



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Prosperity of female is prosperity for all. Female and Male working together will multiply the force to accomplish objectives of a strong World economy." This is the general expression based on the reality that, "Females hold up half the sky" which emphasises the vitality of the need of female's development (Marion,1992).

Females constitute half of the world's population having equally important role along with males, in creating a better life for families. At present in many areas of the world, females are not visible, their voices are not heard, their work is not valued, and their future is dependent upon decision made by male, leaders of the government, religions, communities and families.

An important component of development in the third World countries comprises of rural households as production and consumption units where females play the crucial role in all spheres of household production activities. However, till recent past, this productive role of females tended to be "invisible" and hence, either taken for granted or ignored (Roy, 1996).

Over centuries, millions of females in far flung regions in India have been carrying on their shoulders the burden of poverty, ignorance, superstition, customs and traditions. Despite the multitude of social constraints, economic deprivation and woeful negligence, these females have been the embodiment of

sacrifice, surrendering all their comforts for the welfare of the children and other members of the family, and indirectly for the well being of the community (Kaur, 1989). Rural females in our country share abundant responsibilities and perform a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, maintaining the household, attending to farm labour, taming domestic animals and extending help in rural artisanship and handicrafts.

Although almost all rural women are involved to some extent in different activities, the nature and extent of their participation varies widely and is strongly influenced by the economic status, caste and the ethnic background of the households. The word "status" is dependent on the context in which it is used, more so in highly structured social systems, like in India. In fact, no specific definition has been provided for 'status'. The varying connotations of the term 'status' and the large number of social, economic and institutional factors influencing the status of women, make it difficult to assert or specify, a set of variables that would adequately ensure an empirical measure of the 'status' of women (Subramaniam 1995)

Traditions, customs and usage have all enjoined upon rural females to assume responsibility for performing activities which include, but may not be restricted to, collecting fuel and fodder, gathering food from forests, fetching drinking water, cooking for the household, child rearing, a host of household activities and farm operations. Activities carried by rural females are difficult, time consuming and provide critical support to rural life. Though many of these activities may not be

directly visible and tangible in terms of economic gains, it is nevertheless well accepted that the rural females play a crucial role in the dynamics of our rural landscape. These females lack education, they are poor and untrained for many types of work. In addition to the household and child rearing tasks, they have food production tasks and provide the fuel and water necessary for the family. Even though females do the agricultural work for their households, they do not receive sufficient training in modern technology to work efficiently which results in low production and long hours of labour. They lack the education to help their children develop. The work females do for home and family is not counted in the gross national product of developing or developed countries of the world. Their contribution to the economy is ignored.

The Indian society has been transformed in the last four decades by economic, social and demographic changes that have had large scale effects on the well-being of the family. Rural poverty, shrinking land holdings, mechanisation of agriculture, industrialization, large scale migration to the urban areas, and the rapidly changing ethos have all brought major changes in the basic social unit, the family. One of the major changes is the increasing number of families headed by women (Visaria and Visaria, 1985).

The female - headed household is not a new phenomenon in India, or even around the world. Large scale changes in the social and economic spheres, over the past few decades, in both the industrialised West and the Third World countries have

resulted in the rise of family life styles that differ from the traditional pattern of male headed families. More often than not, these families are headed by women, have dependent children, and are below the poverty line (Buvinic, Yousef and Van Elm, 1978). Death, divorce, separation, desertion, male migration for employment, and unwed mother hood are some of the reasons for the establishment of such families. According to the World's Women Report (1985); divorce, separation, widowhood and male migration are the major reason for universal increase in number and percentage of female headed households.

Female - headed households (FHH) are sometimes described as women - headed households (WHH). Even though the nomenclature adopted varied, referring them as 'female headed families' and women headed families the purpose was to identify the number of single females who were responsible for the upkeep of their dependents as well as themselves.

As defined by Horton and Hafstrom (1985) Female headed households are those maintained by woman without a husband present. Buvinic and Youssef (1978) classified three situations in which female heads emerge : (a) the broad range of domestic situations typically characterised by the absence of a resident male head, viz. widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion (b) migration of male members for long periods, and (c) loss of economic function by resident males due to severe unemployment, disability, illness and male reluctance to accept jobs seen as status reducing, etc. This typology goes slightly further than

the earlier one and focuses also on females whose husbands are present at home, but are economically non functional. According to Kumari, (1989) female headed households are those, in which female is the major provider and/or protector, carrier, and bearer and decision maker in the household.

Thus female headed household is not limited to those households where male member is not present but also to those households where male member is present.

Incidence of Female-headed Households as Reflected by Secondary Data -

A survey of development literature shows the widespread existence of female-headed households across rural areas in all geographic regions. For example, the number of rural women who are heads of households range from 19,629 in Panama (1970), and 23,252 in Costa Rica (1973) to hundreds of thousands in such countries as Morocco (1971) Ghana (1970), and the Sudan (1973). In 1971, Indonesia had almost 3.5 million rural women heading their own households. In terms of percentage, these comprised one - third of all rural households in most of these countries (Kumari, 1989).

According to Kinjavainen (1992) some 30 - 40% of households in developing countries are headed by women. In some countries such as Lesotho, the figure is 72% (FAO, 1990). More than one out of every ten families in the United States was headed by woman and twenty million persons live in these families. Buvinic et. al., (1978) reported that the percentage of female headed

households in India is 18.7% which places India in the low medium category (15 - 19%) on a scale of low ranging from 10 - 14% and high as 25% and above.

In some of the calamities arising in the economy that acts as a buffer to absorb the shocks during the period. The pain of absorption is particularly acute for poor households which are already existing on the fringes of bare survival. And further, due to certain specific gender - related circumstances within the households, it is the female that takes the impact within the buffer (Ranadive, 1994).

The problems of females are so vast and complex that no claim can be made at the beginning to change her status unless the whole social structure which is full of inequalities and diversities is modified. The status which is a combination of several factors viz. extent of participation in decision making in relation to various activities, freedom to spend family income, age, education etc can neither be gifted nor imported but can be acquired when she is aware of her rights as an individual entity in the society.

1.1 Rationale for the Study

More than fifty percent of India's population is characterized by extreme poverty, illiteracy, ill health and subservience to anachronistic skills and behaviour. The poverty alleviation programs of the government have had some impact, but the position of rural women remains largely static, mainly

because of two factors: low status in family and society and a discriminatory division of labour which relegates women to unskilled tasks and nonvisible work patterns inherent in their subordinate position (Naik, 1987).

Female headed households as reported earlier are comprising not only of those households where the male member is not present in the family but also of those families where the male member is not contributing economically to the family. Females in these families do not enjoy a better status but are burdened with entire responsibilities of the household. Majority of females, irrespective of the economic or social class are perhaps on the same footing in India. Although females from high socio-economic class do not have to bother with economic needs of the family, they are definitely not always free to act, interact, take and enforce decisions and be a part of the socio-economic development (Kumari, 1989). Being head of the household does not necessarily ease the female's position, because, the entire responsibility of maintaining the household falls on her. It leads to a situation where she has to work for longer hours and is over burdened with work. The problems multiply in the case of poor females with few or no resources except the sale of labour.

The females left behind after the male migration assume the role of provider and decision maker for the household. They face a number of problems in their efforts to survive due to variety of reasons, the main out of which is that, the male migrant fails to send any income to their family. This situation was found in 2/5th of the cases (Kumari, 1989) and 1/5th of the cases (Hapke,

1992) from Uttar Pradesh district. They further reported that only few women had owned land, so most of them had to rely totally on wages. Even in the case of women who owned their land; they could not do productive investment on their land due to shortage of finance. They were unable to obtain institutional credit due to lack of resources. The tendency of the society to hire male workers limits the wage earning opportunities for the women making the problems more complicated.

The migrant from the lower strata sets out to find work in the city without any specific abilities. He is seldom in a position to support the village based family which maintains itself with whatever work is available in the village. The woman who remains behind has to assume, in addition to her own familial and domestic responsibilities, the role of sole bread winner.

Choudhary, (1991) studied the migration of rural labour in villages from Samastipur backward block of Bihar State and reported that percentage of migration from different villages was heterogeneous and varied from 4% to 35%. All the reasons were closely related to income position of migrant labour. About 49% of the temporary migrants migrated due to problem of unemployment, while 39% due to wages and 12% due to low income. Usual duration of temporary migration was 4 to 6 months 55% migrants stayed outside for 6 months and 45% for 4 to 6 months thus leaving females to head the household in their absence.

Since very few attempts have been made by researchers to study the causes and problems of female headed households there

is a need for in-depth analysis of status of women in these households especially so in a state like Bihar. Bihar state is considered as an underdeveloped state as there are very little employment opportunities for the people. This leads to migration of male for employment resulting in large incidence of female headed households.

Infact, the status of women in Bihar is quite low and there is ample evidence of discrimination against women in several respects such as lower female literacy, lower school attendance rate for girls, age 6-14, sex ratio unfavourable to women, low level of female employment, relatively low age at marriage, higher female child mortality rates, and lower vaccination rates for children (National Family Health Survey, 1993).

Hence, a need was felt to study the special group of women who are heading the family with their unique characteristics and problems. The study aims to gain thorough understanding about these special group of people i.e. female-headed households. The investigator planned to analyse not only socio-demographic characteristics of the female headed households but also sought answers to questions like what are the types of female headed households ? What support structures and strategies do they adopt at the time of crisis ? Do they really face any discrimination ? How these families manage to discharge their responsibilities and how they take decision at various points of time ? What is their position in the family as heads of the households ? Does their status improve if they assume the role as heads of households ?

These are some of the questions which need to be looked into while considering the status of women in general and female headed households in particular. With such a background, present investigation was planned.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the female headed households.
2. To identify the types of female-headed households.
3. To assess the awareness and participation of the respondents in various developmental programmes and the impediments, if any, preventing them from participation.
4. To identify the problems faced by the female head's of the households.
5. To gain an insight into the nature of support structure and survival strategies adopted by the respondents at the time of assuming responsibilities as heads.
6. To know the opinion of respondents towards discrimination against women.
7. To assess the status of women in these households in terms of their (i) extent of participation in decision making and (ii) freedom to spend family income.

1.3 Assumptions of the Study

Female headed households are a separate group with their unique characteristics and problems.

1.4 Hypotheses of the Study

H1 The Extent of Problems Faced by Respondents Varied with Following Selected Variables Namely,

- i. age of the respondents
- ii. educational level of the respondents
- iii. occupation of the respondents
- iv. family income
- v. family size
- vi. types of female-heads
- vii. duration of heading family
- viii. caste
- ix. socio-economic status (SES)
- x. awareness and participation towards developmental programmes.

H2 The Strategies Adopted by the Respondents Varied with Following Selected Variables,

- i. age of the respondents
- ii. educational level of the respondents
- iii. occupation of the respondents
- iv. family income
- v. family size
- vi. types of female-heads

- vii. duration of heading family
- viii. caste
- ix. socio-economic status
- x. awareness and participation towards developmental programmes.

H3 Respondents' Opinion on Discrimination Against Women Varied with Following Selected Variables Namely,

- i. age of the respondents
- ii. educational level of the respondents
- iii. occupation of the respondents
- iv. family income
- v. family size
- vi. types of female-heads
- vii. duration of heading family
- viii. caste
- ix. socio-economic status
- x. awareness and participation towards developmental programmes.

H4 Status of Women Varied with Following Selected Variables Namely,

- i. age of the respondents
- ii. educational level of the respondents
- iii. occupation of the respondents
- iv. family income
- v. family size

- vi. types of female-heads
- vii. duration of heading family
- viii. caste
- ix. socio-economic status
- x. awareness and participation towards developmental programmes.

H5 There will be an Interrelationship Among Problems Faced, Strategies Adopted and Opinion on Discrimination Against Women.

H6 There Exists a Positive Relationship Between Status of Women and Problems Faced, Strategies Adopted and Opinion on Discrimination Against Women.

1.5 Delimitations of the Study

1. This study was limited to three Panchayats of Rahika Block of Madhubani district of North Bihar.
2. The sample consisted of 200 female headed households.