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# **Are Female Headed Households in Distress? Recent Evidence from Indian Labour Market**

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# **Are Female Headed Households in Distress ? Recent Evidence from Indian Labour Market**

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## **Abstract :**

*Acknowledging women as economic agents with their direct contribution to growth continues to remain the focus of the nation among its various objectives even in the Twelfth Plan which suggest various ways of making economic growth truly inclusive . In order to be inclusive the nature and the composition of growth should be such that it should include the poor, particularly the excluded/ marginalised group like women and the disadvantaged socio-economic group. If women lack sufficient decent work opportunities and continue to remain excluded from the main stream economy and cannot contribute to the development process as economic agents for a considerable period of time then can have serious implications for future growth of Indian economy. In India recently there is a debate regarding “Missing female labour” where some portrayed this decline as a positive effect due to rising participation in education among young females and others claim that it was crowding-out of female labour in the face of agricultural stagnation and slowdown of economic growth. The objective of the present paper is to investigate the present status of households headed by female in rural and urban India and examine their demographic structure and employment pattern in comparison to male headed households using unit level data of NSSO employment and Unemployment (68<sup>th</sup> Round). The paper also look into the difference across various socio religious groups. We found that existence of Female headed household(FHH) arising out of several factors mainly absence of male member viz, widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion,migration of male members for long periods etc. The educational status of female head is poor compare to the male head and this results into lower capability and skill of the female head and resulting poor socio-economic condition. A significant section of female headed household (FHHs)is single membered. Average amount of land owned by FHH is much lower that the male headed household. It is found that nearly 60% of female head are not in labour force and are either attending education or engaged in domestic duty. This exclusion from labour market may work as a hindrance for further empowerment. It can be observed that a significant section of women above 15+ age group are attending educational institute .The low rate of participation of*

women in wage employment is an issue of concern and debate. The present of socio-economic condition and growth process need to be much more inclusive to distribute the beneficiaries of growth and economic progress if it is to function in an effective manner. The results of economic reforms and its impact on all the marginal section of the society need to be examined carefully. Across tribal group women of FHHs have larger presence as own account worker than women of Male Headed Households (MHH). Interestingly higher percentage of women of tribal group and Scheduled caste (SC) from FHHs are engaged as wage worker. Around 11% of tribal women from FHHs are working as regular/salaried employee. Again women from muslim group has lower presence in this category. Though women from MHHs are in less percentage share compared to FHHs, presence of upper caste Hindu s are higher as regular wage employee who are coming from MHHs. Again Muslim women from MHHs are less in number. A large section of SC, ST women both from MHHs and FHHs are working as casual worker. This may be a distress drive phenomenon. A small percentage of women from Hindu upper caste coming from MHHs as well as FHHs are working as casual workers compared to other socio-religious group. This indicate that casual employment among women is high among the so called backward group though for the Muslim women it is low. Women from Muslim group both in case of MHHs and FHHs have very low percentage participation in the labour market. More than 70% from FHHs and 77% from MHHs of Muslim women are not in the labour force. Nearly 45-50 % Muslim women are engaged in domestic work and other work along with domestic duty. Surprisingly such percentage is also high for women of upper Hindu coming from MHHs (nearly 36%). This indicate that along with the backward group like Muslim women, the so called higher Hindu upper caste women are also less in the labour market. Among the poor worker from FHHs 46% of them are engaged in crop related activity, 11% in building works, 7% in retail trade, 4% incivil engineering related activities.

A large section of SC, ST women both from MHHs and FHHs are working as casual worker. A significant portion of Women of FHH are present in retail trade, tobacco manufacturing , and building construction. The nature of job as well the other conditions in these sectors generally not suitable for the women. Still women from FHH has higher presence in this sectors than women from MHH indicating a distress driven participation. The policy need to be more inclusive in nature and it requires on the one hand larger capacity building and skill development for women of all section and on the other generation of awareness regarding equality in terms of dignity, opportunity and right.

## Introduction

One of the objectives of the eleventh plan (2007-12) aimed at achieving “faster and more inclusive growth”. Acknowledging women as economic agents with their direct contribution to growth continues to remain the focus of the nation among its various objectives even in the Twelfth Plan which suggest various ways of making economic growth truly inclusive. In order to be inclusive the nature and the composition of growth should be such that it should include the poor, particularly the excluded/ marginalised group like women and the disadvantaged socio-economic group by providing that type of employment and livelihood which would correct the ongoing trend of jobless growth that has created exclusion of women and the socio-economic groups from the growth process (**Eapen and Mehta, 2012**). If women lack sufficient decent work opportunities and continue to remain excluded from the main stream economy and cannot contribute to the development process as economic agents for a considerable period of time then can have serious implications for future growth of Indian economy. This would in turn result into increase in the incidence of poverty among them making them more vulnerable as compared to men. However this increasing incidence of poverty among women who represents a disproportionate percentage of the world’s poor is associated with the rising incidence of female headed household (**Nilufer Cagatay,1998**).

In India recently there is a debate regarding “Missing female labour” where some portrayed this decline as a positive effect due to rising participation in education among young females (Rangarajan 2011). Kannan and Raveendran (2012) claim that it was crowding-out of female labour in the face of agricultural stagnation and slowdown of economic growth. Some argued that it might be the reversal of an exceptional increase in female labour force caused by agrarian distress during the earlier period 1999-2000 to 2004-05. With a rise in income in the later period female labour that was added during the earlier period has probably withdrawn from the labour force.( Abraham 2009; Himanshu 2011; Klasen and Pieters 2012; Neff et al 2012; Thomas 2012).Such fluctuations need to be placed in the context of structural change in labour participation wherein the share of women in the labour force as well as labour participation rate of women has been declining for the last quarter of a century.

The objective of the present paper is to investigate the present status of households headed by female in rural and urban India ,examine their demographic structure and employment

pattern in comparison to male headed households using unit level data of NSSO employment and Unemployment (68<sup>th</sup> Round).

## **I. Current Research**

Studies (**Barros, Fox and Mendonca,1997**) show that in both developing and developed countries Female headed households,(FHHs) have different socio-economic and demographic characteristics compared to male headed households(MHHs) and that there has been a substantial increase in female-headed households in both rural and urban areas all over the world. As evidence shows ( **Mohiuddin,1980**) that female headed households are amongst the world's one of the severely disadvantaged households in terms of their economic condition . There are evidences in the literature(**Kossoudji and Mueller, 1983; Goldberg and Cremen, 1990**) which argues that FHHs are more likely to be poor, at any point in time, compared to the MHHs. A paper by **Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa (2004)** which investigates whether FHHs are more vulnerable to poverty compared to MHHs using consumer expenditure survey data for 1987-88,1993-94 and 1999-00 show that there exist a gender bias in the incidence of poverty if households are categorised not only by the sex of the household but also by their marital status. The study also reveals that not currently married households are more vulnerable to poverty because of the fact that their heads have less education.

## **II. Result & Discussion**

### **1. Demographic Status of Female headed household in India**

A female headed household may be designated as female headed, de facto or de jure . A female headed household is considered to be de-facto if the male member is absent and either the female head is a widow or a divorcee or unmarried mother or an abandoned woman. A female headed household is considered to be de- jure if the male member exist but stays out of the household and contributes marginally to the economic aspect of the household.

The suffer from extreme poverty , low levels of education and skill resulting in low level of economic wellbeing. The female headed household are very much vulnerable to

poverty due to the marital status of the household heads (widowed, divorced, separated, single motherhood), lack of ownership of assets, access to credit, lack of proper and regular income, lack of remunerative employment opportunities, gender inequalities in distribution of income, lack of access to services like health care, education, transportation and social exclusion in economic and political participation. These women are forced to play a dual role in the economy. They are overburdened with domestic work as well as outside market oriented activities. Poverty is also seen to be severe among women as compared to men.

According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) publications, the Indian head of the household is just a reference point having no compulsion of income earning authority. Then there is absence of any significant difference in the incidence of poverty between the two types of households. That is the sex of the household is not correlated with the poverty level of household. But if the head of the household is defined in such a way that he has the income earning responsibility the sex of the head is definitely correlated with poverty.

According to census 2011 there are about 27 million female headed household in India which constitute nearly 10.9% of all household. The percentage of FHH in NSSO 68<sup>th</sup> round Employment & unemployment Survey is nearly 11% of all household (Table 1). 43.7% of households in Lakshadweep and 23% households in Kerala have a female as head. In seven major States, the proportion of Single Member Female Headed HH is more than 20%: Chhattisgarh 29.9%, Madhya Pradesh (24.9%) Tamil Nadu (26.1%), Andhra Pradesh (27.1%), Maharashtra (22.2%), Odisha (22.1%). If we look at the marital status of FHH it is observed that 67% of the female head are widowed and 23% are currently married. The figure of currently married male head of household is 93%. Nearly 6% of Female head are never married which is only 3% for male headed household. It is observed by census 2011 that the major reason of emergence of female headed household is mainly the broad range of domestic situations typically characterized by the absence of a resident male head, viz, widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion. Apart from this Migration of male members for long periods, Loss of economic function by resident males due to severe unemployment, disability, illness and male reluctance to accept jobs seen as status reducing, Households with no mature sons, Sons residing in independent nuclear units also related into female headed household in India.

**Education Achievement** : The educational status of female head is poor compare to the male head (table 2). 46 % of female are illiterate which is 20 % for male. The percentage of graduate and above among female head is only 5% which is 15 % for the male. This implicate the capability and skill of the female head and resulting poor socio-economic condition.

Looking at the size of the household it can be said that a significant section of female headed household (FHHs) is single membered (6 %) and this number is somewhat five times higher than male headed household (MHHs). Moreover, where 13% MHHs consist of either 2 or 3 members, the same is nearly 26% ,i.e doubled in case of FHHs. This may be due to the fact that FHHs are less potential in maintaining a larger household owing to their low income and income earner as well.

If we classify households by their age group and look at the member composition within we find that at higher age group 46 and above percentage of female members are much higher in case of FHHs compared to MHHs in both rural (92.5) and urban areas (89.4%) of India. For age group 66 and above the same is 94.3% for rural areas and 95.1% in urban areas for FHHs. However the % of female members is more or less same for both MHHs and FHHs for lower age groups in both rural and urban areas.

## **2. Asset Holding of Female Household :**

Average amount of land owned by FHH is much lower that the male headed household (table 5) . In rural area average land owned by those who are never married and currently married have no difference though the variation is higher for currently married FHH. In Urban area amount of land owned is very less for both FHH and MHH though it is still higher for the male . According to census 2011 larger proportion of Female Headed Households live in 'No exclusive room' and in 'One room' dwelling units compared to Male Headed Households. The household sizes in case of Female Headed Households tend to be smaller than the Male Headed Households. The proportions of households possessing different assets is lower in case of Female Headed HHs in comparison to Male Headed HH (Census 2011).

## **3. Employment Pattern of Head of the Household**



Participation in labour market is crucial factor that determines that economic condition of the household. We have studied the existing pattern of employment of female headed household vis a vis the male headed household using the unit level data survey by NSSO (68<sup>th</sup> round Survey of employment and Unemployment situation in India). On the basis of current weekly activity status it is observed that around 17% of female head are self employed either as own account worker or helper . The corresponding figure for the male head of the household is much higher (39%, Table 6A). On the other nearly 23% of female head of the household are engaged as wage worker. Among whom 13% is working as regular salaried wage worker which is very significant portion . This may be due to the facet that a part of widowed are getting their spouse job as well as a few of them are engaged in formal sector . And 9% of female head are working as casual worker. Compare to female presence of male worker in these categories are much higher. It is found that nearly 58% of female head are not in labour force either attending education or engaged in domestic duty( 20%).This exclusion from labour market may work as a hindrance for further empowerment. On the other 25% of male head are out of labour force and a meagre 2% of male head attends domestic duty clearly indicating the existing nature of discrimination within household.

#### **4. Employment Pattern of Members of Female headed Household**

According to 2011 NSS data nearly 36 % of male members are engaged in self employment household enterprise (table 6B). Only 17 % women are engaged in self employment enterprise. In this category the percentage of own account worker is much higher for men compared to women and women participation is relatively higher as helper in the household enterprise. If we look at the head of the household we see percentage of own account worker (both male and female) is higher in case of MHHs compared to FHHs .It indicates that either the opportunity or capacity to self-employment is less for the FHHs.

According to the current weekly activity status the percentage of women who are not in labour force (nearly 67 %) is strikingly higher compared to men (30%). Among these women a large section of women (nearly 24 %) are engaged in domestic duty only. Interestingly larger percentage of these women performing only domestic duty are the members of MHHs . Also a large section of women have to carry household work as well as take the burden of other activities like free collection of goods ,tailoring, weaving etc .This percentage of women is higher for MHHs (14.3%) compared to FHHs (8.7%). In case of both MHHs and FHHs very meager portion of male members are engaged in either domestic duty only or both

domestic duty and other work . But interestingly such percentage of male member is higher for FHHs compared to MHHs. It may be due to the fact that the female member is either forced to or sometimes willingly function as main earning member of the household.

It can be observed that a significant section of women above 15+ age group are attending educational institute which is a progressive sign indeed and the percentage of girl child participating from the FHHs is marginally higher than the girls coming from MHHs.

Though women recipients of pension are much lower (1.63%) compared to men (3%), a large section of women from FHHs (6%) receives pension, rent, remittances etc than women from the MHHs. It has been observed that nearly 4% of 15+ women are engaged in begging and prostitution and this percentage of women is higher for FHHs compared to MHHs. This shows that women from the FHHs are much more vulnerable than the MHHs.

If we look at the category of wage employment we would see that nearly 14 % of women are employed as wage workers ,where as 30 % of male members are engaged in wage employment. The low rate of participation of women in wage employment is an issue of concern and debate. The present of socio-economic condition and growth process need to be much more inclusive to distribute the beneficiaries of growth and economic progress if it is to function in an effective manner. The results of economic reforms and it's impact on all the marginal section of the society need to be examined carefully.

Obviously the presence of female members from FHHs are much in wage employment. This may be due to the fact that may be in absence of the male member they have to participate in income generating activity .The percentage of regular salaried women coming from FHHs (11%) are much higher than that from MHHs(5%). Similarly percentage of casual women worker coming from FHHs is higher than MHHs.

Now we like to consider the status of child between 5-15 age group. Among them nearly 75% have reported attending educational institution table (7c). At the same time a small percentage of girl child have to perform domestic duty only (3.5%) and other works like free collection of wood etc(2.5%). The percentage of boys participating in such activity is less (2%) indicating persistence of gender discrimination within the household. Strikingly this percentage of girl child from FHH is lesser than that from the MHHs. This may be due to the reason that MHHs has larger discriminating attitude towards girls .

## 5. Socio-religious Groups and Employment

Looking across the socio religious group it is observed that for the female group variation across different socio-religious group is less pronounced than difference across gender (table 7d). For the female members tribals group has a higher presence in self enterprising household activities. Around 22% of tribals are engaged in such activities. In this category relatively less numbers are observed for women of general group and muslim women. Across tribal group women of FHHs have larger presence as own account worker than women of MHHs. Interestingly higher percentage of women of tribal group and Scheduled caste (SC) from FHHs are engaged as wage worker. Around 11% of tribal women from FHHs are working as regular/salaried employee. Again women from muslim group has lower presence in this category. Though women from MHHs are in less percentage share compared to FHHs, presence of upper caste Hindu s are higher as regular wage employee who are coming from MHHs. Again Muslim women from MHHs are less in number. A large section of SC, ST women both from MHHs and FHHs are working as casual worker. This may be a distress drive phenomenon. A small percentage of women from Hindu upper caste coming from MHHs as well as FHHs are working as casual workers compared to other socio-religious group. This indicate that casual employment among women is high among the so called backward group though for the Muslim women it is low. Women from Muslim group both in case of MHHs and FHHs have very low percentage participation in the labour market. More than 70% from FHHs and 77% from MHHs of Muslim women are not in the labour force. Nearly 45-50 % Muslim women are engaged in domestic work and other work along with domestic duty. Surprisingly such percentage is also high for women of upper Hindu coming from MHHs (nearly 36%). This indicate that along with the backward group like Muslim women, the so called higher Hindu upper caste women are also less in the labour market. Among the poor worker from FHHs 46% of them are engaged in crop related activity, 11% in building works, 7% in retail trade, 4% incivil engineering related activities.

**Rural Urban Difference:** The pattern of employment has distinctive feature among rural and urban sector. More than 50% of female workers in rural area are in crop production activity and women from MHHs have larger presence than FHHs. The other industrial division where

women have larger presence are construction (11%), retail trade (6%), civil administration, education and transport where significant portion of women work.

On the other hand retail trade is biggest sector in urban areas where 16% of women are engaged followed by construction, crop production, related activity. In case of construction sector percentage of women from MHHs are more than that of FHHs. In urban areas women from FHHs are more engaged in household activity, tobacco manufacturing, textile manufacturing and food manufacturing compared to MHHs

## **6. Employment of members of households by Industry Classification**

We have also studied the employment of head of household in different industry following broad division of NIC classification (2008). It is observed that ( table 7a) both for FHH and MHH a large number of members are engaged in crop and animal production activities. Though such participation are much higher for members of MHH (33%) than FHH (27%). The difference is also observed for education sector as well as household activities where FHH members' have relatively higher presence. Now if we look at the employment pattern by gender (table 7b) it is found that women of MHH have larger presence in crop production activities (52%) compare to that of FHH (34%). This may be due to various reason –one may be that amount of land owned by FHH are much less than MHH . Secondly as agriculture in general became less beneficial in the male headed household women has to in this activities and the main earning is coming from other source which may be done by the male members. The encouraging fact is that a large section of women are engaged in education sector both from FHH and MHH.

A significant portion of workers are present in retail trade. 10% of women from FHH is coming to this sector whereas 7% of women from MHH engaged in retail trade. With the growth of real estate the number of worker working in the construction activities is increasing . 9-10% of workers are working in this sector . Though male workers are dominating this sector , a significant presence of women are also observed in this sector which may not be always an wilful option for them. The nature of job as well the other conditions in this sector generally not suitable for the women. Still women from FHH has higher presence in this sector than women from MHH indicating a distress driven participation. Another sector where women participation is larger as well as exploitation is tobacco manufacturing industry. Women from FHH have higher presence than MHH.

An interesting observation is that we found no significant difference between MHHs and FHHs in the context of poor and non-poor household. It has been found that in rural areas 21% of FHH are poor and 24% of MHHs are poor signifying not enough differences in the incidence of poverty. On the other hand occurrence of poverty is higher in FHHs(20%) in urban areas than MHHs (17%).

### **III. Conclusion**

We found that existence of Female headed household arising out of several factors mainly absence of male member viz, widowhood, divorce, separation and desertion, migration of male members for long periods etc. The educational status of female head is poor compare to the male head and this results into lower capability and skill of the female head and resulting poor socio-economic condition. A significant section of female headed household (FHHs) is single membered. Average amount of land owned by FHH is much lower than the male headed household. It is found that nearly 60% of female head are not in labour force and are either attending education or engaged in domestic duty. This exclusion from labour market may work as a hindrance for further empowerment. It can be observed that a significant section of women above 15+ age group are attending educational institute. The low rate of participation of women in wage employment is an issue of concern and debate. The present of socio-economic condition and growth process need to be much more inclusive to distribute the beneficiaries of growth and economic progress if it is to function in an effective manner. The results of economic reforms and its impact on all the marginal section of the society need to be examined carefully. It is also found that casual employment among women is high among the so called backward group though for the Muslim women it is low. Women from Muslim group both in case of MHHs and FHHs have very low percentage participation in the labour market. A large section of SC, ST women both from MHHs and FHHs are working as casual worker. A significant portion of Women of FHH are present in retail trade, tobacco manufacturing, and building construction. The nature of job as well the other conditions in these sectors generally not suitable for the women. Still women from FHH has higher presence in this sectors than women from MHH indicating a distress driven participation. The policy need to be more inclusive in nature and it requires on the one hand larger capacity building and skill development for women of all section and on the other generation of awareness regarding equality in terms of dignity, opportunity, freedom and rights.

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