



Women Headed Households and Social Stigma: A Study in Jammu District

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Abstract

There are different categories that fall in the broader category of women headed households. They are widowed, abandoned, separated and single mothers, women whose husbands have migrated for employment for considerable period of time, and women whose husbands have lost their function as economic providers due to unemployment or illness. This typology also includes women who are defacto heads of households and includes women whose husbands are present at home but are non- functional economically. Thus, a women headed household need not necessarily be single parent family, since the basis for the definition of women headed household is “the women roles as the economic provider regardless of the presence or absence of the spouse at home”.

Key words: Women Headed Households, defacto heads, single parent family, Social Stigma

Introduction

Defining women headed household has been a subject of controversy all over the world. Much of the controversy originated on account of the complexities involved in the defining the term ‘head’ and ‘household’. In statistical usage, the ‘head of the household’ was originally the reference person used to identify family relationship within the household. Since in most cultures the respondent and the perceived bosses of the household were generally men, it was perhaps natural that the person recorded as head of the household by male enumerators was usually a male (Rani, 2006).

The Indian census too has been measuring and identifying women headed households since 1961. The 1961 census defined a household as “the entire group of persons who commonly live together and take their meals from a common mess unless the exigencies of work prevent them doing so”. The head of the household was defined as “a person who is recognized as such in the household” or “the person who bears the chief responsibility for the maintenance of the household” and “takes decisions on behalf of the household”. It was added that the head “need not necessarily be the eldest male but may even be a female or a younger member of either sex”. The National Sample Survey, another body to collect data on socio-economic issues in India, has taken almost a similar view of the household, defining it as “a group of persons living together and taking food from a common kitchen”. However, the survey did not make any effort to define the head of the household. The census doesn’t define a ‘male headed’ and ‘women headed’ household separately. One common definition is adopted and based on the response, ‘male’ or ‘female’ headed households are identified. According to the India census data 2011 about 27 million households, constituting 11 percent of total households in the country, are headed by women.

There are different categories that fall in the broader category of women headed households. Buvinic (1978) included the following groups of women in the category of women headed households. They are widowed, abandoned, separated and single mothers, women whose husbands have migrated for employment for considerable period of time, and women whose husbands have lost their function as economic providers due to unemployment or illness. This typology also includes women who are defacto heads of households and includes women whose husbands are present at home but are non- functional economically. Thus, according to Buvinic a women headed household need not necessarily be single parent family, since the basis for the definition of women headed household is “the women roles as the economic provider regardless of the presence or absence of the spouse at home”.

Bradwein and Brown (1974) argued that a woman may become a single parent through one of several circumstances: (1) bearing children out of wedlock; (2) becoming separated or divorced; (3) becoming widowed. The present paper has focused on the second and third category only i.e. becoming separated or divorced and becoming widowed. According to Rani (2006) there were several reasons for women headedness, widowhood was reported as the major reason in several studies (Pakrasi 1966; Pakrasi & Karmarkar, 1981; Visaria & Visaria, 1985 I; Bharat, 1986; Rajaratnam & Gandhi 1988 and Lingam, 1994). Other reasons were divorce or separation (Pakrasi, 1966; Mehta, 1975; Visaria & Visaria, 1985 and Pothan, 1986) and desertion (Srinivasan, 1987) and male migration (Gulati, 1983 and Shanti, 1994). Even the State of World Women Report (1985) stated that the divorce, separation, widowhood and migration are the major reasons for the universal increase in the number and percentage of women headed households (Chatterji, 1988). Since there were different categories of women headed households but the research was restricted to study only those women who have become the head of the household, either because of legal separation/ divorce or because of death of their partners. Therefore, in order to focus on the problem under study a working definition of women headed households has been adopted.

According to this, a women headed household is one where the single mother with one or more dependent has been the main supporter of the household economy. She heads the household in view of the permanent absence of the spouse either due to death, desertion or separation.

Female head in the patriarchal culture refers to the de-facto head especially a woman who leads and manages the household in absence of eligible male in the family system. Several social science studies reveal that female headed households (FHHs) in the patriarchal societies are increasing rapidly in the world, the households where women are the main bread earners for the family in the presence or absence of their husbands or other adult male members irrespective of their marital status. The women surveyed included both de jure and de facto female heads. The de jure or legal women heads of households were widowed, divorced, abandoned and single women who supported themselves and their dependents. Women who headed their households due to male. Migration or the married women who were financially responsible for their households due to male's disability, unemployment or reluctance to earn a living, were de facto female heads.

Chant, (1997) in her article mentions that it is also important to distinguish between de jure and de facto women-headed households. The former are units with no resident male partner on a permanent basis, and include divorced, separated, and widowed women. De facto female heads, on the other hand are women with no male partners resident in the household, yet where men contribute to household maintenance. The most common type of de facto headship is due to male labor migration, where men migrate societies for certain periods of time, sending remittances home to be allocated by the female head.

Ranjay Vardhan, (1999) in his study on ‘Female Headed Households in Patriarchal Society’ found that majority of the household heads tend to be those of widows followed by women who assume headship due to divorce and desertion which is rising in recent years in our society. Migration for employment of men not only to the other parts of the country but also to the other countries is also emerging as an important reason for the emergence of such households.

Female headed household is one in which the woman is the head in the absence of father due to any reason, i.e., she is manager, provider and decision maker in the family. Female headed household and their children constitute a rapidly increasing population. Much of the initial research on single parent family focused on single mothers due to father's absence. The concept of female headed household is of recent origin. The incidence of female headed households was growing particularly in developed countries. But rearing families as single mothers is tough task and is full of challenges. The female headed

households are often subjected to extreme economic problems. Poverty is persistently linked with female headed households (Rani, 2006)

The headship of the household was defined as a person who is recognized as such in the household or a person who bears the chief responsibility for the maintenance of the household and takes decision on the behalf of the household. One of the changes in the family since 1950s has been emergence of one parent families. Throughout the world, the number of women headed household is on increase. The concept of women headed household originated from the black culture of USA, where the male member of the family was separated from the family as slaves and the females with dependent children were left to have a separate household. However, Blumberg (1994) argue that the mother child family type was widely disrupted around the world and is not a phenomenon linked to being “ethically Negro”. He also says that now a day there is more awareness that such units are increasing in both developing and developed countries and among diverse ethnic groups in Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Latin America, the United States and parts of South East Asia. Over here ten percent of the families in United States are headed by one parent. Nearly 90 percent of these single parents are women. The alarming fact is that all over the world, women headed household are also among the most poverty stricken household.

The growth of women headed families is the widowhood of women. The State of Worlds Women Report says “in many countries it is not a living man that abandons a woman, but a dead one”. It is true that most women marry men older than themselves. In many developing countries particularly in rural areas because of age disparity between the wife and the husband, men generally die earlier than their wives. In most cases widows are forced to live alone and separately due to lack of support from family and the community. Even in developed countries, in spite of the comparatively greater hardship women have to undergo, their life expectancy is longer than that of the men and this also increases their possibilities of being widows.

Earning the income and assuming authority for the family are ascribed to men housework, childcare and emotional support are said to be for women. These assumptions affect the opportunities available to the solo parent. Since most solo parents are women, the economic and authority functions might be anticipated to be the most problematic. Given the need for income, the single parent is often forced to become the bread-winner (i.e., assume the traditional male role). Women’s work is considered to be the private domain affair and men’s work to be the public one. Though the debate of private public dichotomy continues, the women are seen working outside the private domain also. Unfortunately lot many times the dual role of women is not acknowledged. There has been changes in the status of the women, because of education, employment and other factors, but in the patriarchal societies she is still not been able to get the status of head of the household in the presence of a patriarch though she might be contributing economically also.

Emergence of women headed households under different circumstances is not without problems and one such problem, which have been highlighted in many studies is the problem of poverty. While exploring and reviewing literature a general question that came to the mind was whether the women in women headed households are poor only because they were poor before divorce or death of the husband, or does poverty follow from such reasons. Feminization of poverty describe a phenomenon in which women represent disproportionate percentages of world’s poor. UNIFEM describe it as “the burden of poverty borne by women, especially in developing countries”. This concept is not only consequence of lack of income, but is also the result of deprivation of capabilities and gender biased present in both societies and governments. This includes the poverty of choices and opportunities such as the ability to lead a long healthy and creative life and enjoy basic right like freedom respect and dignity. Women’s increasing share of poverty is related to the rising incidence of female headed household. Female headed household are considered to be the poverty-stricken household all over the world. They are at the highest risk of poverty due to lack of income and resources and are more affected by inflation (Vardan, 1999).

Sylvia Chant (1997) argued that women-headed households are commonly regarded as the ‘poorest of the poor’. Not only do they seem to be disproportionately concentrated among low-income groups, but female headship itself is seen to exacerbate poverty. Yet a growing body of research on developing societies suggests that although poverty may precipitate the formation of female-headed households, and that some aspects of female headship can give rise to economic disadvantage, members of these units are not necessarily worse-off than people in male-headed domestic arrangements. In this article the author argues that ‘poorest of the poor’ is a misleading stereotype for female-headed households and that we cannot generalize about female heads, and that examination of intra-household characteristics is essential for the understanding of economic vulnerability. The article also signposts the

dangers of 'poorest of the poor' stereotyping for creating and/or reinforcing negative public images of, and attitudes towards, women-headed households. she further argues that there are many different explanations for why women head households and that these differences can lead to different outcomes that are not necessarily negative for women's wellbeing. Although separation, divorce, and widowhood have often been associated with women's relative poverty, separation and divorce may also be liberating for women, enhancing their personal autonomy: free of the senior male patriarch, their households can become enabling spaces.

Women headed households earn considerably less than men heading household and are clustered in low prospects, low income job. Earned income has a significant positive impact on the personal efficacy of these women, regardless of family demand, race and educational level. However, the effects of both earned and non - earned family income are of similar magnitude, suggesting that these women derive a sense of efficacy from personal income to the extent that it improves family income. Many women heading household face the dual task of being family provider and caretaker in a poverty context. Thus, they are at increased risk for experiencing financial stresses that undermine efficacy and through this, increase depression. Women headed families are more likely to experience chronic stress in the form of low income and low level of social support and are more likely to experience acute stress in the form of major life events. Female heads have much lower self- esteem and efficacy and are much less optimistic about future. Vergheese(1990)and Radhadevi(1988) pointed out that these women face financial problems with few of asset, were placed low skilled, engaged in unorganized sector and were paid low wages. They were the sole earner of the household and were overburdened with the multiple responsibilities of earning, child care and home management. But it was also reported that the work participation rate was higher among the women headed household than the currently married women.

Foster (1981) argued that the issues of women headed families relate to balancing demands with available resources and were somewhat different from that of two parent families. In women headed families, economic resources were fewer and demand on the homemaker for family maintenance were greater due to the absence of a spouse. They had to assess the available resources from the environment and within the family for reallocation to meet the demands on the family system, which need to be prioritized, and many others may not be met. In order to ease the financial strain, these mothers discussed the problems with their children. Disclosure of financial matters and personal worries in a way helped the mothers to curb the children material consumption and social experiences. Since these mothers were forced to earn because of the single status, home making and childcare became additional role responsibilities that led to difficulty in fulfilling role obligations.

Holmstrom points out that it is legally impossible for a woman to head the family if the husband is present, regardless of her relative income, power, or status. Mothers and children are expected to be under the protection of, and dependent upon the man of the family. Sociologists reflect this attitude by routinely measuring a divorced woman's status in terms of her ex-husband or her father, thus denying that she has any status of her own (Nye, 1964).

There is evidence that women in general are taken less seriously and are respected less than men (Goldberg, 1968). Further the female family head would receive less community prestige and status than a man at the same economic or educational level, and probably less status than a married woman who takes her status from her husband. Her reduced status might diminish prestige for the family as a whole, and make the family less powerful vis-a-vis community institutions. Credit granting institutions, will often refuse credit to a divorced/ widowed woman, or grant it only in her ex-husband's name. Banks frequently deny mortgages or other loans to these women, sometimes insisting that the ex-husband or the woman's father sign for her and thus partially control her property (U.S. House, 1970). Landlords may refuse to rent families without adult males, with the result that a woman as head of household may have to pay more than a man for equivalent housing. In general, not only does the women-headed family have fewer economic resources because the head is female, but because of lack of recognition and reduced bargaining power vis-a-vis the community the family gets less with the resources it has. Marsden (1969) notes that women-headed families were often shown little respect by neighbors. The issue of authority has been always remained a matter of concern in patriarchal societies.

The issue of child care and development in women headed households is also of a major concern. The impact of the single parent families on child development is complex and ambiguous. During 1950s and 1960s the prevailing view of researchers was that divorce and other marital disruption were indicative of pathology and children from such families' exhibit pathological behaviors as well. But later this opinion was challenged and the literature emphasized that children in such families were disadvantaged

and the pathological behaviors if any, exhibited by them were the outcome of interaction among a variety of factors (Brandwein, Fox & Brown, 1974).

Socialization process in women headed families differ in important ways from that of a typical two parent families. Three factor seemed crucial for understanding this process. They are parental values and expectations, children attachment to parents and parent's ability to influence their children's decision and behavior (McLanahan & Booth 1989). Socialization difference among parents are determined primarily by the structural condition of being one or one of the two parents (McLanahan, 1988). Parental involvement and supervision in mother headed families were somewhat lower than in two parent families. They were much less consistent in their discipline patterns and household routines and were more erratic. Single mothers had less input into children decision than married parent and adolescents in mother headed families were more susceptible to peer pressure than children in two parent families.

Children from women headed families obtain fewer years of education and were more likely to drop out of high school than off springs from two parent families. Adolescent in women headed families report receiving less help with homework and with planning their high school curriculum than adolescents living with both parents. These mothers were less likely to monitor the adolescent social activities. Because of income insecurity and limited resources, single mother were thought to have lower educational expectation for their children than married mother. But at the same time there are researches which argue that, daughters in women headed families were more likely to report that their mothers wanted them to attend college than were daughter in two parent families (McLanahan, 1988).

Single parent (women heads) considers children help as essential to the functioning of the household. In women headed families, spousal help was replaced to some extent by help from the children (Weiss, 1979). Studies (Peters & Haldeman, 1987) indicate that children from women headed families spend significantly more time than children from two parent families, on the household task such as food preparation, dish washing, shopping, house cleaning and maintenance, care of clothing and physical and non- physical care of family members. This kind of involvement in household work may foster feelings of shared responsibility among family members.

Poverty and economic instability are not the only sources of strain in mother headed families. In addition to income loss, these mothers undergo many other changes some of which involve the loss of social status as well as social support. Income insecurity and changes in work patterns indicate that women heads experience a good deal of stress in daily lives. Single female parents were more depressed and more anxious. The demands of being single parents in themselves seem to affect their well- being, independent of the financial difficulties experienced by them. Many alone parents experience stigma, prejudice, a limited social and sexual life, and feelings of guilt, insecurity, low self- image, loneliness and a sense of failure. All these may be attributed to the strain of one parent doing the job of two parents. Problems in parenting or problems caused by child behavior are sometimes indirectly associated with depressive symptoms. Depression among women heads also appeared to be more closely associated with the stability, resources, role strain due to time and energy demands of work and the level of support available in the neighborhood (McLanahan, 1983).

According to a journal published by National Council on Family relations (2009) stigma is ascribed to divorced / separated women for their presumed inability to keep their men. There are expectations of neighbors, schools and courts that children from broken homes will not be properly disciplined, will have sex role confusion, and will be more likely to get into trouble. The mothers themselves may incorporate society's attitudes, feeling insecure and guilt-ridden regarding their childrearing abilities. They may seek solutions in attempting the "super-woman" role, or in fleeing to remarriage. Further evidence of negative social attitudes towards these families is the virtual absence of social supports such as public provisions for day care and housekeeping services.

In light of the above discussion the paper has therefore tried to look into the resources available to the women in such situations, how are the functions are performed and roles filled by the husbands are redistributed and what are the effects of this reallocation on the family and on its individual members, under what conditions are women able to play the authority role within the family and represent the family to the outside world and do women heading families feel they or their children are being stigmatized or discriminated against and if so what is their reaction to perceive stigma?

Jammu city was selected as the area of the study. The interaction was made with 50 female respondents. During the review of literature it was found that there is hardly any study of single parent household, especially women headed households in the city of Jammu. Hence paper tried to look into these single parent families especially focusing on the women headed families and has focused on their socio-economic, living and working conditions and the problems of the women in the women headed households.

Insight from the Field

The society has different perspectives for widowed or divorced women. If you are a widow, the society will be sympathetic, but if you are a divorcee, they always think that you are the reason of the divorces. Once you hold the title of single mothers, the other married women tend to be protective of their husbands.

During the field work, it was found that majority of women headed household felt stigmatized, the negative perception towards her in the society. The cultural and social norms often tends to marginalize her. They have been looked down upon at all social gathering be it a marriage, birth of child or house care norms. For instance, a widow or a divorcee does not participate in many social functions and festivals because people perceive her presence as inauspicious. The negative perception towards female headed household were normal to them. They experienced such negativities from neighbors, friends and even relatives. This is related to the cultural belief that was adopted by society. Thus, it can be said that sometime women as a single mother, they were exposed to stigmatization due to their status and social inequality. The single mothers were categories as 'good' or 'bad'. The single mother out of a divorce, she would be labeled as a 'bad' woman. Divorced single mothers were considered bad as the society put the blame on them, accusing them to be the reason of the divorce. However, if husband has died, she was considered to be a 'good' woman.

It has been pointed out that when there is only one parent, the family is often less well off financially. A low income family is exposed to conditions like lower education level of children, lower economic achievement and can result in leaving the child feeling isolated and lonely. Being a single parent and struggling for money often coincide. It is also true that children of one parent households are generally less supervised, their action are less monitored and there is usually less communication between the child and parent. This creates a low environment for the family.

Many respondents from the field reported that their children feel stigmatized in the society. The mothers were also worried about the future of their children. There were responses regarding the less concern of the society towards the children from these families. The respondents argued that younger children feel more isolated and stigmatized because of the absence of father, be it a social gathering, going to market theatres, malls or attending parent-teacher meeting. But on the other hand it was also found from the fieldwork that the father are being invited by the mother during the birthday and PTM of the child, so that level of stigma and loneliness can be avoided. They further argued that the children also raised the questions during certain rituals e.g. Karvachauth, questioning mothers for not celebrating it like others. Also, the mothers being divorced were also worried about the marriage of their children.

During the fieldwork, the respondents argued that staying home to actively care and monitor their children was integral to children's physical and psychological well-being and also gave them a sense of being good mother but their financial difficulties were in conflict with the interest to stay home. Due to child care related problems, women were seen to hold low-income jobs that do not provide employment benefits. Mother with young children had much difficulty managing the multiple roles of work and family, hardly obtaining sufficient rest for themselves.

Therefore it has been concluded from the study that a woman's choice of heading her household is affected by her own characteristics such as age, marital status, income, occupation, socio-economic status of her natal home and variety of other facts. Women's new roles created a shift in gender relations and many women said that they were more "uncomfortable" with, than empowered by these new roles.

Problem of identity was a concern for these women, but widows did feel the absence of male Partners. The natal families were concerned about their daughters and in some cases, the researcher was asked to convince the respondents for re-marriage (by their Parents). Divorced women were against re-marriage but a widowed women were found to be more reluctant on this issue.

While women are constantly being victimized and exploited by society, women headed households are victims of double exploitation by virtue of them being single. They lack the protection of a family and therefore, are vulnerable to exploitation- social, economic, psychology and sexual. They suffer from social ostracism, economic deprivation, psychic tension and physical discomfort, there is a need for formulation of special policies for women headed households. There is need for intervention of the government for helping these needy households. It can be done by pushing through a welfare reform package that provided for structural programs and support to allow welfare.

Therefore, the women heads bear the burden of multi-dimensional poverty arising from the absence of support from an adult male and struggle to earn a livelihood as females and as heads of households. Women headship, therefore, brings firstly some escape from male subordination within the households and secondly a range of disadvantages also. It was found that women heads are managing their life with some sort of social support but the financial challenges are mostly difficult to overcome.

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