

**FROM STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHS:
AN INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS
THROUGH NARRATIVES**

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree
Examination in Sociology*

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DECLARATION

I, **LAKSHMY P** do hereby declare that the Dissertation Titled **FROM STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS THROUGH NARRATIVES** is based on the original work carried out by me and submitted to the University of Kerala during the year 2021-2023 towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree Examination in Sociology. It has not been submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title of recognition before any University or anywhere else.

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled **FROM STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS THROUGH NARRATIVES** is a record of genuine work done by Ms. LAKSHMY P Fourth semester Master of Sociology student of this college under my supervision and guidance and that it is hereby approved for submission.

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ABSTRACT

Female-headed households represent a significant portion of today's diverse family structures, reflecting the changing dynamics of modern society. Despite their prevalence, these households often encounter a range of challenges stemming from economic, social, and cultural factors. While existing research has shed light on some of these challenges, there remains a gap in understanding the experiences, coping mechanisms, and transformative journeys of women leading their households that emerge from their narratives.

This study aims to bridge the existing gap by conducting a narrative inquiry into the lives of female-headed households. By delving into the lived experiences, challenges, and triumphs of these women, this research seeks to not only highlight the struggles they face but also to unveil the strengths and coping strategies that enable them to overcome adversities.

Through the lens of qualitative inquiry, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six female-headed households in Thiruvananthapuram. These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of their stories, challenges, and coping mechanisms. The data collected were meticulously analyzed to discern recurring themes, ultimately leading to the identification of four overarching categories, each with its own set of subcategories.

The first category, "personal Problems," encompasses issues such as role overload, role conflict, psychological distress, and end of love. The second category, "Intra-family Problems," is characterized by declined independence and tensions within the family. "Social Problems," the third category, elucidates the challenges of bearing the stigma of neglect, grappling with social insecurity, enduring social isolation, and confronting social exclusion. Lastly, the study unearths positive attributes which includes the development of a positive self-concept and social maturity as a response to adversity. This exploration illuminates the multifarious dimensions of female-headed households' lives, offering insights that can potentially inform interventions and policies to alleviate their challenges and enhance their well-being.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Family is the basic and important unit of society. The household holds a pivotal role, serving as a foundational entity both socially and economically within the community. Changes in household structures, therefore, possess the potential to significantly influence the overall state of a nation.

Female-headed households (FHHs) represent a distinct and evolving aspect of modern societies, reflecting shifts in family structures, gender roles, and socioeconomic dynamics. Historically, the traditional family model has often centered around male-led households, where men have held primary roles as breadwinners and decision-makers. However, the emergence of FHHs challenges these norms and highlights the diverse pathways that lead to women taking on the role of household heads.

FHHs encompass households where women are the primary decision-makers, earners, and caregivers. This can occur due to various circumstances, including widowhood, divorce, separation, or personal choice. Such households are prevalent across the globe, with varying degrees of prevalence in different regions and cultural contexts. They play a crucial role in reshaping the discourse around family, economics, and gender equality.

The phenomenon of FHHs carries multifaceted implications for societal norms, economic structures, and individual well-being. It intersects with issues of social empowerment, economic vulnerability, and the redefinition of gender roles. FHHs offer a unique lens through which to explore the dynamics of power, agency, and resilience within the context of contemporary families.

This study delves into the complex landscape of female-headed households, aiming to understand the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to navigate their circumstances. By examining the diverse trajectories the study seeks to shed light on the socioeconomic, cultural, and individual determinants that shape their experiences.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Households have long been a focal point of interest for social researchers, significantly influencing the social status and well-being of their members. The household holds a central position as a foundational unit within society, serving as both a key social and economic entity, as highlighted by Zarhani (2011). Notably, in recent times, novel household structures have emerged. The role of the household head is pivotal in shaping these outcomes, yet historically, this role has been associated with elder men, leading to a disregard for other household structures. The prominence of households led by women has gained increasing significance globally, especially during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, as noted by Baros and Fox (1997).

The prevalence of women-headed households has surged, especially in regions with diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds across North America, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia (Buvinic et al., 1997). In developed countries like the US, Canada, and parts of Europe, around 20% of households are women-headed, while this number rises to approximately one-third in developing nations (Folbre, 1991; Tinker, 1990). Central America and Sub-Saharan Africa exhibit the highest rates of such households.

Developing countries are witnessing a rising prevalence of female-headed households (FHHs), driven primarily by shifts in economic circumstances, economic downturns, and societal influences, rather than being solely dictated by cultural norms. This trend is particularly pronounced in numerous Asian and Latin American developing nations, where the proportion of female-headed households has experienced substantial growth.

In developing nations, the predominant composition of women within female-headed households comprises widows, with divorced or separated individuals forming a smaller portion. In contrast, developed countries primarily host female-headed households consisting of women who have either never been married or have undergone divorce.

The census of 2011 in India reveals that approximately 27 million households, constituting almost 10.9% of the total, are led by women. The composition of households has evolved, marked by labor migration of husbands to urban areas for work, leaving women to manage households alone.

Socioeconomic factors have also driven women to assume household leadership. Another category comprises households where widows, divorced women, abandoned or unmarried women take charge, termed 'women-headed' or 'female-headed' households.

A striking characteristic of female-headed households is their disproportionate poverty, observed not only in developed but also developing countries (Folbre, 1991). For instance, in the US in 1983, women-headed households experienced poverty rates three to four times higher than two-parent households (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986).

India, as reflected in Census data since 1961, showcases changing household dynamics. Census data defines the household head as the individual responsible for household management and decision-making. In 1981, more than 17% of Indian households were reported to be female-headed (Kumari, 1989). The proportion of women-led households has grown since the 1990s. Notably, the majority of female household heads are widows due to higher female life expectancy and age differences between spouses.

In Kerala, part of the 'Kerala Model of Development,' female-headed households have grown at an accelerated rate compared to the rest of India. In 1999, the percentage of female-headed households in Kerala was 22.1%, whereas it stood at 10.3% nationally.

However, the definition of women-headed households primarily includes widows, abandoned, or divorced women, which results in their underrepresentation. The recognition of female-headed households as a distinct category is relatively recent, making research on the subject limited. Kerala, exhibiting a rising proportion of female-headed households, presents an opportunity for in-depth exploration.

In this background this study aims to comprehend the challenges and strategies for survival among female-headed households in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, offering insights into a dynamic and often neglected area of research.

1.3. FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLD-UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT

The frequently employed definitions of female headships in research often involved self-reporting by women and the physical absence of men due to reasons like migration, death, divorce, or abandonment, as indicated in studies by Buvinic and Gupta (1997). For census purposes, the head of a household is identified as an individual acknowledged as such within the household structure. Typically, this person assumes the primary responsibility for overseeing the household's affairs and making decisions on its behalf.

Fuwa (2000) outlines three distinct categories of female-headed households (FHHs), namely self-reported, demographic, and economic classifications. The self-reported classification stems from respondents' statements in surveys and censuses. Demographic definitions encompass female-headed households in cases where a male partner is temporarily absent and those led by females who are separated, divorced, widowed, or single. Economic considerations also play a role in defining female-headed households, with the third type being economically dependent households. This typology reflects the varying ways FHHs can be identified based on self-reports, demographic aspects, and economic indicators.

Considering the challenges associated with definitions and measurements, some experts propose adopting more precise terminology than the broad term "female-headed households." Alternative terms such as "female-maintained," "female-led," "mother-centered," "single-parent," or "male-absent" have been recommended as descriptors. These terms aim to better capture the diversity of household structures and family dynamics. The suggestion to use these alternatives, rather than the term "female-headed," stems from the desire to accurately represent and differentiate various family situations and arrangements, as highlighted by Buvinic and Gupta (1997).

Numerous pathways contribute to the emergence of households led by women, as discussed by Chant (2004). Married women might experience separation from their husbands, become widowed, and assume household responsibilities without remarriage. Unmarried women might choose to live independently due to personal or occupational reasons, while single mothers might have to raise children without a partner. Even when husbands are present, some married women may consider themselves as household heads due to factors like lower earnings or disabilities.

These diverse trajectories leading to female-headed households result in varying socioeconomic statuses and health outcomes, as noted by Varley (1996). The extent of disadvantage faced by such households is heavily influenced by societal norms, contextual factors, and dynamics within the household, as acknowledged by Chant (1997), Richards (2013), and Milazzo and Walle (2017).

Patriarchal societies and households establish gender roles that restrict women's decision-making power, social mobility, workforce participation, and caregiving roles, as highlighted by Moghadam (2015) and Spierings (2015). In patrilineal systems, men are deemed primary breadwinners and caregivers, while women are confined to domestic roles. This prevailing ideology could marginalize households led by women, causing potential stigma and impacting mental well-being, as discussed by Chant (2007) and AbuFarash (2016).

Additionally, societal norms might hinder women's workforce engagement and limit job diversity (Moghadam, 2015; 2013). Female household heads might encounter fewer job options due to their triple role of working, maintaining the household, and caregiving, pushing them into lower-paying, flexible employment (Bradshaw, Chant, & Linneker, 2019).

According to Census data from 2011, the prevalence of female-headed households in Kerala is notably higher (23 percent) than the national average (11 percent), ranking it sixth across India. This phenomenon is observable both in rural (23 percent) and urban (25 percent) areas. The incidence of single women heading households is on the rise in Kerala (Shameerdas, 2022).

1.4. DISTRIBUTION OF FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The prevalence of female-headed households (FHHs) in India is on the rise. Approximately 27 million households, accounting for nearly 10.89 percent of the total households, are led by women. The southern states, north-eastern states, along with Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, and West Bengal, surpass the national average in terms of FHH proportion. Notably, smaller states/union territories (UTs) like Lakshadweep lead the list with the highest percentage (40.24 percent) of FHHs, followed by Meghalaya (21.70 percent) and Goa (20.28 percent).

Among the major states, Kerala stands out with the highest FHH share at 22.68 percent in 2011. Conversely, Rajasthan reports the lowest proportion of FHHs at 7.01 percent, followed by Bihar (7.43 percent), Jammu and Kashmir (7.87 percent), and Madhya Pradesh (8.04 percent). Other states such as Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Haryana, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Odisha also exhibit FHH percentages lower than the national average. This is attributed to a larger number of male-specific immigrants in these states, evident from migration data. Maharashtra leads in terms of immigrants during 1991-2001, followed by Delhi, Haryana, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh. The trend continues from 2001-11, with higher estimated net interstate migration rates in Maharashtra, Haryana, and Gujarat (Mistri, 2015).

Urban areas display a more pronounced occurrence of this phenomenon compared to rural areas, with a disparity of 1.6 percent between them in 2011 (11.9 percent in urban and 10.3 percent in rural). Among the states/UTs, 26 of them show a higher share of FHHs in urban areas than in rural regions, possibly due to urban-rural discrepancies in life expectancy rates and marital statuses of females. Female life expectancy at birth is generally greater than that of males, with urban females (71.4 years) living longer than their rural counterparts (Arjun et al., 2014), contributing to the phenomenon's prevalence in urban areas.

1.5. WHY AN INCREASE IN FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN INDIA?

In India, a number of factors contribute to the rise of female headship. The population explosion, rising unemployment rate, and the growing trend of industrialisation have brought hardship especially to the lower economic groups. This has forced them to give up cultural values, family ties, and kin bondage. Because of economic hardship, widows are no longer taken care of by relatives or parents. Low income groups are more likely to experience divorce, separation and desertion. Men's addiction to harmful practices causes them to be unable to provide for their families. Migration has left many women "left behind."

1.6. CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The transformation of the household structure has both positive and negative effects on the country as a whole. Many studies have concluded that remittances offer better housing, raise the standard of living of the migrant households, and have a significant impact on the status of the left behind

wives in the household ((Gulati (1993), Sekhar (1993), Hadi and Kamal (1997), Ghosh and Sharma (1995), Rodgers (2000), Singh (2000), Gulati (1993), Hugo (1995), Hadi (1999), Zachariah et al., 2001), Shylaja (2002), Shind (2008)).

At the same time, women's new roles led to a shift in gender relationships, but the majority of women said they were "more uncomfortable" with, rather than empowered by, these new roles (McEvoy, 2008). Female headed families face many challenges that male headed or married, normal families, both nuclear and joint, extended types of families do not (Chatterji (1997). It is widely believed that the economic, social and cultural vulnerability of female headed households without a male member has led to a lot of issues in the family, especially among women heads.

These issues can be economic, psychological, social and children discipline-related, which can lead to serious consequences for the development of younger generations (Carlson, Corcoran, 2001, Barros, Fox & Mendonça, 1997; Bachman, Coley & Carrano, 2011)

1.6.1. FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

As the number of women-headed households increases, so does the level of poverty in these households. In developed countries such as the United States, women-headed households without a partner have significantly lower incomes and are 4 times more likely to be living in poverty than men-headed households (De Navas-Wal, Cleveland, and Roemer, 2001; Short, and Garner 2002).

In developing countries where women have lower educational attainment, they are more likely to be disadvantaged in terms of choice of work, wage level and employment benefits, as well as heavier domestic burdens. Since land is the most important productive asset, women in many developing countries have less or no land at all compared to their male counterparts. As a result, women in developing countries have limited access to formal credit markets. As a result of lack of education, women are generally disadvantaged in terms of labor force participation, are more likely to work in the informal sector, and are employed in lower occupational positions than their male counterparts. Many female heads of household face time and mobility restrictions in the labor market because of domestic responsibilities, and therefore choose informal, part time, or low-paying jobs to reduce the opportunity costs for domestic responsibilities, especially child care.

In developing countries, women who lead households without a partner, without substantial social security benefits, and without economic opportunities are more disadvantaged and face economic

hardship in the form of difficulties in providing for the basic needs of children, such as food, clothes, school fees, maintaining the prior standard of living, and meet personal expenses without the loss of durable and non-durable assets.

On the other hand, female headship as a result of male migration, even if it is successful, provides an economic advantage to the family, but the family may face greater economic hardship if the immigrant men are unable to find good jobs (Sadiqi, Ennaji, 2004) or women married to failed migrants may face the greatest economic burden due to the increased financial responsibilities. Even in the event of successful labour migration, women are still more dependent on irregular and limited remittances (Kothari, 2003). Therefore, economic difficulties may also occur in female headed households as a result of migration of an adult male member.

1.6.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL AND HEALTH PROBLEMS

In a male-dominated society, women whose identities were previously tied to those of their husbands experience a sudden loss of a husband, either through divorce or widowhood, which leads to a sense of devaluation and loss of identity. For many women, anger and fear about the future lead to personality changes (nidhi kotwal, bharti prabhakar 2009) and in the absence of a husband, a woman feels lonely (bose, 2000) and more over anxiety about the safety of her husband and herself, and the issues associated with loneliness lead to a state of psychological stress among the left behind wives (roy and nangia 2005, zhariah et al., 1999, nair, 1998, hugo, 1995, chant, 1993, day & iduygn 1997, donnan, 1997).

A study by Sarah et al., “Divorce and Mental Health in Women” (2006), found that women who have been divorced have a higher risk of developing a chronic illness, particularly over a longer period of time, compared to married women.

Financial stress is one of the primary sources of stress for single mothers, and has been linked to their higher rates of distress and disorder than married mothers (see Brown & Moran 1997; hope, power & rogers, 1999). Single mothers’ stress also extends beyond financial issues to include a range of stressors related to the demands and pressures of being a parent on one’s own (Avison 1995). Poor women are particularly vulnerable to stressors such as job instability, child care difficulties, and lack of access to care (see McLeod and Kessler, 1990).

A woman's life can be affected by the absence of her husband in any way. In addition to her domestic duties, she must take care of many other things that are traditionally done by men, such as doing the household chores and looking after children. She must also work outside the home to meet the needs of the family and manage all outdoor work. When men are absent, women are responsible for their own responsibilities as well as those of their husbands (Khaled 1995, Boehm 2008, Grawert, 1992). Therefore, the responsibility of managing the family, looking after children and elderly family members can lead to various forms of stress, including health issues, among women in female-headed households (Kishtwaria, 1996, Roy, Nangia 2005).

Single women often experience a sense of emptiness and loss of identity after divorce or widowhood. Many women experience overwhelming feelings of shame, guilt, resentment, anger and fear about the future that leads to personality changes. Psychosocial stress is caused by external social stressors like women's lower social status, powerlessness, homelessness, economic hardship, man-made or natural catastrophes, etc. These stressors can reduce or destroy a woman's capacity to take responsibility and can lead to psychological health issues (Patel 2004).

1.6.3 PARENTING PROBLEMS

One of the biggest problems of a single parent family is the lack of effective parenting and the lack of parental contact (i.e., father's absence). With the increasing trend of industrialization and urbanisation, fathers are becoming less and less involved in the decisions and responsibilities of today's families. Therefore, in the absence of a father's support, the primary responsibility for taking care of children lies with the mother. More stressed out by different types of stressors among single women, inconsistent parenting practices lead to children of single mothers who have poorer economic, social, and moral outcomes and are less able to monitor their children (de Snyder 1993).

This can lead to future behavioural problems such as increased peer rejection or negative peer group influence, decreased popularity or quiet, submissive, violent or unmanageable behaviour, lost interest in studies, lost confidence, etc., which money cannot compensate for.

1.7. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Development and social change have led to changes in family structure. One of these changes is the formation of single-head or single-parent families. A female head of household refers to a woman in charge of managing the family. The number of female-headed households has increased

dramatically in the recent half-century, especially in developing countries due to divorce, spouse death, addiction or disability of husband, increased life expectancy among women, migration, or being abandoned by husband.

In traditional Indian societies, aged person in a household is considered as a head of the household. They highly influence the household's decision making. Census 2011, first time reported that a substantial proportion of households in India are headed by female (11 percent) and it would be expected faster growth in the near future. Two facts strongly argue in support of that. Firstly, the robust growth of the elderly population (aged 60 and above) is becoming a major concern in India during last two decades (1991 to 2001). The size of the elderly population has been increasing at a faster rate where the female share is not only higher than male but also the growth surpasses the male population.

Secondly, female life expectancy at birth (70 years) is higher than male (67.1 years) and it has also been increasing in trend. This trajectory suggests that a larger number of Indian households will be led by females in the foreseeable future. However, female-headed households stand as one of society's most vulnerable groups, grappling with numerous issues and challenges. As a result, this study aims to delve into the experiences of female-headed households, shedding light on their unique life circumstances.

1.8. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Studying female-headed households holds profound significance due to its implications for individuals, families, and society at large. Firstly, female-headed households often challenge traditional gender roles and empower women to take on leadership roles within their families. Studying these households' sheds light on how gender norms are evolving and how women are asserting their agency. Secondly as family structures diversify, studying female-headed households contributes to the understanding of evolving family dynamics, which has implications for social norms, relationships, and community cohesion. Thirdly, policies that take into account the needs and realities of female-headed households can contribute to more equitable social development. Fourthly, research findings can guide policy formulation to ensure these households are adequately supported. Finally exploring female-headed households contributes to academic literature. Most studies on female-headed households have been quantitative and empirical, focusing on their

economic problems. However, to better understand the challenges and problems of female-headed households, there is a need for qualitative research that covers all aspects of their lives and shows their living conditions from the perspective of their own experiences and views. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of women in female headed households.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of female-headed households has gained significant attention from scholars, policymakers, and social researchers due to its implications for gender dynamics, family structures, and social well-being. This review of literature aims to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research, shedding light on the different dimensions of female-headed households and their broader implications.

Through a systematic examination of scholarly research, this review identified key themes, gaps, and trends in the study of female-headed households. The review also explored the methodologies employed in existing studies, ranging from quantitative analyses of demographic data to qualitative investigations involving in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations. Through this comprehensive exploration of the literature, the review aims to illuminate the challenges and opportunities faced by women who lead households, with the ultimate goal of informing future research directions, policy initiatives, and interventions that address the diverse needs and realities of these households.

2.2. STUDIES ON FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS-GLOBAL

The term “female-headed family” is often used interchangeably with the term “widow-child” or “mother-headed family.” Heather L. Ross, one of the economists who studied mother-headed families in America in 1976, wrote, “In the past ten years, the number of women-headed families with children has increased almost ten times as fast as the number of men-headed families.” Sawhill (1976) and Ross (2008) argue that the larger society is in a state of transition, with women-headed families living in a transitional state between divorce (or “widowhood”) and marriage.

According to Akbar (1979), there are three types of women-headed households: Young educated women with computer-facilitated jobs, Never married or divorced, Low child-bearing capacity, Middle-aged women who are either divorced or have economically marginal holdings, Older women who are mostly married and have adult children who usually support them.

William, Darity & Samuel (1982) performed an empirical analysis of the economic explanation for the dramatic increase in Black family headings. They demonstrated that Black female headings are not due to welfare attraction. The statistical explanation for the rise in Black female-headings is the decrease in the number of Black females.

In a study published in 1985, Vance (1985) found an increase in female-headed households in rural areas of the Caribbean and South Africa, with high frequencies in both rural and urban areas. In Nicaragua, 48 percent of all female-headed families at the National level were headed by women, due to men being killed in combat against the Contra rebels.

Cushio (1985), Barbara G. (1993) reviews the sociological research on female-headed families published in 1970-1980. According to the literature, children do not necessarily need to have opposite sex or same sex parents in their family to develop sex role behaviour. Children in women-headed families tend to have good emotional adjustment, high self-esteem (except when stigmatized), intellectual development comparable to that of others in their socio-economic class, and low juvenile delinquency rates comparable to others in their same socio-economic class.

In her study of Southeast Asia, Heyzer (1986) acknowledged that women-headed households face difficulties due to their lack of access to income, but she also noted that they are not a homogeneous group, and many of them are not poor when compared to some men-headed households. Hezrog (1987) examined 400 papers on boys in women-headed households in the US, and found that the studies did not show any impact of father's absence on the boy's school experiences or his masculinity, and that while the boys might be somewhat more likely to commit delinquent acts, there are other factors leading to delinquency that would outweigh the impact of father's absence.

In his study, Waite (2000) attempts to evaluate the well-being of female-headed household members by comparing them to the men-headed household members of the suleimaniyahgovevorate (Iraqi Kurdistan) in the summer of 1998 in five collectives of suleimanyah. The results of Waite's research are complex and demonstrate the multiplicity and interdependent gendered experiences of vulnerability. Waite refutes the claim that women-headed

households are disadvantaged in all dimensions of vulnerability compared to men-headed households.

Loy (1996) examines the factors that influence female headship and its implications in Vietnam. Using data obtained from the 1991 Vietnamese Life History Survey, the author argues that female headship is mainly an urban phenomenon in Vietnam. About 50% of the urban households are led by women, while only 28% of the households in rural areas are led by women. Loy (1996), using the logistic regression model, identifies the most important determinants of female headlessness as the variables that reflect the life cycle of households and household composition (e.g., age, marital status, availability of parents/adult children in the household), place of residence, education, etc. In addition, Loy (1996) finds that the variables that significantly influence headship outcomes are: Women-headed households are not poorer economically than men-headed households, in terms of: Living condition index and Per capita daily expenditure.

Garfinkel (1986) and Mc Lanahan's (1986), who argued that the main issue facing single mothers and their families is poverty. They listed three reasons as to why single mothers are poor: low earning capacity, lack of child support and low benefits from the public assistance programme.

In Zimbabwe, women in urban households were 50% less likely to receive income from employment compared to men, while rural women-headed households seemed to be particularly reliant on remittance payments, which is highly likely to be related to restrictions on their access to funds (Mohammad, 1997:22/B).

2.3. STUDIES ON FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS-NATIONAL

According to Krishna Raj and Ranganadive the main reason for female headship was widowhood, (1985). Using primary data from a field survey of women-headed households conducted in Wagholi village, they found that female headship was higher among Christians than Hindus due to traditional orthodox beliefs among Hindus. They also found that gender discrimination in agriculture did not apply to women-headed households, and one of the main issues they identified was that there were no satisfactory analytical criteria to determine headship, thereby ignoring women's economic contribution. This had a negative impact on women's status and position in the family.

Kumari (1987), In her study on 'Status of Single Women' attempted to study the lives of Spinster, Widows, Divorced and Separated women, both working women and non-working women, living in Bangalore city by using a questionnaire as a tool to collect information. According to her findings, economically dependent single women experience economic difficulties to a lesser extent than those who are completely economically dependent or independent. They are expected to work in the kitchen all day for the benefit of other family members and are taken for granted. No effort is made by any family member to help them to perform household duties. Even if they are employed, they are still expected to contribute to family income and household duties.

Shanthi (1993), in a study conducted in Madras, found that Widowhood and separation were the main reasons for the increasing number of female heads in cities. Female headedness is very high among the low-income groups and scheduled caste. There is not much difference in living standards among Female-Headed households and Male Headed households among low-income group respondents. Women in low-income groups are driven to look for employment after death or separation and are forced to form separate households in the absence of parents or parents-in-law and face insecurity and loneliness. On the other hand, middle income female heads are secure and less exposed to sexual harassment.

In Vardhan's (1999), women headed households are seen as a new development in social structure and a challenge to traditional norms, male dominance, and patriarchy. Vardhan states that a woman who assumes the head of the household is confronted with a new set of challenges, including social, economic, and psychological, child-related and other issues. She faces strong resistance from other quarters and is placed in a disadvantageous position compared to her male-headed counterparts.

2.4. CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS CONFRONTING FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Female-headed households are one of the most vulnerable groups of society that confront many problems and challenges (Lebni et.al, 2020). In a study by Lebni et.al (2020) on challenges and opportunities confronting female-headed households in Iran: a qualitative study aimed to identify the challenges and opportunities facing female-headed households in Iran. The result showed that

these women encounter many selves, family, and social problems that can endanger their health. More result confirm that the issue of female-headed households inevitably was not an obstacle and a barrier to women, but also, in some cases, it can enhance an opportunity and improve self-esteem and social maturity.

There is a general perception that women are socially more vulnerable than men because of higher poverty rates and fewer job opportunities, and this perception is more widespread for female-headed households due to fears of intergenerational poverty transmission (Correll,2007 & McLanahan,2010). Women of female headed household suffer from Stress, mental disorders, depression, drug abuse, and financial and cultural poverty. (Ozawa,2011) The results of the Rezaei et al., 2013 study showed that female-headed households are highly vulnerable and experience many problems such as low income, widespread economic problems, mental, neurological and physical disorders and isolation.

In a study conducted by Yoosefi Lebni et al., (2019) and Mirzaee et al. (2015) in the Kurdish areas of Iran, female-headed households as a vulnerable group committed self-immolation. Arias and Palloni (1999) also found that children raised in female-headed households suffer from negative social and economic impacts throughout adulthood and have lower educational and career advancements.

A woman's choice of heading her own household is affected by her own characteristics (such as age, marital status, income, and occupation), the characteristics of the marriage market, socio-economic circumstances of her natal home, and a variety of other factors affecting household formation and dissolution (Alderman, Chiappori, Haddad, Hoddinott and Kanbur, 1994; Schultz, 2001).

However, higher technical and professional education and new varieties of paid employment, varied opportunities for the development of new skills and wider contacts have enabled women to achieve greater equality with men, both within and outside the household in legal, social, educational, occupational, political and economic spheres of activity (Myrdal, 1963).

Verghese, Sheela (1990) in their sample study of 20 households in Kerala states that female headedness is on the increase in Kerala and this should be viewed in the context of increasing status of women such as high literacy rate, favourable sex ratio, higher age at marriage, longer life expectancy than males, better health care and work participation rate, etc. The main objectives of the study were to formulate a suitable operational definition of Female-Headed Households, to identify factors leading to emergence of Female-Headed Households, to analyse their socio-economic conditions and issues relating to their survival strategies and finally to see the time disposition pattern of women. The study pertains to 20 households in Parasala village of Neyyattinkara taluk of Thiruvananthapuram district where majority are poor agricultural labourers. The study defines a female-headed household as one in which a female member has the ultimate command over financial management and decision-making of the households. The study concludes that female heads of the households live in pitiable conditions and something must be done to alleviate poverty among them. (Shinju, 2006).

According to King et al., 2007, Women in developing countries are more likely to be at a disadvantage in terms of employment opportunities, wage levels, employment benefits and the burden of domestic work, particularly where women have lower levels of education. As the most significant productive asset, women in many developing countries have less or no land than their male counterparts. As women do not possess land or any other productive asset (Storey (2004), Diagne (2000), Ratusi (1999) and Swamy (2007)), they suffer from a lack of formal credit markets.

2.4.1 FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

In developed countries like the United States households headed by women without a partner have much lower income levels and are more likely to live in poverty compared to those headed by men (De Navas-Walt, Cleveland, and Roemer 2001; Short and Garner 2002). Female heads of households often face time and mobility constraints in the labor market due to domestic responsibilities, and as a result choose informal, part-time, or low paying jobs to reduce the opportunity costs for domestic obligations, especially child care (Chant 2003; Buvinic and Gupta 1997).

Due to lack of education women in developing countries are generally more disadvantaged in the labor market. They tend to have lower labor force participation rates, are more frequently employed in the informal sector, and work in lower occupational positions compared to men (Lopez-Carlos and Zahidi 2005; Standing 1999; United Nations 2005).

At the same time female headship due to male migration, when successful, is an economic benefit to families, but families can experience greater economic hardship if migrant men cannot secure good employment (Sadiqi and Ennaji 2004) or Women married to unsuccessful migrants may experience the greatest economic strain due to increased financial responsibilities. Even if labour migration is successful, women still have increased dependence on remittances that may be irregular and limited (Kothari 2003). Thus, Economic difficulties may also arise in female headed households due to migration of adult male member.

Bharat (1986) carried out a study of single-parent families in a Bombay slum in 1986. A majority of the single mothers (66 percent) in her study were widows. According to the study, absence of male spouse led to a sharp fall in the income level of the family. She further noted that the emotional problems of single mothers were not due to resulting socio-economic hardships and anxiety regarding children's future.

Many women heads of household face time and labor market constraints due to domestic responsibilities, and therefore opt for informal, part time, or low-paying jobs to reduce the cost of opportunity for domestic responsibilities, particularly childcare (Chant 2003, Buvinic, Gupta 1997). While female headship as a result of male migration, on the one hand, is an economic advantage for families, on the other hand, families may suffer more financial hardship if migrating men are unable to secure good jobs (Sadiq et al., 2004) or women married to failed migrants may suffer the most financial hardship due to increased financial obligations.

2.4.2 HEALTH PROBLEMS

Veisani et al., (2013) also showed that female-headed households have poor health and quality of life, and the most critical factors associated with this low quality of life are low literacy and chronic diseases. Female-headed households are forced to play multiple, conflicting roles after losing their

spouses, and have to work in marginal, part-time, informal, and low-income jobs due to lack of access to high-paying jobs (Connell et al. ,2012). These women are unable to maintain their health due to problems such as poverty, poor socioeconomic status and multiple responsibilities (Ozawa,2011). As a result, they experience more high-risk behaviours and lower quality of life and family satisfaction.

In many women, feelings of anger and anxiety about future bring about personality changes (Nidhi Kotwal, Bharti Prabhakar,2009) In the absence of husband a woman feels isolated (Bose, 2000). More over anxiety about safety of migrated husband and self, and the problems associated with isolation create a condition of mental stress among left behind wives. (Roy and Nangia, 2005, Zachariah et al,;1999, Nair,1998; Hugo,1995; Chant, 1993; Day & Iiduygn, 1997; Donnan, 1997).

The responsibilities of managing family, taking care of children and elderly members of the family create a condition of different types of stress including health problem among women in female headed households (Kishtwaria 1996, Roy and Nangia, 2005).

Single women tend to suffer from a feeling of rootlessness and lack of identity after divorce/ widowhood. In many women, feelings of guilt, shame, resentment, anger and anxiety about future are so dominant, that they bring out personality changes (Kotwal and Prabhakar, 2009).

2.4.3 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROBLEMS

In addition to individual and family challenges, female-headed households faced social problems. One of the issues that bother female-headed households is the label of being unattended for female-headed households, (Towers,2015).

In the Habib (2017) study in Bangladesh, women heads of households also received social stigma, and society did not view them positively. Social and cultural norms and doctrines have been developed for men's household management, and society reacts when women are in charge because they do not accept their position, which leads to stigmatization by society. The formation of a sense of social insecurity in female-headed households was another finding of this study that is consistent with previous research. The lack of men and the loneliness of women allow people,

especially men, to exploit them sexually and even asexually (financial abuse, psychological harm, and so on.) and make them vulnerable in general (Habib,2017).

They also experience some form of social exclusion in line with the social insecurity with which women are involved (Iebni et.al.,2020).

In a study by Thomas and Ryan (2008), the results showed that losing the husband causes the loss of the significant support, and many women lost the support and companionship of their friends after they were left alone by their husbands. Inappropriate social attitudes to female-headed households and harassing them to lead to these women being marginalized and confined to a limited circle of relationships with their family members and losing many of their social opportunities (Iebni et.al.,2020).

2.4.4 POSITIVE EFFECTS

Female-headed households often lead to increased empowerment of women. In these households, women typically assume the role of primary decision-makers and providers for the family. This can lead to enhanced self-esteem, confidence, and a greater sense of control over their lives. Female-headed households have to try for better conditions and support for the family, they feel powerful in managing life and believe that they are capable of progress and success. These conditions lead to social maturity and the expansion of women's participation in outdoor activities. Although this experience has not been found for female-headed households in other studies, some research has shown that after divorce, women are given new opportunities for emotional and individual development, a sense of freedom, and experience of new challenges (Ryan 2008 & Benussi 2006). Female-headed households might foster a deeper understanding and respect for women's rights and gender equality, both within the household and in the community.

2.5. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the growing body of literature on female-headed households (FHH), there remains a significant research gap in understanding lived experiences, narratives, and coping strategies of women heading households. Therefore, in the present research a Qualitative approach is was

adopted in exploring the complex interplay of social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors that influence female headed household members' lives.

2.6. CONCLUSION

The literature review on female-headed households has illuminated a diverse array of perspectives and insights into the experiences, challenges, and strengths of these households. The journey through various scholarly works has revealed the multifaceted nature of female-headed households dynamics, shedding light on both the adversities they confront and the resilience they demonstrate. Nevertheless, as the literature suggests, gaps in research persist. Notably, there is a need for more longitudinal studies, intersectional analyses, and in-depth qualitative investigations that capture the evolving trajectories of female-headed households over time and delve into the intricate narratives of individual experiences. Therefore the present study.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 TITLE OF THE STUDY

FROM STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS THROUGH NARRATIVES

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.2.1 GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the primary challenges experienced by female-headed households across economic, social, and cultural dimensions?

3.2.2 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do women leading households navigate these challenges on a day-to-day basis?

What are the unique strengths, coping mechanisms, and strategies that female headed household develop in response to their circumstances?

What insights can be gained from the narratives of female headed household that could inform the design of more effective policies and support systems?

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Bryman (2012), a research design serves as a framework for data collection and analysis, reflecting the researcher's priorities throughout the research process. In this study, a *case study design* was chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lives of female-headed households, their challenges, and the opportunities they encounter.

The case study design involves an in-depth exploration of a single social phenomenon. This phenomenon could be an individual, a group, an event, a community, or any other social unit. By focusing on a single case, this research approach allows for a thorough examination of intricate details that might be overlooked by other research methods. Central to the case study research is the emphasis on the complexity and uniqueness of the chosen case. Through a detailed analysis,

this method aims to unveil the distinct qualities that make each case individual. In the context of this study, the chosen case is that of *female-headed households*, and the goal is to thoroughly analyze their experiences, challenges, and opportunities.

One of the notable strengths of the case study approach is its ability to capture the richness and subjectivity inherent in the cases being examined. By delving into the experiences and emotions of the individuals within these households, the research aims to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of their situations. In essence, this research approach aligns with the goal of understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by female-headed households. Through the case study design, the researcher seeks to uncover the multifaceted aspects of these households, highlighting their unique circumstances and shedding light on the factors that shape their experiences.

3.4 RESEARCH METHOD

The present research employs a qualitative research methodology, specifically a descriptive approach, to delve into the experiences of female-headed households. Qualitative research emphasizes a profound comprehension of the subject matter, highlighting its intricacies and particulars. In this study, the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lives of female-headed households, focusing on their journey from challenges to strengths. To gather data, a semi-structured interview approach was employed, guided by an interview guide. This approach allows for flexibility while ensuring that key topics are covered. By engaging participants in conversations, the research seeks to capture their narratives, insights, and perspectives. The sample selection followed a purposive approach, where cases were deliberately chosen based on specific criteria that aligned with the research objectives. A total of six female-headed households were included as participants in the study. In essence, this qualitative descriptive research design provides a platform for the participants to share their stories and experiences in their own words. By employing in-depth interviews and purposeful sampling, the research endeavours to uncover the unique narratives of these households, shedding light on their struggles, strengths, and the factors that shape their lives.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analysed thematically. Thematic analysis of female-headed households involves systematically examining qualitative data collected from these households to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within their narratives. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that allows researchers to uncover the rich and complex experiences of these households. Applying thematic analysis to the narratives of female-headed households provides a structured and systematic approach to uncovering meaningful insights. It allows researchers to uncover the underlying stories, emotions, and experiences that contribute to a holistic understanding of the challenges, strengths, and dynamics within these households.

3.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study encountered a significant constraint in the form of women declining to participate. This challenge was mitigated by transparently communicating the study's objectives and importance, along with an assurance of safeguarding personal information. The sensitive and confidential nature of the topic posed several obstacles throughout the research process. Initially, identifying suitable participants, i.e., female-headed households, presented a formidable hurdle. The study aimed to investigate the circumstances faced by divorced and widowed women who assumed the role of household heads, thereby necessitating a thorough understanding of the difficulties and challenges they encountered.

CHAPTER IV

CASE PRESENTATION ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 NARRATIVES

4.1.1 CASE 1 A 32 YEAR OLD DIVORCED WOMAN

The researcher personally engaged with an interviewee named Priya (pseudonym), aged 32. Priya, a divorcee, resides with her 10-year-old son and her widowed mother. She operates a rented beauty parlour near her residence and provides home tutoring to school students. As the head of her household, Priya encounters a range of challenges spanning individual, intra-family, social, and economic domains.

Priya shared her life journey, narrating how she entered into marriage at a young age of 21, soon after completing her graduation with distinction. Despite her academic achievements, her family compelled her to marry. Her husband, employed in the government sector, initially appeared supportive, but his demeanor changed drastically after their son's birth. It emerged that he was involved in an extramarital relationship with a coworker.

This revelation left Priya shocked and emotionally distressed. She described her struggle as she grappled with a husband who not only discouraged her from working and pursuing higher studies but also subjected her to physical and mental abuse. Despite the hostility from her in-laws, Priya persisted for the sake of her son and her family. For eight years, she endured a toxic marriage, primarily for the sake of her child and familial obligations.

Eventually, Priya summoned the courage to divorce her husband, marking the end of a tumultuous marriage. Two years post-separation, she has embraced single motherhood. Priya has undertaken the ambitious endeavor of managing a beauty parlour and pursuing her postgraduate studies through distance education. Despite the array of challenges, she confronts as a single mother, Priya finds solace in having liberated herself from the confines of a harmful marital relationship.

She says, *“I am not telling you not to get married, but pick the perfect time to do it. I’d advise you to fight and put all your effort in your studies. Although studying is difficult, you must persist since it is your only chance for success.”*

Taking multiple responsibilities forces women-led households to work full-time and puts a lot of strain on them, which can put their health and wellbeing at risk over a long period of time.

Priya says,

"During the days I go to work, and when I return home in the evening, I have to take tuition. When I finish the tuition, getting tired and exhausted, I have to do housework, prepare for dinner and for tomorrow's lunch, most of the time I don't know when I sleep"

The different roles that female-headed households play, particularly the role of parents, lead to conflict because, in many instances, these roles conflict with social norms and gender roles in their community.

"Sometimes I don't know how to be a good mother or a strong father to my child. If I act like a kind mother, I am afraid that he won't listen to me anymore. Or if I act like a strong parent, I worry that my child won't be happy anymore."

Going through a separation or divorce can be very difficult, no matter the reason for it. Going through a divorce can be extremely traumatic for everyone involved. A toxic marriage can affect one's mental and emotional health greatly. People from toxic relationships often suffer from anxiety, depression, fear, helplessness. A toxic marriage can turn one into bitter person and seriously harm their mental health.

"Those days had been the most horrifying journey I never had to take. He used to hit me and I was overthrown around. He harassed me verbally and non-verbally". (Priya with her eyes filled with tears)

A painful breakup or divorce may make one afraid to remarry again or being committed with someone else. People may choose not to get married again after having experienced one failed marriage in the past.

My experience has taught me that managing intra-family tension requires patience, compassion, and the ability to have tough conversations.

Households headed by women are considered to be at risk of abuse and violence by society and partners and lack the safety to live and support their families.

“I don’t usually tell people I don’t have a husband when I go out. I usually have to lie and say I do have a husband because if they knew I didn’t have one, they would want to get close to me and hurt me.”

The community does not have a positive view on female-headed households and they are in the public eye and under stigmatization, these women prefer to choose a form of isolation and seclusion to maintain their privacy and social status.

When I noticed that my relatives or other people tried to argue that I could not continue my married life, I stopped seeing them, although I avoided general conversation with them. Because I wanted to forget the divorce chapter in my life.”

Many people don’t want to be exposed to the stigma of a woman’s head of household, so they don’t engage in relationships with them. Because of this, women’s head of households are marginalized in society.

“It’s very difficult. I’m unable to pay the rent, because I’m paid a little amount. As I have no sufficient money to pay as deposit, I should pay more rent. I am not sure how much I can tolerate”

“When my child got sick, I treat them by myself. Cost of medicine and treatment is so high”.

There is also a positive side to being the head of the household. When female heads of households attempt to find employment after taking on the role of head of the household, and find employment, they view themselves and their capabilities in a more positive light.

“It’s ok to get out of something that makes you unhappy, and unwanted. Divorce helped me to find to take back my life”

4.1.2 CASE 2 A 40-YEAR-OLD DIVORCEE

The female household head in question is named Devi, a 40-year-old woman who has undergone a divorce. Devi is also a mother to two daughters. She entered into marriage at the age of 20 and became a mother when she was 21. Her elder daughter, now 19 years old, is married. The younger daughter, aged 16, resides with Devi. Presently, Devi shares her household with her younger daughter, parents, and a brother who is married and lives nearby. Devi holds a profession as a primary school teacher.

Devi's life journey has been marked by significant challenges. Her 7-year-long marriage was characterized by severe violence and escalating demands for money and possessions. Coming from a financially disadvantaged background, Devi's family faces economic constraints.

When I went to my husband's house, his family literally said,

'She has come from a very poor household. She's brought nothing with her'.

Her Ex-husband runs a restaurant in the city. A few months after getting married, she moved back home to her parents because she couldn't handle the mental and physical abuse. However, after coming to an understanding with her husband, she decided to move back to his home. But the abuse continued after her first delivery.

My husband was an irresponsible person.

"I had to go alone to the doctor when I was pregnant. He never accompanies me"

Most of our nights were spent arguing verbally or physically. He became an alcoholic.

"Evenings are worst for me and my child, every day he come drunk, and start abusing me and my child"

I was a mother and I always wanted to leave him for a better future for my child. I always get comments from my mother-in-law about having a girl child because she prefers having a boy child. During that time, I was pregnant. He drunk and came too late at night. He beat me and kicked me, I was frightened. To save the life of my child, I returned to home with my elder daughter. I stayed in my parent's house and I gave birth. He never came back. I and my parents waited for him. He never appears. After 3 years, I decided to get divorced for the better life of my children. At the age of 27, I become a divorcee. My mind was greatly disturbed and I don't know what to do at that with my two kids of aged 6 and 3. After my divorce my family members helped and supported me. They accepted me and made my life easier by not blaming me and not reminding me of the divorce. I worked hard and continue my studies, become a teacher at age of 36.

She stated, *"My In-laws behaviour was rude and unfair towards me due to the reason of dowry. They tortured me physically. The family was abusing me by demanding a divorce. They even started to spread false rumours."*

Female-headed homes simultaneously fulfil all of the parental tasks; as a result, they are under a lot of pressure, often beyond what they can handle.

Devi says *"Having to work outside the home and perform housekeeping at the same time wears me out. I don't have much time to rest most of the time"*.

"I had a dreadful feeling and wasn't sure what part I should play when my daughter receives a marriage proposal. Playing two parental responsibilities at once was challenging."

Taking on multiple roles, which sometimes conflict with reasons of social customs stemming from a patriarchal system can put a great deal of pressure on women and force them to accept multiple and conflicting roles.

"Some of my relatives said that you also responsible for your divorce accused me of not being able to continue my marriage. They did not try to understand what psychological pressure I was passing through. However, I tolerated all this because of my children".

Divorce left them in depression and health problems, because they had not been able to continue their marriage for the rest of their life. Depression leads to feelings of anger, anxiety and insecurity.

As she shared,

"I feel that I don't have anyone in my life to which I can tell and share my feelings. It had been very difficult for me to come out of the trauma and this has affected my health too. It completely shattered me".

When a woman runs the household, her own family and the relatives of her move in closer to help her, especially if she has children. This might interfere with the woman's decisions and her freedom, as well as the independence of her family.

"My daughter's husband is a good boy. He is accepted by my daughter and me totally, but my relatives and one of my uncle first disagrees, and they don't allow this marriage to happen, thinking they should interfere in everything in our lives"

When a woman becomes head of a household, many family members may not be able to cope with the new role of mother as family head and manager for a long time.

“When people see that I am alone and do not have anyone with me, they allow themselves to make any impudent offers. So, I won’t share to anyone about my divorcee status.”

Female heads of households are more in the public eye and more at the centre of attention than others ladies. That is why they may have to appear less in the community due to fear of being defamed.

“I have to go out less and talk to men less because I fear people talk behind me”.

Inappropriate social attitudes to female-headed households and harassing them to lead to these women being marginalized and confined to a limited circle of relationships with their family members and losing many of their social opportunities.

Economic issue is also a problem of a women after divorce. Financial crises are a standing situation with some of the divorcee women. It becomes difficult in meeting the basic needs of children such as food, clothing, travel, maintaining the previous standard of living and meet personal expenses.

“I earned for not myself but for the sake of my children’s upbringing. I got little financial support from my parents because they are also very poor, and could only help me up to that level”.

“I realized all the restrictions preventing me from seeking a happier life had crumbled away. Paying attention to the positives will change your perspective and your life after divorce. After all, you just ended a relationship that probably made you unhappy, and getting out is your first step to discovering a happier, more fulfilled version of yourself.”

Households led by women must strive for better living conditions and family support, they feel empowered in managing life and believe they are capable of progress and success. This leads to social maturation and the growth of outdoor activities for women.

4.1.3 CASE 3 A 35-YEAR-OLD DIVORCEE

The head of the household is Geetha (pseudonym), who is a divorcee. She lives with her 8-year-old son and her parents. She got married at 25 and divorced at 33.

“Had my marriage lasted, (June 3), would have been my 10th wedding anniversary”

I am a BA English graduate and currently working for a Private Company. I worked in a school before my marriage. Soon after the marriage, I had to quit my job because, school was far away

from my husbands' house and my mother-in-law never wanted me to go to work. I got pregnant 2 years later after the marriage. During those 2 years, I was often cursed by my in-laws and husband for not having a child. After 2 years, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy and our family was complete. But things won't always go as expected. My son at 9 months, wasn't able to sit up independently and he certainly wasn't crawling. Things seemed different with him. He didn't wave or point and he rarely smiled. Before, my son's second birthday, I was certain something was wrong so I brought him to see his paediatrician. We were immediately referred to a developmental pediatrician and fast forward, my son was diagnosed with moderate to severe autism. A few weeks after our son's diagnosis, my husband become distant. Our son's development was slow, very slow. By age 5, he was still not talking. My husband was in denial. He was angry all of the time, particularly when our son was present. He told me he wished our son had never born.

One day he brings me and my son to my home and asked us to stay there for a few days. But he never come back after that. We had been separated for eight months. Nobody from his house came to see us.

"After I gave birth to a special child, my ex-husband left me. My child has autism".

I spent a lot of time with my son. My parents also helped me a lot. We were going through the motions of life it wasn't easy but it was manageable. Later, I had filed for divorce and after 1 year we got legally divorced. My son was 6year old at that time. It is been 2 years. Now I am happy with my child. I joined in a private firm and continued to work.

Divorce often results in one parent taking on the majority of childcare responsibilities. The divorcee must handle the emotional, financial, and practical aspects of raising children on their own, this might result in a substantial role overload. Caring for a child with autism requires specialized understanding, attention and support. The role overload can become even more challenging when combined with the duties of running a home as a single parent.

"Raising a non-verbal child with severe autism is challenging"

Role conflict is the stress and difficulty that result from having to perform several roles, each of which has a different set of requirements or expectations. Conflict can result from balancing the duties of raising a child with autism while also taking care of one's own physical and emotional needs. Between providing for their child's needs and scheduling time for their own self-care, the

parent could feel guilty or conflicted. Divorce process, as well as the responsibilities of caring for a child with autism can lead to increased stress and anxiety. The need to manage multiple roles and uncertainty about the future can contribute to feelings of sadness, hopelessness and feelings of loss. Emotional stress and the possibility of social isolation can also contribute to the development of depression.

Divorce often brings about a whirlwind of emotions, ranging from sadness and grief to anger, confusion, and even relief. Divorce signifies the loss of a partnership and the dreams you had for the future.

Divorce can lead to changes in financial circumstances, potentially resulting in a reduced income, shared assets, or increased expenses. Financial dependence or instability can impact a divorcee's ability to make independent choices.

Being a divorcee and caring for a child with autism increased stigmatization of both mothers and their children.

“When I go to a party, everybody points at me and says, look, she is that divorced woman”

“After I become a divorced woman, my relation with my friends deteriorated. Many of my friends did not want to spare time with me”

The life and social status of a divorced women are negatively affected their life in the family and society.

4.1.4 CASE 4 A 35-YEAR-OLD WIDOW

Aparna, a 35 years old widow, suddenly lost her husband in a tragic accident. She married at the age of 24 and became a mother at 25. She has two children. Her household comprises her two children, Anu and Arjun, aged 10 and 8, respectively, and her parents-in-law. With the sudden loss of her husband, she found herself in charge of her family. With the absence of her husband's income, Aparna faced financial challenges. Her modest job as a school teacher was insufficient to meet the household's needs, prompting her to explore supplemental income sources while managing the family's daily expenses. As the sole breadwinner, she faces difficulty in managing her children's education, household expenses, and her own emotional well-being. Her life took an unexpected turn with her husband's passing.

“As I sit in the corner of this home, surrounded by all the happy memories that once filled my heart, I find myself thinking about the path life has taken me down. The path I am on now is one I never thought I would take, a path full of obstacles that I will have to face with all my might.”

It’s been two years since that day- the day my life changed forever. The memory lingers, a reminder of the path I’ve taken as a widow. A little over two years ago, I woke up to the sound of his laughter in our home, the sound of his voice in my ear, the sound of our life together. But fate had other plans for me that day. He was gone, and I was left with a hole in my heart that could not be filled. When he left, I don’t know what to do with my 2 kids. The next few months were a blur of disbelief and grief. I woke up each morning expecting to hear him walk or speak, only to find silence. All the little things that used to bring me joy were now filled with a sense of dread. My days were filled with the mundane tasks of everyday life. As a widow, I faced the challenges of widowhood from the inside out. These challenges weren’t just emotional. They were physical. Every day I lived, I had to deal with the knowledge that he was no longer with me. Each day brought a new set of memories. Grief washed over me. Each day I woke up in a different way.

The burden of these new responsibilities weighed heavily on my shoulders, but I found the courage to rise to the challenge each day. I found comfort in the arms of my family and friends as they stood beside me through the darkest of times. Their presence and compassion were a lifeline to me, a reminder that I wasn’t alone. Their acts of kindness and compassion brought life to my soul, and a spark of hope ignited within me. Over the course of the months and years that followed, I started to accept the healing process. The ache of loss is still there, but it’s a silent pain, a reminder of the love we once shared. I have learned to find joy in the midst of the sadness, to cherish the memories we made, and to live the life he would have wanted us to live.

From being the only breadwinner to taking care of the house, taking care of her kids, and keeping themselves emotionally healthy, the participants described feeling overwhelmed by the multitude of roles and exhausted.

“Role overload is my reality now. I will not let them define me. There will be times when I will fail, but I will not let that stop me from moving forward for my children. I want my children to remember a mother who never gave up”.

Role conflict is one of the biggest challenges I face as a widow with 2 young children. As a mom, I feel like I have a huge responsibility to support them emotionally, provide a stable home, and make sure they are healthy. But as the only breadwinner in the family, I also have to work a lot of hours and want to look my parents-in-law. This means that I have to struggle my time between them and my work.

One of the biggest challenges that many widows face is finding the right balance between taking care of their children and taking care of themselves. This can cause a lot of stress and feelings of guilt.

“There were times when my kids needed me at school or when they were ill, but I couldn’t afford to take time off work. I felt like I was caught between my kids and my career”.

Another thing I struggle with every day is loneliness. The nights are the worst – the silence amplifies the loneliness.

No matter how many friends and family you have, there’s always a part of you that feels like you’re on your own. It’s like there’s a hole in your heart, and you’re trying to fill it.

His absence is like an ache in my heart that will never go away. The sound of laughter that used to fill our house is replaced by the sound of silence. The touch of his hand is like a distant memory.

My loss of independence can be seen in the simplest of things. From managing my finances to making decisions about my home, I struggle with feelings of insecurity and fear. I miss having someone I can talk to, share my thoughts with, and plan with. The feeling of being on the brink of something can be overwhelming.

Since I became a widow, the dynamics in my family have changed drastically. What was once a close-knit family, bonded by shared experiences and my husband’s presence, is now navigating a landscape of feelings, expectations, and stress that I never expected.

Exclusion is a part of the social stigma that comes with being a widow. Couples’ events, gatherings or celebrations can make me feel excluded. It’s like my changing marital status makes me outside of certain social groups. This kind of exclusion can make me feel more isolated and “othered.”

But, it's important to remember that not every interaction is bad. There are people out there who offer real support and empathy. They understand how complicated my emotions are and the struggles I face, and their understanding helps build a bridge of connection in a sea of stigma.

Wedding receptions and social gatherings can be uncomfortable. It's not unusual to feel a change in conversation when I announce my widowhood. Suddenly, everyone feels like they don't know how to talk to me or how to relate to me. Fear of talking about my loss can cause me to avoid conversations or avoid talking about it altogether, which can leave me feeling isolated and invisible.

The pressure to fit in with society can also affect my kids. They may come across family or neighbours who question or criticize our family structure. This can lead to feelings of shame or loneliness. The idea that a widow's family is somehow "broken" or less able to provide a supportive environment can affect how my kids view themselves and their position in society.

Childrens from female headed households face social insecurity. They may face prejudice, misunderstanding or bullying from classmates who don't understand their family's history. This can cause shame or feelings of belonging-lessness, which can have a negative impact on their emotional health and confidence.

Being a widow has sped up my social development, forcing me to adjust to new situations and take on new roles and responsibilities that I may not have thought I could handle. The challenges I face require a certain amount of emotional fortitude and decision-making skills that have pushed me to grow outside of my comfort zone.

Since becoming a widow, my self-image has changed profoundly. While grief is a huge part of my life, it's also been a driving force for self-improvement and self-growth. I've become more aware of my strengths, my values, and my passions. I have a better understanding of who I am outside of my marriage.

4.1.5 CASE 5 45-YEAR-OLD WIDOW

Researcher personally interacted with Latha, a 45-years old, who lost her husband 3 years back. She lived with her two sons of age 24 and 20. Both are studying. She now works as an Anganwadi

helper. She faces many challenges and problems being a widow. Her husband Rajesh worked as a rickshaw driver, a job that comes with its share of uncertainty and economic fluctuations. Although they worked hard, their income was irregular. Latha was not working during that time. Financial stability was elusive, and their modest income was barely enough to cover their living expenses.

Then, her husband's health began to worsen. Diagnosed with a heart condition, he needed extensive medical care, including medications, visits, and stays in the hospital. This added to their already precarious financial situation. As the medical bills mounted, the family was caught in a vicious cycle of debt. Latha and her husband were forced to make tough decisions, sacrificing even the most basic things to make sure that his treatments would continue. The cost of his health was more important than her own happiness, a proof of how much they cared for each other. Latha's role changed from supportive spouse to caregiver, taking care of her husband's needs while bearing the burden of his illness, both emotionally and financially. The strain of his health, their family's financial situation, and her work as a mother all combined to create a never-ending cycle of fatigue.

In spite of their financial difficulties, the Latha and husband continued to have hope and moments of love in the midst of their difficulties. Their love was the glue that held them together. It served as a reminder that even the toughest challenges can be overcome. However, their journey turned tragic when the husband's condition worsened further, leading to his passing. When Rajesh passed away due to heart complications, Latha was left with no choice but to become a widow at the age of 45. The loss of her beloved husband was unbearable and grief became a constant companion. However, amidst her grief, Latha was able to find solace in the lives of her two sons- Arjun, aged 21, and Rohan- aged 17. When he passed away, the widow faced not only the loss of her husband but also the burden of medical bills incurred during his treatment. The financial impact of his illness lingered as she juggled widowhood and being a single parent while trying to pay off her mounting medical bills.

Grieving the death of her husband while taking care of her own emotional health and providing for her sons is emotionally draining. She needs to find a way to deal with her grief while providing strength for her family. After a year of suffering through her husband's illness and death, Latha's journey turns into one of resilience and new opportunities. With the help of our ward councillor, she manages to get a job as a helper at Anganwadi, a momentous occasion that starts to change her

life and the future of her family. Over the past year, the widow's life has been filled with sadness and determination. She had to deal with the grief of losing her husband, as well as the financial burden and psychological problems. Despite all the hardships, she stayed strong and dedicated to raising her two sons, 24 and 20 years old. The ward councillor becomes a life preserver for her family. He understands how hard the widow is working and how much she needs the help. He helps her by getting her to join the team of helpers in Anganwadi. Not only does this give her a steady source of income, but it also opens up new opportunities for personal development and financial stability.

As she begins her life as a helper at Anganwadi centre, Latha begins to find meaning in her new life. She finds solace in the joys of caring for young children in the community. The joys of the children's laughter and innocence become a refuge for her healing heart, providing a respite from all the hardships she has faced.

She goes above and beyond to take care of her family. She juggles the day-to-day running of the home, managing her finances, and providing emotional support for her two teenaged children. The burden of all this can be too much for her and she struggles to find time for herself.

Latha's life is a never-ending struggle as she juggles her responsibilities as a mom, a breadwinner, and a person on the path of self-improvement. She often finds herself caught between her sons' needs and her own aspirations. She wishes to pursue her interests and career, but her motherly duties often come in the way.

Since my husband passed away, I have fallen into so many financial and non-financial difficulties that I have reached the point of madness. I often experience depression. Nothing brings me joy.

Her life partner is no longer with her, which can cause her to feel very lonely and isolated. Widows often struggle with social isolation, particularly if their social circle was very close to their spouse.

"Anxiety was a constant companion. The thought of facing life's difficulties alone, making my own decisions, and worrying about taking care of my family's needs filled me with dread."

When their love story ended, she was left with an emptiness that could never be replaced. While she still loves her sons unconditionally, she grieves the loss of her husband, the love that marked a milestone in her life.

Since my husband passed away, his family has been a constant presence in my life and my children are more alive than ever before. Sometimes I need their consent to make a big decision or else they won't let me make it.

Within her family structure, Latha finds it difficult to maintain harmony. Transitioning from a traditional family structure to a modified family structure after the death of her husband requires open dialogue and compromise. As a mother, balancing her role with her sons' growing autonomy can cause misunderstandings and conflicts

Ever since I lost my husband, I have noticed a change in how people look at me, how they talk to me, even how they avoid me. It's like my presence has become a symbol of life's fragility. A reminder that all the things we hold dear in the world can be ripped away from us in a blink of an eye.

As a middle-aged woman, I'm struggling with feelings that I never thought I'd experience so often: social anxiety, loneliness, and an overwhelming sense of isolation. It's like life has woven a web of insecurity around me, and I'm caught in a never-ending cycle of conflicting emotions that leave me feeling lost. Social anxiety is like an invisible hand guiding me through my interactions with others.

4.1.6 CASE 6 30-YEAR-OLD WIDOW

Diya is a 30 years old widow. Her life changed forever when her husband passed away due to the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic. She was left with a 1year old child. Diya faced many challenges in her life that she had never faced before. She now lives with her parents. Diya's path to marriage and widowhood wasn't an easy one. At 27, she was about to embark on a new phase of her life. She was looking forward to the promise of love and friendship. Her marriage was the start of a new journey with her husband. A journey full of hope and dreams that lay ahead for them. The, early days of their marriage were full of excitement and adventure. Diya built a life

with her husband, combining their dreams and aspirations into a series of experiences and memories. Just as they were getting settled into their lives as a married couple, tragedy struck. Diya was just 29 years old when she lost her husband to COVID-19. The disease took him away from her in an instant, leaving her a widow with a broken heart. The dreams she had made for them were shattered, and she was thrown into a world of pain and loneliness. Diya's husband, who was very energetic and full of life, suddenly got sick. At first, they thought it was just a common flu. But as he got sicker and sicker, they realized it was something much worse. They tried everything they could to help him, but the virus was relentless. After many prayers, he succumbed to the virus and Diya was left with a broken heart.

The shock and grief of her husband's death was immense. She felt as if the earth had been ripped out from underneath her, leaving her in shock and disbelief. The dreams they had for their future lay all breakdown, and the once vibrant home they had made for themselves was now silent. In the midst of her sorrow, Diya found she was pregnant, carrying a part of her husband inside her. This bittersweet realization became a beacon of hope in the darkest of times, a reminder to Diya that life goes on, even in the face of loss. The impending arrival of their child was a bright light in the darkness. Pregnancy is supposed to be a shared experience between two people who love each other, but for Diya, it was a journey of self-discovery. She went to doctors, made baby plans, and went through the ups and downs of being a soon-to-be mom. She missed her husband's presence, but she clung to his memory, and found strength in the love that they had. While Diya was waiting for her baby to be born, she found comfort in unexpected places. Even with these obstacles, Diya found a source of strength that she didn't even know she possessed. Her friends and family reached out to her, even from far away, sending virtual hugs and encouragement.

“Perhaps the most important thing I learned was that loneliness doesn't mean being alone. I built a network of friends, relatives, and people who supported me and encouraged me. Through these relationships, I learned how to lean on others when I needed to and how to lean on myself when I needed to.”

As the months went by, Diya's belly grew with her determination. She remembered her husband's love and support and used it as a beacon in the dark. When the day finally came, Diya held her

newborn baby in her arms. She felt a mix of joy and sadness as she watched her baby continue her father's legacy.

Diya was a mother, a provider, and a caretaker all rolled into one. Suddenly, she had to take care of not only her grieving heart but her child's well-being as well. The burden of running the household, managing the finances, and dealing with her own emotions all added up to Diya feeling like she was drowning in a sea of responsibility. Diya's juggling act often left her feeling torn and overwhelmed as she juggled her family's needs and her own. The psychological impact of her husband's death was immeasurable.

“Every day brings its challenges, both large and small. Sleepless nights, endless feedings, and endless diaper changes all became a testimony to the never-ending demands of being a mother. But it wasn't the physical challenges I faced that bothered me the most. It was the emotional burden of doing it all alone, without the support of someone who used to share these responsibilities with me.”

The abruptness of losing her husband and the burden of being a single parent caused her to experience periods of depression and anxiety. The difficulties she encountered in dealing with her emotions and coping with the traumas of losing her husband only made her mental health issues worse.

Losing her husband was not just the end of her dreams and aspirations, but it was also the sudden end of a long-lasting and meaningful relationship. The absence of her husband left her with an emptiness that could not be filled.

The responsibility of taking care of our home, taking care of our baby, and making important decisions now falls on my shoulders. Decisions that we used to share are now my responsibility as both parents. This loss of autonomy has reminded me of how much I used to rely on him, his advice, and his love to get through the day.

Diya grieved not only for the passing of her husband, but also for the end of her love story. The social stigma attached to widowhood was one of the most difficult things Diya had to deal with. The taunts and disapproving stares from the society were a painful reminder of her new status. The

stigma kept her from engaging in social activities and connecting with people who could offer her support. Social stigmas, coupled with her new role as a single parent, added to her sense of loneliness. Diya was often lonely, searching for companionship and acceptance in a world that had lost touch with her. Despite all the obstacles that came her way, Diya's journey also showed her how strong and resilient she really is. Through the fog of grief and the ups and downs of being a single parent, she started to form a positive self-image. She found a strength within herself that was rooted in her determination to give her child the best life possible while also taking care of her own health.

“My family has been there for me every step of the way since my husband passed away. They have been there for me through thick and thin. They have held me in their arms when I was on the brink of losing it all. They have given me a safe space to express my feelings without judgement. They have shown me that I am not alone in this world and that I have a network of loved ones that will always be there for me no matter what.”

Diya's journey through the ups and downs of marriage, grief, and motherhood painted a picture of strength, resilience, and love in the midst of life's greatest challenges.

4.2 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is a foundational method of analysis that needs to be defined and described to solidify its place in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is a widely used method of analysis in qualitative research. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning repeatedly. Hence while going through the data, the researcher found the following themes and analysed the cases.

4.3. THEMES

The researcher has delineated four main themes and twelve corresponding sub-themes to guide the analysis of the collected data.

i. Challenges at the Individual Level

- Overwhelm of Responsibilities

- Conflicting Roles
- Emotional and Mental Strain
- Deterioration of Romantic Relationships

ii. Challenges within the Family Context

- Erosion of Personal Autonomy
- Strain within the Family Dynamics

iii. Societal Challenges

- Perceived Social Stigmatization
- Issues of Social Security
- Feelings of Social Isolation
- Instances of Social Exclusion

iv. Positive Aspects

- Development of Social Maturity
- Nurturing a Positive Self-Image

The study involved six participants who were all above 30 years of age. Among them, three had gone through divorce, while the other three had become widows. All of these respondents had children and were acting as the primary decision-makers in their households. All participants were residing in the Thiruvananthapuram district. Upon analyzing the data, the researcher discovered numerous challenges that women encountered when assuming the role of household head. The chosen six participants represented a diverse range of difficulties and issues they had faced.

4.3.1 CHALLENGES AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The first category of research focuses on individual problems women face when they become the head of the household. These include: Overwhelm of Responsibilities or role overload,

Conflicting Roles, Emotional and Mental Strain and Deterioration of Romantic Relationships or end of love.

4.3.1.1 Role overload or Overwhelm of Responsibilities

When a woman becomes the head of the household, she has a lot of roles to do. Not only do they have to take care of their health, but they're also expected to do things that have traditionally been done by both partners, like earning money, managing money, being a parent, and doing housework. All of this adds up to a lot of extra work, which can be physically and emotionally draining as they try to do it all at once.

As case no. 2 states: *"I feel like I have a never-ending list of things to do, all of which require my time and energy. From keeping track of my finances to making sure my kids are healthy, from managing my work obligations to keeping the house in order, the weight of these responsibilities often feels like it's pressing down on me from all sides"*.

As a result of taking on more than one job, women who lead households have to work full time and put a lot of pressure on themselves, which can lead to long-term health and well-being issues.

As Aparna (case no 4) quoted *"Role overload is my reality now"*. Highlights the recognition of the numerous roles and tasks that have become an integral part of their life due to circumstances like being a single parent.

4.3.1.2 Role conflict

Transitioning to the role of head of household can bring about role clashes that are rooted in social norms and gender stereotypes. Women may find themselves struggling to balance the demands of being the breadwinner with the duties of nurturing and caring. Trying to do both at the same time can lead to feelings of confusion as they try to balance their new roles with societal expectations and pressures.

To quote: *"In the middle of it all, I think of the support I used to have with my husband. There was a time when we could share tasks, responsibilities, and rely on each other emotionally. Now I'm on my own, and it's an isolating feeling. I wish I could just take a few minutes to breathe. A break from the constant demands that feel like they're drowning me."* (Widow; case no.5)

4.3.1.3 Psychological problems Emotional and Mental Strain

Moving into the role of head of household can lead to a variety of psychological issues. The increased stress, financial burden, and emotional adjustment can lead to psychological issues like anxiety, depression and feelings of loneliness. The burden of these issues, coupled with the lack of support from a spouse, can have a lasting impact on mental health. Over time these psychological issues can affect their self-worth, self-confidence, and quality of life.

Diya (case no. 6) states that *"After my husband's death, so many problems came up that I got a mental illness, I was hospitalized for a while, and I take pills. It's really tough to be both father and mother alone."*

The loss of a spouse through widowhood results in profound grief. Individuals may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, disbelief, anger, and emptiness. Grief can be intense and persistent, affecting daily functioning and overall well-being.

"After my husband passed away, I was in so much pain and suffering mentally and socially. I thought of committing suicide but didn't do because of my children". (35 years old widow)

Divorce can make them feel sad, hopeless, and anxious. The break-up of a relationship and the fear of the future can cause them to feel overwhelmed. They may not be able to handle changes in your day-to-day life and relationships.

To quote: *"After divorce my physical condition deteriorated very badly. I didn't want to take divorce because I was worried about my children's basic needs. I was very upset and disappointed."* (Case no.2, Divorcee)

One of the biggest impacts of divorce is the impact it can have on their social circle. They may feel lonely as you adjust to their new single life. The loss of a partner's company and the loss of friendships can leave them feel lonely.

4.3.1.4 End of love or Deterioration of Romantic Relationships

For women who are divorced or widowed, the loss of a romantic partner is often accompanied by a deep sense of loss. The love and companionship that they shared with their partner may suddenly

be gone, leaving a hole in their heart that is hard to fill. Trying to cope with the loss of their partner while managing the day-to-day running of their home and taking care of their loved ones can be emotionally draining and leave them feeling lonely and sad.

To quote: "After my husband died, my feelings died too" (45-year-old widow)

When the idea of marriage was brought up, respondents said they were hesitant and unsure. Some said the wounds from their past relationships were still raw, making them hesitant to open their hearts to new love. Others talked about how difficult it can be to move on after losing a loved one or going through a divorce. Many expressed feelings of apprehension, asking themselves, "can I trust anyone again?" or "can I truly give my heart to someone new?"

According to a study by Yoshida (2011), women are less likely to get married after losing a spouse for cultural reasons.

40- year-old divorcee (Case no.2) states:

"I was emotionally attached with my husband but he never cared about my feelings. He came got drunk and verbally abused me. I have no better memory with him. Our relationship became so bitter in later days that there was no space for love. So, it was completely the sudden end of the dreams of my life".

A painful breakup or divorce may make one afraid to remarry again or being committed with someone else.

4.3.2 INTRA-FAMILY PROBLEMS OR CHALLENGES WITHIN THE FAMILY CONTEXT

The second category that female-headed households experience and deal with its problems and challenges within the family, including sub-categories of declined independence and intra-family tension.

4.3.2.1 Declined Independence or Erosion of Personal Autonomy

When a woman takes on the responsibility of running the family, whether it's because she is a widow, divorced, or something else, it often involves a complicated mix of family support. Support from her husband's family, as well as her own family, which can affect her autonomy, choices, and the flow of her life.

This increased support is often for the better, but it can also lead to unwanted interference in her day-to-day life and decisions. Family members feel a greater obligation to guide and counsel her, which can include areas that she used to be able to handle on her own. This can range from giving unsolicited parenting tips to commenting on her finances or personal life choices.

To quote: *“Over the course of the next few days, weeks, and months, I started to notice a subtle change in the tone of conversation. What used to be conversations about my day-to-day life and my baby’s health began to turn into more pointed questions and comments. Suddenly, it seemed that everyone had an opinion on how I should be raising my child, how I should manage my finances, and even how I should spend my time. It felt like everyone was trying to tell me what I should and shouldn’t do.”* (35-year-old divorcee, Case no.3)

4.3.2.2 Intra-Family Tensions Strain within the Family Dynamics

When a woman takes on the role of head of the household, many members of the family may find it difficult to accept the new responsibilities of mother as head of the family and family leader for an extended period of time. The children often disobey his commands, argue with each other, and even think of themselves as independent. This creates a lot of stress for the family and for the mother.

As 45-year-old widow stated: *“After my husband passed away, things started to change in our family, especially with my older son. I think his father’s death made him rethink his role in the family. I started to notice him questioning my authority and not following my orders. It was like he was struggling with his own path to independence which sometimes contradicted my idea of being the head of the family”.*

The burden of being the head of the household, especially in a man’s position, makes the woman unable to full-fill her responsibilities and the children will not listen to her always.

4.3.3 SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

The third category that female-headed households are engaged in is social problems, which include sub-categories of the social stigma, social insecurity, social isolation, and social exclusion.

4.3.3.1 Social Stigma or Perceived Social Stigmatization

Households headed by women often suffer from social stigma. Social stigma is based on gender stereotypes, cultural values, and social expectations. Social stigma can manifest itself in many different ways, influencing how women-led households are seen and treated in their communities.

“The stigma permeates every aspect of our lives, from the workplace to our children’s behaviour. We may experience subtle forms of discrimination at work, where employers unknowingly question our commitment or aptitude. Our children may be subjected to bullying or exclusion due to non-traditional family structure”. (Divorcee 1)

Widows and Divorcees heading households are often stigmatized because of their marital situation. Widows are often treated with sympathy or contempt, while divorcees are often treated with suspicion or gossip about the causes of their divorce.

"When people call me “widow”, I feel bad. I feel weak. I hate this word." (35- year-old widow)

In the Habib (2017) study in Bangladesh, women heads of households also received social stigma, and society did not view them positively.

4.3.3.2 Social insecurity or Issues of Social Security

“Friends, co-workers, even strangers, sometimes feel free to cross borders because they know we don’t have the safety net that a family can offer. This vulnerability comes in many forms – from financial abuse to emotional abuse. Our pursuit of stability for our families leaves us vulnerable to those who take advantage of our situation”. (40-year-old divorcee, case no.2)

Social insecurity is often exacerbated by financial uncertainty. Widows often find it difficult to access equal economic opportunities, especially if they are dependent on their husband’s income.

“Life is very difficult. Everything is expensive. I am unable to pay my child’s educational expenses in a sufficient quantity.” (Case no.1)

"In comparison with men, in ordinary conditions, women suffer from unequal social conditions and this situation is worsened when women are stigmatized by divorce” (Case no.3, 35-year-old divorcee)

4.3.3.3 Social Isolation Feelings of Social Isolation

Isolation can lead to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These mental health challenges can be particularly pronounced for women who are already dealing with the stress of managing household responsibilities and potentially facing financial difficulties.

“Sometimes our friends and family don’t understand the struggles we go through. When we talk about family, relationships, and duties, it can make us feel like we’re alone in the world, leading to feeling of self-isolation”. (32-year-old divorcee)

After divorce, women face many difficulties when starting their new life and society doesn’t make it any easier for them

“After divorce I didn’t go out of house for a few months. I didn’t feel comfortable in public due to social stigma around divorced women” (Divorcee 1)

“The isolation isn’t only physical; it’s also mental. It’s the feeling that I can’t share my thoughts and feelings with anyone else, that I’m afraid my sadness will affect those around me. The feeling that no one really understands the pain I’m in or the complexity of my journey”. (45-year-old female head, Case no.2)

4.3.3.3 Social Exclusion or Instances of Social Exclusion

They also experience some degree of social exclusion, which is in line with the social vulnerability with which women are associated. In Thomas and Ryan’s (2008) study, they found that the loss of a husband leads to the loss of significant support, and that many women lose the support and friendship of their friends after being left alone by their husbands.

Widows may experience economic exclusion as a result of losing their spouse’s income. They may not have access to money, jobs, or social security benefits. In some instances, they may not inherit property or inheritances, making them victims of property conflicts or evictions.

After divorce, women face difficulties in starting their new life, and society doesn’t make easier for them. Women are many times reluctant to go into the public after a divorce

“Many times, I felt that there must be someone who can understand me. I feel alienated”. (Case no.2)

Men's households have been created according to social and cultural rules and beliefs, and society responds to women being in charge because they don't accept their status, which results in social stigmatization.

4.3.4 POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OR POSITIVE ASPECTS

The last category that female-headed household experience is the positive side that result from being the head of the household. This category includes the sub-categories of social maturity and positive self-concept.

4.3.4.1 Development of Social Maturity

The transition to becoming the head of a family often propels women into a journey of personal growth, self-discovery, and social maturity. Navigating the challenges and responsibilities alone cultivates a sense of self-efficacy and resilience. This newfound empowerment is a catalyst for positive self-perception and the development of social maturity. As women step beyond the boundaries of their familial roles, they forge wider connections within society, leading to enhanced relationships and improved working conditions. This, in turn, nurtures a distinctive form of social maturity.

The profound impact of this transformation on women's self-esteem cannot be overstated. The expectation for women to not only manage their families but also secure employment after the loss of a spouse has a profound effect on their sense of self-worth. As these women embrace the dual responsibilities, they find themselves capable of achieving what might have seemed insurmountable. This, in turn, bolsters their self-esteem and confidence, shaping them into empowered individuals.

Assuming leadership roles within female-headed households contributes significantly to the elevation of self-confidence and self-esteem. The management of household finances, decision-making, and family care amplifies their sense of competence. Taking charge of these crucial aspects of life solidifies their belief in their abilities and reinforces their intrinsic worth.

A poignant testimony from a 45-year-old divorcee encapsulates the transformative nature of such experiences:

"I've learned that endings can also be beginnings, and this divorce has given me the chance to redefine my priorities and follow my passions."

This quote eloquently captures the essence of the journey these women embark upon. Through adversity, they find opportunities for growth, self-reinvention, and the pursuit of passions that might have been relegated to the background in a different context.

In conclusion, the process of becoming the head of a family bestows upon women a unique path to personal evolution. This journey instills a sense of self-efficacy, resilience, and empowerment. The shift from family-centric roles to wider societal engagement nurtures social maturity, fostering deeper relationships and improved working conditions. The blend of leadership, resilience, and self-discovery contributes to the elevation of self-esteem and confidence. As women redefine their priorities and grasp the reins of their lives, they exemplify that even in the face of adversity, they can emerge as empowered individuals capable of redefining their destinies.

4.3.4.2 Nurturing a Positive Self-Image or Positive self-concept

Assuming the role of the head of a household can indeed have a transformative effect on one's self-image or self-concept, particularly for women who take proactive steps to secure a job and contribute to their family's well-being. This positive shift in self-perception is often fueled by the empowerment and personal growth that comes with the responsibilities of being the primary decision-maker and provider.

Some female-headed households look for a job after becoming the head of the household and when they find a job, they see themselves and their skills in a more positive light.

“Life without my husband was an adjustment, but I adapted” (Case no.4)

“I can manage living on my own, although it is difficult, but I am happier than before” (Case1, Divorcee).

Female heads of households often exhibit remarkable resilience and strength as they take on the responsibilities of both earning income and managing the household. Entering the workforce exposes women to new experiences, people, and perspectives. This exposure broadens their horizons and contributes to personal growth, fostering a stronger sense of identity and purpose. The transition from a traditional role to that of a provider and decision-maker prompts a reevaluation of self-identity. Women often redefine themselves in terms of their capabilities and achievements, resulting in a more positive self-concept.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 FINDINGS

The primary objective of this qualitative study was to ascertain the challenges, difficulties, as well as the potential advantages and strengths encountered by female-headed households in Thiruvananthapuram. The findings of the research brought to light that these women confront a multitude of personal, familial, and societal issues, which could potentially exert adverse effects on their overall well-being. Further analysis of the results corroborated the notion that the phenomenon of female-headed households, while inherently presenting obstacles and hindrances for women, can, in certain instances, yield positive outcomes, fostering enhancements in self-esteem and social maturity.

According to the findings of the study, women heads of households in the area faced a number of challenges in terms of self, family and society that could have a negative impact on their overall health, including physical and psychological health. These challenges may include role conflicts, role overload, end of love, intra family problems, family duties, social stigmatization, social isolation and coping with social expectations and prejudices.

Importantly, the research also showed that being a head of household wasn't always a barrier or obstacle for women. In fact, in some cases, it could be an opportunity for personal development, self-empowerment, and self-esteem enhancement. So, while there are challenges that come with being the head of household, there can also be positive outcomes that come from taking on this role. For example, taking on this role could give women the authority to make decisions that affect them and their families. This could lead to greater self-assurance and a greater sense of success. It could also give women the opportunity to develop strong leadership skills, improve problem solving skills, and be more resistant to adversity. The experience of overcoming challenges could also help women become more socially mature, allowing them to gain a better understanding of social dynamics and strengthen their role in society. The challenges and opportunities of female head of household vary from person to person, depending on circumstances, culture, and support systems. Some women may experience growth and empowerment, while others may face more

significant challenges and difficulties. The challenges of divorce and widows are different depending on the situation they are facing.

5.1.1 Personal problems

The first category women-headed household face is personal problems and challenges. Because of the nature and status of women's roles, women's heads of households face multiple challenges that often result in multiple problems. They face role conflicts, role overload, psychological problems and end of love. Various research shows that changing the family structure from a two-parent family to a single parent family presents many difficulties for each person. (Lowenstein;2005 & Rokach;2004).

According to Habib (2017), women's concerns about the head of household role, the struggle to make a living, and the high level of physical activity can lead to fatigue, physical injury, and even disability. Herbst (2012), for example, cited multiple tasks as a major challenge for women heads of household. The role conflict and the burden of household chores are aggravated by a lack of women's support institutions, inadequate support services for women, and a lack of education for women.

Another finding of this research is the existence of psychological problems in female headed households. Studies of Meyer B D & Cheeseman (2011), have also referred to the psychological problems and depression of female-headed households. According to a study by Yoosefi LEBNI et al. (2019) and Mirzaee et al., (2015), in the Kurdish regions of Iran, female-headed households were identified as a group at risk of self-immolation. Many socio-economic pressures and a lack of support structures lead to many psychological issues for female-headed households.

Another difficulty that women-headed households face is the low chance of getting married again and end of love after the death of their spouse or divorce.

5.1.3 Intra-family problems

The second category of challenges faced by female headed household is intra family problems. This includes declined independence and intra-family tension. Female-headed households experienced a high level of family conflict with children and lack of control over children. In another study, Arends (2006) and Duryea (2006), women-headed households experienced tensions and challenges with children. Like any family, female-headed households can experience

interpersonal conflicts. These issues may be compounded by financial issues, the stress of being a single parent, and adjusting to a new set of roles and responsibilities. Social norms and gender stereotypes can lead to a reduced sense of autonomy for female heads of households. These traditional roles may restrict their capacity to make choices or access certain opportunities. Many female heads of households are dependent on extended family members or friends for assistance. This dependency can affect their decision making and sense of independence.

5.1.4 Social Problems

In addition to personal and family problems female headed household also face social problems. Social problems include social stigma, social insecurity, social isolation and social exclusion. According to Towers' (2005) research, one of the problems women-headed households face is the label of being "unattended". In a study conducted in Bangladesh by Habib (2017), women heads of households also faced social stigmatization, and society did not perceive them as positive. Societal and cultural standards have been created for the management of men's households, and society responds when women are in charge because they do not acknowledge their position, which results in stigmatization by society.

They also suffer from some degree of social exclusion, which is in line with the social insecurity that women experience. According to Thomas and Ryan's (2008), "the loss of a husband leads to the loss of significant support," and "many women lose the support and friendship of their friends when their husbands leave them alone." In Finkelstein's study of women in 2011, women chose to avoid social activities and chose seclusion.

Stigmatization can cause women heading households to feel ashamed, guilty, and inadequate, which can have a negative impact on their self-confidence and mental wellbeing.

Stigma can also lead to social isolation, as people may shy away from social situations to avoid being judged. Women who lead households are often subject to inappropriate social attitudes and harassment, resulting in them being marginalized and restricted to a small circle of family members.

5.1.5 Positive effects

While a significant portion of research has predominantly focused on the negative repercussions of assuming the role of a household leader, the outcomes of this study underscore a crucial

perspective - that being a household head for women not only yields adverse effects but also carries positive ramifications, notably in terms of fostering a positive self-image, enhanced self-worth, and social growth. This innovative revelation constitutes one of the noteworthy contributions of this research.

The study reveals that women at the helm of households experience not just challenges but also positive outcomes, including the development of social maturity and a constructive self-concept. As these women strive for improved living conditions and seek family support, they discover empowerment in effectively managing their lives, nurturing the belief in their capacity to advance and prosper. This, in turn, culminates in their social maturation, encouraging their increased participation in outdoor activities.

The insights offered by Thomas in the study titled 'Women's perception on divorce experience: A qualitative study' are highly relevant here. This study establishes that divorce, despite its inherent difficulties, often presents women with fresh opportunities for emotional growth, personal development, newfound independence, and the embrace of novel challenges.

For widows, the transition after the loss of their husbands necessitates venturing into outdoor tasks and even seeking employment, thereby expanding their social connections. The very necessity for these women to independently manage various responsibilities cultivates self-reliance and a strong sense of self, driving both personal and social development.

In summary, this research diverges from the conventional focus on the negatives of female-headed households by illuminating the positive dimensions. These encompass an elevated self-perception, strengthened self-worth, and progress in the realms of social maturity and self-concept. Through empowerment, adaptation, and the pursuit of newfound opportunities, women leading households not only confront challenges but also uncover opportunities for growth and advancement.

5.2 LIMITS AND STRENGTHS

This qualitative research delves into the life experiences of female-headed households, exploring their challenges, difficulties, and positive impacts. Unlike much of the existing body of work that primarily emphasizes the economic aspect, this study aims to shed light on the often overlooked social and cultural intricacies that shape these women's lives. As a result, this research has the potential to unveil previously undisclosed facets of personal, familial, and societal challenges.

While previous studies have predominantly approached the issue through an economic lens, the current research takes a novel perspective by highlighting the social and cultural dimensions of female-headed households. By doing so, it not only addresses the challenges these women encounter but also unveils the potential positive outcomes that can arise from assuming the role of household leader.

An acknowledged limitation of the study pertains to the participation of women. Some women declined to take part, and this challenge was addressed by clearly articulating the study's objectives and its essentiality, assuring participants of the confidentiality of their personal information. Nonetheless, some respondents might not have been entirely forthcoming about their personal experiences and issues.

Strengths:

Comprehensive Exploration: The research provides a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by female-headed households, moving beyond the economic aspects to encompass social and cultural dimensions.

Novel Perspective: By highlighting the potential positive outcomes of assuming household leadership, the study introduces a fresh perspective that contrasts with previous predominantly negative portrayals.

Undisclosed Aspects: This research aims to uncover previously undisclosed aspects of personal, familial, and societal challenges, contributing to a deeper understanding of the experiences of these women.

Limitations:

Selective Participation: The limitation of women's reluctance to participate in the study could potentially result in a sample that doesn't fully represent the diverse range of experiences within female-headed households.

Subjective Reporting: Respondents might not have been entirely candid about personal issues due to cultural sensitivities or privacy concerns, potentially affecting the accuracy of the data collected.

In conclusion, this qualitative research introduces a unique approach to studying female-headed households by emphasizing the social and cultural dimensions of their experiences. While

overcoming limitations such as participation challenges and potential lack of candidness among respondents, the study offers valuable insights into the challenges, strengths, and opportunities faced by these women, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their lives.

5.3 CONCLUSION

According to the findings of the study, female-headed households face many personal, family and social difficulties that in many cases, interfere with their personal and social lives and seriously affect their health. However, being a head of household for women is not only associated with adverse outcomes but, in some cases, results in positive outcomes such as improved self-esteem and social development. Therefore, in order to promote the health and empowerment of women-headed households, multi-dimensional programs should be implemented that cover all aspects of their well-being. Therefore, women can be ready to adjust to new, multi-faceted, and sometimes conflicting roles by learning the necessary techniques. They should also be provided with more economic support. In addition, it is possible to improve the social status of the female-headed household by providing adequate education and helping to break gender stereotypes so that the head and manager of the family can be easily accepted in society in order to avoid social problems such as stigma, social uncertainty and social exclusion.

At personal level, the study emphasizes the resilience and strength of these women in facing challenges. They often shoulder the burden of financial responsibility, household management and caregiving. They have a remarkable capacity to adapt and flourish. The narratives reveal the emotional impact of these responsibilities and reveal the mental health issues that can result from the constant demands of female heads of household, role clashes and overloading of roles.

Within the context of the family, the study highlights the complexities of family relationships within these households. Female leaders often take on leadership roles, and their children often look up to them as role models for resilience and self-sufficiency. However, traditional gender roles can be challenged, resulting in empowerment as well as conflict within the family. This may cause intra-family conflict and declined independence.

On a societal level, women heads of households face structural barriers that limit their access to opportunities and resources. Economic inequalities, social exclusion, and gender-based discrimination are just a few of the challenges they face every day. Social stigmatization and

isolation compound their problems, and highlights the need for wider societal shifts to improve gender parity and create a more inclusive society.

The study also identifies positive impacts that arise from the resilience of female-headed households. The resilience of women-led households also leads to positive outcomes, such as empowerment and self-esteem. They develop a sense of social maturity and positive self-concept. Women find their voice and a sense of purpose as they take charge of their lives. Their commitment to providing for their families encourages creativity and encourages them to pursue education and training to improve their lives.

Female-headed households face a range of challenges that span economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Economic Challenges include financial Instability where they often have to rely on a single income, which can lead to financial instability and difficulties in meeting basic needs. The study found that social challenges include stigmatization, Lack of Support Networks; Emotional Stress; and Healthcare Access. Female-headed households face social stigma, as they challenge traditional family structures and gender roles, which can lead to isolation and discrimination and these households may lack strong social support networks, leaving women without avenues for assistance in times of need. While balancing multiple roles, including being the primary caregiver and provider cases reported emotional stress and burnout. Cultural Challenges include Cultural norms and expectations often dictate traditional gender roles, making it difficult for women to step into leadership roles and decision-making positions. And cultural expectations regarding marriage and remarriage influence women's choices and decisions, affecting their well-being and autonomy. In the study it was found that women leading households demonstrate exceptional determination and adaptability in navigating their daily challenges. By employing a combination of practical strategies, emotional resilience, and leveraging available resources, they not only manage their responsibilities but also create opportunities for personal growth and positive change. In conclusion, the challenges faced by female-headed households are complex and multifaceted, spanning economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS

Diverse Representation: Include women from various educational backgrounds, skill levels, and age groups when conducting research, recognizing the unique circumstances of each female household head.

Job Opportunities for Children: Implement job reservations in government positions for children of female-headed households, aiding in securing stable employment for their future.

Legal Reforms: Enforce stringent divorce laws that ensure child support income from divorced fathers and safeguard inheritance rights to the property of deceased husbands.

Social Protection: Introduce pension and life insurance schemes specifically tailored for female-headed households to provide financial security for their future.

Educational Support: Offer scholarships to children of female household heads, promoting access to quality education and improving their prospects.

Financial Aid: Extend interest-free individual loans as financial assistance to female heads, helping them manage their households and pursue economic independence.

Employment Opportunities: Collaborate with social agencies to create employment opportunities for female heads, enabling them to support their families while maintaining a work-life balance.

Community Support: Establish an association for female-headed households, providing a platform for sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and collectively seeking solutions.

Counseling Services: Set up counseling centers aimed at addressing the emotional and psychological well-being of women in female-headed households, offering guidance and support.

Incorporating these recommendations can contribute to a more equitable and supportive environment for female-headed households, promoting their empowerment and facilitating positive changes in their lives.

5.5 FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Future research on female-headed households can delve deeper into various dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences and needs. Some potential research implications include:

Long-Term Impact: Investigate the long-term effects of being raised in a female-headed household on children's education, career paths, and overall well-being, to understand the generational impact.

Mental Health and Well-being: Explore the psychological well-being of women leading households, considering factors such as stress, resilience, coping strategies, and the role of mental health support.

Legal and Policy Analysis: Conduct an in-depth analysis of existing legal frameworks and policies that pertain to FHH, assessing their effectiveness and identifying gaps for improved support.

Intersectionality: Study how factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation intersect with being a female head of household, understanding how unique challenges are shaped by these intersections.

Narratives of Success: Highlight success stories and positive narratives of women in FHH who have overcome challenges and achieved personal and professional milestones.

Government Initiatives: Evaluate the effectiveness of government programs and initiatives aimed at supporting women in FHH, assessing their reach and impact.

By addressing these research implications, future studies can contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences of women leading households, leading to more effective policies, programs, and interventions to support their well-being and empowerment.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

FROM STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHS: AN INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF FEMALE HEADED HOUSEHOLDS THROUGH NARRATIVES

PERSONAL PROFILE

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Marital Status:
4. Education:
5. Profession:
6. Nature of Place you live (Rural, Urban, City, Town, Other)
7. Number of members living in the family
8. Do you have children?
If yes, how many?
Which class they are studying or are they working?
9. Religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Others)
10. Category (General, EWS, OBC, SC/ST)
11. Income class (Very poor, poor, Lower middle class, Middle class, Upper middle class, wealthy)
12. Type of ration card (yellow, pink, blue, white)
13. Annual income of the family (less than 1 lakh, 1-2 lakh, 2-5 lakh, 10 above etc)
14. Type of house (concrete roof, tiled roof, shed/hut, sheet roof)
15. Ownership of the house (owned, rent)
If rent, what is the monthly rent (specify)

OCCUPATIONAL DETAILS

1. What is your present occupation?
2. If you are working, when you have been working?
 - Before marriage

- After the death/divorce/ separation/desertion of your husband
- After marriage
- Others

3. If you are not working, how do you spend your time?

- Management of kitchen
- Management of house
- Watching TV/Reading
- Engage in social and cultural activities
- Engaged in free tuition and other social services
- Others

4. If you are working, have you changed your job after the death/divorce/separation of your husband?

If yes, specify the reasons:

5. Your job belongs to which category?

- Permanent
- Temporary
- Seasonal
- Others

6. Are you satisfied in your job?

If No, have you tried to get another job?

7. Did you face any difficulty in getting this job?

8. How many years passed after getting the job?

9. Why do you engaged in job?

10. Did you have to suffer any kind of torture, or harassment from your officers or seniors?

11. Do you have to face any kind of harassment from your colleagues?

QUESTIONS RELATED TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

PERSONAL

1. Situation lead to take the household headship
2. If divorce or separation is the reason, what was the problem?

- Unable to give dowry
 - Malpractices of the husband
 - Others
3. Have you changed your home after the death/divorce/separation of your husband?
 4. With whom you are living now?
 5. Can you kindly recall the past experience with your husband?
 6. Can you elaborate some of the experiences of being the head of the family?
 - Problems of being head of the family
 - Challenges faced
 - Psychological problems
 7. How do you manage or overcome the problems?
 8. Duration of marital life:
 - Up to 1 year
 - Between 1-5 years
 - 5-10 years
 - More than 10 years
 9. At which age you took headship:
 10. What are the weaknesses in managing the household?
 11. How does being the primary decision-maker and provider affect your emotional well-being and mental health?
 12. Are there times when you feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pressures of your role? How do you cope with such situations?
 13. How do you manage the balance between your household responsibilities and your career goals?
 14. Are there moments when you feel that your role is more of a burden than a responsibility?
Can you provide an example?

FAMILY INTERACTIONS

1. What type of mingling you have with your family members?
2. How is your relationship with your children after being the head of the family?
3. Whom do you depend on day- to- day problems?
4. As a head of the household did you have to hear criticism from others in any situations?

5. Will relatives or other family members interfere into your personal life?
6. What is the approach of relatives towards you?
7. How do they help you?
8. Who take major decisions in your family matters?
9. How do you take decisions in your household affairs?
10. Do other members accept your decisions?
If no acceptance, how do you implement your decisions?
11. Whether you are a victim of other persons gossiping?
12. Are there times when you feel conflicted between meeting the needs of your family and pursuing your own interests?
13. How does the responsibility of being the primary decision-maker impact communication within your family?
14. How does your role as the female head of the household affect your relationships with other family members? Are there instances of role strain or conflicts?
15. How do the family problems you face impact your emotional well-being and mental health?
16. How do your responsibilities as the female head of the household impact your parenting role? Are there challenges you face in raising and guiding your children?

SOCIAL

1. Do you participate in social and religious ceremonies like marriage/birthday parties, festivals etc?
2. Are there instances where you've experienced stigma or isolation due to your role as the female head of the household?
3. Do you occasionally visit your friends and relatives?
4. Do you participate in all family functions?
5. What is the treatment you receive from other family members?
6. Did you have to suffer any harassment from other male members after taking the household headship?
7. Did you feel discriminations in any situations?
8. Have you ever come across any social expectations or preconceived notions about female-led households? How does this impact your life and interactions?

9. Can you discuss any conflicts or tensions that arise from balancing societal expectations with the needs of your family?

POSITIVE

1. In your experience, what are some positive aspects of being the female head of the household when it comes to decision-making and empowerment?
2. How do you feel your role impacts the overall decision-making process in your household? Are there any specific instances you can share?
3. Can you describe a situation where you felt your leadership positively influenced your family's well-being or future plans?
4. How do you balance the responsibilities of being the head of the household with care giving roles?
5. In what ways do you think your presence positively contributes to the emotional well-being of your family members?
6. What are some positive aspects of managing the household finances and allocating resources as the female head of the household?
7. What values or lessons do you hope to pass down to your children or other family members through your leadership?
8. How do you prioritize self-care and well-being while managing various responsibilities in your role?
9. Can you share any strategies you use to maintain a healthy work-life balance?
