

Food Insecurity and Resilience among Extreme Poor Female Headed Households in Coastal Bangladesh

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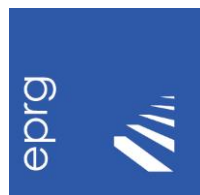
OWASIM AKRAM
PROGRAM OFFICER (RESEARCH & LEARNING)

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Abstract

The situation of extreme poor women living on their own is an area which remains under-studied in Bangladesh. This qualitative research was carried out in two coastal districts of Bangladesh with the aim to know about the livelihood and coping strategies as well as the challenges faced by FHHs in terms of managing food insecurity. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with 32 extreme poor female heads and 5 focus group discussions with female heads. The study finds that women survived through different livelihood options but faced extreme challenges in all cases. Household composition is found to be one of the most influential factors regarding a FHH's coping decisions. Age and marital status are also key variables. Extreme poor FFH's access to social safety nets and legal support depended on their political loyalty to other influential residents. High levels of food insecurity among FHHs is a very serious problem and leads to what we want to term as 'food orphans', i.e. infants and small children who are put into public or private orphanages or are sent to work as residential housemaids in richer families in exchange for food. Thus, children become the first livelihood shock absorbers for FHHs by supplementing family work and complementing family income running a high risk of intergenerational transmission of extreme poverty. The findings of this study suggest that FHHs tend to travel a passage of time led by inequality and draw attention to dimensions of vulnerability of FHHs which revolve around food insecurity. This paper demonstrates that the use of children to improve FHH food security is subjected to gender dimensions.

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1. Introduction

The World Food Summit of 1996 stated, “Food security exists when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (FAO 2008). It is estimated that nearly 870 million people, or one in eight people in the world, suffer from chronic undernourishment and 852 million of them live in developing countries. This represents 15 percent of the population of developing countries (FAO 2012). What is more, 60 percent of the world's hungry are women (UN 2010).

It is becoming clear that across the world the numbers of female headed households¹ (FHH) are increasing. Data from 173 Demographic and Household Surveys (DHS) collected from 73 countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the 1990s and 2000s shows that the proportion of FHHs in these areas ranges from 7% to 39% (Akbar & Vaida 2013). Levels and trends in FHHs are important indicators of social change, especially in the way families are organised and reproduced.

Recent research indicates that self-reported FHHs are overrepresented among the poor (Buvinic & Rao 1997) and that the number of FHHs is also increasing within developing countries (Buvinic 1991). A baseline report on the extreme poor in Bangladesh published by Shiree² indicates that 31.3% of the total sample (73,492 HHs) were female headed, with the proportion among rural communities lower (30%) than among urban communities (40%) (Shiree 2012). This prevalence of FHHs also raises questions about the intergenerational transfer of poverty (Barros et al. 1997). If FHHs tend to be poorer than non-FHHs in terms of income, then it suggests that children’s welfare will be lower in FHHs, as will consumption (including food consumption) patterns, education expenditures, and so on (Fuwa 2000). High illiteracy coupled with a weak asset base, fewer work opportunities outside the home, limited mobility, low social status and high levels of dependency on male relatives all contribute to women’s “double edged” vulnerability in South Asia (Ariyabandu 2000). Akhter et al. (2007) found that in five of six Sub-Saharan African countries (Ghana being the only exception) and in all three Asian countries (Bangladesh, India and Vietnam), FHHs are more likely to be found living in ultra poverty than in moderate poverty. In the same study, a comparison of those living in ultra poverty with those living on more than \$1 a day shows that households in ultra poverty in the three south Asian countries are more likely to be female headed.

The situation of extreme poor women living on their own is an area which remains under-studied in Bangladesh. Hence the aim of this research paper is to know about the livelihood and coping strategies as well as the challenges faced by FHHs in terms of managing food insecurity. The research was carried out in two coastal districts of Bangladesh: Patuakhali and Barguna.

This is a qualitative research which draws on data gathered from in-depth interviews with 32 extreme poor women who were heading their families, 5 focus group discussions with female heads to help validate the findings. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents and no financial or material incentives were provided. Privacy and confidentiality were assured throughout the study.

The study finds that women born into extreme poor families often then marry into an even poorer family or to husbands with abnormalities. This happens because of the women’s poorer social status or the inability of the family to pay a dowry or gift. Nonetheless, marrying an elderly or sick husband was

¹ By Female Headed Households we refer to households where a female is the main income earner, key decision maker and the key risk taker. This definition allows for situations where there are male adult members in the family but where the woman are heading the family.

² See www.shiree.org

preferred to not having a husband at all, mostly because the presence of a male gives women some freedom to manage their livelihood. Having a male child was also preferred to a female child for the same reasons and also because they act as a form of future insurance for FHHs. Widows often inherit their husband's debt and liabilities which tends to exacerbate their situation as paying off the debts of a deceased person is usually prioritized even if it means remaining in hunger. A few of the female heads (with or without a husband) migrated to/from other towns to access work opportunities and to avoid the shame of working outside their homes in their own locality. On the other hand, the presence of a malnourished or disabled child or husband in the household prevented women from going for work outside their homes or in adjacent areas. Some other women reported exploring labouring opportunities in the local labour market. If successful, they then faced wage discrimination and wage related frauds, often receiving low and irregular payment compared to the agreed wage rate and compared to men. Most of the respondents in the interviews shared that they had been denied land ownership by their in-laws and relatives. Land is viewed as an asset that also gives social status. Some even commented that living on one's own land, even if they were hungry, is better than living on occupied land with a full stomach.

Household composition is found to be one of the most influential factors regarding a FHH's coping decisions. Age and marital status are also key variables. Young females of FHHs having a husband relied more on outside jobs while those having no husband relied more on home-based work. One of the reasons for the greater vulnerability of women in FHHs is the lack of regular cash based income. This means women rely more on home-based income paid in kind rather than in cash.

Generally, FHHs were denied access to formal credit. The presence of a husband or son was a collateral condition for access to such credit. Informal credit lenders viewed women heads as risky clients and therefore imposed high interests on their borrowing. A considerable number of extreme poor and food insecure FHHs reported being refused access to safety nets based on the political catchment they belong to. Extreme poor FHH's access to social safety nets depended on their political loyalty to other influential residents.

Early widowed, young divorced/separated women face repeated incidence of social pressure and harassment as well as unwelcome and unethical proposals from men in exchange of support for food and livelihood. Female heads were found to have less legal support even if they required it more frequently to ensure their rights to SSNs or land. The FGD discussion revealed that UP members and chairmen feel that dealing with issues related to female heads can stigmatize their image. The data analysis provides a list of coping strategies which are grouped in the following categories: changes in dietary practice, increasing options for food availability, engaging children in work and labour, reducing or completely eliminating supplementary food costs, and others such as collecting fitra/zakat from Muslim families, collecting food leftovers and vegetables from markets, stealing food, gleaning from harvested fields and so forth.

High levels of food insecurity among FHHs is a very serious problem and leads to what we want to term as 'food orphans', i.e. infants and small children who are put into public or private orphanages or are sent to work as residential housemaids in richer families in exchange for food. In this way, children become the first livelihood shock absorbers for FHHs by supplementing family work and complementing family income. The price for this is that children of such FHHs have to abandon their education. In such scenarios, the risk of intergenerational poverty increases because the transmission of disadvantage occurs inter-generationally.

Extreme poor FHHs also develop foster relations with some comparatively rich families in nearby villages or surrounding area, and allow their children to be called 'foster daughter or son'. This provides the FHH with a different kind of relationship which is more sympathetic and acts as an insurance for them when they face severe food insecurity.

The study findings draw attention to dimensions of vulnerability of FHHs which revolve around food insecurity. This paper demonstrates that the use of children to improve FHH food security is subjected to gender dimensions. Further research should be carried out to explore the dynamics of 'food orphans' and better understand how they live and what their futures look like. FHHs are numerically prominent among the extreme poor and have specific experiences of food insecurity and associated vulnerabilities. This study offers a very sensitive analysis of gender and FHH isolation where the FHHs face constant exploitation and exclusion. Of these two, the process of exclusion is worse than that of exploitation since it has adverse impacts on both women and their children. The findings also indicate that FHHs are also politically excluded. In summary the experience of extreme poor FHHs needs to be better understood and development efforts should be carefully designed to address the need of FHHs.

2. Literature review

The literature on FHHs has increased in the world of development agencies since 1980s (Bridget 1998). As female headship is believed to have increased worldwide they have become a common target group for poverty alleviation programmes (Sara & Pramila 2007). FHHs have different characteristics and have a different demographic, sociological, and microeconomic status. This has major implications for the design of policy and programmatic interventions (ICRW 1983, Joshi 2004).

The relationship between poverty and food insecurity is complex (Jannatul 2012). While food insecurity is the outcome of a complex set of problems, the vulnerability of women and children to food insecurity is significantly attributed to gender inequality and the way gendered livelihood opportunities are unequally structured – all of which determine the extent to which rural women and their households can cope and adapt to external shocks (Zenebe 2010). In FHHs, women typically suffer from household labour shortages limiting their livelihood options and increasing their reliance on other family members (Rebecca et al. 2011). It is also evident that a household lacking male-earned income simply has a much higher probability of being poor (Mallick & Rafi 2010) because of the restricted opportunities for women. A broader understanding thus requires consideration of the economic position and livelihood capabilities of FHHs. Similar antipoverty policy interventions may have different success rates depending on the status of the headship of a particular household and its composition (Barros et al. 1997).

Female-headed households in Bangladesh are especially vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity, and have not benefitted from recent improvements in hunger and poverty rates (McIntyre et al. 2011). Despite considerable efforts to earn adequate incomes to feed and manage their families, ultra poor women and their children suffer from chronic food insecurity punctuated by periods of absolute food deprivation (McIntyre et al. 2011). Even if FHHs are not poor, they may be more vulnerable to poverty as they face higher risks and have fewer options for ex ante and ex post coping strategies (Stephan et al. 2011). As the sources of vulnerability for women are different than those of men, women have developed their own coping mechanisms. Many of those coping mechanisms are needs-based and contribute to the reduction of their vulnerability in the short-term (Abedin et al. 2013).

Often poverty is measured solely in terms of income. But income provides only a limited insight into the situation of the household (Sara & Pramila 2007). As we know traditionally in developing societies women have less access to and control over finances and resources compared to men. Hence, gender is an important lens through which to analyze food insecurity and to identify pragmatic lessons. There are relatively few empirical studies on vulnerability and these pay insufficient attention to the significance of gender (Stephan et al. 2011). Hence, dedicated studies on the vulnerability of female headed households in terms of food insecurity will help increase our understanding of food security and begin to identify relevant policy solutions.

There are a number of studies which report on the impact of development programmes targeting female headship (Buvinić & Gupta 1997). Nevertheless little research has been conducted on the processes through which female-headed households are formed and on their specific problems and needs (David 1993). While many studies have identified systematic gender productivity differentials, there are few studies that have identified the underlying explanation for them (Modirwa & Oladele 2012). There is a need to understand the systematic relations between different types of female headed households and poverty, and to understand these in specific contexts (Fuwa 2000). Although female-headed households appear to have entered the mainstream development discourse in Bangladesh, we cannot design effective graduation programmes without more grounded empirical and analytical research (David 1993).

3. Research methodology

Most food security related studies are focused on households headed by men although data in those studies are also collected from the female members of the households. While such studies can provide information on household level experiences of food insecurity, the different situation of women who live on their own remains under-studied in Bangladesh. Focusing on a particularly vulnerable region in terms of food security, i.e. the coastal areas of Bangladesh, this study intends to address a gap in the literature and contribute to our understanding of female head women's survival and coping strategies³.

3.1 Research objectives

The broad objective of the study was to explore the livelihood and coping strategies and challenges of female headed households in terms of managing food insecurity in two coastal districts of Bangladesh. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To examine the gender roles and cultural practices that contribute to the food insecurity of FHHs.
- To understand the challenges experienced by FHHs in managing food security.
- To identify gendered livelihood strategies and coping mechanisms adopted by FHHs to overcome food insecurity.
- To derive policy imperatives around the food security agenda of the country.

³ By coping strategy, we are referring to a set of decisions, actions and initiatives taken in order to manage food insecurity of the household. These decisions, actions and initiatives may have direct or indirect implications on food and livelihood of a household.

3.2 Research methods and tools

The study was conducted in two coastal districts of Bangladesh named Patuakhali and Barguna. The study uses qualitative research techniques, mostly interviews and focus group discussions. All respondents were FHHs, typically identified from the beneficiary list of the project entitled, 'Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Adaptation, Leadership and Learning' (REE CALL). The project is implemented by Oxfam in Bangladesh, and is one of the suite projects funded through the UKAID-Government of Bangladesh SHIREE (Stimulating Household Improvements Resulting in Economic Empowerment) programme. The project targets extreme poor households typically identified using the following criteria:

1. Per capita daily income less than or equal to BDT 22 (\$0.28)
2. Access to productive assets/capital with a value of not more than BDT 5000 (\$64)
3. Own less than 3.5 decimals of productive land
4. Eating less than 3 meals per day
5. No access to or member of financial networks or MFIs, and no outstanding formal credit from MFIs

During the selection of project beneficiaries, priority was given to HHs with:

1. Widow/divorced/separate and abandoned women as heads
2. No homestead land or where HHs are living on someone else's land
3. Poor quality housing (grass or low grade/relief tin or rice straw roof and bamboo fence/low grade tin)
4. Lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation
5. Elderly, physically challenged or sick family members
6. *Adivasi* household with little access to productive asset/land

For this research, we focussed on the food insecurity related experiences of the respondent, prior to the period of Shiree intervention. In other words, this is not an evaluation of the project, but of the context of extreme poverty (of FHHs) which the project seeks to confront.

In-Depth Interview with Female Head Women

In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 Extreme Poor Women (22 from Patuakhali and 10 from Barguna) selected from the list of the beneficiaries included in the REE CALL project.

FGDs with Female Head Women

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with female head women to cross validate the findings generated through the in depth interviews and to explore emerging issues. Five FGDs were conducted (3 in Patuakhali, 2 in Barguna) with at least 8 women in each of the FGD.

Data was collected from September to November 2013, and we had to carry out the research in two phases because of pre-election political violence which restricted mobility and increased security concerns. The questionnaire generated information on socio-demographic status; gender roles and cultural practices; livelihood strategies and vulnerability; causes, challenges and coping strategies of FHHs in terms of food insecurity.

3.3 Ethical issues

There was already a good rapport with the community and beneficiaries since the project was in operation in the area for more than a year. This familiarity facilitated access to the respondents.

However, in some cases where the women felt uncomfortable to talk with the researcher (male), a female field officer of the respective area would accompany the researcher. We found that this strategy worked well. Respondents were selected purposively but suggestions from the frontline field staff were sought to identify a good range of female headedness (i.e. separated, widowed, married, divorced, young as well as elderly).

Although there was a pre-existing rapport, informed consent was obtained from all respondents before the interviews and it was made clear to the participants that participation was entirely on a voluntary basis and they could withdraw at any time during the interview. Parental or husband's consent was also obtained where needed. One interview was cancelled as the respondents in the middle of the interview started feeling sick. All the interviews were conducted inside the house without the presence of friends, neighbours or family members although in few cases small children of the respondents were playing around during the interview. No financial or material incentives were given. The ethical aspects of the study were approved by the EPRG (Extreme Poverty Research Group) panel members as well as by senior management of Oxfam in Bangladesh. Privacy and confidentiality were assured by maintaining the anonymised identity of the respondents and protecting the soft copy of the transcribed data in a password protected laptop. Hardcopy of the data was only accessed by the researcher.

4. Findings and discussions

Findings are discussed and analysed below under headings and sub-headings, starting with a brief socio economic profile of the respondents followed by livelihood strategies, challenges experienced and coping strategies adopted by the FHHs.

4.1 Socio-economic profile of respondents

The mean age of the interview respondents was 43 years (minimum aged respondent was 25 and maximum aged respondent was 65 years old). 22 (69%) out of 32 respondents had received no formal education. Only one respondent had high school level education. The rest had some sort of primary level education. The average age at marriage was 14 years, the minimum age reported was 11 and maximum age was 18 years. 87.5% had married before reaching the age of 18, and only 4 of the respondents had been married at the age of 18.

The average monthly household income was Taka 1075 (=US\$14).⁴ The average household size was three. Half of the respondents are widows (16 out of 32), 10 are separated⁵, five are married and only one of them is divorced. However, eleven of the women were married to a husband who was ill (mostly asthma, heart problems and other acute illnesses). Six of them were married to disabled husbands, and again six were married to elderly husbands.

⁴ 1\$=BDT 78

⁵ A few of the separated women have contact with their husbands. However in all cases, the husband doesnot contribute to the maintenance of the family

Table 1: Socio Economic Profile of Respondents

Variables	Interview (n=32)	FGD (n=61)
Age		
Mean Age	43 Years	41 Years
Minimum Age	25 Yeats	28 Years
Maximum Age	65 Years	62 Years
Mean Age at marriage	14 Years	15 Years
Education		
No Formal Education	69%	62%
Primary Level	28%	33%
High School Level	3%	5%
Average Income/Month	1075 Tk (\$14)	1128 Tk (\$15)
Marital Status		
Widowed	50%	39%
Married	31	33%
Separated	16%	20%
Divorced	3%	8%

In the five FGDs conducted, there were in total 61 female heads present making an average of 12 in each of the five FGDs. The average age of the respondent was 41 years. The average monthly income reported by the FGD participants was Taka 1128 (=US\$15). The majority (i.e. 24 or 39%) of the respondents were widowed, followed by married (33%), separated (20%) and divorced (8%). Almost all the married women reported that they have a sick or disabled or elderly husband in the family who are not economically active. Those described as ‘separated’ had no legal document stating this. They all confirmed however, that they had no contact with their husbands since they left the family.

4.2 Livelihood strategies of FHHs

It is imperative to know the livelihood context of the FHHs as this gives us an important insight into their coping strategies. The livelihood strategies of the extreme poor are usually determined by the range of resources and opportunities available to undertake activities that can enable them to secure their livelihood. However, for female heads livelihood opportunities are fewer. Like all the poor women in developing countries, female heads have to manage the daily household chores as well as often take primary responsibility for the household’s income. However, the depth and severity of livelihood challenges for female heads are distinct, and in some cases, exclusive to them.

Interviews and FGDs showed that female heads adopt diverse livelihood strategies to survive and those strategies can be situation and time bound. Almost all the females reported working as housemaids in their lifetime mostly for payments in kind, while some indicated that they were paid partly in kind and partly in cash. Such work only provided partial support and was insufficient to meet all the needs of the family. Therefore, FHHs tend to diversify their livelihoods and sources of income constantly. This strategy does not always bring success.

Household composition, range of opportunities and social capital available played an important role in terms of deciding livelihood opportunities. Young separated women or widows were found to rely mostly on home-based work close to their living places while young or aged married women who were heading the families were found in a comparatively privileged position of accessing work outside the home.

Women who had young daughters were found to select their livelihood with great care, as their association with certain kinds of income generating activities can stigmatize their daughters and can also negatively impact their ability to arrange marriages. Women's involvement in 'non-domestic' activities entails work with other men. This gives people the opportunity to spread rumours. Furthermore when women are engaged in non-domestic activities without *purdah* this heightens the risk of getting a bad reputation and can bring shame on the household and across the community. Thus, the actions of a female head mother affects the image of any unmarried young daughters in the household. Therefore, those women tend to avoid particular types of income earning activities (i.e. cash for work, day labouring etc). However, such cultural and social sensitivities leave the same HHs with limited income generating options, and this eventually impacts their food insecurity.

"I didn't work outside in the UP cash for work program because I have a daughter. People would say, she works on the street, it's better not to get married to her daughter." Zainab, 38 Years, Separated

"I left my restaurant job thinking about my daughter because it will affect her marriage. Although this decision deteriorated my situation" – Farida, 40 years, Separated

"I started working outside the home only after getting my daughters married." – Lutfa, 35 years, Separated

Women with younger aged children had very little opportunity or scope to work because they could not leave their children at home. A few of them who worked outside of the home had engaged older children to take care of the younger ones. This usually means pulling the older children out of school. The situation was worse for women with a sick or elderly husband who needed fulltime care. Those women had the responsibility of managing household chores, taking care of children, taking care of the husband as well as earning and managing a livelihood for the whole family. Nevertheless in most cases, the presence of an elderly or sick husband was preferred to not having a husband at all, mostly on the grounds that a husband in the house gives women more freedom to manage their livelihood. Female heads also reported that having male children gave them a level of relative freedom to work outside as well as acting as a form of future insurance. Many of the women also mentioned that their livelihood option and family situation deteriorated further if they only had daughters. Two respondents for example mentioned that they started working outside only when they were able to marry off their daughters.

"If I had daughters I would have nothing to do except begging." – Fatema, 40 years, Separated

A few of the women challenged the socially perceived patriarchal norms and gendered expectations by managing to do some petty trading and by establishing linkages in local markets. Those women were found to be comparatively better-off, but still faced considerable and frequent challenges because by working outside of their homes, they were generally considered to be challenging the predominant religious norms and values.

A few of the female heads who are middle aged mentioned that establishing links with the local government enabled them to be registered for the work social protection programme. The women who took part in this programme reported that it was effective in reducing their food insecurity. However,

only a few women managed to register for the programme. Some other women reported that they had looked at opportunities in the local labour market. However, they complained that they could not overcome wage discrimination and wage related frauds, often receiving low and irregular payment compared to the agreed wage rate and relative to men. Rabeya, 39 years, separated, said:

“Our family is very religious but I do not follow them. I have to feed my children. I go fishing; I go to sell vegetables in the market. When you see your child in hunger you hardly care about rules. If anyone says anything I tell them to give me food but they won’t. So why do they come to say these things!”

A few also mentioned that they begged as a coping strategy. The old women were found to beg locally while comparatively younger women and women who were previously well off with higher social status were begging in Dhaka or a nearby city. Often these women would beg on alternative weeks leaving the family in the village and returning back to survive off the begged alms for the next few days. It is difficult sometimes to clearly separate livelihood strategies from coping strategies as, in reality, the two are intertwined. Therefore, in this paper, the findings are reported under the term coping strategies which seem most appropriate for extreme poor women’s means of subsistence.

4.3 Challenges that contribute to food insecurity

This section analyses major challenges women face in trying to be food secure. It follows a life cycle approach starting from women’s marriage, cultural restrictions, access to land, household composition, access to paid labour, access to credit, social protection schemes, mobility and obstacles to entrepreneurial efforts, dowry, social stigma and lack of legal support.

Marrying off with liabilities

Being born into a poor family or into an extreme poor family, most of the respondents ended up getting married into an even poorer family or to husbands with different incapacities. Normally this happens because the women’s family have a low social status or are unable to pay the required dowry. Moreover, the women are often married off to elderly, disabled or sick husbands. As indicated earlier, 11 of our respondents were married to sick husbands, six to disabled husbands, and six to elderly husbands. Most of those who were married to a physically capable man were later separated as the husband either cheated on them, married another woman or simply abandoned them. Women often find themselves with a husband who has more than one wife. The women are not consulted about this and in some cases they were even not informed with whom the second marriage was arranged.

Widowed, separated or divorced women mostly lived as single women and in a FHH with children. They do not re-marry mostly because their children would probably be rejected by the second husband. Moreover, the cultural context found in rural areas does not encourage women to remarry. In such cases, the women are forced between two bad options: remain single or confront the social norm by getting re-married. Eventually most of the female heads in the rural areas preferred not to remarry. Women who were widows often inherit their husband’s debt and liabilities. Paradoxically, although taking on this debt plunged most into even more extreme forms of poverty, most women still saw it as their “sacred duty” to repay the debt. Selina, a 35 year old widow, explained:

“When my husband died he had a loan of 35 thousand taka. After his death I worked in the cash for work program of the government and at the end I got a handsome amount. I repaid the loan with this money.”

In most cases when the husband became sick or died, the in-laws' family members immediately rejected the distressed wife or widow. Those who were not asked to leave their in-laws' house, however, did not feel secure and it became difficult for them to stay. In such cases, the women often returned to their parents' house or started living adjacent to them. In a few cases, giving birth to a female child meant that the women had to leave the in-laws' house as a female child is not considered economically productive. Giving birth to a girl when the father is economically inactive was also considered an undeclared offence by the in-laws.

Cultural restrictions and internal migration

Some female headed households (with or without a husband) migrated in order to access more work opportunities and avoid the shame of working outside their homes in the nearby locality. Being forced to take on outside jobs is an indicator that the social status of the women has deteriorated further. However, after a certain period of time the women returned to their homes when the family size and living cost had increased, or when the husband had died or become old. In these circumstances, the women are more vulnerable to food insecurity. The women then find that the unsupportive in-laws want to restrict their mobility and this impedes their chances of building a livelihood.

This has also been observed for women who had sick or disabled husbands. Respondents reported that they covered important treatment costs for their sick or disabled husbands or children by using their meagre savings or daily earnings. Two married female respondents, Aneesa, 42 years, and Geeta, 25 said:

"To pay for treatment, we have lost our homestead land, used all my income and even starved. If I did not have to invest in his treatment, I would not have to see these miserable days."

"We have sold the land, my earrings and even the crockeries we had to treat my husband."

Nonetheless, the women mentioned that the presence of a disabled or sick husband allows the female to earn a livelihood more freely by being involved in 'out of home' work. Most of the female heads prefer to live even with a disabled, sick or elderly husband than living alone because of the increased security offered by the mere presence of a man. Feroza, Married, 34 years old said *"It is beneficial to have a husband alive even if he is sick or disabled."* The data strongly suggests that women having male children also enjoy greater security than those having girls only.

Limited access to land

Land is one of the most important productive assets especially in the rural economy. There is a strong association between landlessness and extreme poverty. Nearly 80% of the ultra-poor in Bangladesh do not own land (Akhter 2007). Land and property ownership is often considered instrumental to women's economic empowerment enabling them to be more food secure. Land also has a symbolic value that brings social status, confidence and so forth. While exclusion from political power can occur on the grounds of ethnicity, gender, or other prejudices (discussed below), it can also result from a lack of asset ownership. Land ownership can give social status or political power (Carter et al. 2007).

Most of the respondents in the interviews shared that they had been denied land ownership by their in-laws and relatives, and they were living in their parents' village although not necessarily with their parents. Those few widows who live on the land of their husbands feel insecure as they know they could

be evicted at any time. In both the FGDs and interviews with the female heads, land was repeatedly mentioned as the single most essential and desired asset. Land is important not only for food production but also because it contributes to their psychological and social empowerment by increasing their sense of security and protection. Land is viewed as an asset that gives social identity, and gives people a sense of dignity. Having land commands respect. Furthermore, some respondents argued that it was better to live on one's own land and go hungry than to live on occupied land with a full stomach. Respondents explained that not having their own agricultural land is comparatively better than not having their own homestead land. Having homestead land is considered important because it gives identity and allows people to be socially attached to a location.

"What can be more pleasing than to live on your own land! If you have land you will have an identity. You can produce your own food." - Keya, 34 years, Separated

In summary, most of the respondents argued that they are extreme poor because they are landless. In many cases, it is relatives who made the women landless. Geeta, 25 years old, married, captures the fragility of this neatly

"If my pagol (mad) husband dies today, from tomorrow I will not be able to stay here."

Immediately after being separated from the in laws, the small amount of land the women may have some claim to is grabbed by other family members and relatives

"As soon as my husband died, my in-laws started quarrelling with me. They said I will not get anything from them not even the portion of land my husband inherits." – Rasheda, 38 years, Widowed

Thus, denial of land ownership blurred the social identity of women leaving them not only in a state of acute food insecurity but also making them socially marginalized and vulnerable. The whole debate over land ownership is linked to the dynamics of patriarchal structures and relations. In Bangladesh, possession of land or other productive resources is still not thought of as a right for women, and even less so for FHHs.

Household composition

Household composition is one of the most influential factors regarding a FHH's decisions about coping strategies. Age and marital status are key variables. Young females of FHHs where the husband is still present, relied more on outside jobs. On the other hand, young females of FHHs where the husband was absent, relied more on home-based work and managed their livelihood locally. Women who did not have a husband started to seek outside work once they had become older. Rasheda, a 40 year old widow, explained:

"When my husband died I was so young and couldn't dare to work outside of the home. I only stitched clothes, made handicrafts, worked in the neighbouring house as a housemaid when they called me. However, when my sons got older, I started working in a restaurant in the market as cook."

The situation of the females with small children was more vulnerable than that of women with adult children. The former have far more restrictions on mobility and work. Nilufa, a woman separated from her husband explains how child care can hamper income generation:

"I used to sell clothes; but now there is no one to look after my son who is only 4 years old. He almost sank in the pond four times, therefore, I stopped

selling clothes. Since then I am living a horrible life. I will start my work again after a couple of years when he gets older."

Gender discrimination in the labour market

One of the reasons why women in FHHs are particularly vulnerable is because they lack regular cash income and rely more instead on home-based in-kind pay. Often women in FHHs have restricted mobility and therefore have no choice but to take on these jobs. Religious norms, restrictions by in-laws, relatives or husbands all play a part in making decisions about women's mobility.

"I work outside home which is not good for a woman; I feel guilty because I don't know what I will say to the Almighty on dooms day!"- Saleha, Widowed, 55 years

Female heads also experienced discrimination in wage payments as well. Respondents said that since they are alone when they are paid, they cannot protest if they are not paid correctly. Employers tend to use this opportunity to exploit women. Most respondents agreed that employers could not exploit men in the same way.

"We get 150 taka, but they (men) get 300 taka. The employers say that this is the highest wage rate for women."- Zainab, 35 years, Separated

"I do not get paid instantly for my work. Many of them (employers) deliberately pay late. Despite this, I still work for the same employer because I do not have any option" – Kulsum, 45 years, Widowed

Access to credit

Generally, FHHs were denied access to formal credit. The presence of a husband or son was a collateral condition for access to such credit, including the credit offered by mainstream microfinance programmes. Although female heads have access to other types of in-kind support, very few of those who are widowed or separated reported having access to credit. In fact they are denied credit on the grounds of not having a husband or adult son in the family. Some of the women did not think about borrowing money, as failing to repay could result in social harassment which would be shameful for them. Whereas formal microcredit systems prefer women as their clients, the informal credit lenders (moneylenders) viewed women as risky clients and therefore imposed high interest rates for borrowing. FHHs with a sick husband or adult son were, therefore, only able to access informal types of credit under strict conditions (high interest rates and small amounts of credit). The quotes below illustrate this complexity:

"When I went to ask for credit to a moneylender, he said, 'how will you pay, what do you have from which I can get my money back? If you need money I can give you 50 or 100 taka as charity.'" – Rokeya, 45 Years, Widowed

"I went to Grameen Bank to borrow 5000 taka but when they found out that my husband is pagol (mentally ill) they refused me the loan. I wanted to start a handicraft business." – Shirin, 28 years, Married

"I borrowed money from a moneylender but since my husband is sick and I had nothing to mortgage, the interest rate was higher. I borrowed 2000 taka at the rate of 10% interest per month." – Geeta, 25 years, Married

Social Safety Nets and Social Protection

A considerable number of extreme poor and food insecure FHHs reported being refused access to safety nets based on the political catchment they belong to. UP members and chairmen were reluctant to allocate SSNs to the extreme poor who reside in areas where the electoral support for the elected chairman was low. Access to SSN of the extreme poor FFH can therefore, depend on the political loyalty of other inhabitants. They therefore, often suffer from political regime changes.

“Since the UP Chairman changed after the last election, we have not received any help. The new Chairman failed in our area, and therefore accused us of not voting for him.” Rokeya, 45 years, Widowed

Moreover, discussions revealed that the distribution of SSNs can be gender discriminative. The data reported that women were denied SSN access because they are politically under-valued by men in power in local government institutions, and often considered less efficient advocacy instruments for them. When selecting recipients for SSNs, chairmen expect that the beneficiaries will reciprocate and be loyal to him. (Moreover the research had found evidence that household composition, especially the presence of elder sons or a disabled husband in an FHH, increases the bargaining power of extreme poor women to access the SSNs and gives them a relative comparable advantage over single, widowed, abandoned women with no male support. This suggests that the political value of an FHH depends on them having men who support them (with financial, in-kind, social, or moral support). Rasheda (40) was such a widow who managed to enlist herself on the VGD program after asking help from some of her male neighbours to plead on her behalf to the UP Chairman. She had approached the same Chairman on her own, but that failed.

“I got listed for the VGD program with the help of some of my male neighbours. I approached the Chairman many times but he simply ignored me.

I got rice for two years and after that it stopped.” Rasheda, 40, Widow

Thus, FHHs with weak social networks are less likely to access SSNs than their male counterparts. Respondents reported that men have greater access to SSNs than women because they can influence the local government using different social networks or contacts. Furthermore, respondents said women are the ones who can be easily denied SSNs without any proper ground or logic as there is less chance that they will complain.

“When the UP Chairman changed after the last election, we never received anything. He failed in the elections and accused us of not voting for him.”
Rokeya, 45 years, Widowed

Experience of harassment

Young widowed, divorced and separated women face repeated incidences of social pressure and harassment, and are also the target of some unethical proposals from men. Many of them are offered food and livelihood support in exchange for an illegal relationship in the form of extra marital affair. This kind of harassment also prevents and discourages women from getting out of home to work.

“Many men asked me to leave my (disabled) husband and even some of my relatives suggested me to leave my husband and marry someone else. But my parents said a woman can only get married once in her life.”- Aleya, Married, 40 years

“A man once gave me an indecent proposal to have an illegal relationship with him. In return he promised to feed me and my children as long as the relationship continues. He would not dare to make such a proposal if I had

a husband or a son. Many other men also wanted to do the same but I always avoided them.”- Shahinur, 40 years, Widowed

“People tried to defame me as I didn’t listen to their indecent proposals. I was strong; I never surrender myself to them. How can I do this when I have small kids.” – Seema, 35 years, Separated

“After the death of my husband I faced many problems. Last year, an elderly man started disturbing me whenever I went out for work. Later my neighbours helped me. They threatened the man and since then he has stopped following me.”- Sabita, 30 years, Widowed

Some women avoid selling their products in the local market because people would recognise them and might spread bad rumours. Quite often when doing business in public, FHHs will put on a veil to hide themselves because at least in some places, being mobile in the market can carry a stigma and bring a bad reputation (*durnam*). Interestingly for some widows, the dead husband continues to enforce patriarchal values.

“When my husband died, he made me promise never to leave the household premise, never to get married again. He also said, if I did that I would face huge suffering. I have kept my promise ever since his death. But if I did not have the promise, I could have lived like a queen after his death.” – Anwara, 65 years, Widowed

A considerable number of women believed that they could not survive on their own because they were not allowed to work whilst their husbands were alive. For social and religious grounds, they were not allowed to work and be mobile even if this would have helped the family accumulate assets and savings and therefore be more resilient to hazards and shocks.

Limitation and challenges in entrepreneurial efforts of women heads

Unrestricted and equitable access to both product and labour markets is one of the preconditions of economic growth of a family and the country. In Bangladesh women’s access to markets is minimal and highly restricted. A woman cannot easily opt for multiplication or diversification of income and this results in lower earnings for the women.

“As soon as I started a stall here, a group of people didn’t like it. The other shop owners try to spread bad rumours about me as well as try to uproot me from here.” – Krishna Rani, 38, Married

Experiences of cheating, theft, fraud were frequently mentioned by FHHs who had started petty entrepreneurial opportunities. According to our respondents, male peers had taken these actions in order to scare them out of local markets.

“Leaving my daughters in the orphanage I started a tea stall, but one morning I found that my shop had been ransacked and the items stolen. I couldn’t recover from that situation. I think I know who did this. He is my relative who didn’t want me to get on in life and preferred to see me as a beggar.” – Fokron, 38 years, Widowed

Dowry

While dowry is understood as one of the contributing factors for increasing the number of female heads, a considerable number of female heads lived with their divorced or separated daughters because of their inability to pay dowry. Many of the female heads sacrificed what money they had in order to

arrange a dowry for their daughters, others were not able to manage this. However in both cases (with or without dowry) the daughters suffered because the mothers were not able to complete the dowry payment or because they could not pay anything. The daughters were then sent back home. A few female heads reported that they needed to pay a higher dowry compared to other 'male headed' families because a daughter without the identity of her father, does not have the same 'good reputation'. To get them married may therefore require greater dowries.

"My son-in-law wanted many things but I was not able to pay, therefore, he refused to take my daughter back. Although she is not divorced, she lives with me and her husband has gotten married again." Lutfa, 35 years, Separated

Social stigma related to extreme poverty

This study did not foresee social stigma of the extreme poor as an issue for food security. Although many studies tend to refer to solidarity networks within rural villages which enable poor women to subsist, the data collected shows the limitations of these networks and how extreme poor women from FFHs are often excluded. The following quotes show how respondents feel humiliated by the treatment they sometimes receive from close community members:

"Once I visited my neighbour when she was cooking fish. Upon seeing me she covered the cooking pan. She didn't take the cover off when I was there as she thought I would give a bad look (looking greedily). She wanted me to leave but before I left the fish was burnt." – Minara, 40 Years, Widowed

"When we visit our neighbours, everybody feels that we visit them to ask for food, money or charity. They behave as if dogs were more welcome than us." - Sabiha, 48 Years, Married

Although social support in the form of charity was important for female heads, it can also bring stigma and humiliation. According to Hasina (38), she is treated worse than animals and is not welcomed easily by the neighbours.

"I went to my neighbour's house to ask for the faen (water strained from boiled rice), but she rudely refused to give me the faen as she wanted it for her livestock. We live a life worse than animals." – Hasina, 38 Years, Widowed

Low or no access to legal support

Female heads have low or no access to legal support. Legal support in the form of simple mediation at the village or UP level can open up and protect rights to SSNs or land. Some of the divorced and separated women mentioned that mediation support from the UP would also have saved their marriage but no one was prepared to offer support. One woman in an FGD mentioned that local (elected) leaders do not want to handle their cases as they fear that they might lose some voters. Other women who were present in the FGD agreed with this analysis. The FGD discussion revealed UP members and chairmen feel that dealing with issues of female heads can stigmatize their image. However, with no legal support, FFHs are more vulnerable.

"As soon as my husband died, my in-laws refused to give me the land my husband inherited although I have a son. I went to the UP Member and Chairman to ask for their help but they said that my complaint was a family matter and that I should solve it myself! I had to leave my husband's house and move to my parents' village." – Fulbanu, 36, Widow

*“My husband attempted to get re-married leaving me with my two children alone. Everyone in the village knew about this. I went to the Chairman for a *salish* (village level arbitration) but he told me that my honour would be at stake if I pursued the *shalish*. I did not want people to spread bad rumours about me. However, if the Chairman had taken the initiative, my husband would not have left me.”* Kajal, 32, Separated

4.4 Coping Strategies to food insecurity

Through data collection, we generated a list of coping strategies. However, we did not rank them because as our respondents told us ‘they are all important’. The coping strategies are grouped in the following categories (see Annex 1 for the complete list)

- changes in dietary practice,
- getting more food,
- engaging children in paid labour or domestic work,
- curbing supplementary costs and food costs,
- *food orphans*, foster families and reliance on donations.

Changes in dietary practice

In order to cope with food insecurity, most of the FHHs relied on food which was either inferior in quality or is not normally consumed (e.g. the kernel or middle stem of banana plant, wild vegetables, stem of water lily etc.). Sharing meals as well as reducing meal size and meal frequency were obvious coping practices. Often the adult member in general and the female heads in particular reduced their consumptions to allow the children or elderly and sick members to eat more. Extreme poor female heads also preserved *faen/vater maar* (water strained off from boiled rice) to use as another meal. Some also mentioned that they collect *faen* from their comparatively better off neighbours. For example Rizia a 50 years old widow told us that *“I have to pre-book the ‘faen’ of my neighbours well ahead of time so that they do not give it to their livestock.”* In the worst cases, female heads and their families simply starve for the day.

Getting more food

Female heads frequently borrow food from neighbours. A few of the respondents also reported purchasing food from neighbours on credit. Most of the female heads indicated that they often sell their labour in kind in order to access food. However, this strategy reinforces food security when the price of rice is higher in the market during the lean season. Respondents also mentioned that they had to sell their labour in advance, thus, committing to below market wage rates for the future season. A few of them also sent their children to visit neighbours’ houses during meal times so that the child at least can eat for the day if not the mother herself. Visiting a relative’s house was also found as a coping strategy. However, such visits are mostly limited to maternal relatives. Respondents also reported that they frequently saved handfuls of rice so that when food was scarce or difficult to manage, they at least had something to feed the family.

Engaging children in paid labour or domestic work

Sending children to work in other people’s houses is a common practice among the extreme poor. This means the children are withdrawn from school. Most of the cases involve girl children. Boys are

expected to be engaged in work activities such as collecting fish or other natural resources, grazing the livestock, and in some cases buying or selling produce in the market. Several other respondents also said that they had sent their children to the orphanage or to relatives' houses. This helped reduce the number of household members to be fed. While engaging a girl child as housemaid was common.

Extreme poor FHHs also reduce or completely eliminate supplementary food costs in order to focus expenditure on essential food. In most cases, FHHs cut back or stopped buying cooking oil and spices. Most of the female heads mentioned that they hardly use kerosene or other oil to light their house at night. Female heads also reported stopping some of the regular costs like hair care oil, bathing soap or cloth washing soap. Expenditure on clothing is reduced by collecting old clothes from rich neighbours. At the same time FHHs will keep some particular types of dry food (dry fish, dry chilli etc) to use during lean periods.

"I hardly light my lamp at night, I hardly use oil for my hair, I rarely go to the market to buy anything. Where will I get money from? My sons do not look after me." Rabeya, 50 years, Separated

There were many other reported coping strategies adopted by female headed households which are not easily classified under the above headings. Asking favours from neighbours and relatives were repeatedly mentioned. A considerable number of respondents receive and collect *fitra/zakat* from better-off Muslim families. A few of the respondents who live adjacent to a village market also stated that they collect food leftovers and vegetables from shops at the end of the day or even damaged items. In the study areas there are also a number of *mazars* (shrines) which often arrange food for the *kangalis* (needy people). Extreme poor women said that they know when the shrines hold these events so that they can have the food on those particular days. A few of them also said that they try to find out about funerals in Muslim families because the families often arrange food for the attendees of the funeral ceremony as well as for the poor. Collecting rice, potatoes or vegetables from the harvested fields in return for being allowed to glean the remaining crop residues is also common. A few women stated that they collected and sold naturally available vegetables in order to earn money. One FHH also said she wears garlands and amulets from the shrine or religious leaders because she thinks this will help reduce the severity of hunger.

Some FHHs reported that they managed to secure access to SNNs in the form of relief or emergency food supply when their areas were hit by an emergency such as flood, cyclone and so forth. At the extreme end of coping strategies, some female heads turn to begging either temporarily or permanently. Some FHHs confessed that they had stolen in order to survive.

"My children were crying because they were hungry. We had not had food for two days. How I can tolerate this as a mother! I even stole half kg rice from my neighbour's house, cooked it and gave it to my children to eat." – Khadija, 35 years, Married

"Out of hunger my children were crying like dying chicken. I lost my mind, went to a neighbour's house at noon when there was no one and I stole some potato and rice from that house. I cooked it for my children. What a shame! I will be cursed one day." - Krishna, 37 years, Married

Some FHHs from religious minority groups said they hid their religious identity in order to manage food and their livelihood. Two Hindu women shared their experience of hiding their identity

“I went to collect clothes from a rich Muslim man’s house during the Eid. I kept myself hidden so that no one would recognize me as a Hindu. Although my community would not say anything, it is still a matter of shame.” - Geeta, 25 years, Married

FHHs also mentioned that sometimes they hide their illness to reduce the cost of treatment because any investment in their health was perceived as being less important than feeding the children or husband. Thus, women not only share their food but also sacrifice more for their family members.

Food orphans

Within an FHH, many children are effectively “Food Orphans”, either formally when they are in orphanages or informally when they are working as housemaids. They have dropped out from school. In this way, children are potential shock absorbers for the family: they can help lower consumption, supplement family work and income generating capacity, and reduce expenditure by not going to school. Rokeya a 45 year old widow said:

“When I failed to provide food, I gave my daughter to the government orphanage here in the district town. I even sent my younger son to the lillah boarding (private orphanage cum teaching institution for Muslims) but later I brought him from there and kept him with me.”

The result of different kind of political, social and cultural disenfranchisement is the rise of a considerable number of children who are effectively *food orphans*, i.e. infants and small children who are put into either a public or private orphanage or are sent to work as bonded labour or as residential housemaids in better-off families where they receive food and shelter, and sometimes education. This, I would argue, is a new form of patronage which might help extreme poor households deal with food shortage but can also have unintended negative consequences.

“The family who took my daughter promised to bring her up and educate her, but they didn’t keep their promise. Rather they used to torture her. I brought her back. I’d rather die in hunger than do this again.” – Shilpi, a 34 year old widow

Data collected from the interviews and FGDs revealed that those who did not receive safety nets suffered from acute hunger. When they began to endure repeated days without meals (i.e. more than once a week) 8 out of the 32 considered sending their girl children to orphanages in order to cope. Of them 3 succeeded in sending their girl child to the public orphanage for a certain period of time, 2 of them recently sent their young daughters to the orphanage until they become old enough to get married, and one continues to live in the orphanage as she is only nine years old.

“I kept my younger daughter in the orphanage for 6 years, I also tried to keep my elder daughter there but they didn’t take her as she didn’t qualify because of her age. I put the older daughter in a rich man’s house where she worked as a housemaid for more than 2 years before she got married.” – Fokron, 38 Years, Widowed

Two other separated women also wanted to send their daughters to an orphanage but since the father of the child was still alive, the orphanage authority refused to take them since, children with a living father are not considered eligible (even if the father has no active contact with the children). Another two FHHs could not afford the transport cost to and from the orphanage and therefore could not send

them, although they wanted to. Only one male child was kept in a private Islamic orphanage (known as *lillah boarding*) where Islamic education is also mandatory.

"I tried a lot to put my children in the orphanage but since their father is still alive, they refused to take them even if I do not have any contact with their father." – Banu, 48 years, separated

Most of the female heads chose to send their girls rather than their boys to the orphanage. The key reasons include:

- Male children give social security and can make greater financial contribution. This is true irrespective of age. ,
- Older male children can perform activities which girls normally do not, including scavenging work, fishing from water bodies, wild vegetables, gleaning leftover grains from the fields. Boys more than girls can go to the market to buy household needs.
- Girl children need to be married off and it is important to ensure their reputations are kept intact in order to arrange a better marriage.
- Girl children pose more compelling security concerns. Respondents said that it is more difficult to work outside leaving the children at home if the child is female.
- The promise of having the girl fed, clothed, educated and possibly with a contribution towards the dowry was also an important incentive. Although in many cases this promise was not fulfilled (see cases above).

Family relations, foster relations and patrons

When children are not accepted in the orphanage, extreme poor women develop foster relations with their children's grandparents' brother or sister. For instance, elderly female widows often adopt the grandchildren of their poor daughters who live separately. This is seen as a win-win situation for both mother and grandmother. For the mother the advantage is one less person to feed. For the grandmother having a grandson or granddaughter is helpful because s/he gives company and can assist with daily household chores.

"I have the grandsons with me, I feel mentally strong. At least I am not alone. Otherwise I would have died in this dark room and no one would even know I have died." – Anwara, 65 years, Widowed

However, female heads who are comparatively young also developed relations with some comparatively rich families in the village or surrounding area allowing themselves to be called their foster daughter. This provides them with a different kind of relationship which is more sympathetic and acts as insurance for them when they face severe food insecurity. They also get other forms of support from their 'foster parents' around the year. If the foster family is well-known in the community and has a good reputation, this will also be afforded to the 'foster daughter'

"The family where I work as a housemaid has no daughter. So I made them my foster parents. From that day onwards they take great care of me and my family. Often I receive money, food, rice and clothes from them." – Farida, 40 years, Married

Religious beliefs

One of our respondents told us she relied on enchanted water, garland, and amulets to reduce the severity of her and her daughter's hunger. She collected a garland with the help of a neighbour in exchange for 101 taka from a shrine in Chittagong. She always wears this around her neck. Although no

other respondent reported such kind of practice, this woman mentioned that she learned about it from other poor women in the area.

5. Conclusion

The findings have brought out some special dimensions of vulnerability of FHHs especially in relation to food insecurity. There are many ways to become an FHH. However, a more common route for rural women in Bangladesh to become FHHs is to never get married for the second time or to have an economically inactive male partner (sick, disabled or elderly partner). Except for elderly widows, most of the FHHs have children on whom the female head relies heavily. Often this means the children, especially the female children, absorb the shock of FHH shocks and hazards. Although this helps the household, it also compromises the future prospect of the children. In some cases, initiatives which strengthen food security have unintended consequences for the children. This is more likely to happen in cases of 'food orphans'. This paper demonstrates that the instrumentalization of children for food security is also subjected to gender dimensions. Further research should be carried out into how many children are suffering as food orphans and their experiences, paying particular attention to the gender and inter-generational dimensions.

The main argument put forward here is that food security is not only gendered but it is also heavily influenced by household composition. This paper has argued that if extreme poor women in FHHs were able to access opportunities and resources the way that men do, then the 'feminization of poverty' would be decreased. Presence of cultural and social restrictions on female head women adversely and acutely affects their efforts and limits their opportunities to overcome periods of food insecurity. This feeds into an argument which states that the removal of cultural and societal restrictions on women would significantly improve the food security of FHHs and help them accumulate assets and earn cash based income. This has also been supported by other studies (Cain et al. 1979, Mallick & Rafi 2010). FHHs experience not only direct but also indirect labour exploitation because the care of children and other family members (e.g sick husbands) falls on the sole female head breadwinner.

FHHs are often deprived of their legal entitlements and excluded from legal support which could ensure many of their rights including rights to land. There is a critical need to address this issue perhaps by implementing programs focused on community based legal support to women in general and female heads in particular. The Government is currently activating and strengthening the village courts system in Bangladesh, but these need to be sensitized about the specific needs of FHHs.

Typically FHHs (widowed, abandoned and divorced) are left without marital inheritance (dowry or contribution to her children's upbringing) or an inheritance from their fathers (as her husband retains the dowry), and have restricted income earning opportunities. On the contrary, if it were a male (widower, abandoned or divorced), he would not be deprived in the same way and would be able to command relatively higher wages when working.

FHHs are numerically prominent among the extreme poor and their experience of food insecurity and associated vulnerabilities is qualitatively different from that of other households. This paper offers a detailed analysis of gender and FHH isolation where FHHs are constantly exploited and excluded. Of these two, the processes of exclusion and marginalization are worse than exploitation since their impact is greater on both the women and their children.

The research found that extreme poor female heads have comparatively higher discount rates (compared to men and women in male headed HHs) with the focus on current survival taking obvious priority over future investments. The constant struggle of FHHs through mild, moderate and extremely degrading coping options helps them merely survive but does not help them recover to a level of being food secure.

In summary, the whole analysis has underlined the need for a detailed and holistic understanding of the lived experiences of extreme poor female heads, without which the poverty of this group will be impossible to understand and then address. Therefore, this research should lead to further studies which explore the lived experiences of female heads in different contexts and geographical locations, covering both income and non-income dimensions of poverty. Development interventions should also be carefully designed to address the need of FHHs. However, to reduce the inequality experienced by FHHs, it may be worth thinking about some form of positive discrimination which prioritises the needs of extreme poor FHHs.

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Annex 1: List of Coping Strategies by FHHs

<p>1. Changes in Dietary Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relying on less preferred low quality food Shared meals Reduced meal size Reduced consumption by the adult members to allow children to eat more Reduced number of meals each day Starving Visiting neighbours' house during lunch/dinner time Visiting relatives who are comparatively well off Collected water strained off from the boiled rice from neighbours Preserved water strained off from boiled rice to be used as another meal
<p>2. Getting more food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Borrow food Food on credit Collecting wild/naturally available food which are usually not consumed Selling labor in kind (mostly rice) Advance sale of labor, especially payment based housemaid work Visiting neighbours' house during lunch/dinner time Visiting relatives who are comparatively well off
<p>3. Using children as a coping strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sending children to work as housemaid to decrease HH members Sending children to orphanage/madrasa to decrease HH members Sending children to live with relatives to decrease HH members Engaging children to manage fish from the natural sources, and in some cases to sell the fish for money
<p>4. Other Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking favors from neighbors/relatives Begging Asking for fitra/zakat/ Saving handful rice during each time of cooking Asking foodstuff/vegetables from the shop owners at the end of the day when there are leftovers or damaged items Cut down on using fuel to light the house. Eating from mazar/shrine Collecting rice/potato/vegetables from harvested fields to collect remaining/gleaning Change in habit (stopped eating betel leaf, betel nuts etc) Wearing spiritual garland/amulets collected from shrines/religious leaders to reduce the severity of hunger Access to SSNs Collecting and selling of naturally produced vegetables Stealing rice from neighbor's/relative's house
<p>5. Reducing supplementary cost and food cost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced use of oil and spices in food Stopped using oil for lighting the house Stopped using hair oil/soap/cloth washing bar Collected old clothes from neighbors Reduced use of cooking oil and spices Keeping foodstuff dry (dry fish, dry chili) to consume in future

Box 1: Rokeya's Story

Rokeya (42) was born in a village of Patuakhali immediately after the liberation war of 1971. Her father had no land and was living hand to mouth. She was married at the age of 14 to a poorer family and no dowry was exchanged. Rokeya started living in a joint family with her in-laws. Her husband was a poor agro-laborer with limited physical ability to earn as he was having chest problems. After two years of marriage, Rokeya gave birth to a girl child. Giving birth to a girl child in an income poor or resource poor family was not welcomed. At this stage Rokeya was forced to contribute to the family income and started working as a housemaid and harvesting work. However, her family's income contribution to the joint family was not satisfactory and so her in-laws asked them to live separately. The only thing Rokeya's husband inherited was the three decimal homestead land. Rokeya and her family started living separately. Her situation gradually worsened further when she gave birth to five more children (one daughter and four sons) of whom one died of diarrhoea at the age of eight. To manage their livelihood, they decided to migrate to Dhaka and started earning as day laborers. Rokeya's income became instrumental for the survival of the family as her husband could earning only 10-15 days a month. Life was not good but they were surviving. Rokeya was involved in brick crushing, sand lifting etc. and her husband was pulling a rickshaw. They survived eight years there. But after that Rokeya's husband was diagnosed with cancer. Rokeya continued day laboring to feed the family but also started collecting charity to pay for her husband's treatment. When the health condition of her husband deteriorated further, Rokeya decided to send her husband back to the village to her mother as he was in need of a carer and for Rokeya it was not possible to both earn and care. Within a few days her husband died. Rokeya was pregnant at that time carrying the last and sixth child in her womb. Rokeya had to leave Dhaka and returned to her village because of security concerns, as people around her were not behaving well since her husband died. When she returned to her in-law's village they didn't allow her to live on the land her husband had inherited. She took shelter in her parents' house. But she was not welcome there by her brother's wife. Her brother bought her three decimals of land in a nearby village where she built a thatched house. By this time her eldest son started earning but as soon as he started earning in Dhaka, he got married and stopped providing support to his mother and younger siblings. Rokeya had nothing to do in the village except work as a housemaid in the neighboring houses. Along with her children, she started starving. Finding no other alternative, she was then bound to choose between making all the children starve or sending them somewhere else. She went to the public orphanage in the nearest district town and left her nine year old daughter there. She wanted to also leave her son aged seven but she couldn't as there was no boy's orphanage nearby. So she got him admitted into a *lillah* boarding (an Islamic orphanage where learning Quran is compulsory) but brought him back after few days as she needed him to contribute to the household chores. To manage food for the children, Rokeya went through some sad experiences. While her younger son (7) were engaged in household chores, fishing and taking care of the younger sibling, Rokeya was collecting *faen*, gleaning from harvested field, collecting leftover vegetables and food from the markets. Rokeya also keeps herself informed if there is any occasion in the nearest shrine or if there is any funeral ceremony, marriage ceremony in the locality so that she can try and get some food there. Rokeya only once received relief during a cyclone but she is not sure whether she got it from the Union Parishad (UP). She visited the UP several times to get herself listed in any of the SSNs but failed to do so as the UP Chairman said she had not voted for him in the past. Rokeya told us, "There are only a few odd things that I haven't done in order to feed my children."