



Differences in the socio-economic characteristics and nutritional status of male and female headed households in CLP 2.1

Background

The Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) aims to improve livelihoods and reduce poverty of the poorest and most vulnerable people living in the *chars* of North-West Bangladesh. Through the pioneering Asset Transfer Project (ATP), the first phase of the CLP (CLP-1) directly targeted 55,000 households. Phase two (CLP-2), which began in April 2010, aims to lift a further 67,000 households out of extreme poverty.

Often portrayed and recognised as “the poorest of the poor”¹, women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and are one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in society. In Bangladesh’s patriarchal society, female-headed households are particularly vulnerable.

Vulnerability of Female-headed Households

In April/May 2010 a random sample of 405 households was used to collect baseline data on the socio-economic and nutritional status of newly recruited CLP2.1 households. The survey disaggregates data for male and female-headed households, facilitating a comparison. A marked distinction can be observed for the majority of indicators, which clearly reveal female-headed households as more vulnerable and disadvantaged. 17% of the households sampled were female-headed households. Whilst the average household size overall is 3.91, female-headed households had on average 1.8 fewer members than male-headed households.

Key Findings:

- Significantly more female than male household heads have not attended school (91.6% and 76.9% respectively).
- Only 5.5% of male and 5.6% of female-headed households had access to safe drinking water.
- Male-headed households had more than double the amount of productive assets than female-headed households.
- Average monthly income for male and female-headed households was Tk.2633 and Tk.1198 respectively.

¹Chant, S (2004). *Dangerous Equations? How Female-headed Households Became the Poorest of the Poor: Causes, Consequences and Cautions*. IDS Bulletin, 35(4):19–26.



Education

School attendance is much less common for females than males, particularly for females in female-headed households. Significantly more female household heads (91.6%) have not attended school, compared with male household heads (76.9%). Significantly more girls (57.1%) from male-headed households attended school, than those from female-headed households (27.3%).

Employment

Most employed male household heads in the *chars* work as day labourers, whilst for female household heads, maid work and housework are the most common occupations alongside day labour. 91% of male household heads reported having a paid occupation over the last 30 days, compared with 73.2% of female household heads. More female household heads reported that they resorted to begging.

House Ownership and Structure

On average, female-headed households reported having resided on their homesteads for longer (6.4 years), as compared with male-headed households (4.7 years).





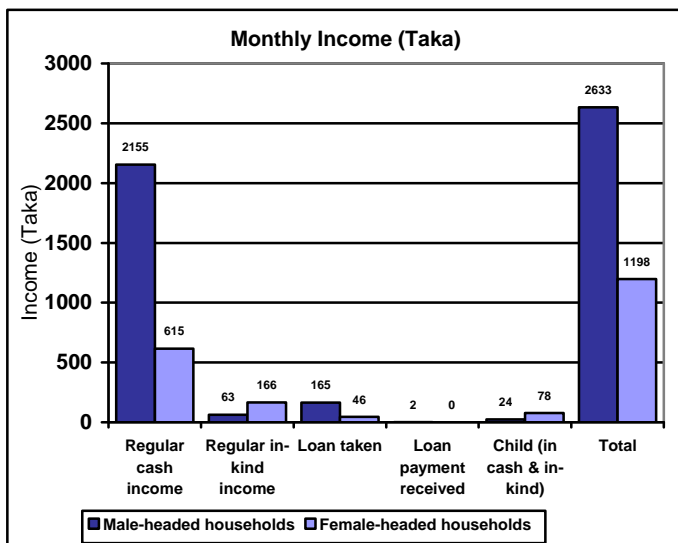
Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Defecation Practices

The percentage of households with access to safe drinking water was very low at 5.5% of male-headed households and 5.6% of female-headed households. Male-headed households were more than three times more likely to own, or have shared ownership of a tubewell. Only 1 in 3 male-headed households had soap or ash available for handwashing at the latrine, whilst no soap or ash was observed in female-headed households. However, a marked discrepancy between reported handwashing and observed soap or ash at the latrine showed that reported handwashing was higher. Only 21% of households had access to a sanitary latrine and there was no significant difference in access between male and female-headed households.

Income and Expenditure

Female-headed households have a significantly lower mean monthly income (Tk.1198) than male-headed households (Tk.2633). However in-kind income was found to be significantly higher in female-headed households and there was no significant difference in per capita income between male and female-headed households, due to the smaller family size.

Figure 1: Monthly Income (taka) for Male and Female-Headed Households



Savings and Assets

The percentage of households with savings is much higher under male headship (75% with savings) than female (59%). Among those with savings, male-headed households' savings were, on average, double those of female-headed households, at Tk.470 and Tk.211 respectively in the month preceding data collection. The average total value of household assets in male-headed households was Tk.2149, whilst female-headed households had only Tk.1110. Male-headed households had more than double the amount of productive assets than female-headed households.



Food Security

Female-headed households reported eating an average of 4 food groups during the last 7 days, thereby showing significantly poorer dietary diversity compared to male-headed households, which consumed 5 groups during the last 7 days. Female-headed households had a significantly lower intake of eggs, fish, oil and fruit.

Both male and female-headed households practice coping strategies during food shortages and about half of female-headed households reported eating lower quality meals, whilst one third of male-headed households were likely to eat lower quality meals.



Nutritional Status of Mothers

Undernutrition is a significant problem for mothers, as well as children. Although no significant difference was found in Body Mass Index (BMI) between mothers in female and male-headed households, the former had significantly lower haemoglobin levels. This is an indicator of the iron deficiency anaemia and 57.7% of mothers from female-headed households were anaemic, compared with 45.0% in male-headed households.

Conclusion

These findings support information collected in other studies and confirm that female-headed households are significantly disadvantaged in a number of different ways. Compared to female-headed households, male-headed households have relatively higher incomes and expenditures, savings and assets. Females in female-headed households also receive significantly less education than females in male-headed households thereby restricting their opportunities even further.

CLP supports those households that meet strict selection criteria (e.g. assetless, jobless, landless) which are proxies for extreme poverty. If female-headed households meet these criteria then they receive CLP's full package of support. 16.8% of CLP's second cohort of households (2.2) are female-headed.