

FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS LIVELIHOODS IN EASTERN CAPE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The research was on the livelihoods of female headed households in Eastern Cape. The central aim of the paper was explorative in nature paying attention to livelihood strategies of the female headed households (FHH). A Qualitative methodological instrument in form of in-depth interviews with 15 female heads was conducted to elicit thick descriptions with regard to how they earn a living and challenges they face. The study uncovered that female headed household's gained income from state transfers, remittances, petty trading and savings groups. Households survived according to their access to natural capital and off-farm income. The study concluded that female heads engaged in low return livelihoods hence continued to be locked in perennial vicious poverty however; this does not discredit the significance of such livelihoods.

Keywords: household, livelihoods, female

Introduction

Talking about poverty and underdevelopment of black people in South Africa, one cannot overlook the apartheid system. South Africa has a prolonged history of struggle against racially segregated system (economic and political exclusion of the majority by the minority). This dates from 1948-1994 under the rule of National Party. During the tyrannical rule of National Party, indigenous South Africans become aliens in their own land (Seedat, 2021). In particular, separate development was institutionalised white people benefited on the expense of black poverty and deprivation of life necessities (including well-paying jobs, land ownership, health care, education and welfare services) to mention but a few. In general, the apartheid system was pervasive and had ripple effects on multi-generations and to-date its effects are still experienced in democratic South Africa (as seen in the plight of female headed households). These inequalities still persist despite the advent of democracy in 1994, although there have been efforts to address and redress the inequalities these attempts have not reached everyone especially the poor and the vulnerable in rural areas.

Rural communities to date suffer severe backlogs in terms of infrastructure, service delivery, human capacity, self confidence, access to information, markets and poor access to natural capital. Attempts to rejuvenate the rural livelihoods has been on the heart of the new regime, African National Congress (ANC) but the adoption of the neoliberal approach to economic and development of rural communities has compromised 'attempts' by ANC for instance land reform, new water legislations, improved service delivery (May, 2018). The adoption of the neoliberal policy saw reduced state intervention, commitments, control and decentralisation. Overall, the government lost autonomy and competency to local management and other decision structures. As a result there has been tension between goals of fiscal discipline and decreasing poverty (May, 2018).

The assertion by May (2018), leads to the conclusion that South Africa as a middle income country has the greatest of inequality. Approximately half of the population lives under perennial poverty (May, 2018). This is in congruent with Hunter et al; (2013) who says that South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world with about 35.8% of its population living below the poverty line of \$2 per day. Rural masses particularly women and other vulnerable groups continue to be marginalized and occupy the lower ranks of the social ladder. Female headed households have been labelled as “poorest of the poor” and in need for various forms of intervention (Chant, 2013; Momsen, 2012). Female-headed households are often reported as being more dependent, and having low socio-economic status (Chant, 2017; Posel, 2021). The larger population of South Africa is in rural areas and is believed to suffer poverty at different scale and level. Narayan et al (2020) further provides a gender sensitive claim that amongst the rural population female headed households (which are the focus of this paper) are claimed to suffer more. Female headed households are more likely to be in poverty than male headed households (Forgey *et al*, 2019). Gender bias stands as the most debilitating phenomenon. This is more rampant and pernicious in developing countries where the majority of women engage in non-wage employment for the purpose of consumption. In finding solution they are compelled to least rewarding jobs. The progress in transforming rural livelihoods has not been fully realized. However, female heads are not submissive to the failure of government in providing a decent livelihood but they have employed other survival strategies to achieve economic well being.

Sustainable livelihood approach is a framework that is used as an analytical tool mainly for rural livelihoods. the SL framework “became a analytical structure for coming to grips with the complexity of livelihoods, understanding influences on poverty and identifying where interventions can best be made” (Farrington *et al.*, 2014). The sustainable livelihood framework is built around important assets which are vital to the achievement of sustainable livelihoods. Assets refer to the resources which people use to carry livelihood strategies. Thus assets “are not simply resources that people use to build livelihoods: they give them the capability to be and act” (Bebbington, 2019). The assets can be identified as natural, physical, social, human and financial capital. Assets are building blocks, which enable individuals or households to achieve their desired outcomes (including health, income and reduced vulnerability). Assets therefore can be depicted as stocks of capital, which can be used either directly or indirectly to survive (Ellis, 2020). The framework covers many aspects of rural people and helps to investigate and get a broader understanding of livelihoods from a bottom up perspective mainly in rural context. SLA focuses on the challenges that rural people face, how access and control of certain resources influence and shape pursued livelihoods. Despite the criticisms given to the framework it has proved to be a successful analytical framework that places people at the forefront.

The increase of feminization of poverty today reflects growing misery of women and their children and unless addressed millennium development goal of halving poverty will be missed with a large margin. Female headed households have become of concern and are perceived as a vulnerable group. Buijs and Atherfold (2015) write that “interest in and concern about households and families largely

or solely supported by women is not only theoretically significant but directly related to some of the major economic and policy issues confronting developing countries today". This concurs with the view by O'Laughlin (2016) who argues that female headed households are one appropriate group that needs welfare assistance concerned with social dimensions of adjustments. Despite the questions raised by other scholars concerning female headed households as better well off than other households, overall female headed households in South Africa are often poor than other households and are more prone to vulnerability than their counterparts.

For that reason this study picks female headed households as a focus of study primarily because they are vulnerable and lack decent livelihoods hence there is need to ascertain how they construct a living in absence of males and the challenges encountered in pursuit of livelihoods. Literature on gender suggests that the rise of female headed households emerged during the time when the modernization theory arose (Budlender, 2013). Due to modernization new jobs were created in towns and cities hence resulting in changes of household formations (Burns & Scott, 2014; Mencher & Okongwu, 2013). Based on Jamaican experience more women entered into the labour market and became more economically independent as compared to men (Buvinic Youssef and Von Elm, 2018). The major reason for this is that men were discouraged by low salaries in the emerging industries and women scooped the opportunities to secure livelihoods for their families. As a result female headed households became common.

Further conditions that have necessitated the formation of female headed households are periods of turbulence and financial insecurity which lead to the disbanding of relationships and reduced social controls (Bolles, 1986; Mecher and Okongwu, 2013) and the increasing lifespan of women which results in widows becoming household heads (Simkins, 2013). Clark (2014) concurs with Mencher and Okongwu (2013) argues that the emergence of female headed households can be attributed to the traditional way of life in which women who were involved in polygamous households were accustomed to take full responsibility of their own houses and children in particular.

Based on South African context men migrated more to cities in search for work in mines (Posel, 2011). This has resulted in the incidence of poverty and rise of female households. Women were left behind to take care of families. Drawing from Marxist structuralist work on Southern Africa capital refashioned rural households by pulling cheap labour from them thus reducing subsistence production. However it did not pay importance of migrant labour effect of remittance as having significant transformation in rural livelihoods. Due the absence of the breadwinners women did not become passive victims but became active agents seeking to secure a better livelihood through a range of activities to supplement income in case of husbands who had abandoned their families. Department of Health, Medical Research Council, OrCMacro (2017) argues that households headed by women in South Africa accounts for more than half of all households. Female headship is attributed to historical patterns of patriachalism and the history of Apartheid in South Africa. It is no doubt that the intensification of female households is connected to the macro-economic conditions (Goebe *et al.*, 2020).

Chant (2021) proposed conditions for the formation of female headed households; these seem to be applicable to the households in Ntselamanzi. Chant notes that the unit of compensation, labour and property accumulation should be individual, regardless of sex. In addition, Chant put strong emphasis on the need for women to have control and means to subsistence, particularly be it waged formal employment, access to remittances from children, social security (in form of grants) and lastly the right to inheritance. Blumberg (2018) argues that a further existence of female headed households is that women's opportunities for subsistence must not be noticeably less than those of men and if they are then the state must act in a supportive manner unambiguously (including provision of state grants).

Over and above, it is clear that women-headed households are mainly found in conditions of poverty and unemployment as well as in areas where migration and urbanization is rampant. Therefore the existence and increasing numbers of these female headed households is significant in Ntselamanzi where the above discussed factors prevail.

A number of studies have been conducted on rural livelihoods focusing on rural development, climate change, livelihoods and HIV/AIDS. This paper is significant for a number of reasons. It fills an empirical gap in the study of female headed households in Ntselamanzi specifically; it brings to the fore the gendered character of income sources and challenges faced.

Research Method

A purposive convenience non-random sampling technique was utilized to select fifteen female headed households from the Ntselamanzi village. Thomas and Nelson (2011) observed that, "convenience sampling is used in some case studies because the purpose of the study is not to estimate some population value, but to select cases from which one can learn most". Permission was sought from the councilor to conduct the study in the village. All the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were informed to withdraw from the research whenever they wished to do. Anonymity and confidentiality was emphasized too. Because of the language barrier between the researcher and the research participants an interpreter who fluently speaks Xhosa was used to interpret during the interview sessions.

In-depth interviews were conducted with female heads. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long. All interviews were recorded with a tape recorder to get as much detail as possible. This was done to enhance accuracy and trustworthiness of the data collected. As for data analysis, data was grouped into themes.

Results and Discussion

Engagement with the female heads reveal the importance of the following: social security, remittances, subsistence farming and other sources of income.

Social security

Grants were radicalized during the Apartheid era mainly paid to whites, coloureds and Indians. Hansi Pollak (2020) strongly emphasize that South Africa's development trail throughout apartheid was one marked by "colossal achievement and tragic failure", this underline the weirdness of South African life during apartheid system. The advent of democracy in 1994 saw the black majority included into the social security system. Female heads interviewed were recipients of these old pension grants. Data reveals that nine of the fifteen interviewed female heads were recipients of old pension grants and child support grants (for their nephews). Perhaps this is strategy that the South African government is using to redress the colonial discrepancies as well as alleviating poverty within households that do not participate fully in the labour market. Ardington and Lund (2015) argues that grants are the most effective social programme in targeting and reaching economically vulnerable groups. Pension grants are significant in the lives of female headed households (FHH). In this regard, the testimony by one female head is very revealing:

"the pension grant is helping me a lot, because I have grandchildren whom I support, some of them go to school and I'm able to buy them food and the basic necessities. For example I'm able to buy groceries such as bread, meat, milk, butter, etc. So I can say the pension is helpful to me because without it I could not have been able to meet these needs since I don't have any other source of income".

Such sentiments clearly show that pensions are important in as far as household sustenance is concerned. Committee of Inquiry (2012) notes that the old age pension grant is the primary source of income for old persons who would otherwise be living in abject poverty and is estimated to reduce the poverty gap for the people by 94%. Not everyone shared the same sentiments on the significance of old pension grants. Some of the interviewed beneficiaries indicated that the old pension grant had failed to keep their 'heads above water' or keep the 'wolf away from the door'. The major reasons for the inadequacy of the cash transfer was mainly attributed to the ever increasing of prices especially of basic commodities hence the money fell short by a large margin to meet the household necessities. Secondly, household size and demands by dependents made the grant too strained to the extent that not all the desired necessities were delivered. One disheartened female head revealed the following:

the pension is not enough we have bigger families who need to eat everyday and go to school, want clothes etc when I go and buy my groceries the money is already finished. Before the end of month I can't afford to provide for the family because the money is already exhausted. The house become difficult to manage because everyone will be too demanding at me and I will be having neither money nor food to offer. Sometimes I have to rely on borrowing money."

This interviewee expressed disgruntlement with the cash transfers. There is therefore a need for other safety nets and other income generating activities for this group of dependents so as to minimize the burden on the old age pension income.

In short, the participants relied largely on the cash transfers inform of the old pension grants and in some cases child grant depending with existence of beneficiaries. Despite the mixed feelings from different interviewees most female headed households have been able to subsist at a level they could not if social security was not available. Through the pension, female heads have managed to buy basic necessities for daily use as compared to those households which were not recipients of the pension grant. Although this system of grants is welcomed in South African communities much more deserving vulnerable old people have not been reached and have lost hope in travelling to seek approval of such cash transfers. This assertion has been proved by this study; two female heads expressed disillusionment with the process through which one needs to go through to be a beneficiary.

Remittance

Remittances also served as another source of income for female headed households. There is no consensus on the definition of remittances. Generally speaking, World Bank (2008) defines remittance as cash or in kind transfers by migrant workers to their countries of origin. Findings review that the lack of unemployment in the nearby town of Alice has forced a majority of able bodied adults (men or women) to migrate in search for work in other provinces of South Africa. Remittances are a source of support for female households to supplement their livelihoods. Even though there are variations in the amounts of remitted income, they have significantly contributed to the livelihoods of a large proportion in the sample of this study.

Remittances received by rural households have positive effects. Interviewees clarified that remittances have increased income for consumption and have managed to mitigate risks that households are subjected to for instance lack of finance. Remitted income in some instances is transformed into other income generating activities for instance vending in the near town of Alice and purchasing of household assets. Furthermore, they have been used to purchase fertilizers and seeds to intensify subsistence agriculture and purchasing of livestock. Consequently, this contributed to female headed households to be more self-reliant. One respondent related the following with regard to remittances:

“my daughter works in KwaZulu Natal as a teacher every month she comes back here in the village. If she fails ... [to come] because of work she always send money through the bank. Upon getting that money I buy food for my grandchildren and save some money in case emergency you know these little ones always get sick and need to get medication”.

Despite the cash remitted home it is apparent (from the above sentiment) that sons and daughters has a tendency to come back home after every two or three months. In-kind goods brought to the village included salt, cooking oil, rice, flour, washing and bathing soap to mention but a few. By so doing, food security has been strengthened.

Subsistence Agriculture

Aside from social security and remittances interviewee (particularly those who owned a piece of land) indicated that they derive an income (from sold surplus produce) and fresh crops for immediate consumption from subsistence farming. Buvinic (2018) cites female-headed households, especially widows as being prone to survive on subsistence agriculture and that the majority of agricultural workers are women. Rural economies are mainly dominated by subsistence farming. Farming was practiced at different places. A majority of female heads undertook farming at their place of residence. While other interviewees inherited land and undertook farming at a distance from the place of residence. Overall, interviewees concurred that subsistence farming (in form of gardening in the backyard) was carried out annually with specific growing of leafy vegetables (cabbage, carrots, beans, tomatoes and spinach). While extensive farming including growing of maize commenced with the start of the rainy season. As mentioned earlier above, interviewees managed to evade erratic prices of in the supermarkets. One female head therefore reported the following:

Farming is very important, at times when things are tight we can survive through the crops that we grow and it helps again to reduce expenditures on crops that we can grow at home. These days' tomatoes are expensive but because we grow them we manage to save that little money

Despite the centrality of subsistence farming to female heads, farming is not without problems. For example farming was mainly affected by lack of sufficient labour, lack of sufficient water supply because water was erratic (especially gardening) and destruction of crops by animals (gardens were not well fenced) and there are no grazing land for instance paddocks. Furthermore, given the lack of adequate labour, no interviewee indicated to be hiring labour because of exorbitant prices charged.

Apart from farming crops, keeping livestock was prevalent within the interviewed female heads for instance keeping fowls, goats, sheep, pigs, donkeys and cattle. The number of fowls ranged from five to fifteen and the number of goats, sheep and cattle kept ranged from two to eight. The major reasons for keeping the livestock differed from one female head to another. For some female heads fowls were mainly for their own consumption with exception of a very few who were selling road runners (traditional chicken) to students at Fort Hare University. Fowls also provided eggs for breakfast and other use (including selling eggs). However, as for cattle and goats they were mainly for generation income. One female head indicated that when she sells her sheep to a local butchery she (female head) could receive an estimated amount of R600-R700 per sheep. While goats ranged below the R600. One female head therefore exclaimed:

ndifuye iinkomo, iibhokwe, kunye neegusha, kwaye ndiya- zithengisa ukuze ndikwazi ukuphila. Maxa wambi ndiye ndiyithenise inyama xa ndithe ndaxhela igusha, ibokwe kunye nenkomo. When translated it means (I own cows, goats, and sheep and I always slaughter a cow, goat or sheep so as to get money. Sometimes the other meat will be for my family).

Such a sentiment indicates the significance of keeping animals not only for immediate consumption

but for income generation through selling the meat as well as milking. However, in times of a crisis for instance death of a family member one could slaughter one cow to feed the crowd who attend the funeral. Over and above, subsistence agriculture is one of the livelihood strategies employed by female headed households especially in rural areas (Adelzadeh *et al.*, 2013).

Vending

The village is located very close to the small town of Alice close to Fort Hare University. Despite all the other survival strategies mentioned above female headed households engaged into vending. On one hand vending occurred at home where a tuck shop was opened selling mainly basic commodities (including cooking oil, sugar, salt, washing powder, roiboss and many other). However, not much income was generated from the tuck shops simply because customers did not have the buying power especially at the middle of the month when no one had money. Hence tuck shops at the village provided a basis to purchase immediate products (for those who owned them). The proximity of the town (Alice) made villagers to regularly visit the town to purchase groceries hence the tuck shops did not attract many customers. At the village this business did not prove to be profitable because some other customers bought on credit which they never paid.

Female heads who were vending in town particularly profited. Cooked food was mainly prevalent during month ends when people had received their grants and other incomes. Cooked food that was sold included fried chicken pieces, fried hake fish, fat cakes to mention just a few. Steel containers were mainly used as shelter from which the business was carried out. These were rented hence there was a tendency among the female heads and other people to rent together a container and reduce the renting costs. Overall, vending provided a basis for survival of the female headed households although the returns differed from one female head to another. Other writers (Blumberg, 2013; Bolles, 2016; Friedman & Hambridge, 2021; Simkins, 2013) emphasize that work in the informal sector often augments other forms of income. Friedman & Hambridge (2021) remark that women can often make use of domestic skills to generate income outside the home (for instance, laundry services, the sale of food, and so on), and that informal work is often an extension of the domestic role. The casual jobs usually sought by these women have limited opportunities (Myanmar, 2020).

More ways of income

It became apparent from the in depth interviews that women did not only derive income from the above mentioned income. Additional sources of income were revealed for instance stokvel (rotational and savings groups) depended on the relationship and trust between the group members. Cash was mainly prominent although in-kind goods (groceries most) were rotated depending with consensus. Money from boyfriends (children's boyfriends) was reported to be helpful in sustaining households; nonetheless this was not representative of all interviewed participants. Amongst the people who formed the core of my study two were child minding in two of the homes in the villages. The women concerned could thus run this service while at the same time looking after the needs of their own households. Further probing into the conditions of female headed households revealed that female

heads depended on social networking (including friends, relatives and community in general). Kritzinger (2013) claim that women survive on social networking especially in the context of poverty. Women also depended on social networking especially in the context of poverty. The significance of such networks cannot be underestimated because they offer security. For younger female heads that at times go to work, sent children to grandmothers for care. This is constant with the argument by Triegaard (2015) who argues that social networking is significant for poverty reduction as it trim down the burden of the poor and allows them to seek employment. Social capital is essential to women's survival in Nstelamanzi and has helped to reduce socio-economic hardships that women encounter. Aside from the importance of social networks Kasente (2020) claims that some social networks have a tendency to exploit women for the benefit of other members.

However, this does not distract social networks as viable to female headed households. The results of this paper reiterate a study by Lingam (2014) which confirmed that female heads sustain relationships with relatives to fall back on when assistance is needed. Female heads (six out of fifteen interviewed) reported to be skipping meals. Bauer (2008:8) observed that during hard times, vulnerable poor households consume only one or two meals per day. This was mainly reported in times when food coffers had ran dry before the next income, eating meat was at times seen as luxury hence less nutritional diets were saved. Children were only allowed to eat while older people could only eat one meal. Breakfast was saved later in the day in order to skip lunch but there was no report of skipping supper probably because members of the family could have worked the whole day in different places hence hungry and boost energy for the next day. This enabled saving food for the future and sometimes the available food stayed for long. However, meal skipping can have repercussions in children as they suffer malnutrition (Bae, Kim and Hong, 2018)

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has uncovered the experienced realities of female headed households. It is indeed true that these households exist and are faced with many struggles in earning daily lives. Clearly, without the social security system most of the household could not be subsisting at the level they are. However, there is over burden on the old pension grant as it caters for the whole household and as result, it becomes insufficient. Besides, the old pension grant playing a significant role in sustaining female headed households, a number of activities have been pursued to raise and at times supplement cash income. Female heads are often faced by multi-faceted challenges; such challenges have further exacerbated their plight. Rural food security has fallen to unimaginable percentages and therefore rural food insecurity is rampant. Without proper employment most of the rural people have become vulnerable and are kept in vicious cycles of poverty. To that end, there is therefore need for a gendered focus on female households and improve their well-being.

Lack of income in female headed households can be reduced through debasing of loans to the poor household in order to develop more small businesses. As shown in the discussion of vending. Credit loans will provide female heads with more money to start and develop more spaza shops.

Hence this will create constant income generation that will see eradication of poverty.

Training is also part and parcel of entrepreneurial (namely basic entrepreneurial skills). This is significant for female heads who want to be involved in the main stream income. By so doing such female heads are fed with business information for instance risks that are involved in running businesses. This enables femaleheads especially younger ones to attain skills and be competitive on the labour market.

Public work programmes are important as well. Such programmes provide income and employment to poverty stricken families. Public programmes also are significant in that infrastructure building like schools, clinics and road construction will benefit community at large, therefore service delivery.

Security wise, it is important for the South African Police service to make sure that the vulnerable female headed households have the required security (as seen in the case of a release of a bugler). Night patrols are significant in this regard.

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