

Nutritional Surveillance

for Disaster Preparedness and Prevention of Nutritional Blindness

Nutritional Status of Children in Female Headed Households



Summary:

The few descriptive studies looking at female headed households point to the extremely hard circumstances in which they live. This study, using data from a longitudinal surveillance system finds that children in female headed households are nutritionally far more compromised than children in male headed households.

Nutritional Surveillance for Disaster Preparedness and Prevention of Nutritional Blindness

Nutritional Status of Children in Female Headed Households

Introduction

The few descriptive studies looking at female headed households in Bangladesh have pointed to the extremely hard circumstances in which they live. (1-4) In societies where women are systematically discriminated against in income generating activities, access to health and educational facilities, and other basic services, female headed households face far greater obstacles in every day activities than those headed by men. When mothers become the sole bread earners in their families, especially if their occupation takes them away from their home, they have less time to spend in breastfeeding and looking after other aspects concerning the welfare of their children. For the purpose of this paper, female headed households are defined as those households where a woman makes the decisions regarding major household issues. Using data from August 1991 to August 1993 in all the rural thanas surveyed by the Nutritional Surveillance Project (NSP), 808 children of female headed households were compared with children of male headed households. The children of female headed households were nutritionally far more compromised than the children of their male counterparts.

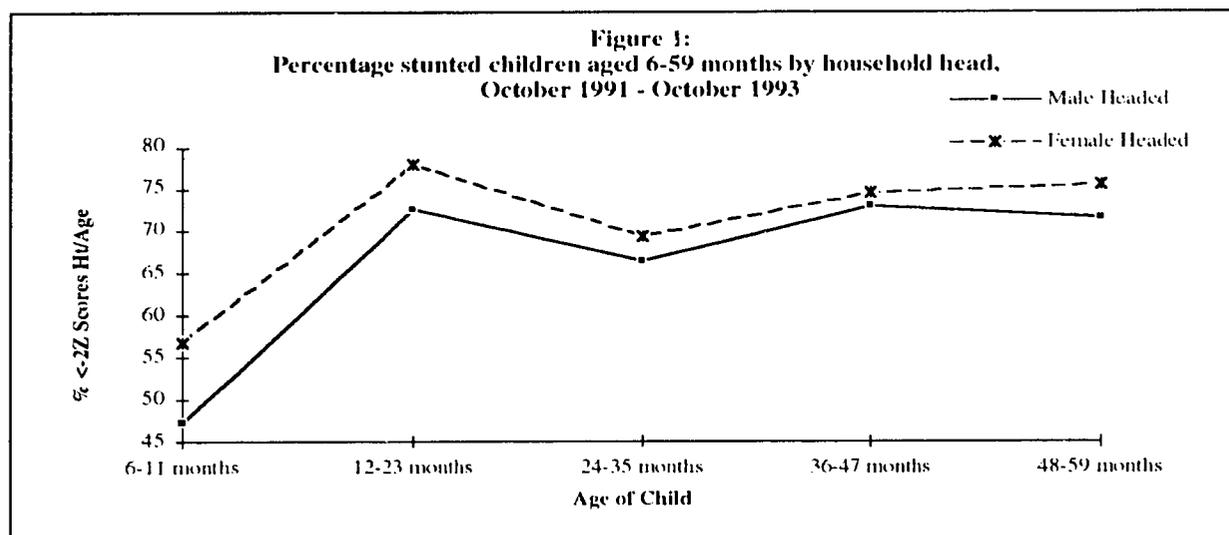
Basic Descriptives

Female headed households comprised 1.1% of the population in the rural areas covered by the NSP. As expected, they had smaller families with fewer children under five than their male counterparts. The mothers in these households were significantly less educated. They were also poorer; they owned significantly fewer radios and t.v.'s and a greater percentage of them were landless. Whereas 54% of male headed households engaged in some sort of agricultural labor, only 31% of female headed households worked in agriculture. They were proportionately more represented in the occupations of day labor, servant and beggar. In general, both male and female headed households owned their own homes but a far greater percentage of female headed households lived with relatives.

Nutritional Status

Children from female headed households had consistently worse nutritional status than those of male headed households by the three anthropometric indicators used (using WHO recommended cutoffs and means for weight-for-age, weight-for-height, and height for age). This was especially pronounced in stunting (height-for-age) which indicates that children of female headed households suffer more from long term chronic food shortages. Figure 1 and 2 compare the nutritional status of children in each household by age of the child and size of the house.

There was also some evidence for less nutritional sex-discrimination within female headed households.



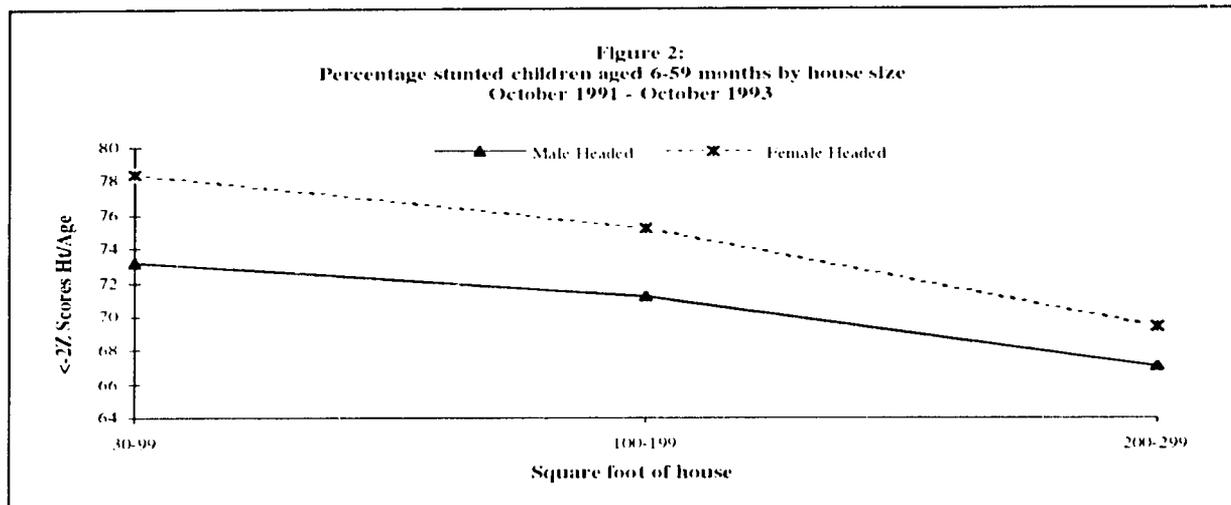


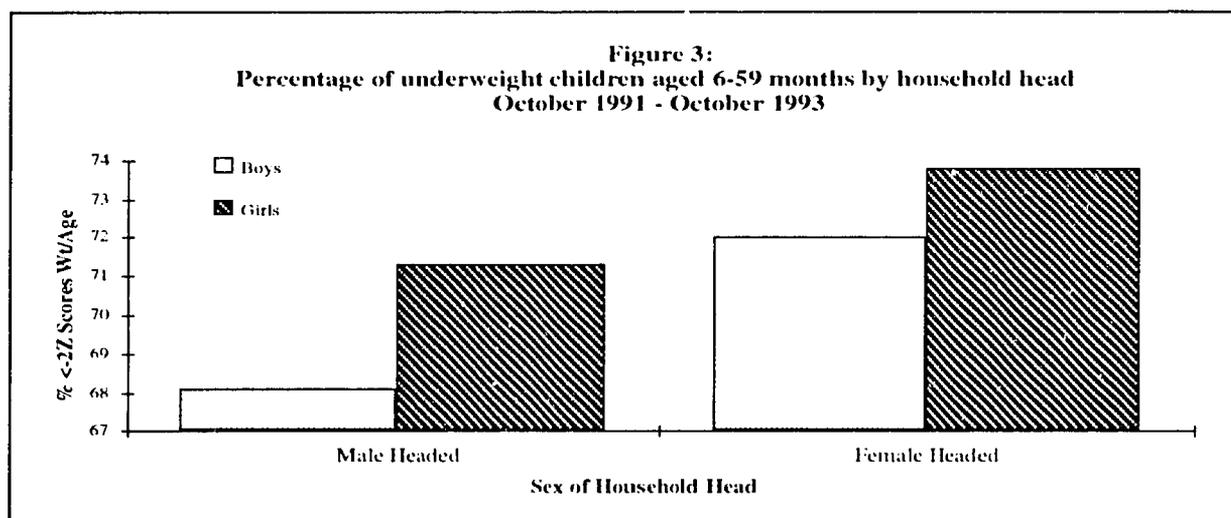
Figure 3 details the differentials in sex discrimination by sex of the head of the household. The NSP consistently shows the nutritional status of girl children to be far worse than boy children. However, the gap between boy and girl children appears to be reduced in female headed households.

Discussion

By all indications, the general nutritional status of children in female headed households is worse than that of male headed households. Even with smaller families and fewer children under five these women have a harder time providing the inputs needed to improve the nutritional status of their children. It is hypothesized that the reduced sibling discrimination by gender found in households headed by women may be due to a variety of factors. Perhaps female headed households have so little food within their families that it is not possible to make intra household allocation decisions that would bias one child over another. It is also possible that in the absence of a

dominant male family member women are able to make different allocation decisions than they would otherwise be forced to. Whatever the reasoning, it is obvious that female headed households constitute a subgroup of the "poorest of the poor". In a country where rates of stunting often exceed 70%, children in female headed households reach unacceptably higher levels. Although this subgroup is often ignored by macro level analysis, it is time that policy makers focus attention and inputs toward female headed households.

1. Islam, Mahmuda, 1991, *Women Head of Household in Rural Bangladesh: Strategies for Survival*, Pub: Narigrantha Prabartana
2. White, S.C. 1992, *Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh*, Pub: Zed Books
3. Mencher JP and Okongwu, A. 1993, *Where did all the Men Go? Female Headed/Supported Households in a Cross Cultural Perspective*, Pub: Westview Press, Boulder, CO
4. Hartmann, Betsy and Boyce, James K. 1983, *A Quiet Violence: View from a Bangladesh Village*, London: Zed Press



For information and correspondence
contact:

Dr. Martin W. Bloem, Country Director
Helen Keller International Bangladesh
P.O. Box 6066 Gulshan
Dhaka - 1212, Bangladesh

Telephone: 880 - 2 - 814234
880 - 2 - 816156
880 - 2 - 314408
880 - 2 - 324048

Fax: 880 - 2 - 813310

This project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development