although it is believed that families, whether nuclear or extended, are headed by men and primarily rely on a male breadwinner, there are many female-headed households even in patriarchal contexts. Like other parts of the world, the number of female-headed households in Bangladesh has also been growing in recent years.

Bangladesh is a lower-middle income country situated in South Asia. Almost 25% of the Bangladeshi people still live under extreme poverty (earn less than one US Dollar in a day). However, women are considered as the poorest among the poor (Mannan 2000). Women are not only poor, but prejudiced by gendered customs and beliefs, and are struggling against the patriarchal dominance of the society. The situation becomes worse for the women who are the heads of household. In Bangladesh, about 15.4 percent of the households are headed by women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 1996), though it is assumed that the actual proportion could be around 20-30 percent (Afsar 1996; Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 1998). The female heads of households usually experience an atypical situation due to the change of household headship. Previous studies showed that women

who head households are worthy of especial attention because they are triply disadvantaged: they experience the burdens of poverty, gender discrimination, and lack of supports (Jazairy et. al., cited in Bavinic & Gupta, 1997). The female heads of households in Bangladesh also seem to face these triple disadvantages.

Studies around the world generally characterize female-headed households as resource-poor marginalized families while they give excessive emphasis on their poverty situation (e.g., Pressman, 2002; Quisumbing et al. 1995; Buvinic and Gupta, 1997; Barros, Fox & Mendonka, 1997; Fuwa, 2000; Klasen, 2000; Hamdok, 1999; Mencher, 1993; Lewis, 1993). A few studies further revealed that female headed households are disadvantaged not only economically but also by social factors like education, access to services and ownership of land and assets (Mencher, 1993; Lewis, 1993; Mannan, 2000). However, female heads of households may also be constrained by other cultural factors like gendered specific rules/norms of a society. Therefore, we need a broader perspective (including economic, social and cultural dimensions) to understand the real situations/struggles of the female heads in a particular society. However, there is a lack of studies that focused on both socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of the struggles faced by the female household heads in patriarchal society, particularly in Bangladesh.

Since female-headed households are not all homogeneous group (Lewis, 1993; Barros, Fox & Mendonka, 1997; Fuwa, 2000), there is also a gap in the literature that shows how the struggles of female heads may differ from each other according to their socioeconomic status, ethnic and religious background, geographic location (rural/urban), and routes through which they became their household's heads. The main objective of the current study is to explore the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of the struggles faced by the female heads of households according to their class position, geographical location, and routes to female headship in Bangladesh.

Data and Methods

Study Design

This study followed a qualitative methodological approach to explore the experiences of female household heads in Bangladesh. A qualitative method was considered more appropriate to obtain an in depth understanding about the detailed life situations of the female heads.

Sites under Study

The fieldwork was conducted in two typical rural and urban communities in Rajshahi – a north-west district of Bangladesh. This means that there were two study sites – one rural and another urban. The rural study site was located in Paba, one of the nine sub-districts in Rajshahi District, whereas the urban site was located in Raninagar, one of the wards of the Rajshahi City.

Samples and Data Collection

The sample of the study was made of 22 female household heads. The study perceived female household heads as the women who were financially responsible for running the family. They were the primary breadwinner of their families. A purposive sampling method was employed to select the participants. Qualitative study is about depth, context and process rather than quantity. Therefore, the purposive sampling method was used to include in the research a small but heterogeneous and diverse

group of female household heads in terms of age, marital status, socio-economic class and rural and urban locations. To collect data from the female heads, the study followed an in-depth interviewing technique. Data collection comprised with the voices and real life experiences of the female household heads in the study areas.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic data analysis technique was used to analyze the data collected from in-depth interviews with the study participants. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. At first, all audio recorded interviews were transcribed in Bangla (the native Language) and later translated into English. These verbatim transcripts were the basis of analysis. The interview texts were read thoroughly for identifying their patterns and categories. Finally, they were analyzed to develop their themes.

Ethical Issues

The study was conducted in accordance with the operational guidelines and procedures for research with women recommended by the Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC). All the study participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study and their oral consent was obtained before the data collection and audio-recording. Written consent was waived because there were many illiterate study participants. The respondents were assured about confidentiality of their identity. It was explained to them that they will not be identified or be identifiable in any way, because the data will be anonymous at the time of analysis.

Study Findings

The qualitative thematic analysis of the data revealed that the female household heads were struggling with a number of constraints. Four major themes supported by a number of sub-themes emerged during the data analysis process: a) Constraints related to work and livelihood, b) Having problems in child rearing, c) Feelings of insecurity, and d) Facing Social stigma. The interviews of the female heads indicated that these difficulties took different shape and extent for the female heads regarding their economic status and routes to female headship and sometimes according to the place they live in.

Constraints related to Work and Livelihood

The majority of the respondents indicated that the constraints they were struggling with were related to their work. It was almost inevitable for them to work for a wage as they needed to run the family as household heads. The exposition of the following sub-themes provided the in-depth understanding of the constraints the female heads are experiencing while generating an income for the survival of the family.

Low Wage or Insufficient Income

Insufficient income was found to be the most common and predominant constraint that the female heads were facing. The head with low economic status had very low educational background as well and were engaged with low income job like working as house maids, small business, agricultural activities etc. Financial hardship due to insufficient income seems to be the foremost concern of the heads with low economic status regardless of their places of living. A poor female head (38 years old) in the urban community, occupied with a small business of selling clothes from door to door in the city, revealed that her income was insufficient to run the family:

I sell undergarments from door to door and for that I have to spend 10 hours a day and the whole day I have to walk from one place to another...I walk 10–12 kilometers a day but after all this effort I earn about 1200 Taka per month...moreover, this income is not consistent... sometimes I earn more ...sometimes less... I am always worried for my insufficient income ... you know, there are so many things to manage and all you need is the money to survive ... (Interview No. 11, 2013).

Overburdened by Workload

Overburdened by extreme workload was also revealed as one of the major constraints faced by female household heads in the sample. All interviews indicated that this was a problem concerning all female household heads regardless of their economic status or places of living. A working mother (39 years old) living in the city area, overstrained by workload, was struggling to fulfill her dream:

I work as a housemaid in 5 different houses, so that I can earn enough money to manage everything ... you know, it's not just providing the food for us (me and my daughters) ... I have to earn more for my daughters education. My husband does not give a penny for me or my daughters; it is me who is struggling day and night to earn a living. I've arranged coaching for my elder daughter who is in class eight and going to sit for a public exam. You know, it needs extra money ... I've increased my work to make up this need ... sometimes I feel I'm not able to work anymore ... my body aches ... but I have no other choice ... My dream is to educate my daughters ...may Allah bless them so that they would not face sufferings like their mother ... (Interview No. 4, 2013).

Having Problems in Child Rearing

Motherhood is often regarded as the primary gender role of women. Women are perceived as the 'natural' caregivers and nurturers of life. Therefore, women have to bear the sole responsibility for the care of family members. As female household heads, the study participants were the main financial contributors of the family and, at the same time, the primary caregivers of their children. Whilst earning their livelihood they could not be able to avoid their responsibilities as mothers. Two sub-themes emerged from the interviews developed the main theme 'problems in child rearing' which was commonly expressed by the study participants.

Lack of Time to Take Care of Children

The female household heads participated in the study were mostly constrained by time in order to take care of their children as well as to govern them in a proper way. The interviews of a 42-year old female head, working as a housemaid in the city, expressed her frustration regarding rearing her only child as follows:

Every day I work 10 hours outside my home and there is nobody to look after my daughter... When I work outside, my daughter has to stay in some of our neighbor's or relative's home. Sometimes they do not treat her very well...but I have no choice...I got her admitted in a school, but when she was in class five, she stopped going school...I wanted to make her educated but I couldn't give her time and company, as I have to spend most of my time outside home... (Interview No. 12, 2013).

The sub-theme 'lack of time' similarly emerged from the following interviews of a 43 year-old female household head who was constrained by time in child rearing though she had a good job and was financially well-off:

You know, sometime I feel guilty that I am not spending enough time for my only son ... he complains why I do not fetch him from school when he sees his friends' fathers/mothers fetch them from school ... I have to stay at my office from 9 am. to 5/6 pm. It's been even later sometime... this year my son will going to sit for a public exam ... I am wondering how would I manage time to help him with his study ... after I return from the office I have to do the cooking and other household chores ... I've been so tired after working the whole day ... it's been difficult for me to monitor his study ... (Interview No. 10, 2013).

In Bangladesh, when a man earns for his family, he seems to be freed from other family responsibilities like child care or doing the household chores. However, when a woman earns the money for the family, she also has the responsibility to care for her child and all the household chores like cooking, washing etc. In case of the female heads, they are not only the breadwinners, but they are also responsible for every other thing including care for their children, household chores and also the necessary shopping for the family. As there is no other person in the family to share their work, the female heads in this study found it very difficult for them to juggle between their work and household chores simultaneously. However, the job itself which met the urgent need for earning an income appeared to be a problem in the lives of the female heads in the sample.

Difficulties in Parenting a Child

Another major challenge of the female head mother is represented by the difficulties in parenting their children while they hardly have time to take proper care of them. A 33-year old woman who had a teen-age son further expressed her gendered thinking about her ability as she believed that her children became out of control because of the absence of a male head in the family:

My son became disobedient because there was no male head in the household... He was not afraid of me and didn't obey me... I could not control him... first, he stopped going school ... then he started to work in a garage but he does not give me the money, rather he spoils the money with his friends... mingles with miscreants ... I am always worried about him ... (Interview No. 17, 2013).

The interviews with a 35-year old highly educated woman head (having a MS Degree) that was rather solvent with her own income also revealed the same as she felt the absence of the guidance of a father in nurturing her children:

When my husband died, I felt that could I bring up my sons ... who will teach them good English, which their father was very good at ... when my elder son was at class nine, I felt again the absence of his father while choosing among Science, Arts and Commerce for my son ... you don't know, so many times I felt helpless in bringing up my sons in the absence of their father ... I feel worried for my elder son who is now 18... would I be able to control him in future... (Interview No. 9, 2013).

Feelings of Insecurity

From the data, a common theme emerged about the feelings of insecurity widespread among the female heads regardless of the economic class and the place of living. Insecurity was cited by the heads as a hazard of living alone, or without any adult male member in the family. The following two sub-themes illustrated the situation of the female heads.

Feeling Unsafe and Scared to Live Alone

This sub-theme was emerged from the interviews of an abandoned woman (42 years old) living with her 15 years old daughter and her mother as she described her feelings:

It's very difficult to live alone with only a daughter... I always feel scared to live alone... that's why I have arranged my mother to live with us. My daughter is growing up... I am also worried about her safety ... I wonder whether somebody teases or behaves indecently, how can I protect her? If her father was here ... the responsibility would be his... (Interview No. 12, 2013).

A 42-year old female household head living in a rural area also expressed her feelings of insecurity as she was staying alone in her natal home:

At day times I remain busy with all the household chores, feeding the cow and the fowl, but when it gets dark I feel lonely and scared ... sometime I hear sounds on my tin shade roof ... it's sounds like somebody is throwing small stones on my roof top ... I don't know the reason of that sound but it frightens me ... it may be done by wicked people ... or may be by the evil spirit ... it's been difficult to stay alone without a male member in the house ... therefore, I am planning to adopt one of my nephew... (Interview No. 7, 2013).

Provocative Male Behavior

The other type of feeling insecure was related to provocative male behavior. Not only abandoned women, but also other female participants pointed out provocative male behavior that made their lives vulnerable to free movement in public places. Many study participants revealed that they were harassed by inappropriate suitors, who wanted to marry them without undertaking any responsibility for the family. From the interviews of a 40 year old female head, it appeared that her feelings of insecurity made her remarry – as she shared her experiences:

After the death of my first husband I came to the city with my children... at that time I was young and was harassed by many inappropriate suitors who wanted to marry me but not as their only wife! ... either they had other wife/wives or they were very aged... or some were interested to live together with me... In fact, because of this insecurity, I had to marry again ... (Interview No. 16, 2013).

It was also emerged from an interview with a female head (43 years old) that a high status job and sufficient income could not avert the uncertainty of a lonely life:

Apparently my life is going on normally with me and my only son ... but you know, there is a feeling of emptiness ... sometimes I got phone calls from unknown persons who proposed me to marry again It's so embarrassing ... as my answer is and always will be negative, it does not

satisfy the person who proposed At times I could hear the angry and fuming voice from the other side of the phone ... often I just cut the line ... but you know, I am always scared about my son ... when he plays around outside home, I fear the person denied may try to do harm to my son ... this terrible feelings snatched the peace from my life (Interview No. 10, 2013).

From the interviews, it appeared that the lack of male authority makes the respondents feel insecure. The common view of Bangladeshi society is that a woman must live under the shelter of an adult male and this view also reinforces women's perception of insecurity. The respondents seem to be scared of living alone due to their own attitudes. Economic scarcity as well as feelings of insecurity forced poor female heads to remarry. Female heads with higher economic status were also found to agonize over these insecure feelings.

However, it also appeared that the female heads differed according to the routes to household headship in facing challenges such as "feel unsafe and scared to live alone" and "provocative male behavior". The study revealed that the de jure female heads (widows, divorced or separated women heads living without an adult male member in the family) are likely to feel insecure and experience the social stigma of living alone i.e., without the male shelter, while the de facto female heads (the married female heads where the husband is sick/disabled and unable/unwilling to contribute financially), through retaining their status as married women, received a positive view from their relatives, neighbors and society as a whole and combat their feelings of insecurity.

Facing Social Stigma

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society and conventionally males perform the role of heads of the households. Besides economic hardship, when women become the heads of household, the change of household headship also causes the loss of social and emotional supports from relatives and neighbors and adds the social stigma for maintaining the family as female heads, which has been traditionally and widely considered as a male domain in Bangladeshi society. The interviews of a re-married female head (33 years old) revealed her experience of social stigma when she was living as a lone, abandoned woman just after her separation:

I know very well how people look critically towards a lone woman ... after the separation with my first husband, I lived in one of my relatives' home where I worked as a housemaid ... me and my 4 year old son were surviving with my income ... but people looked at it very critically ... they often passed comments at me ... they said 'why do you spend so much time outside home? Why do you leave your son at home? Why do you go outside with fine clothes?' they even said I am not a woman of good character ... it was so stressful for me ... (Interview No. 17, 2013).

Another female head (43 years old) with solvent economic status also stated that her neighbors did not appreciate or accept that she was managing life without a male authority. Her interviews revealed the viewpoints of neighbors and relatives as disapproving and impertinent:

I don't understand why people look down to a lone woman ... I am surviving with my own income and managing my family by myself ... I don't depend on others (who talks negatively) ... so, why do they bother ... why do they think that I should not live independently, rather it would be better if I stayed with my parents ... every person could have his/her own choice ... as

I have my own ... sometimes I feel so irritated ... but you know, how people think does matter ... I do not wear colorful clothing or jewelry ... you know, it's not appreciated for a widow to relish ... usually I don't share my feelings with others ... except for a few very old friends ... (Interview No. 10, 2013).

The above expressions revealed that the female heads of households were experiencing social stigma as they are somehow breaking the traditional social norms by managing their family alone as female heads. In a patriarchal society, a woman needs to depend on her husband or father, or brother/s. The study revealed that the female heads are struggling with enormous constraints in their everyday life and the social stigma has made their lives harder to live alone. However, in terms of social stigma, the experiences of female heads differ according to route to headship. The de facto female heads – particularly those who are currently living with their sick/disabled husbands – revealed that they were not stigmatized by the society for managing the family. Besides, it appeared that the widow female heads faced fewer social stigmas than the heads that were separated or abandoned by husbands. While the widows encountered restrictions in different facets of life, the separated or abandoned women heads were blamed for their separation or abandonment. For example, the case of an abandoned woman (28 years old) can be noted where she expressed that people often considered her responsible for her abandonment:

It's been so hard to live for a lone woman ... people look at it very critically ... they say, it must be my fault, that my husband left me ... now tell me, if my husband leaves me, it is me who will suffer the most ... so, why should I cause my husband leave me? People do not understand the difficulties of a lone woman; rather they stare at me as I am managing my life alone and aggravate my sufferings... (Interview No. 14, 2013).

Discussion

From the findings, it appeared that the struggles of female heads differed in terms of their class position, place of living, and the route to headship. It indicated that the female heads from lower-class households used to face both financial and social constraints while the better-off heads only faced social constraints like difficulties in child rearing and provoking male behavior. The study also explored that the female heads in urban areas were more vulnerable to male indecent behaviors than their rural counterparts. On the other hand, the de jure female heads were more likely to feel insecure and experienced social stigma compared to the de facto heads.

The study suggests that the female household head in Bangladesh uses to face immense difficulties in terms of juggling between paid work outside their homes and responsibility in taking care of their children, in addition to doing the domestic chores. The constraint like trouble in rearing the children was common for the women heads irrespective of their place of living. No matter where they live in, women heads as well as working mothers were struggling with the proper care of their children. This might be related to the typical gender division of labor prevalent in Bangladeshi society where men are supposed to be the main breadwinners as well as guardians of their families while women should play their nurturing roles.

These findings appeared to be congruent with the 'social role theory'. Though the classic 'role theory' introduced by Parsons and Bales (1955) was criticized by feminist scholars for the assumption of the division of labor between husbands and wives, i.e., the instrumental-expressive dichotomy and

its implication that women's sphere should be limited to the home (Barrett, 1986); the present study suggested that in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, the role division between husbands and wives still exists. Findings of the study provided support for Eagly, Wood and Diekmann's (2000) theorization that gender roles reflect a society's distribution of men and women into breadwinner and housewives roles. The findings conform to the fact that women and men sought to accommodate to the socially acceptable roles and the recognition of conventional sex role renders exceptions as deviance (Stanly & Wise, 1983). In fact, the narratives of the female heads participating in this study revealed the inconveniences of being the heads of the household where men have normatively been considered as the household heads.

The difficulties of the female heads related to child rearing might also be associated with the patriarchal social structure of the country. In a patriarchal society like the Bangladeshi, men are perceived to be the 'natural' heads of the households. In traditional male-headed households, usually women remain under the domination and guardianship of men, who may be a father, husband, adult son or any other male member of the kin group (Islam, 1993). When women become the heads of the households either by divorce, abandonment, or death of husbands, it may become difficult for them to maintain the domination and guardianship over their children.

The feeling of insecurity of the *de jure* female household heads is also likely to be associated with the patriarchal social order in the country. In a patriarchal society, married women are implicitly seen as sex objects under the custody of male guardianship. Therefore, in the absence of a male guardian, separated/divorced/widowed women may become the explicit target of patriarchal indecent men in the society. For overcoming this feeling of insecurity, some women tend to keep their marriages despite the husband's reluctance to earning for the family, or even physical abuse. A previous study based in Dhaka slums (Pryer 2003) also argued that violence against women within marriage was frequent and was tolerated by women to gain some protection from their men. Thus *de facto* female heads might be protected from harassment of other men, though at the same time they may be exploited by their husbands.

The stigma related to female headship is also broadly related to the patriarchal norms of the society. In the context of the male breadwinner and female housewife gender roles, females who are breadwinners as well as heads of their households might be stigmatized and viewed as 'deviant'. The stories of the female heads not only revealed the negative attitudes of relatives and neighbors towards them, the women themselves perceived that moving in public spaces for earning an income as men do was disrespectful for women. However, the in-depth narratives of the female heads also uncovered the fact that the experiences of the female heads differed regarding their social class position as well as the location of their residence and the routes through they became the female heads. These findings appeared to be congruent with the recent feminist thinkers and showed how the women's experiences are often shaped by their social class position and other socio-cultural factors (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). The current study revealed that *de facto* female heads were less likely to be stigmatized than that of their *de jure* counterparts. This could be due to the fact that the married female heads were living with their husbands who were incapable of earning and managing the family. As their husbands were staying in the same households, the women were found to be free from the stigma of living alone as female heads. The expressions of the married female heads also indicated that they were staying with their husbands who were financially unable or unwilling to bear the responsibility of the family, to just get rid of the social stigma of living as lone women.

Conclusions and Implications

The study indicates that in general female household heads are likely to face immense socio-economic and cultural constraints that make their lives very difficult to survive in the society. While previous studies mostly considered female-headed households as homogenous in resource poor communities in Bangladeshi society, the current study suggests that the struggles and challenges usually faced by female heads differed with regard to their socio-economic class, place of living and the routes through they became the female household heads.

As there is paucity of research in dealing with the female headship issue in Bangladesh, the current study is one of the very few studies to capture the detailed life situations of the female heads. Along with providing a rich qualitative data set on the struggles of female heads, the study also offers important theoretical contributions and practical implications for social work policy and practice. It is expected that this study would broaden the potentials of future research directions and expedite the understanding of the emerging needs of female headed households, so that a community based holistic support system could be incorporated for enhancing the lives of female heads and also for the overall well-being of female heads.

Since female household heads in Bangladesh are generally constrained by socioeconomic and cultural factors, the study suggests that government or non-government social agencies should create support services that could enhance the socioeconomic security of female heads. Social welfare agencies should focus on female heads so that they can achieve confidence and leadership skills, which would enable them to deal confidently with outdoor business matters and take part in the public spheres and activities. These organizations should also provide childcare services for female heads, as they need to spend long hours in working outside the home in order to meet the family expenditure leaving their children unattended.

This study also aimed at informing the policy makers about the special situations of female heads in Bangladesh. It is important that more remunerative employment opportunities be provided for the female heads who are struggling with financial constraints due to the lack of better paying employment. Social agencies should be encouraged by appropriate social policies to provide work particularly for female heads. The necessary funding should also be provided in the national budget for launching special education and training programs for female heads to improve their skills and abilities so that female heads would be more able and confident to perform the role of main breadwinners. There is also a need to change the overall gendered order of the society. A social action is needed to change people's patriarchal attitudes toward female household heads in Bangladesh. Both general macroeconomic policies and specific micro-level interventions should be aware of predominant gender discriminations against women, and be concerned about the various needs of Bangladeshi female household heads.

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