



FEMALE HEADS OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SRI LANKA: MAKING AND SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS IN PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT

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Abstract

Since 1990, Muslim internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the district of Puttalam in Sri Lanka have been living in a state of protracted displacement. During this time, they have been confronted with various socio-economic and political challenges concerned with the realization of durable solutions to their displacement. After nearly two and a half decades, while some IDPs have become victims of the negligence and exclusion thrust upon them by the Sri Lankan government and donors, others have instead proven themselves to be anything but simply victims. By focusing on female heads of households (FHHs) and their attempts to generate and sustain positive livelihoods, this paper aims to unravel how the livelihood strategies of FHHs are mediated through their heterogeneity and hence their agency to access different resources to make a living in the context of protracted displacement. This study is informed by a larger survey that was undertaken by the author in 2014, which focused on Muslim FHHs' access to economic, social and cultural resources in Puttalam. This paper also uses data obtained from twelve in-depth interviews and one focus group discussion with IDP FHHs, conducted subsequent to the completion of the larger survey. The study finds that the heterogeneity of FHHs is highly influential on their livelihood strategies and their agency to access livelihood resources. This heterogeneous character also overlaps into accessing livelihoods. In sum, the paper reveals the importance to FHHs of both 'compliant' agency and 'transformative' agency in making and sustaining livelihoods in displacement.

Keywords: Female heads of households, internally displaced persons, livelihoods, agency, Puttalam

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Female Heads of Households in Sri Lanka: Making and Sustaining Livelihoods in Protracted Displacement

Fazeeha Azmi

Introduction

Sri Lanka is today approaching the end of its first ‘post-war era’ decade. Yet, adequate comprehension of the discourse of ‘post-war development’ and ‘recovery’ remains lacking. Although the government of Sri Lanka, which was in power until 2015, made significant developments in physical infrastructure in war-affected areas, it failed to adhere to a comprehensive resettlement plan that would address the needs of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs), displaced as a consequence of three decades of armed conflict. During the 1983-2009 war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), civilians from the war-affected northern and eastern regions were, regardless of their ethnicity, subject to multiple waves of displacement on account of the fighting between Sri Lanka’s armed forces and the LTTE. Among the displaced, the plight of Muslim IDPs, who have been living in protracted displacement in host communities throughout the country for nearly two and a half decades, remains unforgotten, and they continue to lack any semblance of a sustainable solution to their displacement (Badurdeen, 2010). Indeed, they face continued discrimination in the post-war development agenda of Sri Lanka. A recent article on northern Muslims by Haniffa (2015) highlights how the efforts of local activists and actors to emphasise the importance of Muslim IDP needs were caught up in the conceptual confusion related to ‘victimhood’ in government and donor discourse.

This paper seeks to unpack the attempts that are made by FHHs to rebuild their livelihoods while living in a situation of protracted displacement in the Puttalam district of Sri Lanka. Although the case studies presented in this paper may not reflect the stories of all FHHs living in protracted displacement, these narratives nevertheless exemplify how FHHs, who are commonly labelled as both powerless and the poorest of the poor, employ various strategies to establish livelihoods, doing so through combining not only economic and financial, but also human, social and cultural resources. The FHHs in this study vary according to their age, education level, employment type, household structure, reason for becoming a FHH, and length of time as a FHH. This study aims to understand how this heterogeneity influences the livelihood strategies of FHHs, and how FHHs use agency to realise livelihoods in what is a gendered context of protracted displacement.

This paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, key analytical concepts will be presented, specifically heterogeneity, agency and gendered livelihoods. Next, the methodology is presented, with a focus on sample selection and FHH heterogeneity. The study background is then outlined, before the findings of the paper are presented. Drawing upon these findings, the paper then moves on to discuss how FHH heterogeneity is associated with FHH livelihoods, and how these overlap in connection to accessing livelihoods, before then concluding.

Analytical Concepts: FHH Heterogeneity, Agency and Gendered Livelihoods

The literature has diversely represented, defined and positioned FHHs in different societies. This has contributed to a strengthening argument of definitional disagreement surrounding the concept and scope of FHHs (Buvinic and Gupta, 1997; Chant, 1997, 1999; Fuwa, 2000; Ruwanpura, 2003).

In south Asian countries, although women are responsible for households, not only as housemakers and carers, but also as the main decision-makers and primary economic contributors, society has largely refused to recognize them as heads of households. This has been largely a consequence of the gendered ideologies that permeate these societies, with women themselves also being uncomfortable to identify as heads of households. It is therefore clear that socio-cultural factors influence the definition of FHHs in these societies.

Adding to these complexities, an increasing range of factors have contributed towards women taking up the main and/or sole responsibility for their households. The increasing life expectancy of women; improvements in female access to employment and education; husband's illness, death or disappearance; male migration; rising separation and divorce rates; and demographic ageing have all resulted in an increasing number of women having to take on greater household responsibilities. Indeed, many of these reasons can be observed in the present study. Nevertheless, despite this range of factors that have contributed towards women taking up greater responsibilities as heads of households, it is still cultural factors that determine who is and who is not considered to be the head.

In the context of the present study, in order to understand who would be considered a FHH, informal discussions and focus group discussions were held with women during the larger research project. In addition, a women's NGO working in the study area was also consulted on how they identify and define FHHs in their work. Based on these views, for the purposes of the present study, FHHs are to be categorised into five categories depending upon the reason for why they became responsible for their households. These five categories are:

1. women whose husbands are deceased,
2. women whose husbands are away due to war,
3. women whose husbands have migrated abroad for work,
4. women who are divorced or separated, and
5. women whose husbands are unemployed due to either ill health or old age.

Of these five categories, with the exception of women whose husbands are working abroad, all women are to be considered either the sole or main income earner in their household. Indeed, while a variety of reasons are identified as causes for why women became FHHs, income earning is most often highlighted. Besides the categorisation of research participants into these five groups, the research participants also vary by age, by length of time as a FHH, and by household composition (in terms of whether there are any males present in the household and whether any other household members are employed and/or educated).

In employing the concept of agency, this paper draws on the work of Kabeer. Inherent in the actor-oriented approach, the concept of agency takes on different meanings in different disciplines (Long, 2001). Agency according to Kabeer (1999, 435) is a 'process of decision making as well as less measurable manifestations... such as negotiation, deception and manipulation'. The concept has received considerable scholarly attention in gender and development related research in the global south (Kabeer, 1999; Rao, 2014). Kabeer (2016, 313) distinguishes between 'compliant' and 'transformative' forms of agency. While 'compliant' forms of agency are associated with exercising agency within the field of socially accepted behaviour, transformative agency is concerned with a type of agency that has the ability to challenge gendered structural constraints. Feminist research has shown how women accommodate accepted gendered norms to secure compliant agency and how they have used their agency to challenge transformative

structures (Ramnarian, 2016; Azmi, 2014). This paper applies the concept of ‘agency’ as defined by Kabeer (1999), and as such aims to show how FHHs utilise compliant and transformative agency, and how these two agency forms intersect with FHH heterogeneity.

The literature on livelihoods has repeatedly endorsed the view that ‘livelihood’ is not only concerned with employment, but also with resources (what people have), strategies (what people do) and outcomes (what people are able to do with what they have) (Chambers, 1983; Chambers and Conway 1992; Allison and Ellis, 2001). This understanding has therefore taken the concept of livelihood far beyond simply equating it with employment. The above definition also alerts us to the realization that livelihoods are not gender neutral, as gender conditions access to and ownership of assets (Razavi, 2003; Deere and Leon, 2003; Oberhauser et al., 2004; Kabeer and Whitehead, 2001). Unlike in other situations, in the context of displacement, gendered access to livelihoods is embedded in highly contested socio-economic and political environments (Azmi, 2014). In this paper, the concept of gendered livelihoods will therefore be used to show how FHHs access resources when strategizing livelihoods and how this process is influenced by their gendered FHH identities.

Methodology

This article draws upon data collected from a 2014 research project, titled ‘Survey on the status of Muslim FHHs and their access to economic, social and cultural rights in the district of Puttalam, Sri Lanka’. The empirical evidence in this article consists of data collected from 12 individual interviews carried out with FHHs in the Puttalam Divisional Secretariat (DS) division of the Puttalam district. In addition, a focus group discussion (FGD) was held to better understand the context of the problem studies. FHHs were identified using a snowball sampling method, based on both the reasons for becoming a FHH and their income earning role. Table 1 (below) provides socio-economic details of each of the research participants. As stated in Table 1, the research participants included FHHs who were such because of the death or ill health or old age of their spouse, because their spouse was away due to war or had migrated for work, or because they were

Table 1: Profile of FHHs research participants

Respondent No.	Age	Education (Grade)	Employment	Reason for becoming a FHH	Length of time as a FHH	Structure of household (HH)		
						No. of HH members	Other HH members work	Male present
R-1	50	10	Tailor	Husband's death	24	3	N	N
R-2	65	None	Agricultural laborer	Husband's death	23	3	N	N
R-3	57	5	Dry fish seller	Separated	18	5	N	N
R-4	70	None	Snack maker	Elderly husband	24	4	N	N
R-5	66	None	School canteen staff	Husband missing	30	9	Y	Y
R-6	58	5	Home garment shop	Husband's death	15	5	N	N
R-7	60	6	Snack maker	Husband's death	22	8	Y	N
R-8	67	None	Agricultural laborer	Husband's ill health	29	6	N	Y
R-9	63	3	Dry fish seller	Husband's ill health	16	8	N	Y
R-10	51	None	Middle East migrant and shop owner	Husband deceased	14	9	N	Y
R-11	55	*GCE (O/L)	NGO worker	Divorced	19	5	N	N
R-12	63	None	Agricultural laborer	Elderly husband	10	7	N	Y

Source: Field data, Puttalam, 2014. * General Certificate in Education, Ordinary Level

divorced or separated. The heterogeneity of FHHs is revealed by the differences between the research participants in terms of age, length of time as a FHH and household composition. It was upon these variables that the analysis for this study was conducted.

Table 1 presents a summary of the each FHH profile. The age range of the participants was 50-70 years. Many of the participants had not completed their primary education. Except for one FHH, all others were employed in the informal sector. For the majority of the women, the main reason for them taking up the head of the household was the death of their husbands. Further, more than half of the households are absent of any males. The length of time as a FHH ranged from 14-30 years, with the number of dependant family members ranging from 3-9. Except for in two households, no other family members worked.

Background: Muslim IDPs

In October 1990, the LTTE announced that all Muslims living in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka should leave their land, businesses and livelihoods, which their families had had possession of for many centuries. Unable to challenge the decision forced upon them, all Muslims in the Northern Province had to leave immediately against their will. The majority of those who fled were initially accommodated in welfare camps in the neighbouring district of Puttalam, an area that already had a large Muslim population, while some IDPs managed to reach other districts closer to their villages or to the southern part of the country, where they had friends or relatives.

The sudden arrival of IDPs in the district of Puttalam, in the North Western province, not only altered the demography but also gradually changed the economic, political, social and cultural landscape. The IDPs who arrived in Puttalam expected that they would soon be able to return to their villages. Holding similar expectations, the host community were willing to, in the short-term at least, share many of their resources, such as education, housing and employment opportunities, with IDPs. However, over time, hope for return faded among IDPs, who found themselves dependent mainly on aid for their survival. The situation affected both IDPs and host communities, with competing pressures on vital resources leading to increased hostility. Researchers working in the field have documented the various causes and consequences of such a hostile environment and have shown how IDPs and host communities in such contexts have had to negotiate their differing identities (Brun, 2003, 2008, 2010, 2013; Hasbullah, 2001; Thayalasingham et al., 2009).

Due to the protracted nature of displacement, IDPs lost access to their traditional forms of livelihoods, to which they had been accustomed prior to their displacement. Further, they were unable to compete with locals for the resources necessary to rebuild their livelihoods. The situation badly affected both men and women IDPs. Women, and particularly FHHs, faced substantial barriers to establishing livelihoods in this new environment. In particular, most FHHs faced difficulties in finding “proper” jobs that conformed to the gendered expectations of their communities.

The war between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE officially ended in May 2009. During the post war years, the government prioritized the resettlement of 280,000 IDPs who had been affected by the later stages of the war. However, less attention was paid by the Sri Lankan government to addressing the issues faced by the northern Muslim IDPs, with their safe return instead being a low priority (Haniffa, 2015). Although twenty-seven years have lapsed since their arrival to Puttalam, many IDPs continue to live within their host communities. This situation has given rise to many dilemmas, related not only to return but also to resettlement, re-integration, livelihoods and citizenship. Due to the protracted nature of displacement living, alongside the evident socio-economic and cultural issues, IDPs’ very conceptualizations of ‘place’, ‘home’,

‘belonging’ and ‘citizenship’ have changed, with this having important implications for the seeking of solutions to the IDP issue (Hewamana, 2015; Azmi, 2015; Brun, 2003). Yet, while such discourses are pivotal, they have remained largely ignored in any consideration of durable solutions to IDP issues. Decades of government neglect, which is due in large part to its inability to realize durable solutions to IDP issues and its failure to prioritize older IDPs, has left many IDPs needing to strategize their own solutions to their displacement.

Insights from the Field

In the context of a life of protracted displacement, with fading hopes of return, the stories of FHHs presented below reveal a wide range of strategies that have been employed to ensure livelihoods that benefit both them and their families. Their stories demonstrate a strong element of heterogeneity not only between FHHs but also between the livelihood strategies that have been employed. Their stories also show how FHHs use both their transformative and compliant agency to create gendered livelihoods that benefit them and their families. Turning now to look precisely at the responses given by the research participants, these will be considered under the five themes of education, household structure and family support, access to social capital and social networks, reasons for becoming a FHH and length of time as a FHH.

Education

Respondent 11 (R-11) had a relatively good education compared to the other women interviewed. She volunteered in NGO activities as she wanted to work towards the betterment of conflict-affected women from her community. Her interest in activism and education helped her to find employment with a local NGO after five years of living in protracted displacement. However, she paid a high price for her decision. R-11 was 31 years old when she arrived in Puttalam with her husband, three daughters and in-laws. She recounts her experience of becoming an IDP and the reason why she decided to take up a job with an NGO:

When I expressed my willingness to work, my husband was not happy and the dispute ended in our divorce after a year. I have no experience in doing a job, though I wanted to do something for the betterment of women from my childhood. I have voluntarily took part in women NGO after becoming displaced.

Taking up employment outside the home, specifically in an NGO, was an important step for R-11. Her husband’s irregular income was insufficient to supplement their family’s needs. She was worried about the hard life that they had endured during the first five years of displacement. As her husband came from a very traditional family, where women had never worked outside the home, her decision to do so was considered to be damaging to their family’s honor. She said that her interest in activism and education helped her to take this important decision in her life for the betterment of her family. Although she is worried about her husband’s decision to divorce her because of her employment, she does not particularly regret her decision, as this has increased her position in society and her family could do well as a result.

Household structure and family support

The FGD revealed that, in respect to households with an extended family, a disproportionate number of young children and family members with special needs, such as the elderly, could impose a heavy socio-economic burden on families headed by women. It became clear that a number of factors were important considerations in deciding upon FHH livelihoods, namely the

number of household members, their employment status, and whether or not there were any male family members above the age of 18 in the household. It is clear from this research that household structure can serve as both an enabling and a containing factor in respect to FHH livelihoods. Although a high number of dependent, unemployed family members may place a high economic burden in certain contexts, it has also been a help to FHHs in expanding their horizons in respect to their livelihood strategies, when other family members support FHH livelihoods.

This was the experience of Respondent 1 (R-1), who lost her husband while making the hardest journey in her life with her family members. Her husband, who was 22 years older than her, suffered a sudden heart attack in the boat in which they were travelling and died as a result. For R-1, life as an IDP in Puttalam therefore started with the label of 'widow'. She was also pregnant. Upon her arrival in Puttalam, she had to perform the necessary Islamic rituals associated with widowhood. Her life in the camp was plagued by many difficulties. Immediately after becoming a widow, her husband's family ostracized her. R-1 was, however, emotionally and economically supported by her parents. She then lost her father three years after her displacement. She now lives with her young daughter and her mother. As she recalled:

My parents were my great strength. After three years of living in Puttalam, my father also passed away. Although my mother was interested in arranging a marriage for me - as she feared my life after her would be difficult - I did not like that arrangement. My mother worked in a saltern field. For the last 12 years, she could not work as she became sick. She did not allow me to work. She feared the gossips attached to young widows. I followed a tailoring course conducted by an NGO, while my mother was working in the onion farm. I started to follow the course in morning hours as my daughter was at school. Now I am making clothes for a local garment factory from home. This makes me safe and it is good for my daughter's future as well.

Becoming a young widow not only entails an economic cost but also a social cost. Mobility and visibility in public space is restricted, although in some cases these restrictions are self-imposed. R-1 faced hardships during the early period of widowhood, mainly due to the associated social stigma and her age. However, her parents, particularly her mother, helped her to overcome the problems she faced. Although she encountered many hardships during the initial years of living in displacement as a young widow, the economic and emotional support given to her by her mother shows how such support is critical for young widows in situations of displacement. As a young widow, she was careful when selecting her social connections and relationships. Influenced by her mother's decision and her own wishes, she chose a livelihood path that is considered to be a "proper" job for women. Although she is unable to make large profits from her work, she is nevertheless satisfied with what she is doing for her livelihood. Her story reflects a clear compliance in the nature of her agency.

Respondent 10 (R-10) was displaced with her whole family in 1990. Her husband worked as an agricultural laborer in their former village. He could not find regular jobs in Puttalam even after 10 years of living in the district. The family survived through IDP assistance provided by the government. Many male IDPs felt psychologically challenged by their inability to provide as per their gendered role. R-10's husband became paralyzed in 2005, later dying in 2010. R-10 decided to migrate to Saudi Arabia to work as a domestic maid. Although her decision shocked her family, her family members had to accept her choice as local income-earning opportunities for the other household members were scarce. R-10 stated:

After becoming an IDP, I worked in an onion farm with my mother-in-law and my unmarried sister-in-law. Although three of us earned, we could not save a single rupee. One day, I met one of my

former friends from my village at the hospital, who had just returned from Saudi Arabia after her first contract. She encouraged and helped to go to Saudi Arabia. Although my family did not like my decision at the beginning, they accepted it later. I worked 10 years in Saudi Arabia and was able to start this business, after my return. My in-laws looked after my family and it was great strength.

In the above narrative, it is evident that extended families and dependants can positively contribute towards access to livelihoods for FHHs. For R-10, her dependant family members, particularly her in-laws, have helped her by taking care of her family for nearly 10 years. Thanks to this family support, she was able to build a satisfactory livelihood, which has since facilitated her development into a now successful businesswoman. She has employed two of her family members in her shop. She happily mentioned her ability to support her extended family members by providing them with jobs. R-10 frequently mentioned the family support she had received and how this had helped her to undertake a job abroad. Many FHHs do not have such childcare support, however, if they did, then they too could travel to work in the Middle East. R-10's narrative also showcases her transformative agency, specifically her ability to negotiate and overcome structural barriers related to women making their livelihoods in a global labor market.

Access to social capital and social networks

Aside from family support, access to social capital is also crucial for realizing FHH livelihoods in protracted displacement contexts. Information concerning access to social capital and social networks was obtained during the individual interviews. Not all FHHs had access to such social capital or social networks. Although established social capital was destroyed by the realities of forced displacement, FHHs were able to form social ties over time. The narratives of Respondent 3 (R-3) and Respondent (R-9), both of whom work as dry fish sellers, reveal how they have made use of social capital to engage in livelihoods. As R-3 explained:

I have been doing dry fish business since I am separated in 1992. I have children to feed and my parents are living with me. I have two daughters. One daughter is studying in a university. Other one is waiting for job. Now the situation in our old village is good. I go there with a friend (R-9) and bring dry fish from there. We sell the dry fish to local shops. We have made good relationship with some local shop owners who buy our dry fish.

R-3 and R-9 became friends following their displacement. They shared similar experiences and challenges in living in an unknown place. R-3 was separated from her husband 18 years ago, and R-9 had to take the headship of her family after her husband became ill 16 years ago. They met each other during an NGO workshop and became friends. They travel together to their former villages to buy dry fish and sell it in Puttalam. They have found that such a relationship is essential to successfully navigating what is otherwise a male dominated space. Their travel to their former village also requires them to stay in the village, at least for one night, with either a relative or a friend. Thanks to their dry fish selling, they have been able to buy plots of land in Puttalam. They have both also been able to establish links with the host community. Through these links, R-3 was able to arrange her daughter's marriage without dowry. This latter point is important because those FHHs who struggle to arrange marriages for their daughters due to economic hardships, and the consequent lack of funds for a dowry, are often forced to arrange early marriages for their daughters if an offer of marriage is made without a request for a dowry.

Reasons for Becoming a FHH

Respondent 6 (R-6) became a widow fifteen years ago. She found it difficult to engage in employment outside the home as this was deemed inappropriate for young widows. She has five children, all of whom live with her. Two of her children, both boys, were born after arriving in Puttalam. Her three other children, all girls, are between 20-27 years of age. None of the girls are yet married. R-6 is worried about her daughters' futures as she has been unable to earn money to save for the necessary dowries. She is particularly worried that her elder daughter will soon pass the age of marriage. R-6 is running a small clothes shop at her home. She buys ready-made garments from another IDP woman who brings clothes from Colombo. Through this business, she earns a very limited income, hardly enough to save. Her daughter expressed the concern that, as many people are now switching to online shopping, they fear losing their businesses. As R-6 put it:

I have three young girls. I have to be very careful in working outside home as it might affect the future of my daughters. That is why I decided to start this business at home with the help of microfinance. I have to repay the loan and interest. What I earn from my business is hardly enough to save for the future of my children. My husband's family is not supporting me. But they are very careful in what I do and where I go. I am worried about my daughters' future.

Although the strategy employed by R-6 enables her to earn an income to feed her family, because she does not want to challenge society's portrayal of the "suitable job" and the "good woman", her livelihood strategy has not helped her to build a strong future for her children. R-6 is reluctant to challenge social expectations regarding a widow's employment outside of their homes. Her ability to negotiate social structures is constrained by her worries over her daughters' futures. As such, she relies on her compliant agency to make her livelihood choice. The narratives of Respondent 4 and Respondent 7 (R-4 and R-7) reflect similar views in respect to finding suitable jobs that adhere to society's expectation of the "good woman".

Respondent 12 (R-12) had to take up primary responsibility for her household due to her husband's age. She now works on an onion farm:

My husband was a fish laborer and he was able to provide a good life for our family, when he was physically good. Now he is old and his vision is weak. I decided to work in the onion farm ten years back. My husband is known to many people in Puttalam. It is because of that I was able to get a work. I did not have any problem until now in working in the onion farm. Some women, who were widows, have talked to me about sexual exchange in terms of labor work in other fields. But, it has never happened to me. Men are afraid to approach us we have our husbands.

The narrative of R-12 shows how, although she is a FHH, her husband's presence provides her with security in accessing work. Respondent 2 (R-2) mentioned that she had to work as an agricultural laborer because her husband had died, and their family was desperate for money. She, in contrast, had no males present in her household. She said that although the work was low paid, she nevertheless decided to take up the job at the onion farm as it is closer to her home camp. Respondent 8 (R-8), who also works on an onion farm due to her husband's ill health, mentioned that her choice was influenced by her husband's illness. In essence, his illness meant that she had to become the primary caregiver in the household.

Length of time being a FHH

Respondent 5 (R-5) was heading her household even before she became an IDP. Her husband was kidnapped by the LTTE when he was involved in fishing with four other villagers in 1988. She has, since that time, heard nothing about her husband, despite taking all possible steps to find him. She had to abandon her hopes of finding her husband after she was displaced because she was forced to prioritize other problems that she then faced. In particular, she had to take full responsibility for her children in the new location, at which she had no access to land or to any of the resources to which she had had access prior to her displacement. At the time of her displacement, she had five children. All five of her children are now married, as she was able to raise the necessary dowries for her daughters. R-5 must now therefore take care of her daughters and her grandchildren. R-5 has been engaged in a variety of livelihood types since her arrival in Puttalam. Immediately after her displacement, R-5 worked in a school as a cook. During the school holidays, she made snacks, which she sold to neighbouring shops. R-5 continued to work hard to feed her family. As she recalled:

Though I was an FHH even before I came to Puttalam, I did not have any problem in feeding my children or sending my children to school. I had land and my family and husband's family supported me. But after we came to Puttalam, I had to face a new set of challenge in the new place. I felt uncertain and was fear at the beginning. Over time, I have gained confidence and power. Although, all my sons and daughters are married, and living in different places, they still consult me, when taking important decisions.

In sharing her experiences in her former village, R-5 expressed strong feelings of sadness over the loss of her land, cows, goats and her home. She had to work hard to buy a small plot of land in Puttalam. R-5's narrative therefore also reveals transformative agency in action. In this connection, during the FGD, the FHHs mentioned how their confidence and power to make decisions grew with the length of time that they had been the head of their households.

Discussion: FHH Heterogeneity and Agency

The insights presented in this paper show how FHHs manage the making of livelihoods in protracted displacement, and how their heterogeneity has placed them in differing positions in their pursuit to secure strong livelihoods for them and their families. The insights also help to reveal how FHHs utilise their compliant and transformative agencies in forming their livelihoods.

Education

Table 1 shows that the level of human capital possessed by FHHs when accessing successful livelihoods was strikingly low. Half of the research participants had had no schooling and only two had a comparatively higher educational level. They also did not possess any other skills that could be used to seek employment in the local and national labor markets. Education was not valued as an important determinant of livelihoods in their villages of origin prior to their displacement. Their village economies were characterized by agriculture, fishing and trading. Women worked with their husbands and fathers to support their families, but only on a voluntary basis. After being forcibly displaced, both men and women generally found it difficult to secure livelihoods, even within the agriculture and fisheries sectors, due to extreme competition in the host community. In contrast, those who held government positions prior to being displaced were able to continue their jobs in the host community and elsewhere in the country.

Many women, especially the FHH who were interviewed, had no educational qualifications that could have helped them in securing jobs. Only R-11, who possessed the highest qualification among all of the FHHs interviewed, was able to secure a job with a local NGO. After the arrival of IDPs in Puttalam, the number of NGOs working on IDP issues increased slowly. These NGOs not only supported development but also gradually increased women's empowerment, activism and participation in development. However, the host community did not welcome this increased NGO presence. Many from the host community, mainly men, believed that NGOs were trying to inject "foreign ideas" into local women. They also blamed IDP women for setting a bad example by being involved in NGOs. A few IDP men also held similar views, thereby preventing the women in their households from participating in NGO activities. Due to these prevailing attitudes surrounding NGO activities, those women who were working in NGOs were not socially accepted. Indeed, women who joined NGOs faced considerable criticism. R-11 also faced criticism from her husband's relatives. However, she was able to put aside such criticisms and move forward. She enjoyed a privileged status among the women working in the NGO. Her case presented a progressive attempt to realize a strong and positive livelihood for her and her household. At the same time, this also shows how she was able to use her education and employment to challenge dominant societal views, and, as such, her actions reflect her transformative agency in livelihood generation.

In the FGD, the research participants mentioned that they only realized the importance of education after their displacement. They have since paid serious attention to their children's education, regardless of gender. The decision to invest in a girl's education also demonstrates FHHs' transformative agency. Throughout their continuing displacement, their children have developed a strong identity of place and attachment with Puttalam, and many IDP women have already invested in improving their children's human capital. Indeed, it is important to remember that IDP children do not have the same level of exposure to agriculture or fishing that their parents had.

Family structure and support

Family structure and support is essential in securing livelihoods and accessing livelihood resources. The narratives reveal that while family structures have promoted successful access to livelihoods for some FHHs, for other FHHs they have been forced to strategize on livelihoods that are not less profitable. Displacement has considerably altered the family structures that existed in their former villages. It has also changed individual and household access to livelihood resources, and hence changed gender relations at the household and societal levels. This has implications for FHH livelihood strategies, as shown through the narratives. While some families maintained the traditional gender attitudes that had persisted before displacement (i.e. that women are forbidden from working outside of the home), the attitudes of others either evolved voluntarily or were forced to change. In terms of the former, compliant agency was typical, but in terms of the latter, FHHs were able to utilize transformative agency to secure their chosen livelihoods.

Social capital

Forced migration and life in protracted displacement radically alter the traditional social structures of IDP families. Families often lack the traditional protection and social networks they once enjoyed in their former villages. During the early years of displacement, a lack of social capital and a lack of social networks meant that many families were ill-equipped to access livelihoods. The social and institutional (mosques) organizations that helped them were destroyed by their

displacement. They were either unable to access or were excluded from such organizations in Puttalam. However, with time, they managed to re-establish social networks within the IDP community, and to a lesser extent with the host community. NGOs worked for IDPs and provided a platform for them to re-establish their social networks. While not all FHHs were successful in accessing spaces that allowed them to create social networks and social capital among themselves and with the host community, some of the narratives in this study nonetheless reveal how such relationships were created and how FHHs benefitted from such opportunities when they were available. The narrative of R-3, in particular, revealed how she was able to explore social capital within the migrant community and host community to accomplish her livelihood.

Reasons for becoming FHHs

The reason why women became FHHs also influenced the nature of their FHH livelihoods. The majority of FHHs reported that their husbands found it extremely difficult to adapt to the livelihoods that were available in the host community. For many displaced men, loss of livelihood represented a loss of past and a loss of future. A lack of social networks, low self-esteem, hopelessness, powerlessness, anger and distress had a significant psychological impact on many IDPs. During the FGD, it became clear that this psychological impact was greater in men than it was in women. As a result, some men died young, became ill or left their families as they could not sustain the masculine gender roles that society expected of them. This hence forced many women to take up jobs.

It has of course not always been easy for FHHs to make strong livelihoods for themselves and their families. The narratives appear to show that those FHHs whose husbands are alive, but unable to work either due to age or ill-health, are better equipped to negotiate social structures that may otherwise limit their livelihood options. At the same time, young widows were very cautious when selecting their livelihoods. Widowed FHHs who did not have a male family member faced multiple challenges in accessing livelihoods, in particular, they feared any unwanted gossip about them in the community. As a consequence, some of them selected livelihoods with low earnings because they did not want to be seen to challenge existing gender norms. Such FHHs have therefore responded to the situation by utilising their compliant agency. However, it is important to note that, for widows, the longer the amount of time that they head up their households, the lesser such social restrictions become, meaning that the consequent negative impact on their agency is reduced.

Length of time as a FHH

The narratives and FGD data reveal that, in general, the longer a woman is a FHH, the greater is her ability to secure a strong livelihood that provides good financial returns. As just mentioned, this has proved to be the case particularly for widows. When their children are older, are married or are employed, FHHs feel powerful and successful. Through this, they also acquire a strong social position. Yet, some of the narratives showed how FHHs nevertheless continued to have additional responsibilities that forced them to remain as a caregiver, including for their grandchildren. The narratives reveal that the early years as a FHH are always stressful, not only psychologically but also in respect to accessing livelihoods. In such cases, FHHs have initially found themselves utilising their compliant agency to access livelihoods, but with time they are later able to exercise transformative agency too.

Conclusion

In sum, this research study documents how the ability of FHHs to secure strong, positive livelihoods is influenced by their heterogeneity within the gendered society in which they are displaced. Although a number of common threads run through the narratives, FHHs are far from being a homogenous group. For them, their age, education level, employment type, household structure, reason for becoming a FHH and length of time heading up their household, have either supported or hindered their livelihood choices and outcomes. The narratives also reveal the overlapping dimensions of FHH heterogeneity that determines their access to livelihoods. Their stories reveal how their livelihood strategies change over time, as influenced by their heterogeneity. Their stories also endorse the view that, since assuming responsibility for their families, FHHs have explored various ways of ensuring the wellbeing of their families. The research also reveals how their heterogeneity both positively and negatively affects their livelihoods. Almost all of the FHHs interviewed for this research were engaged in a different type of employment, which they accessed through using either compliant or transformative agency. Interestingly, protracted displacement has provided many women in general, and particularly FHHs, with the opportunity to employ their agency to achieve their livelihood objectives. Some were able to challenge gendered norms related to FHHs in their communities, reflecting their ability to utilize their transformative agency. Their agency has also been used to obtain resources through either family, community or other structures. The narratives of FHHs further reveal how many of them have used their agency in conformity with existing socio-cultural traditions. Indeed, it is important to point out that even among those women who were able to cross geographical and social boundaries in making and sustaining their livelihoods, the main intention of their action was not to realize radical social change but was to create a safe space for women's participation in which they could then secure positive livelihoods. The narratives presented in this study also have an important policy message. They show that even within the context of weak government policies on resettlement, re-integration or return, FHHs are nonetheless seeking to advance their livelihood strategies. Their narratives, specifically the heterogeneity that they reveal, could therefore provide useful insights for the development of policies, strategies and plans on resettlement, re-integration and return.

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