Challenges of the Female Heads of Household in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: This study explores the socio-cultural challenges faced by the female heads of household in Bangladesh. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the interviews with 22 purposively selected female household heads from two communities in northwest Bangladesh. The study revealed that the challenges of female heads differed according to their class position, place of living (rural-urban), and route to the headship. It indicated that the female heads used to face both financial and social challenges like difficulties in child rearing and provoking male behavior. The study also explored that the urban female-heads were more exposed 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 policies and interventions should create income-earning opportunities and a positive social environment where these women can live freely.

Key words: Female Heads of Household; Challenges of Female Heads; Bangladesh.

Introduction

The given emphasize on the male-headship of households as a normal phenomenon renders female-headed households as unusual, isolated and underprivileged category in many societies (Chant, 1997). Although it is generally believed that families, whether nuclear or extended, are headed by men and primarily rely on a male breadwinner, the phenomenon of female-headed households is not totally uncommon. Indeed the number of female-headed households are growing recently even in the social contexts where patriarchal norms are absolutely dominant. The number of female-headed households in Bangladesh has also been growing in recent years.

Bangladesh is a lower-middle income countries situated in South Asia. Almost 25% of the Bangladeshi people 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 12.5 percent of the households are headed by women (Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 2014). Since the society expects that men should be the household head, the female heads of households usually experience an atypical situation due to the change of traditional 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 (Buvinic & 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 emphasize on their poverty situation (Barros, Fox, & Mendonca, 1997; Buvinic & Gupta, 1997; Fuwa, 2000; Hamdok, 1999; Klasen, 2000; Lewis, 1993; Mencher, 1993; Pressman, 2002; Quisumbing, Haddad, & Pena, 1995). However, a few studies revealed that the female headed households are not only economically disadvantaged but also disadvantaged by social factors like education and access to services (Lewis, 1993; Mannan, 2000; Mencher, 1993). However, female heads of household 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/challenges 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 challenges faced by the female heads in patriarchal society, particularly in Bangladesh.

Since female-headed households are not all homogeneous group (Barros et al., 1997; Fuwa, 2000; Lewis, 1993), there is also a gap in the literatures that shows how the challenges 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 the heads. The main objective of the current study is to explore the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of the challenges faced by the female heads of household according to their class position, geographical (rural-urban) location, and routes to the headship in Bangladesh.

**Data and Methods**

**Study Design**

The 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 northwest 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 Raminagar, one of the wards of the Rajshahi City.

**Samples and Data Collection**

The sample of the study was 22 female household heads. The study perceived female heads of the household 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 heads of households 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 heads of household 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 were emerged during the data analysis process which revealed the constraints of female heads that they face in their daily life. The ranges of these constraints and difficulties the female heads are struggling with, which appeared from the vivid interview of the female heads, are as follows: 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 the earnings 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, engaged 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 head in the sample. All interviews indicated that this was a problem of 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 the 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 not 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 the 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 the responsibility 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 for Taking Care of the Children

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

Every day I work 10 hours outside the home and there is nobody to look after my daughter... When I work outside, my daughter has to stay in 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’ was similarly emerged from the following interviews of a 43-year-old female household head who was constrained by time in child rearing though she was having 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’ father/mother fetch them from school ... I have to stay at my office from 9 am. to 5/6 pm. It’s been even late 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 the child and all the household chores like cooking, washing etc. In case of the female heads, they are not only the breadwinner, but also responsible for every other thing including care for the child, household chores and also the necessary shopping for the family. As there is no other person in the family to share the work, the female heads in this study found it very difficult for them to juggle between their work and household chores simultaneously. However, the work which met the urgent need for earning an income was itself appeared to be a problem in the lives of the female heads in the sample.

Difficulties in Parenting the Child

Another major challenge of the female head mother was the difficulties in parenting their children while they hardly have time to take proper care of their children. A 33-year old woman who had a teenage 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 father in nurturing her children:

When my husband died, I felt that how 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 of 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 was emerged as the feelings of insecurity that was 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 the safety of hers...I wonder if 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 sound 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...

Provocative Male Behavior

The other type of feeling of insecurity was revealed as the provocative male behavior. Not only the abandoned women, but also the other female participantsindicated about provocative male behaviors that made their life vulnerable to move freely in the public places.

It was also revealed that many study participants 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 high status job and sufficient income could not avert the uncertainty of 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 person 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 if the person denied try to do harm to my son ... this terrible feelings snatched the peace of 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. For poor female heads, economic scarcity along with the feelings of insecurity forced them to remarry. The female heads with high economic status were also found to be agonized from these insecure feelings.

However, it also appeared that the female heads differed according to the routes to household headship in facing the challenges like “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 brings the loss of social and emotional supports from the 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 Bangladesh 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 was staying with one of my relatives home and was working 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 well dress-up?’ 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 shared that her neighbors do 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 life 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 who are currently living with their sick/disabled husbands – revealed that they were not stigmatized by the society for managing the family. Besides, it was 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 women ... people look at it very critically ... they say, it must be my fault, that my husband left me ... now tell me, if my husband leave 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 aggravated my sufferings (Interview No. 14, 2013).

Discussion

From the findings, it appeared that the challenges 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 in Bangladesh use to face immense difficulties in terms of juggling between paid work outside their home 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, the women heads as well as working mothers were struggling with caring for their children properly. This might be related to the typical gender division of labor prevalent in Bangladesh society where men are supposed to be the main breadwinner as well as guardian of the family while women should play their roles through taking care of the family.

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 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 (1993) theorization that gender roles reflect a society’s distribution of men and women into breadwinner and home-maker 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 (Stanley & Wise, 1983). In fact, the narratives of the female heads participated 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 Bangladesh, 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 controlled 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 the 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 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 the female headship is also broadly related to the patriarchal norms of the society. In the context of male breadwinner and female home-maker perspective of gender role, the female who are the breadwinners as well as heads of their household might be stigmatized and viewed as ‘deviant’. The story of the female heads not only revealed the negative attitudes of the relatives and neighbors towards them, the women themselves perceived moving in public spaces for earning an income as men’s job and so, as 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 the husbands were staying in the same households, the female heads were found to be freed from the stigma of living alone as women 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 the female household heads are in general likely to face immense socioeconomic and cultural constraints that make their lives very difficult to survive in the society. While previous studies mostly considered female headed households as homogenous resource poor communities in the Bangladesh society, the current study suggests that the challenges and challenges usually faced by the 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 challenges of the 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 the female headed households, so that a community based holistic support system could be incorporated for enhancing the lives of the female heads and also for the overall well-being of the female heads.

Since female household heads in Bangladesh are generally constrained by socioeconomic and cultural factors, the study suggests that the government or non-government social agencies should create support services that could enhance the socioeconomic security of the female heads. Social welfare agencies should focus on the female heads so that they can achieve confidence and leadership skills, which would enable them to deal confidently with outdoor business matters and to take part in the public spheres and activities. The organizations should also provide childcare services for the 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. The social agencies should be encouraged by appropriate social policy to provide work particularly for the female heads. The necessary funding should also be provided in the national budget for launching special education and training programs for the female heads to improve their skills and abilities so that the 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 the female household heads in Bangladesh. Both general macroeconomic policy and specific micro-level interventions should be aware of predominant gender discriminations against, and be concerned about the various needs of, the female household heads in Bangladesh.

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