

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS OF RURAL NORTH BIHAR : AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF STATUS OF WOMEN

AN ABSTRACT
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(Abstract)

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. Over half of the females of the World live in rural areas of developing countries. Approximately one-third of household are headed by females. (Baker and Balakrishnan, 1992). For the present study female-headed households 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. Being head of the household does not necessarily ease the female's position, because, the entire responsibilities of maintaining the household fall on her. The females left behind after the male migration assume the role of provider for the household. The major objective of the study was in-depth analysis of status of women in female-headed households. Status of women was reflected by the women's participation in decision making and their freedom to spend family income. The sample included 200 'Female-headed households' of Madhubani district of Bihar State. Survey method along with interview schedule was adopted for eliciting detailed information. The data were analysed in terms of descriptive and relational statistics.

The Major Findings of the Study

Female-headed households were characterised by younger age group (mean age 34 years) as more than three fourth of the respondents had been heading the family because of husband's outmigration for employment during the major part of the year. Most of them belonged to the low income group. The mean income of the family was Rs 409.5 per month from all the sources, had no regular income and were mainly dependant upon agricultural wages, farming on small land holding followed by self employed and caste occupation. Almost all the respondents were illiterate, belonged to the scheduled caste, back ward class and from upper caste. More than half of the respondents were aware regarding developmental programmes but the participation was very poor. Traditional handicrafts like Mithila painting and Janew making by CHARKHA were most popular ones. Majority of the respondents did not participate in developmental programmes because they were busy in field work.

The economic problems were highlighted among the problems faced by the respondents. The scarcity of fund was found to be acute as they belonged to low income group. The respondents being illiterate could not teach and guide their children themselves, therefore, proper education of children was not possible in absence of father. The female heads of households from upper caste could not seek any type of work outside their homes, the widows had restriction on their dressing and they experienced discrimination while seeking employment. Being illiterate and

lack of accessibility respondents could not obtain government subsidies offered to the farmers. Since being females the respondents could not go to the distant market to sell the product and get true value of the products, they had to sell their product cheaply in the local market.

In case of emotional problems respondents had high level of support which indicated that consolation on the part of neighbours, relatives, friends etc was available to the respondents as and when required but financial support was not so readily available and the female heads had to find sources of income of their own to survive. A major proportion of the respondents had limited choice of strategies to meet the problems faced by them. Survival strategies adopted by them were poor with a mean score of 19.2, due to lack of awareness or/and they had no access to the sources of help.

Regarding discrimination against women it was found that nearly all of the respondents felt that women were being discriminated in various areas.

Status of women had been measured by using two indicators viz extent of participation in decision making and freedom to spend family income. Regarding household activities women were chief decision makers, they were dependent on others to some extent while taking decisions related to farm activities, more than half of the respondents had medium level of decision making regarding livestock and income generating activities. On the

whole about half of the respondents had medium level of participation indicating that they took joint decision to some extent, forty percent of them had, high level of decision making i.e. they took independent decisions and eleven percent of them had low level of decision making i.e. they were dependent on other. With regards to freedom to spend family income almost all the respondents had high level of freedom in spending family income. On the whole the extent of participation in decision making and the freedom of spending family income together found high status of female heads of the households.

Findings of the analysis confirmed that problems faced by respondents were affected by all the variables except occupation. Strategies adopted by the respondents were not affected by any of the variables. However, opinion on discrimination against women were affected by some of the variables, namely, education, occupation of the respondents, and socio-economic status of the family. Status of women was directly influenced by personal variable-education, familial variables - family size, caste and socioeconomic status but not affected by situational variables at all.

The status varied inversely with the problems faced and it was also influenced by strategies adopted; status of women improved with better strategies but the status of women was not affected by opinion on discrimination against women.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that overall status female-headed households was found to be high but irrespective of the status of women the female heads felt that women were being discriminated. Their participation in programmes was very poor, among the problems financial problems were faced to a great extent. There ^{is} need to raise the literacy level of these females as the effect of education on women is always helpful in the context of making them more assertive and self reliant which would act as catalysts to raise their status in the family as well as in society. This will also make them conscious of their present condition in comparison to other women of our country who enjoy and take advantage of developmental programmes. Such an awareness, no doubt will expose them to the wider world of knowledge and help them to improve their survival strategies.