

Original Article

Sociological analysis of injuries of the female head of household: a case study of households covered by west mazandaran well-being

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Abstract

Background: Nowadays, the number of female-headed households is increasing. These women are significantly vulnerable due to factors such as separation from their spouse, the death of a spouse, and the transition to a new and unfamiliar life. This research explored to understand the reality of the social world from the perspective of individuals and aimed to understand the meaning they give to their lived experiences.

Methods: This research employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, using semi-structured interviews conducted with female-headed households covered by social welfare in Western Mazandaran Province, until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA, and phenomenological methods were applied for the interpretation of results.

Results: The study identified the following social and economic vulnerabilities among the female-headed households: financial difficulties, employment challenges, housing issues, social isolation and restrictions, sexual insecurity, distrust, role duality, deterioration in mental and social health, unsuccessful remarriages, children's aggression and delinquency, school dropout, drugs abuse, and concerns about the future of their children.

Conclusion: The results indicate that female-headed households under study face many challenges due to the economic and social structures of the society. These challenges result in extensive economic and social harm to both the women themselves and the community.

Keywords: Family Characteristics; Female-Headed Households; Social Vulnerability; Economic Vulnerabilities; Social Welfare.

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Introduction

Female heads of households are among the most vulnerable groups in society. They are considered a social issue because headship of a household requires securing financial resources and managing all life tasks alone. Given the gender division of labor in Iranian society, many women are not trained to perform the

male role and provide financial support; therefore, when they are placed in the role of head of household, they face difficult situations that increase the risk of various social, psychological, and physical harm. Playing a dual role inside and outside the home is the most important problem that these women initially face (1). Statistical

studies show that the number of female heads of households has increased in recent years in developing and developed countries (2). According to the UN reports in 2015, women constitute more than one-third of heads of households (3). Recent research indicates an increase in the number of female-headed households in developed countries (4). In Iran, statistical data indicate an increase in the number of female-headed households; So that in 1976, 1986, 1996, 2006 and 2011, respectively, 7.3, 7.1, 8.4, 9.4, and 12.1 percent of all Iranian households were headed by women (5), and in 2016, 12 percent of all Iranian households were headed by women. So that we are facing the phenomenon of "feminization of poverty". Legal, customary restrictions, and inequalities in most socio-economic fields for women, especially women heads of households in our country, have made it necessary to pay attention to the issues of women heads of households as a vulnerable segment of society.

In developing countries, special attention should be paid to women heads of households, because it is difficult for them to access the formal market, and on the other hand, they are forced to bear the pressures of cultural and social norms (6). Most women heads of households are under the protection of support institutions and do not have financial independence; therefore, after they face difficulties in accepting the guardianship of their children in terms of suitable jobs and income, and as a result, they turn to informal, low-value, and simple jobs with lower income. Low income and high living costs drive them into poverty (7). Being a head of household has caused behavioral and psychological problems, including depression, incompatibility, aggression, prostitution, and addiction. These women often fall prey to street men and abusive and deceitful men, which leads to more insecurity and distrust, and as a result, pessimism towards the environment and others (8). Loeber et al. (9) believed that when children live with one of their

parents, there are inappropriate interactions between them, which cause inappropriate growth and greater vulnerability of the children. The pressures that these women endure in life lead to a decrease in their functioning and a decrease in their quality of life, and satisfaction. Considering the commonality of many problems among female heads of households, everyone has a different experience depending on their economic and social conditions (10).

The results of the recent research show that women heads of households do not have access to adequate socio-economic services and are therefore exposed to harm. The harm is greater in the field of women's work. Since the lack of resources increases the vulnerability of families, it also leads to job discrimination. This job discrimination destroys social welfare and leads to inefficiency (7). Since women form the foundation of family and community health, providing them with the care they need is possible when there is a broad view of their situation and problems. Most studies on women heads of households have been quantitative and empirical and have focused on their economic problems. However, to better understand the challenges and problems of women heads of households, there is a need for qualitative research that covers all aspects of their lives and examines their living conditions from the perspective of their own experiences.

In order to answer to the research question of "What experiences have you had as a female head of household?"; overall objective of this research was examining the social and economic challenges and problems of female heads of households covered by the welfare system in Western Mazandaran Province.

As postulated by Buvinic et al. (11), a female head of household is someone who is responsible for the care of a family without the regular presence or support of an adult male. In the definition of the Welfare Organization, female heads of household include women who, due to

reasons such as the death of their spouse, going missing, being sentenced to prison, the whereabouts of their spouse, divorce, the disability of their spouse due to a terminal illness, their spouse's addiction, as well as girls who are responsible for providing for the family's financial needs and are eligible for support due to not being married (Comprehensive Social Support Guidelines of the Welfare Organization, 2012). According to the definition of the Statistical Center of Iran, a head of household is a member of the household who is usually responsible for providing all or a major part of the household's expenses or for making decisions about how to spend the household's income. This person can be a man or a woman (5).

Fuller and Lain (12) demonstrated in their research that there was a difference between the vulnerability and resilience of female and male heads of household, and that women were more vulnerable than men. Fox and Shriner (13) confirmed that women in second marriages have a fear of failure and family disintegration because these marriages involve complex stepfamily relationships. Mirhosseini and Koochpeyma Ronizi (14) concluded in their research on women's perceived understanding of social harm that the harms in women's sphere are to intra-family relationships, the formation of cocoons of loneliness, individualism, child-centeredness, generalized parenting, incompatibility, and challenges related to social welfare. Various studies describe the problems of female heads of households as poverty, economic, social, and political insecurity, powerlessness, health problems that affect all family members, and, as a result, women are more vulnerable (15). Most of the harms suffered by female heads of households are in the psychological, social, economic, and cultural areas. Based on a review of studies, female heads of households are more vulnerable psychologically and socially than materially. Thus, the origin of the deprivations and harms suffered by female

heads of households cannot be analyzed without the influence of society and family.

Understanding women's experiences in the field of social harms can pave the way for social planning for such vulnerable groups. Women's health is a prerequisite for improving the level of psychological and social security in society, and since women heads of households are the managers of the family and children, raising their standard of living plays an effective role in the cultural development of the country. Therefore, this study emphasizes women heads of households, whose quality of life and chaotic economic situation expose them to harm.

Methods

This research was qualitative research that aimed to explain the behavior of actors in a conceptual way. This method seeks to understand the reality of the social world from the perspective of individuals and aims to understand the meaning they give to their lived experiences. The qualitative research method reflects unknown concepts that are used to explore new issues and points in the context of various topics and areas that have received less attention. To deeply understand the attitude of female heads of households towards the challenges ahead, qualitative research is unavoidable. The goal of qualitative research is typically a detailed and in-depth study.

The complexity and sensitivity of the phenomenon under study in a socio-cultural context led to the adoption of a phenomenological strategy. Therefore, the research data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The statistical population of this research was all female heads of households covered by the welfare of the Western Province, numbering 4,000 people. The number of participants in qualitative research is not predetermined, and the sample size depends on the data collected; therefore, in coordination with the welfare departments of Western Mazandaran province, female heads of

households who were willing to cooperate with the researcher were selected. Therefore, purposive sampling was continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when additional data did not help to complete the theoretical category. In this study, 20 female heads of households covered by the welfare department of Western Mazandaran province were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews, as the research sample. Among the participants, 11 were divorced women, 6 were widowed, and 3 were deserted women. The duration of marriage ranged from 3 to 20 years. In terms of education level, 1 person had a master's degree, 3 had a bachelor's degree, 4 had an associate's degree, 10 had a diploma, and 1 had a middle school degree.

To analyze the data in this study, after the end of each interview, an audio file was transcribed and coded in text format, and then concepts were extracted from the interviews without repetition and based on the purpose of the study, categorized, and the information was analyzed using

MAXQDA, and phenomenological methods were applied for the interpretation of results.

Validity and reliability of the study

In this study, coding, categorization, and themes were extracted after interviews and careful study of the manuscripts; the results were evaluated according to the objectives by the authors, and finally, to increase the validity and credibility of the study, reports and interpretations were provided to the participants to evaluate the accuracy and completeness of the analyses.

Results

In this section, a report from an in-depth interview with 20 women heads of households covered by the welfare system in Western Mazandaran province is presented. First, the researcher presents the concepts from the interviews. The interview review in the first stage showed 171 initial codes, and in the second stage, 44 codes, which are shown in the table below with the codes and an example of the conceptual expressions related to that code.

Table 1. Description of the Background Characteristics of Female Heads of Households in the Study

Row	Place of residence	Age	Duration of marriage	Education Level	Job Status	Reason for guardianship
1	Village	34	14	Diploma	In flowers and plants	Death of spouse
2	City	27	6	Master's Degree	In the insurance office	Death of spouse
3	City	26	3	Diploma	In mat weaving	Divorce
4	Village	30	10	Associate's Degree	Secretary	Death of spouse
5	City	29	5	Diploma	In garment production	Divorce
6	City	35	3	Bachelor's Degree	Secretary	Divorce
7	Village	46	20	Middle School	Wage worker	Death of spouse
8	Village	44	25	Diploma	Housewife	Divorce
9	Village	26	4	Associate's Degree	In a service worker	Divorce
10	City	23	3	Bachelor's Degree	In service	Divorce
11	City	40	15	Diploma	In service for	Runaway spouse
12	City	24	7	Diploma	Housewife	Divorce
13	Village	36	18	Diploma	In service for	Death of spouse
14	City	35	10	Diploma	Agency driver	Divorce
15	village	20	3	Diploma	Housewife	Divorce
16	Village	25	4	Associate's Degree	Tailor	Divorce
17	Village	28	7	Bachelor's Degree	Housewife	Death of spouse
18	City	43	20	Diploma	Hairdresser	Runaway spouse
19	Village	37	18	Diploma	Housewife	Runaway spouse
20	Village	33	10	Associate's Degree	Shop apprentice	Divorce

Table 2. Codes and Components Related to Harms in the Area of Female Heads of Households

Codes	Conceptual phrases
High cost	The cost of living is very high now. I don't know if I can afford the cost of living.
Living with family	I live in my father's house
Forced marriage	They are forcing me to settle for marrying an old man because of the living expenses and shelter.
Sexual safety	I would like to have a safe environment at work, at least sexually.
Hiding the divorce	I didn't tell anyone I separated from my husband.
Service work	I was forced to do service work to make ends meet.
Relocation	I would like to migrate from that place and go to an unknown place.
Inappropriate view of divorce	My smallest behaviors are under the microscope of my neighbors.
Isolation of children	they are less likely to be in public.
Children's decline in education	My children have poor academic performance.
Children's work	My son (15 years old) has dropped out of school and is working.
No entertainment	We only work to make ends meet, no entertainment or parties.
Providing for living expenses	I have to cover all living expenses myself.
Family's criticism	I constantly hear criticism from those around me.
Inadequate income	My concern is that having a good income and living in my father's house is very difficult.
Betrayal	After my wife cheated on me, I couldn't stay in that life
Illegitimate offers	When I was looking for a guarantor to get a loan, they offered me a guarantee on the condition of becoming a concubine
Inattention to the children	They have not seen happiness, neither when their father was there nor now.
Long working hours	I have to work long hours so as not to need my family.
Verbal harassment	Verbal harassment is a common form of humiliation of female heads of households in the family environment.
The tense environment	The unstable family conditions before the divorce, and the problems related to the absence of the father in the family
Children's incompatibility	Due to the tensions of marital life, children become extremely incompatible.
Children's stress	My child is extremely stressed and cannot focus on his studies.
Family opposition to separation	Divorce was not a custom in our family; everyone was against it.
A suitable job	My most important mental concern is finding a suitable job so that I can cover my living expenses.
Insecurity in my job	I want to work in a feminine environment.
Unwillingness to have a relationship	Their behavior made me realize that they no longer want to have a relationship with me.
The cold gaze of those around me	After I got divorced, my friends and those around me looked at me coldly and negatively.
Refusal to accept children	They were against accepting custody of my child.
Constant fatigue	After returning home, I am very tired.
Working outside the home	My family is against working outside the home.
Worrying about the future of my children	Thank God I did not have children; otherwise, I would have to drag a child after me and make him miserable.
My son's addiction	My son also turned to drugs.
Away from an inappropriate environment	With my divorce, I wanted to save my children from an unhealthy environment caused by my father's addiction.
Negative impact on a child's life	Issues have affected my daughter's life and vision.
Distrust	I hate all men.
Depression	I don't have the patience for anyone or anything. I like to be alone.
My husband's betrayal	Because of my wife's betrayal, I couldn't stay in that life anymore.
carefree husband	My husband was a fun-loving and irresponsible man.
The housing concerns	Housing deposit and monthly rent are very high. I really don't know what to do to meet the monthly rent.
Loyalty to parents	My son was very dependent on both of us, and he was very upset after the separation.
Financial independence	Thank God I can work for myself and not depend on others.
An independent life	My daughter and I live alone.
Responsibility in life	Most of the things in life were with me.
Children's desire for peace	Their desire for peace and stability in everyday life.
A small parental home	A small and old house with 3 single children. There was no room for me and the children.
Poor family economy	I am under a lot of pressure in terms of financial conditions.
Breaking up with married friends	I broke up with many of my married friends. I realized that they no longer wanted to be in a relationship with me.



Figure 1. Cloud Diagram of Concepts Extracted from Interviews on the Harms of Female Heads of Households

Deprivation of individual authority

The family of female heads of household, especially their brothers, instill a sense of humiliation in women by offering opinions, commands, prohibitions, and false zeal. Due to the absence of a man in their lives, others make decisions for the individual and impose their own opinions (16).

Verbal humiliation

Voice abuse is a common form of humiliation of female heads of household in the family and work environment. Verbal humiliation includes blaming women, giving them inappropriate titles, and arguing with them in the family and work environment (16).

Isolation and social restrictions

Becoming a guardian due to divorce causes the individual to be labeled as divorced. This label affects the individual's behaviors and actions; it brings about isolation and social restrictions concerning other people.

Failed remarriage

The need to have an emotional partner is one of the main needs of every human being, and ignoring it can cause people to suffer from many mental problems (17). In addition to the annoying views of men towards women heads of households, many

of them are forced to remarry due to their lack of ability to face life's difficulties and the pressures of society and those around them. They are often forced to marry older men or men with children. The most important problem for women in the issue of remarriage is the satisfaction of their children.

Role duality

Since women heads of households are forced to pay for their living expenses through economic activity, and on the other hand, they cannot ignore the role of motherhood, raising and caring for children, and housekeeping, they face many problems. Usually, men are responsible for managing life, and women have not received any training in this regard. When they become heads of households based on their living conditions, they experience additional suffering.

Sexual harassment in the environment

Women feel helpless and lack social and emotional support after losing their husbands. The experience of sexual insecurity is an integral part of their lives, which appears and manifests itself in various social areas, such as the public space, the workplace, in the form of undesirable marriages without suitable conditions, demands to become

concubines, street harassment, etc., which are collectively called sexual harassment. Sexual harassment in the workplace and outside the family somehow shows the authority or power of men in imposing sexual desires. This harassment is sometimes done so subtly that it leads to accepting sexual desires in exchange for rewards.

Mental and physical health

For women heads of households, the disintegration of life, worries about the future, and their loneliness, and the abandonment of children are very disturbing and increase mental problems, and the blame-based feeling of divorced women will bring them nothing but despair, frustration, and loss of self-confidence.

The prevalence of distrust

Another obvious issue is that distrust of men and unwillingness to remarry are very high among divorced women. Research results indicate that women distrust men and form insecure relationships based on this distrust.

Zeinab says, "It's enough that my husband lied to me; I can't trust any man anymore. Men in general cannot be trusted."

Employment

The most important concern of female heads of households is not having a suitable job. Most of these women are not familiar with specific professional skills to start a business that would provide them with a minimum income. Despite the multiple roles and performing dual duties, they receive lower wages than men, which in turn negatively affects the facilities and opportunities available to these women and perpetuates the cycle of inequality and poverty; in a way that poverty itself reproduces the cycle of harm and problems (18). Given the current conditions of society and the fluctuations of the economic market, it has not been possible for them to start an independent business; on the other hand, working in the service sector has

always posed problems for them, given the way society views women as heads of households.

Housing Problems

The period after divorce for female heads of households is accompanied by lack of love from those around them, especially the family, and the issue becomes critical when the woman faces financial and housing problems and the father's family is also unable to provide material support; in this case, providing housing costs and choosing a healthier living environment are usually the most important concerns of these women, which leads to areas of abuse and many moral harms.

Harms related to children

Divorce has presented opportunities and threats to women, and children are the main victims of the social harms of divorce. Because children are exposed to countless psychological pressures, they face symptoms of depression, anxiety, mental disorders, and low self-esteem, higher divorce rates, and insecure attachment in adulthood (19).

Educational decline

Immersion in matters related to meeting living expenses can cause family members to distance themselves from each other and neglect their children's issues (14).

Drug addiction

I was responsible for providing for my children's living expenses, and my husband was always either drunk or a corpse. This had a huge impact on my children's lives. I tried to keep them away from their father, but the conditions were very unfavorable. Now that he has run away, my son has suffered from severe mental problems, has low self-esteem, and has turned to smoking, which is something I was always afraid of.

Worrying about the children's future

Feeling worried about providing for the living, educational, and career expenses of their children puts additional pressure on

women who are heads of households. I have difficulty providing for the living and educational expenses of my children. I worry about the future of my children and how much I can meet their needs given the problems.

Aggression and incompatibility

Parental separation and living in two homes were stressful for the children and affected their lives extensively and for a long time. The children felt torn between their sense of loyalty to their parents and their desire for peace and stability in their daily lives. The general perception of the children's experience was that living in two homes was like living in two worlds. Children struggled with feelings of loss, loyalty, and attachment.

Analysis of the interviews showed that one of the most important concerns of female heads of households was the incompatibility of children, which resulted from the unstable family conditions before the divorce and problems related to the absence of a father in the family.

According to the information in Table 3, 44 codes were, as a final point, reduced to 15 codes with different frequencies. It can be stated that the concepts of employment, concern about the future of oneself and

Table 3. Frequency Table Related to the Components of Social Harms of Female Heads of Households

Row	Concepts	No.
1	Distrust	12
2	Environmental pressure	13
3	Negative view of divorce	11
4	Disenfranchisement of individuals	5
5	Unfavorable financial conditions	20
6	Worry about the future	20
7	Children's incompatibility	10
8	Children's education	5
9	Sexual harassment	9
10	Verbal abuse	10
11	Isolation	14
12	Employment	20
13	Living at a friend's house	4
14	Loyalty to parents	4
15	Housing provision	11
		171

one's children, and inadequate financial conditions were the most frequent. Therefore, from the perspective of the interviewed women heads of households, having a suitable job and sufficient income to cover living expenses reduces their concerns about the future of their lives and their children.

According to the interviews conducted, the concepts and codes extracted from the interviews are ultimately the main and sub-themes of the research as described in the table below. According to the information obtained, the harms suffered by women heads of households are divided into two categories: social and economic, which can be demonstrated separately in Table 4.

Table 4. Socio-economic disadvantages of female heads of households identified in this study

Main content	Sub-theme
Social harms	Denial of personal authority, verbal humiliation, psychosocial and physical health, failed remarriage, sexual insecurity, verbal humiliation, drug addiction, isolation, limited social connections, role duality, delinquency of children, dropout and dropout of children's education, prevalence of distrust, divorce in children's marital life, incompatibility, challenges related to single parenthood
	Economic harms
	Insufficient income, unemployment, lack of access to suitable employment, and housing rental costs

Discussion

According to the results, it was determined that the majority of women heads of households under welfare support in the study area were divorced women, which indicates that the prevalence of divorce in recent years in the studied society has been growing, which has caused many problems for women and families. The harms suffered by women heads of households can be divided into two categories: harms that affect the women themselves and harms that affect their children. The understanding and interpretation obtained

from the interview data indicate the inadequate economic and social conditions of women heads of households under welfare support. Financial problems, lack of suitable job opportunities, and, as a result, failure to meet living expenses and provide suitable housing, lead to frustration and pressure, resulting in greater vulnerability for them and their children. On the other hand, the lack of appropriate social ties and networks, and the lack of support from family and those around them, lead to increased poverty and greater vulnerability for women and their children.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Ahmadnia and Ghlibaf Kamel (18), who asserted that the structure of all human societies, including Iran, has a male structure in the process of creating job opportunities, and the labor market is very male; therefore, the male workforce is more welcomed, and the lack of job opportunities commensurate with the level of society's needs has prevented a large portion of female heads of households from finding a job with a suitable income that meets the minimum living standards. Since these women are forced to meet their living expenses through economic activity and also perform the role of motherhood, raising and caring for children, and housekeeping, they face many problems.

The results were in agreement with Mirhosseini and Koohpeyma Ronizi (14), who established that when women become heads of households based on living conditions, they experience double suffering. The quality and satisfaction of these people in life are low, and they are exposed to all kinds of harm due to double discrimination. Financial problems and taking on a dual role in life cause feelings of despair and frustration, loss of self-confidence, and ultimately a lack of control over children, which can result in social harm to children in these families. Children from single-parent families have less social competence and show more behavioral problems. The academic performance of

children from these families is weaker, and they are generally introverted. Also, due to the mother's busy work schedule, social control and supervision over their behavior is not sufficient. Children of female heads of households, as children of the lower class compared to their peers in school and neighborhood, fail to achieve their goals and needs and feel frustrated, which provides them with the opportunity to commit delinquency, drop out of school, be aggressive, and be intolerant. Therefore, it can be said that these women are very worried about their future lives and those of their children. Female heads of households endure more pressure than families where both parents are present, and as a result, their satisfaction level decreases. Increased life pressures and decreased social relationships lead to social isolation and frustration among women, which leads to negative emotions and feelings, and as a result, mistreatment of their children.

In line with the findings of this study, Gholam Niyrami (20) reviewed recent research on dimensions of social security among women householders and reported that insecurity in society is one of the issues that these women were struggling with. Since these women have no man to take care of them, many men allow themselves to have inappropriate desires, such as concubines, secret relationships, and unconventional relationships. This insecurity spreads to all parts of these women's lives and develops a kind of distrust of men among them and their children. The worst thing that can happen to a society is the loss of trust, which is worse than poverty. Such a society will never progress. This insecurity has also affected their social relationships, so much so that many friends and people around them avoid continuing relationships with them. Therefore, in order to avoid this insecurity and the negative view of society and people around them, these women try to limit their social relationships and choose solitude and distance from friends and acquaintances. This leads to a kind of restlessness, anxiety,

and depression, and leads to the loss of their mental and physical health.

Furthermore, as confirmed by El-Lawindi et al. (2), even today, despite the support of the government and organizations such as the Relief Committee and the Welfare Organization for female heads of households, we always witness a large number of these women facing an inappropriate situation in various social, economic, and psychological fields, each of which plays a vital role in the occurrence of harm in society. These harms are a sign of the inefficiency of social management, which is influenced by cultural and economic management in the country. In these circumstances, it is natural to focus on the decisive and effective issues in these areas, including the state of mental health literacy or social literacy, having vitality and social capital in society, family vitality, the existence of values, religious beliefs, social norms and compliance with the law, which are important issues, and it is necessary to make expert and thoughtful policies by considering these dimensions.

Although the Welfare Support Organization provides various material and non-material services to these women to improve their living conditions, due to the extent of the problems of this group of women, it rarely responds to their needs. Therefore, solving the problem of these women depends on empowering them in various personal, psychological, social, and economic dimensions, so that a fundamental step can be taken to improve their situation and get rid of poverty and problems.

Recommendations

According to the research results and concerns of female heads of households, it can be suggested:

- Regarding employment, the most important concern of female heads of households is therefore the need for welfare workers to spend more time on individual counseling and holding technical and

professional skill classes and business training to prepare women for entering the labor market

- Guiding and introducing female heads of households to production and industrial workshops, and encouraging employers by providing support packages such as low-interest facilities, tax exemptions, and insurance discounts to attract and retain female heads of households

- Regarding housing, it can be stated that with the increase in the costs of purchasing and renting housing, policies in the form of the National Housing Plan should progress more quickly for women to benefit from residential units

- Also, changing the current guidelines and approving new guidelines by taking a commitment of several months to pay facilities and grants before renting a house.

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