Feminisation of Poverty and Female Headed Households Due to Land Loss and Male Migration (India)

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ABSTRACT:
The feminisation of poverty in India describes the uneven way poverty is concentrated and experienced by women because of structural gender inequality in assets, work, and social protection. In rural settings, land loss and male migration intensify this process by shifting responsibility for survival onto women while keeping control over land, income, and institutions largely in male hands. Land is the central asset in rural India. When women do not have secure ownership or inheritance rights, they remain excluded from credit, subsidies, insurance, and recognition as farmers, even when they are the primary cultivators. This creates a poverty trap: women carry the burden of agricultural work and household reproduction, but without land titles they cannot easily convert labour into economic security. Recent studies also show that male migration is now a common livelihood strategy in agriculture-dependent households facing poverty, food insecurity, and climate stress, but its benefits are highly uneven. This paper aims to study the phenomena of Feminisation of poverty and increase of Female headed households due to loss of land and male migration (1970s to latest secondary research). Case of UP and Bihar are also presented. Secondary sources are used for this paper.

Keywords: Land acquisition, poverty, female headed households, feminisation of poverty, Special Economic Zones, UP, Bihar

Introduction

Land loss through fragmentation, diversion, or weak enforcement of rights deepens insecurity because it reduces both livelihood options and women's bargaining power within households and communities. Male migration adds another layer to this vulnerability. When men leave for work, women frequently take over cultivation, livestock care, wage labour, water and fuel collection, childcare, and household management. This is often described as the feminisation of agriculture, but the term can be misleading if it suggests empowerment by itself. Evidence from recent reviews shows that women's decision-making may improve somewhat, especially in nuclear households, yet workload and drudgery increase substantially and control over major resources does not rise in the same proportion. In many cases, migration transfers responsibility without transferring power.

The gendered consequences are especially severe when migration is distress-driven rather than opportunity-driven. In poor rural households, men often migrate because local farming is no longer viable due to low returns, climate

variability, or land stress, and remittances may be irregular or insufficient. Women then become de facto managers of farms, but they still face weak access to markets, limited mobility, and poor institutional support. As a result, household poverty may be hidden rather than reduced: income can become more diversified, but women absorb the costs through longer workdays, stress, and unpaid labour.

Land loss magnifies these effects because ownership and cultivation are not the same thing. Women may farm-land, but if the title is in a husband's or father-in-law's name, they may not be able to take loans, claim compensation, or make long-term production decisions. This legal exclusion matters because land titles are tied to access to formal institutions. Without them, women are pushed toward informal credit and precarious coping strategies, which often deepen indebtedness and poverty. In this sense, feminisation of poverty is not simply about women becoming poorer; it is about gendered systems making poverty harder to escape.

One can deduce two strands of reasoning on migration: one that emerges from economic growth theory and the other that emerges from (1) a bird's eye view of work on Third World urbanisation, and (2) extremely limited empirical studies, which are based on small sample surveys on family migration in India. Growth theories consider migration an invariable accompaniment of growth in developed countries is the shift away from agriculture, a process usually referred to as industrialisation and urbanisation. Such movements are seen to be induced by the prosperity of the recipient sector: industries located in urban centers. Technological innovations improve productivity in the industrial sector and lead to expansion in employment opportunities and an increase in wages in that sector. Simultaneously, mechanisation that takes place in agriculture, which is labour-saving, creates a surplus labour and also improves productivity in that sector. Labour "pushed" out of the agricultural sector due to labour-saving technological transformation gets absorbed in the industrial sector. In the next stage, the increase in prosperity of the industrial and agricultural sectors triggers off the demand for services and consequently the tertiary sector (often located in urban areas) and expands to attract labour from the rural areas. Thus, migration in this scheme is pull or prosperity induced. In this scheme, families decide to make the investment (incur the costs of migration) if and only if the expected returns exceed the costs of such investment. It needs to be noted that in this scheme family migration is induced only by a better earnings potential in destination locations, and hence is pull induced. McGee (1971), on the other hand, while analyzing the Third World urbanisation process, concludes that migration from rural areas in these countries reflects lack of employment expansion in agriculture. Labour pushed out of rural areas as a result of stagnation in agriculture does not get absorbed in manufacturing industries which are also stagnant, and end up in the tertiary sector. In this scheme, the tertiary sector functions as a "residual employer" and the growth of this sector is often associated with growing underemployment and unemployment. Thus, migration, which results in terrorization of the urban economy, is push or distress induced, and is hardly the desired form of labour mobility **(Jayaraj,2013)[1].**

There seems to be, a shared concern that the country has not been successful in transforming "its growth into development", the problem manifesting most significantly in serious regional imbalances and emergence of a few megacities with a high concentration of affluence as islands in the ocean of poverty. It is argued that the window of migration will provide an opportunity to labourers in backward regions and remote rural areas to shift rapidly to growing regions and dynamic urban centres. As they get absorbed in emerging modern activities, they will be able to improve their socio-economic conditions and simultaneously contribute to the efficient deployment of the

[1]Jayaraj, D. (2013) 'Family migration in India: "Push" or "pull" or both or what?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 October, 48(42), pp. 44-52.

workforce in the economy **(Kundu and Saraswati, 2012)**[2]

Much of the development literature, however, characterizes migrants as poor and distressed, pushed out of the agricultural system, living in slums and squatters at their places of destination, denied basic civic amenities, often forced into illegal and immoral business. Several policymakers and researchers, while being sympathetic to migrant populations and their right to settle down in the place of their choice, often associate them with problems of law and order, threatening local and national security, outbreak of epidemics and incidence of HIV/AIDS . Even studies rooted in concern for the low urban-directed mobility of women for economic reasons attribute increases in levels of such mobility to "progressive devaluation of what was traditionally women's work, propelling several gendered social processes, unfolding in the countryside" (Centre for Women's Development Studies 2012). A negative perspective is, thus, confirmed even by researchers who implicitly endorse the standpoint that the slowing down of migration would be desirable not only for the well-being of the receiving populations but also the migrants. **(Kundu and Saraswati, 2012)**

The big cities in India are growing faster than small and medium towns. The government has responded to this coming crisis by promoting new townships close to Indian metropolises in an attempt to decongest them **(Wang, Kundu and Chen, 2010)**. However, the development of new towns functions less as a means to decongest the older metropolitan centres than as a means to bypass them. This is the new face of urbanisation in India; it relies on the "bypass" approach to urbanisation instead of the urban regeneration approach one finds in western cities **(Bhattacharya and Sanyal, 2011)**[3].

In the raging controversy over land acquisition for development of new towns, the contradiction between subsistence and accumulation assumes critical proportions. This is especially true when it comes to land acquisition for the development of new towns. Controversies and political struggles over land acquisition have often revolved around land prices offered to those from whom land is acquired. **Morrison and Pandey (2007)**[4] argue that the price should be "income protecting" for the displaced rather than what the market principle yields. That is, the price of land should be the capitalised value of the value-added – rather than rental – yield, because those who are separated from the land will not find alternative employment opportunities in conditions of surplus labour and scarce land. The owner may voluntarily part with the land if the compensation is significantly higher than the market valuation. As the land ends up in the dynamic accumulation economy, its market value increases manifold. In what appears to be a non-coercive process, at the end of the day what happens is that the land that was under the command of producers in a non-corporate, need economy is alienated and corporatized within the accumulation economy. The outcome is none other than that of primitive accumulation although it involves no coercive state power or goons and guns **(Bhattacharya,Sanyal, 2011).**

To resist such acts of predatory primitive accumulation, masked as impersonal market forces, the losers of land resort to political agitation and even violence. Thus, each new

[2]Kundu, A. and Saraswati, L.R. (2012) 'Migration and exclusionary urbanisation in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 June, 47(26-27), pp. 219-227.

3Bhattacharya, R. and Sanyal, K. (2011) 'Bypassing the squalor: New towns, immaterial labour and exclusion in post-colonial urbanisation', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 July, 46(31), pp. 41-48.

[4]Morrison, A., Raju, D. and Sinha, N. (2007) *Gender equality, poverty and economic growth*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 4349.

town is born out of a violent, blood-stained conflict between the compulsions of accumulation and the imperatives of subsistence **(Ramakrishnan 2011).**

I Gender and Migration

Recent literature also warns against treating women left behind by migration as a uniform category. A 2025 systematic review found that effects vary by household structure, age, and social position: some women gain more mobility and resource access, while others experience greater isolation and pressure. Research from Uttar Pradesh similarly found that male out-migration has both positive and negative effects, but workload increases are substantial and improvements in control over resources are limited, especially for younger women. This shows that the impact of migration must be read together with land relations, caste, class, and life-cycle position.

Indrani Mazumdar, N Neetha, Indu Agnihotri (2013)[5] argue that the macro-picture of the composition of male and female migrant workers indicates that the pattern of labour migration is actually aggravating gender biases in the labour market, particularly for industry and services. The 380-395 migration data of the NSS shows that within an overall multi-sectoral bias towards males in labour migration in India, female labour migration is particularly differentiated from male migration by the relatively greater weight of agriculture in the sector profile of female migrant workers, and a far greater weight of services and industry among male migrant workers.

Mazumdar, Neetha, Agnihotri (2013) suggest that these features are linked to a highly gendered employment crisis reflected in the declining female work participation rates in rural India and stagnation at extremely low levels of female employment rates in urban areas. Such a crisis has been sharply foregrounded by the absolute fall – by over 21 million – in the numbers of women workers between 380-395 and 380-395, which, although concentrated in agriculture, is also evident in industry and services.

Mazumdar, Neetha, Agnihotri, 2013 further suggest that the relatively greater weight of agriculture in the overall structure of the country's female workforce – despite the recent massive fall in their numbers – is also partly maintained because relatively smaller proportions of the female agricultural workforce are migrating for urban style employment. The indications are that migration in the contemporary period has led to relatively limited diversification of female occupations. A more marked process has been of concentration of women labour migrants in brick kiln work in rural areas and paid domestic work in urban areas. In rural areas, although agriculture remains the single largest occupation of women migrant workers, the proportions involved in agricultural work prior to migrating was higher, while the numbers involved in brick kiln work almost trebled after migration. A more sharply delineated trebling of numbers involved in paid domestic work after migration in comparison to before was the most significant feature of urban-wards migration, even as employment in new and other diverse service jobs also increased after migration among urban women migrant workers. The process of concentration in paid domestic work thus emerged as the most distinctive trend of female labour migration to urban areas and cut across all caste and community lines.

Mazumdar, Neetha, Agnihotri (2013) point out that gender, emerges as the primary axis for expanded menialisation of women's employment. Arguably associated with a partial reconfiguration of status hierarchies in the sphere of social reproduction premised on feminisation of paid menial services in the domestic sphere, albeit clearly outside the family units of their employers. The family thus seems to be a major determinant in currents of female labour migration at both supply and demand ends. This is not to deny the existence and entry of women in individual/autonomous capacities

[5]Mazumdar, I., Neetha, N. and Agnihotri, I. (2013) 'Migration and gender in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 March, 48(10), pp. 54-64.

into several occupations that are not so closely linked with the family structures of society, but rather to point out that such entry or expansion has not been of a sufficient order to challenge the centrality of the family order in shaping the most significant currents in women's work and migration.

A striking finding was that when viewing migration from village sites, the average annual income of households with migrants was less than that of households without migrants; educational levels were also lower in the former, and even nuclear family units were of a slightly lesser proportion in comparison to village households without any economic migrants. This suggests that the standard assumptions of development and economic growth led transition of labour from agriculture to industry/services through migration and expectations of attendant restructuring of families towards nuclear units are inadequate for understanding the role of migration and gender in India's development story. Despite the push towards migration from agrarian distress, a pullback also appears to be operating, linked to the predominantly temporary and unsettled nature of the developing employment regime. **(Mazumdar, Neetha, Agnihotri, 2013)**

Additionally, the findings that a very large proportion of male migrant workers and a not insignificant proportion of female migrant workers were leaving children behind in their villages suggests a widespread inability of the migrant workforce (male and female) circulating at the lower ends of the economy to sustain social reproduction without periodic retreat to the village, even as the village economy is not providing sufficient employment or income for survival. The findings related to wages confirm the view that a substantial section of migrant workers do not earn enough to support a family. **(Mazumdar, Neetha, Agnihotri, 2013)**

II Impact of Male Migration on Rural Females

McGee (1971), while analysing the Third World urbanisation process, concludes that migration from rural areas in these countries reflects lack of employment expansion in agriculture. Labour pushed out of rural areas as a result of stagnation in agriculture does not get absorbed in manufacturing industries which are also stagnant, and end up in the tertiary sector.

Surinder Jetley (1987)[6] in a study on "Impact of Male Migration on Rural Females" based in UP, researching on women left behind after the man of the house has migrated to the city ,concludes that for the females in the family, work is not a privilege but a traditional hardship. Living in highly congested, dreary and ill-ventilated dwelling places with no amenities and facilities, these women spend most of their lives in finding food, fuel for cooking, and fodder for cattle. They have very few material possessions. Social obligations and basic needs may force them to incur expenditure far beyond their earning power, for which they have get into debt. During the first few years of migration, the males are hardly in a position to help the family. It is the women who assume the additional responsibility.

Jetley (1987) further elaborates that a lifetime of loneliness and struggle for bare survival by these women is interspersed with short visits by their husbands, when many important decisions are taken. In their day to day life, the wives cope with problems related to children, other members of the family, financial breakdowns and complications regarding employers, neighbours, relations, etc. The migration of males not only increases the burden on women but affects even the children. Their educational opportunities do not increase. In fact, in the village they help the family and in the city then are, at best, absorbed in the unskilled labour force.

Jetley's study finds that the husbands and sons maintain a visiting relationship with the women and exercise authority in major decisions in the family. The females seldom visit the city. The reasons are segregation of the sexes, desire by

[6]Jetley, S. (1987) 'Impact of male migration on rural females', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 October, pp. WS47-WS53.

the older members to keep the male migrant tied to village home (which is possible if the wife and children continue to live in the village) and the perceived inability of the females to get work in the city.There seems to be some kind of satisfaction in working the land, which is perceived as more dignified.

In spite of the long absence of males there is little change in the authority structure of the family, and major decisions regarding purchase of household items, cattle, inputs or land, credit, expenditure on ceremonies, etc, are postponed till the migrant's visit. Women, however, take decisions on problems regarding the daily subsistence of the family, and keep it from slipping into deeper poverty. Whatever wages the women get are of use value whereas the migrants' remittances have exchange value. Thus the power base remains with the males. The females spend most of their lives managing the home front, in many cases single-handedly. Since the family does not have enough of a material base to withdraw her from the workforce, she continues to work till she is quite old, though the adult sons assume the power and authority.

Jetley concludes that, the root of the problems of male migration and female suffering lies in the structural inadequacy of the rural society For this reason, the solution to the problems must also be found in the rural areas. It is there that the human power, both male and female, should be better equipped with new skills to become part of the development process India which is basically a rural country. Any plans for development must emphasise the modernisation of rural society in a manner that promises increased opportunities for all strata. Catering to the landed groups will only push large number of persons out of the village, and India's urban industrial complex is inadequate to absorb this influx. When such a trend affects the rural family, the women in the village suffer the most, they are forced to lead a life of prolonged hard work, loneliness and powerlessness.

In another study by **Thelma Paris, Abha Singh, Joyce Luis and Mahabub Hossain** (2005)[7] based on labour outmigration, livelihood of rice farming households and women left behind in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, they conclude that male labour outmigration is predominantly high and will continue to increase as long as there are economic incentives to move and as long as the ownership and operation of agricultural land is no longer the predominant source of household income. Migrants are the young, able-bodied and literate male family members while majority of the uneducated especially the women are left behind to manage the farms. Migrants are farmers or agricultural wage labourers. Due to male absence, women from nuclear households have to take over tasks traditionally done by men particularly during land preparation and other tasks during the peak-cropping season. Their participation in decision-making related to farm has also increased. De facto female heads of households lack access to new seeds, new skills and knowledge on improved methods of rice farming.

Paris, Singh, Luis and Hossain (2005) further highlight that the contributions of female family members among households with migrants are higher than those without migrants indicating the dependency on unpaid female members to work on their fields and as exchange labourers in others'fields. Their study further reveals that in almost all of the cases, when sons are the migrants, the husbands receive the remittances. However, in nuclear households, the wives receive the remittances so they bear the responsibility of budgeting these earnings between food and other daily expenditures. In almost all areas of decision-making the husbands are the primary decision makers whether households have migrants or not. However, within migrant households, wives have a greater participation in decision-making

[7]Paris, T., Singh, A., Luis, J. and Hossain, M. (2005) 'Labour outmigration, livelihood of rice farming households and women left behind: A case study in eastern Uttar Pradesh', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 June, pp. 2522-2529.

compared with the wives in the non-migrant households on farm-related responsibilities such as what crops to grow, time and amount of fertiliser to apply, time to irrigate the fields, when to hire labour, how much money to invest on capital goods, and how much money to spend on farm inputs. The power base however remains with the males.

III Female Headed Households and Feminisation of Poverty

Households Headed by Women in Third World Countries:. An Overview by **Mayra Buvinic and Nadia H. Youssef (1979)**[8]is considered a landmark paper in FHH's study and analysis. They say that our ignorance of women's economic behavior within poor households is not confined to those living in households that shelter "intact" families but also to women who function as the de facto heads of perhaps the poorest households in the world today, that is,women who, because of marital dissolution, desertion, abandonment, male migration, absence of spouse or the inability of the spouse to provide for the household, are placed in a situation where they become economically responsible for their own and their children's survival. Buvinic and Youssef point out that these households are neither few nor restricted to a particular region, culture, or ethnic or socioeconomic group. Further, a major portion of poor families in all countries inhabit these households.

Buvinic and Youssef (1979) explain that typically, such households are characterized by the absence of a resident male head. Visible examples are households of widowed and divorcedmothers; less obvious and more difficult to detect are those of separated, abandoned, single mothers and those households where men are drawn away as migrant labour for considerable periods of time.

Buvinic and Youssef explain that the extent to which women in any of the situations become de facto heads of household (that is, they come to assume functions of economic responsibility for themselves and their children) will depend on a combination of two factors: 1)the specific position accorded to them by family and society, and 2) the ability or willingness of the kin unit or society at large to acknowledge financial responsibility to its female members. In many societies families are supposed to assume responsibility for some of these women (widows, for instance), but economic pressures prevent families from "actualizing" these duties. Insuch cases women become de facto heads of household.

Buvinic and Youssef (1979) conclude that poverty appears to be more prevalent among families with female headship. Women who are family heads work much more frequently than women in general. In developing societies the absence of a welfare system suggests that a woman might well have to have both independent access to employment and the contribution of some of her children in order to support her family. Children and marginal occupations seem to be complementary economic solutions to the survival needs of households headed by women. Women, who are the most adversely affected by the consequences of marriage/union disruption, are the least likely to be literate or trained vocationally to enter the labor force in a productive capacity.Therefore the earnings of female heads have been shown to come mostly from employment in the informal sector of the economy.

Buvinic and Youssef (1979), while analysing the trends of FHHs point out that one of the most prominent trends accompanying modernization in Third World countries has been the migration to the cities that was triggered by actual or perceived economic opportunities during the early stages of economic development. Majority of women migrants to urban centers are young and single, hence the higher incidence of women-headed households. Women have more income-earning opportunities in towns (as domestic servants and petty traders)--"pull"

[8]Buvinic, M., Birdsall, N., McGreevey, W.P. and Merrick, T. (1979) *New measures for new development goals*. Washington, DC: International Centre for Research on Women.

women to urban areas; the change to a cash based economy has lessened women's contribution (in comparison to men's) to the economic support of the family in rural areas "pushes" women out of rural areas.

The concept of feminization of poverty is used as a short hand for a variety of ideas. It can mean either one or a combination of the following:

a. Women compared to men have a higher incidence of poverty.

b. Women's poverty is more severe than men's.

c. Over time, the incidence of poverty among women is increasing compared to men, particularly associated with rising rates of FHHs.

(Nilüfer Cagatay for UNDP, 1998, Briefing paper on the 'feminisation of poverty' Prepared by BRIDGE for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), 2001, Marcelo Medeiros and Joana Costa (2008))

Poverty has been traditionally understood to mean a lack of access to resources, productive assets and income resulting in a state of material deprivation. Emphasizing deficiency in private consumption, poverty has been defined as private consumption per person falling below a particular level. In this approach, absolute rather than relative poverty has been the focus of attention. The consumption/income approach to defining poverty has come under increased criticism, it has been suggested that in the analysis of poverty common property resources and state-provision of commodities should be taken into account and the concept of poverty should be broadened to include lack of dignity and autonomy. The need is to focus on the concept of human poverty as it helps us see the causes of poverty, not merely its symptoms. **(Nilüfer Cagatay for UNDP, 1998)**[9] Poverty eradication is an aspect of human development, which is defined as "a process of enlarging people's choices" (UNDP 1990).

'Poverty is increasingly seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, which includes market-based consumption (or income) as well as the public provision of goods ands services, access to common property resources, and the intangible dimension of a good life such as clean air, dignity, autonomy, low levels of disease and crime'.(**Carolina Johansson Wennerholm: The Feminisation Of Poverty – The Use Of A Concept; Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency,2002)**. The World Bank includes material deprivation and low achievement in education and health as well as vulnerability and exposure to risk and voicelessness and powerlessness in definition of 'poverty'. UNDP maintains the definition of 'human poverty' from 1997.

Women are indeed poorer in most societies in many dimensions of capabilities such as education and health. Resource allocation within households is often biased against girls and women. In addition, it is harder for women to transform their capabilities into incomes or well-being. Gender inequalities in the distribution of income, access to productive inputs such as credit, command over property or control over earned income, as well as gender biases in labour markets and social exclusion that women experience in a variety of economic and political institutions form the basis for the greater vulnerability of women to chronic poverty. Gender inequalities in economic life limit the range of paid economic activities they can undertake. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls' education, women's limited mobility, women's lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

[9]Cagatay, N. (1998) *Gender and poverty*. Working Paper 5. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

(Nilüfer Cagatay for UNDP, 1998, Valentine M. Moghadam ,2005[10])

Shubhashis Gangopadhyay, Wilima Wadhwa's paper ' Are Indian Female-Headed Households More Vulnerable To Poverty?'[11]2004, points out that gender bias can operate in (one or both of) two different ways. First, women may be discriminated against in the workplace; discriminating employers may prefer males to female applicants. Alternatively, women may not be hired in well-paying jobs, not because the employer discriminates against them, but because he (or she) does not find them suitable for such jobs. Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa explain that this could happen if the job requires skills, and women are less skilled than males. This will get reflected in lower incomes among females.

Further, if women are less skilled than males, then the responsibility for this kind of discrimination lies within the household, where the parents train, or educate, the boy child more than the girl child. While less schooling means less of human capital, there is another reason why females may earn less income , in particular, owning less of income generating physical capital like cultivable land.

Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa further analysis reveals that currently married rural FHHs, are less than 20 per cent of all rural FHHs in all years, a number significantly lower than the proportions of currently married urban FHHs. In 380-395, the not currently married FHHs had lower incidence of poverty than the currently married FHHs in both the consumption and employment surveys. This is very different in the urban sector, where the not currently married FHHs had higher poverty incidence in all years, when compared to the currently married FHHs. Further, on comparing the amount of cultivable land owned by rural households, Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa found that FHHs come out as losers on the average . Further, both currently married as well as not currently married FHHs have significantly smaller land holdings than their male counterparts. Clearly, then, in terms of both physical and human capital, FHHs are worse off than the MHHs. Gangopadhyay and Wadhwa conclude that there is a gender bias in the poverty incidence, if we categorize households not only by the sex of the household but also by their marital status. Not currently married FHHs appear to be more vulnerable to poverty.

Ramaprasad Rajaram in the paper 'Female-Headed Households And Poverty: Evidence From The National Family Health Survey' [12]2009, estimates whether female-headed households are poorer than their male-headed counterparts, using household data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) for the year 380-395. He uses poverty measures that reflect on people's permanent income such as housing condition, wealth index and standard of living index, and argues that these measures could be more informative about the chronic living condition of people than the official measure based on consumption expenditure. Employing probit and logit estimations, the results from the analysis provide evidence that the relationship between female-headed households and poverty depends on the choice of poverty measure. Specifically, poverty measures based on the housing condition and the wealth indices show that female-headed households are less poor than male-headed households. However, based on the standard of living index measure of poverty, female-headed

[10]Moghadam, V.M. (2005) *The "feminization of poverty" and women's human rights*. Geneva: UNESCO, Gender Equality and Development Section, Division of Human Rights, Social and Human Sciences Sector.

[11]Gangopadhyay, S. and Wadhwa, W. (2004) 'Are Indian female-headed households more vulnerable to poverty?', *India Development Foundation*, revised January 2004. New Delhi: India Development Foundation.

[12]Rajaram, R. (2009) *Female-headed households and poverty: Evidence from the National Family Health Survey*. Athens, GA: Department of Economics, Terry College of Business, University of Georgia.

households are marginally poorer than their male-headed counterparts. He further points out that socio-economic gender bias against women in India places female-headed households at a greater risk of poverty, where women are the primary earners. Also, female heads must shoulder the burden of economic support and household chores, which leaves them with lesser time for leisure compared to male heads. This link between leisure-work trade-off also leads to intergenerational transmission of poverty in female-headed households. **Rajaram** concludes that although, female headed households are poorer than the male-headed counterparts, based on the standard of living index, quantitatively the effects are very small to warrant immediate antipoverty policies specifically focused on female-headed households. Overall, the results do not provide evidence to support the claim that female-headed households are any poorer than male-headed households and that they require special assistance.

The domination of market forces under globalisation and privatisation has aggravated the marginalisation of women and poor. The inability of the poor to respond to market mechanisms, their lack of bargaining skills and strengths, competitive processes make them doubly exploited. The social conditioning of men and women, the role stereotype together with social values and customs, confinement to household boundaries and responsibilities even while going to work outside to earn wages and income has made women scattered and powerless. Poverty, ignorance, social conditioning and values make the rural poor women most vulnerable to under development and domestic violence.

The social conditioning of men and women, the role stereotype together with social values and customs, confinement to household boundaries and responsibilities even while going to work outside to earn wages and income has made women scattered and powerless. Poverty, ignorance, social conditioning and values make the rural poor women most vulnerable to under development and domestic violence. **Bhat**[13] elaborates that violence against women such as domestic violence, rape, girl child abuse, female foeticide, and infanticide, etc. are directly related to the lack of various Rights for them, particularly, when they are poor, marginalised and unorganised. Alcoholism in India is identified as one of the major factors which contributes to domestic physical violence and broken homes. The lack of access to justice because of poverty, powerlessness, social conditioning and ignorance makes the life of rural poor most miserable.

However**, Sylvia Chant(2003) in her paper 'Female Household Headship and the Feminisation of Poverty: Facts,Fictions and Forward Strategies'**[14]points out that factors responsible for the 'feminisation of poverty' have been linked variously with gender disparities in rights, entitlements and capabilities, the gender-differentiated impacts of neo-liberal restructuring, the informalisation and feminisation of labour, and the erosion of kin-based support networks through migration, conflict and so on. Emphasis is however largely on female headed households. This is especially so given the assumption that female household headship is prone to arise in situations of economic stress, privation and insecurity, whether through labour migration, conjugal instability, and/or the inability of impoverished kin groups to assume responsibility for abandoned women and children.

Chant (2003) goes on to elaborate that, the common disadvantages of informal

[13]Bhat, R. (2002) 'Feminisation of poverty and empowerment of women: An Indian perspective and experience', paper presented at *Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights: Setting a Global Agenda*, Townsville International Women's Conference, James Cook University, Australia, 3-7 July.

[14]Chant, S. (2003) 'Female household headship and the feminisation of poverty: Facts, fictions and forward strategies', *New Working Paper Series*, Issue 9. London: Gender Institute, London School of Economics.

employment not only in respect of earnings, but also in terms of fringe benefits, social security coverage and pensions, the short- and long-term implications for female heads of household are potentially serious. It is also important to remember that women's conventionally limited access to 'physical capital assets' (Rakodi, 1999) or 'non-labour resources' (Kabeer, 2003:198), such as infrastructure, land and property ownership, may exacerbate financial difficulty. Chant, however argues that pockets of poverty are equally, if not more, likely to be found in households headed by men.

She argues that, it is by no means clear that female household headship is responsible for an 'inter-generational transmission of disadvantage', with research in a variety of contexts indicating that children in female-headed households may actually be better off than their counterparts in male-headed units in terms of educational attainment, nutrition and health. Moreover, despite the common assumption that female heads of household send young children out to work, levels of child labour do not seem to be noticeably higher in female-headed units. Her review of various studies give conflicting findings, and she concludes that it is wise to refrain from over-emphasizing the 'plight of female-headed households' and sweeping stereotypes about the poverty of women-headed households are misplaced.

Chant (2003) advocates equalizing the status of female- and male-headed households on the premise that, poverty is not just about incomes, but about power, self-esteem and social legitimacy, legislation and campaigns to promote a socially-inclusive stance to a broad spectrum of family arrangements could make major inroads in respect of equalizing the status and opportunities of female- and male-headed households. Knowing that female headship has the full support of the state and society could also mean that women within male-headed households have more options. In turn, these options may lead to more bargaining power among women, and greater compliance with obligations to the children they raise on the part of men.

Evidence from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

Bihar case

Bihar offers a strong case of feminisation of labour and poverty linked to male migration and weak land security. Research on rural Bihar shows that women increasingly shoulder agricultural work as men migrate out for wage employment, while also continuing unpaid domestic responsibilities. A recent study notes that women's participation in agriculture in Bihar has risen sharply and that the state's agrarian transformation has produced a wider feminisation of labour, especially in female-headed and migration-affected households. However, this increased participation does not automatically translate into empowerment because land ownership remains limited and male control over property and decisions persists.

Historical and qualitative evidence from rural Bihar also shows that male migration is often treated as unavoidable in poor households, but the women left behind experience intensified workload and restricted mobility. In districts such as Madhubani and other north Bihar regions, women have been found to manage cultivation, household care, and daily survival in the absence of men, yet their labour remains poorly recognised. These findings demonstrate that in Bihar, feminisation of agriculture and feminisation of poverty occur together: women work more, but do so with limited land rights, weak bargaining power, and few protections against shocks.

Uttar Pradesh case

Uttar Pradesh shows a similar but distinct pattern, especially in Bundelkhand and other migration-prone areas. A study of male out-migration and left-behind women in Uttar Pradesh, based on household surveys across 10 districts, found that migration had both positive and negative effects, but the negative effects were substantial in terms of workload, emotional strain, and incomplete empowerment.

Another study from a poor farming village in Bundelkhand reported serious psychological and social consequences for women left behind, including loneliness, sadness, depression, and heightened responsibility in daily life. These are important indicators of feminised poverty because deprivation is not only economic but also social and emotional.

In Uttar Pradesh, male migration often emerges from agrarian distress, drought vulnerability, and low returns from farming. This means women are not simply "left behind" but are effectively required to maintain households and, in many cases, farms under increasingly fragile conditions. Yet they usually do so without secure land titles or equal access to resources. The 2022 study from Uttar Pradesh also found that some women gained more decision-making space, but this was uneven and often limited to day-to-day matters rather than control over major assets or long-term planning. Thus, the UP evidence shows that migration may slightly expand women's responsibility and autonomy, but it does not necessarily reduce poverty or structural dependence.link.springer+1

Interlinked mechanisms

Across both states, three mechanisms are especially important. First, **land loss** weakens women's asset base and denies them collateral, compensation, and legal recognition. Second, **male migration** shifts the burden of cultivation and care onto women, increasing their unpaid and underpaid labour. Third, **institutional exclusion** ensures that women's new responsibilities are not matched by ownership, voice, or welfare access. Together, these mechanisms create a form of poverty that is gendered, durable, and often hidden within apparently functioning households.

The concept of feminisation of poverty is therefore best understood not as women becoming poor because they work more, but as women being pushed into greater vulnerability because economic change is occurring on unequal terms. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh illustrate this clearly: women take over agriculture and survival work, but land rights remain weak, labour burdens intensify, and migration does not translate into secure livelihoods. For this reason, any policy response must combine women's land rights, recognition as farmers, rural employment support, and gender-sensitive migration policy.oar.icrisat+5

IV Conclusion

Poverty in the third world cannot be addressed effectively by policies that do not specifically recognize the role that women play in society and the special burdens that poverty places on them. Policies and programs that have been aimed at men, on the theory that improving the economic status of men will also improve that of women, have been seen not to work, because they do not take into account the fact that in a great many cases either there are no men in a household or they cannot provide for their families by themselves. Women then must find a way to bring in income as well as to raise children and take care of the home. In order to be effective, policies and programs aimed at women must be concerned not only with meeting their basic needs but also with addressing the underlying causes of their poverty. Most poverty eradication programs do not address the structural issue of poverty for women. Traditional income earning activities, alternate income generating opportunities, training, vocational skills, marketing know how and credit and cooperative are stressed as effective ways to improving the lives of women in poverty. (**Mayra Buvinic,Nancy Birdsall ,William P. Mcgreevey ,Thomas Merrick's volume of papers, ' New Measures For New Development Goals', 1979)**[15]

Women in developing countries, particularly those who are living in poverty have been doubly jeopardized by the welfare approch on their behalf. The welfare programs receive but a small proportion of development funds and skilled human resources.In addition, including

[15]Buvinic, M., Birdsall, N., McGreevey, W.P. and Merrick, T. (1979) *New measures for new development goals*. Washington, DC: International Centre for Research on Women.

women'sconcerns only in welfare-oriented policies excludes women from the broader national development program and policies that would help them to become more productive. Policy development should not be grounded on the premise that women in poverty are a welfare issue , rather women should be perceived as a source upon which development planners should draw. Programs and policies must be based on maximizing women's strengths, women's development and women's economic self-sufficiency. **(Nadia H. Youssef (1979)[16]**

The household is a key site of gender discrimination and subordination and is thus an important focus for examining gender and poverty issues. There is a need for further research to avoid making simplistic correlations, such as between increases in female-headed households and any 'feminisation of poverty' as there is a lack of systematic data that disaggregates expenditure or consumption by gender means that such broad statements are often based on questionable assumptions. FHHs may be better off in some ways, however they may face greater difficulties than men in gaining access to labour markets, credit, housing and basic services, and there are sometimes additional layers of discrimination against female heads. Due to household survival strategies during economic restructuring, there is an increasing reliance on informal sector employment for both men and women. However, UN statistics show that the informal sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men (**Briefing paper on the 'feminisation of poverty' Prepared by BRIDGE for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), 2001** ,United Nations, 2000).

The rise of female participation in low return, urban, informal sector activities is also considered evidence of the feminisation of poverty. Poverty is multidimentional, and hence limiting measures to income shortfalls and poverty lines masks the true extent of poverty, particularly for women and children. Standard income/expenditure data fails to capture the complexity of gender differences in poverty and a gender-differentiated assessment of well-being. **Briefing paper on the 'feminisation of poverty' Prepared by BRIDGE for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), 2001**

Education is an important component of opportunities and empowerment , however, it is just one element of opportunities and empowerment. The two other types of opportunities and empowerment are — women's access to markets (labor, land, and credit) and women's decisionmaking power within households—that have an impact on poverty reduction and productivity at the individual and household level. Children's wellbeing is another pathway through which increased gender equality may be associated with poverty reduction and growth linking increased female schooling and control over household resources to improvements in children's health and schooling. (**Andrew Morrison, Dhushyanth Raju and Nistha Sinha's for The World Bank, 2007)[17]**

Other than their labor, land often serves as the most important productive asset for households dependent on agriculture. Consequently, access to arable land, the quantity and quality of land, and the strength and extent of rights over land have strong implications for both the present and long-term economic welfare of rural households. In much of the developing world, women's land rights are significantly circumscribed, if not in principle, then in practice. (**Andrew Morrison, Dhushyanth**

[16]Youssef, H. Nadia (1979). *What We Do Know About Women in Poverty: Implications for Programs and Policy Development*. In Buvinic, M., Birdsall, N., McGreevey, W.P. & Merrick, T. (eds.) *New Measures for New Development Goals*. Washington, DC: International Centre for Research on Women, April.

[17]Morrison, A., Raju, D. and Sinha, N. (2007) *Gender equality, poverty and economic growth*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 4349.

Raju and Nistha Sinha for The World Bank, 2007)

The relationship between the incidence of poverty and the level of gender equality as measured by various alternative indices suggests that developing countries with higher gender equality tend to have lower poverty rates. Greater gender equality under the law, including legal rights of women to own assets such as land and property, the right to move freely outside the home and to participate in various markets, and women's rights within marriage might be expected to boost growth by increasing women's productivity. (**Andrew Morrison, Dhushyanth Raju and Nistha Sinha for The World Bank, 2007)**

Policy responses need to address land rights and rural labour conditions together. Secure women's land ownership, joint titling, and inheritance enforcement would improve access to credit, insurance, and state support. At the same time, women must be recognized as farmers in data, extension services, and welfare schemes rather than treated only as household helpers. Migration policy also needs a gender lens so that the burden of care and farm management does not fall entirely on women without institutional support.

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