



## Socio-economic Marginalization of Female Heads: A Case of Haryana

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**Abstract:** *Over the years patriarchy has maintained several stereotypical images of men and women. It describes a specific type of male dominated family where an elderly male is considered to be the head. These heads are usually fathers controlling women's mobility, sexuality, marriage, production and reproduction and responsible to provide economic support to the family while women are generally home makers. In the present context due to various social and economic transformations shift is visible from this traditional patriarchal family to female headed family. In the event of absence of male, women are assuming direct responsibility of running the household. The female headed households are not only posing challenges to male hegemony but also bringing out changes in women's status in the patriarchal society, however these female heads are facing problems due to their relatively poorer condition as being prior dependent on male partners financially, their late entry into labour market and their socialization as having lower position in the gender hierarchy. The present study tries to find out the socio-economic profile of female heads, their social exclusion and exploration of identity, psychological well being and factors affecting their lives. Qualitative and quantitative both the methods of research have been applied. The results indicate that they suffer from double burden of earning livelihood and at the same time tackling with domestic chores single handedly. Moreover they have to develop coping mechanism to deal with societal pressure and maintaining their integrity.*

**Key Words:** *Female heads, household, patriarchy, stereotypes, marginalization*

### Introduction

The term "Head of the Household" is heavily loaded by traditional, patriarchal and cultural values. It usually has a connotation of authority in itself and is a concept that generally tends to be associated with men. This usually leads to the presumption that men are heads of households even when the women have assumed the role of sole economic provider. Now the family, household structure and headship are fast changing under the impact of structural changes. Gender roles are also diverting from the traditional responsibilities and these changing gender roles may clash with the predetermined societal norms. Many women now dare to live independently without the help of men. Due to various circumstances they are assuming the role of sole economic providers and managers in the household. Although not in greater number, yet their number is quite significant and their status as head of the household represents change in their status.

Brydon and Chant (1989) define female headed family as one which consists of woman living alone with her children<sup>1</sup> while according to Ranjana Kumari (1989) female headed household is one in which the female is the major provider and/or protector, carrier, bearer and decision maker in the household.<sup>2</sup>

The phenomena of female headed households also known as matrifocal families and mother only families developed in response to cultural changes and industrialization and urbanization. Widowhood, divorce and separation are found to be the most common reasons for women setting up separate establishments. Addiction of men to evil practices, inability of the men to support the family, increased rate of migration of rural youth to the urban economy also lead to women to take up the total responsibility of the family left behind. Higher technical and professional education and a variety of new opportunities have enabled women to reach at a level and to achieve greater equality with men both within and outside the household in legal, social, educational, occupational, political and economic spheres. They are not only becoming independent but are also taking decisions in the household. These women choose to be spinster, set up their independent establishment and become head of their households. Patriarchy generally separates women from their natal homes after their marriages to which they no longer have any claim. Hence in the case of death of husband or desertion or divorce, they are often rendered destitute, as they neither have a home in their family of marriage nor in their natal homes. This perspective points to some of the problems with

which women have to encounter while running and managing the households. Earlier such women were looked after by others in joint families in case of any such event but now in response to changing social and economic conditions, more nuclear families are emerging in which women alone have to assume the responsibility to run the household.<sup>3</sup> They suffer from various economic, social, emotional problems and physical insecurity as they have to play the role of both father and mother. Despite of various challenges, they are not only acquiring headship status in the household, but are running and managing it efficiently.

Buvinic et. al. (1978) cited five reasons for emergence of female headed households: (1) The broad range of domestic situations typically characterized by the absence of a resident male head viz. widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion (2) Migration of male members for long periods (3) Loss of economic function by resident males due to severe unemployment, disability, illness and male reluctance to accept jobs seen as status reducing etc. (4) Households with no mature sons (5) Sons residing in independent nuclear units.<sup>4</sup>

Yousseff and Hetler (1984)<sup>5</sup> distinguish between defacto and dejure female-headed households. Dejure heads are women who never set up home with the father of their children, or who are legally or permanently separated from them because of divorce, desertion or widowhood. Defacto heads are women whose spouses are either temporarily absent, or those who despite having a co-resident partner, play the dominant economic role in daily family life.

Ranjana Kumari (1989) has classified Female Headed Households into two broad categories on the basis of their emergence i.e. in the absence of male/ presence of male. In the absence of male category, she has categorised widows, adult males out migrated, separated/ deserted women, divorced and unmarried women. In the presence of male, female-headed households which have (i) More able and competent female (ii) Adult males physically handicapped (iii) Adult males able and working but not contributing to family fund (iv) Adult males not willing to work.<sup>6</sup>

As per Census 2011<sup>7</sup>, in India out of total 2,467 lac households, about 269 lac i.e. 10.9% are headed by females. In rural areas 10.4% and in urban areas 12.0% households are headed by females. The Census report shows that Lakshadweep has the highest number of female headed households i.e. 40.2% followed by Kerala (22.7%). In Haryana the

percentage of female headed households was 9.5 in 2011. In the year 2001 there were 10.4% female headed households in India. The Census also shows that female headed households account for nearly three fourths of those headed by a widowed person, about two thirds of those headed by separated people and about 60% of those headed by the divorced. Only 4% of married women head a household.

In the patriarchal society a woman becomes the household head only if the male is absent from the house either permanently or temporarily or he is unable to support the family financially, thereby leaving woman to become the chief provider and the decision maker for the family. The burden of maintaining a family for a woman head is not any less, it is in fact even greater. With little educational attainment, female heads face several handicaps relative to men not only in developing their potential but also with respect to physical survival. These handicaps when coupled with social customs and traditions bring more difficulties for them. In the present study an attempt has been made to explore socio-economic profile of female heads, their social exclusion and exploration of identity, psychological well-being and factors affecting their lives with the help of case studies.

#### **Review of Literature**

Mukherjee & Ray (2015)<sup>8</sup> in their study found that existence of female headed households is arising out of several factors mainly absence of male member viz, widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion, migration of male members for long periods etc. The educational status of female head is poor compare to the male head and this results into lower capability and skill of the female head and resulting poor socio-economic condition. A significant section of female headed households is single member. Average amount of land owned by female headed households is much lower than that of the male headed households. They added that casual employment among women was high among the so called backward group though for the Muslim women it was low.

The study of Buvinic and Gupta (1997)<sup>9</sup> concluded that female headed household in general had more dependents and these have higher non-workers to workers ratio compared to other households. Secondly, female heads typically work for lower wages and had less production resources compared to men owing to gender bias against women. Thirdly, women typically bear the burden of household chores

that result in time and mobility constraints compared to male heads.

Research by Datta and Mishra (2011)<sup>10</sup> pointed out that women increased their work load, mobility and participation in both private and public spheres in rural Bihar, as their husbands migrated into towns or other villages for work.

The study of Habib (2010)<sup>11</sup> suggested that absence of a male bread winner and the lack of tangible resources led to a situation of increased vulnerability for the female heads of households, that in turn affected socio-psychological status of the female heads adversely. The study also suggested that the intangible resources like informal social support had to some extent, compensated the scarcity of tangible resources for the female heads.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are;

- 1) To know the socio-economic profile of female heads.
- 2) To understand the perceptions of female heads towards themselves in relation with the role they have acquired in the society.
- 3) To study their livelihood strategies.
- 4) To identify socio-economic factors affecting the life of female heads and their coping strategies.

#### **Methodology**

To study both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the lives of female heads, explorative survey design has been used in the present study. To study quantitative aspects, information regarding personal profile, financial condition and family structure has been gathered and qualitative aspects i.e. social and psychological life, support system and challenges of female heads have been investigated with the help of a semi structured questionnaire designed for the purpose.

Female headed household is not a common phenomenon in our society, In order to make the sample representative it was important to ensure the participation of all the categories of the female heads in the study. So the selection of the sample was not limited to a particular area. Convenience sampling method has been applied to collect the sample and a total of 25 female heads have been included in the study. The sample is collected from five districts of Haryana namely Kurukshetra, Karnal, Kaithal, Jind and Hissar.

Female heads under different categories were contacted personally and their detailed case study related to their becoming of the head of the

household has been recorded. Besides this, observation, informal interviews and discussions were also used to collect relevant information. The case studies were conducted during January – March, 2019.

#### **Main Findings**

##### **Socio-economic Background of Female Heads**

The findings of the study showed that majority of respondents were widows i.e. 48 percent followed by 24 percent divorcees or separated from their husbands, 20 percent were unmarried and 8 percent of respondents' husbands had migrated to another country. The largest proportion of the respondents i.e. 48 percent belonged to 30-39 years age group followed by 24 percent belonged to 40-49 years of age. The lowest percentage of respondents i.e. 4 percent were in younger age group of 25-29 years. It was encouraging to note that the highest percentage of respondents i.e. 32 percent were having the post graduate or any further degree like Ph. D., 20 percent respondents were educated up to matriculation level and the same 20 percent were illiterate. The results further showed that 60 percent respondents belonged to general caste. 12 percent of the respondents were housewives and rests of them were earning a livelihood. Among the working respondents 48 percent were doing government or private job. Before assuming headship most of the respondents were housewives and only after the death or separation from their husbands they had to take up the occupation.

##### **Challenging Traditional Family System**

###### **Coping with family and livelihood**

In general, in the Indian context, a house wife is not always equipped with the skills of earning livelihood. Hence, it gets very difficult for her to over come the loss of a husband as well as to become the support of other dependents of the family. Structure and size of the family are two important factors to consider while studying the family of female heads of the households. It was observed that many of the respondents used to live in a joint household setup before the loss or the separation from their husbands. But afterwards they established their own household as either they could not adjust with their in-laws family or they wanted to live independently without becoming burden on anyone. They challenged the traditional family system of being absorbed in the larger family and be at the mercy of the relatives for the survival of their own and children. The results indicated that due to the absence of a male provider in the family, women underwent many tribulations

and the worst sufferers were those who had younger children. They felt themselves handicapped while meeting the basic requirements of children and at the same time they had to play the role of a father as a protector. Where the children were grown up at the time of death of their father they started supporting their mother by contributing towards family income within few years.

Financial status of the family played an important role in this condition. It was seen that in families having poor financial condition with no or very less savings, as a consequence some children dropped out of the school due to lost interest in studies and took up petty jobs of wage labour in the fields or on shops in the market. In a few cases the older parents of the demised husband were also dependent on the earnings of their daughter in law. Being belonged to lower socio-economic class, they were the most vulnerable amongst others. In some cases where the family had a medium socioeconomic status women had to sacrifice a great deal to continue the education of children in the hope that one day, when her children would grow up and start earning, they would be relieved from a great responsibility.

Further in the families belonging to upper socio-economic strata, women heads having adult children were in relatively better position since they did not bear the stress of rearing them up. Female heads who were already earning an income before the death or separation from their husbands were also holding a better footing as they did not need to put in extra efforts to find a work.

The plight of female heads was heightened if they were illiterate and possessed no skill to generate income. Therefore, they were required to make for more economic adjustments. They not only had to change their living standard but they came in direct contact with the basic problems of subsistence itself. It can be considered as rearranging their life pattern. The findings indicated that after the death of the husband or divorce, some of the educated women enhanced their level of education and acquired a job while some other continued their husband's occupation like running the shop, taking up agricultural contract etc. The respondents informed that they had to make tremendous changes in their life style as they solely could not fulfill all the requirements of the family. Some of the respondents (24%) being illiterate or marginally literate became daily wage earners in the informal sector of employment. Female participation in low return informal sector activities is considered evidence of

the feminization of poverty. Due to household survival strategies during economic restructuring, there is an increasing reliance on informal sector employment for women (Bridge, 2001).<sup>12</sup>

Research on female headed households by Buvinic and Gupta (1994)<sup>13</sup> has tended to suggest that female headed households are more likely to be poor than male headed households, hence the term "feminization of poverty" is often linked to it. The reasons for vulnerability cited by the study of Desai and Ahmad (1998)<sup>14</sup> are more or less similar to the present study. They suggested that first of all female headed households are more likely than male headed households to have a smaller number of adults contributing to the household's economic welfare. Secondly, they are usually more likely to be concentrated in poorly paid jobs; thirdly, they may be more constrained by child care demands and consequently may have to accept lower paying jobs.

In case of unmarried single women it was found that all of them were financially secure as after maintaining a certain financial status they decided to remain single. It was also observed that the single women were spending a large amount of their income on their old parents and on brothers' families as they were sharing equal responsibility with their brothers. When the researcher interacted with women heads where husbands had migrated to some other country, it was found that immediately after their husband's migration they suffered from extreme financial crisis as they remained housewives. But after a couple of years when their husbands started sending them money, their condition improved substantially. Klasen, Lechtenfeld and Povel (2011)<sup>15</sup> substantiated that differentiation by subgroups of headship remains important, since especially widows and singles are generally worse off than female heads with a migrated spouse. World Bank (2001)<sup>16</sup> also indicated that de facto households headed by women whose husband migrated in order to work elsewhere may benefit from regularly sent remittances preventing them from falling into poverty.

The respondents with lower income group admitted to face mental and physical stress due to overburden of work and responsibilities however they reported to be never denied by their friends or relatives for financial help. Baden and Milward (2000)<sup>17</sup> posit that female headed households are heterogeneous category and may include relatively well off women. There are more sophisticated analyses of female headship which disaggregate this category into subgroups such as those determined by life cycle



stage, marital strategies or labour deployment. Different subgroups are more likely to be vulnerable to poverty than other. The characteristics of these subgroups vary considerably between contexts depending on a number of factors including the extent of social support available and the degree of social legitimacy accorded to different types of female headed households.

### **The Politics of Social Exclusion**

The female heads of the household function in an environment of socio exclusion. Social discrimination may be found in spheres of social participation, interaction in day to day affairs and in the form of social problems faced by them. This discrimination not only adds to their difficulties in managing their household affairs but also creates challenges in their readjustments with life. On being asked about what type of relationship they maintained with the people surrounding them, majority of them however, reported to maintain cordial relations but at the same time acknowledged to experience social exclusion which was more subtle and difficult to quantify. Widows among the other categories of female heads were the most discriminated ones. It was observed that the age and financial condition of the widows were two important factors determining their social exclusion. A relatively younger widow with smaller kids felt herself the most insecure. A few of them admitted that they were the subject of gossip and even some people tried to make advances with sexual motive perceiving them alone. It was reflected by the findings that the female heads with sound financial status were not worried about the attitude of the society towards them as good financial status brings courage and confidence to deal with any odd. The results also indicated that the relatively younger respondents most often did not participate in the social and religious gatherings and did not get mixed up well with the people around them except their close relatives. On the other hand the older respondents did not find any hesitation in communicating with other people.

The unmarried and the young divorcees reported to be asked embarrassing questions by many people regarding their life plans. They repeatedly suggested them to marry again as it would become very difficult for them to live their whole life alone. People feel uncomfortable with spouseless women around them. They doubt their integrity. In our patriarchal society the honour of a woman is safeguarded by a male patronage. The fear of loosing this honour is

manifested through their concerns and worries about the future of female heads.

### **Issues related to Single Parenting**

Most of the respondents reported that their children, especially younger ones missed the presence of their father very much. The respondents whom husbands were living away believed that their children felt emotionally insecure and lacked paternal care and protection although their husbands were providing all the material facilities to fulfill daily needs of the children. They mentioned that a single mother had to bear much more responsibilities than a father of providing attention, care, emotional support and maintaining a balanced environment of discipline and freedom in the home to groom healthy personality of the children.

The respondents gave varied responses when asked about behavioral changes they perceived among children after the loss of their father. Some of them felt that the children became mature and responsible and started cooperating in each and every affair of the household while some others said that children especially males developed emotional problems and stopped taking interest in studies as they thought that earning money immediately to tackle financial crisis was more important. The results indicated that the socio-economic background of the respondents played an important role in the brought up of children. Women who were educated and belonged to medium to higher income groups faced lesser challenges regarding brought up of children. Respondents' association with relatives was also significant in this matter. Children got timely emotional and material support from the relatives if the mother kept good relation with them.

### **Support System**

Respondents' articulation regarding whether they had ever sought anyone's help in overcoming their day to day difficulties revealed that they had received support and help from their parents or siblings. They mentioned that it was only with the support of their parents that they were able to establish their own establishment. A few of them reported seeking help from the family of their in-laws or of their neighbours to deal with routine difficulties. The findings indicated that the help they sought was mostly financial in nature or sometimes it was in the form of either looking after the children in their absence or in the matters related to paying bills, purchase or construction of a house, marriage of children etc.

### **Psychological Wellbeing**

The analysis of case studies further revealed that female heads apart from social problems suffered from various psychological and emotional problems since they lived all by themselves either with or without children and did not have anyone to share their emotions and feelings. The problem is grave when they lack interpersonal relationship with others. They keep distance with others probably due to the fear of being misunderstood. In the absence of a mature companionship, they experienced loneliness, depression, anxiety and insecurity. The women with grown up children suffered the most with this sense of loneliness. It was seen that the women who were having younger children did not get much time to be alone as they remained busy in fulfilling the needs of their children after getting back from work.

The young respondents mentioned that during odd hours when they needed to move out, they felt very insecure. However, the respondents who were having grown up sons did not face such situation. Since majority of them suffered from the feeling of loneliness and insecurity they were asked about importance of presence of a male in the household. It was significant to note that over whelming majority of respondents considered male's presence as a necessity of the household. They were of the view that however, a woman alone is capable to run the household but the presence of a male provides moral and emotional support in a male dominated society.

#### **Exploring Identity of a Female Head**

Within the household composition of family, hierarchy of members, division of labour, accessibility to resources like education, work and income, recognition of work and political authority determine position of a woman. The belief that woman is suited for domestic service and that motherhood is woman's central vacation is used to legitimize their status in the economy. As soon as they assume headship and become responsible for decision making the ideology that reinforces their economic subordination starts to diminish. They find themselves in a completely different state where change in thoughts and actions is required to accept new role. They come through with a new identity of themselves where only they are responsible for any good or bad in the family not a male. They become actor of their own choice.

All the respondents except the single ones revealed that the female heads are in more disadvantageous condition while heading the households. The reasons they pointed out were firstly, the difficulty in meeting the financial requirements of the family and secondly,

they lack experience of independently running the household. On the contrary the unmarried respondents felt that there was no difference between a male and a female head and women were equally capable and competent to tackle all kinds of situations.

The findings of the study reflected that for the respondents belonging to the lower income group, lack of finances to run a family was the biggest challenge in the absence of a male bread winner. But to the respondents who were already working at the time of death or separation from the spouse or the ones who got a job in the organized sector afterwards did not face as much financial crisis as faced by the women who were daily wage earners or running a petty business. Further it was found that bringing up of younger children, educating them especially the sons who had lost interest in the studies, marriages of children especially of daughters due to the practice of making heavy expanses on girls' marriages, emotional problems aroused due to the lack of companionship and societal problems associated with a lonely woman like non-cooperative attitude of relatives and lack of social participation were the major challenges reported by many of the respondents. The unmarried women heads mentioned that they had to face stiff opposition from various quarters on their decision yet they stuck to their decision.

All of them were agreed that female heads had broken the traditional image of a woman that her life revolved around domestic sphere and they were totally dependent on a male partner for their survival. They showed that a woman had courage and efficiency to run her establishment. Earlier desertion, divorce or widowhood was considered as a curse for women and they had to lead a life under the controlled environment of joint families. The findings reflected that the respondents perceived societal acceptance of them as the head of the household. In the initial days even they did not gather courage to consider them as a head. But now as they are participating in outside activities and acquiring several life skills, they are gaining confidence, becoming more and more independent and receiving acceptance of the society.

#### **Conclusion**

In the traditional social set up when a woman assumes headship her life is not as easy as a male head. Being a female she has to counter with different kinds of issues like personal, economic, social, psychological and familial. They suffer from a

sense of loneliness and physical insecurity as well. These female heads are generally more vulnerable to poverty as they have less options of survival because of limited education and training. Female headed households are disadvantaged regarding the access to land, labour and credit and discriminated by societal attitude. They suffer from a double burden of earning livelihood and at the same time tackling with other domestic responsibilities single handedly. Moreover they have to develop coping mechanism to deal with societal pressure and maintaining their integrity. These women are bringing out change in the status of women and deserve special attention of the policy makers especially the ones who are at the margin of poverty.

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