HPG briefing note

Economics, social status and gender relations: what makes households 'female-headed' in Somalia?

Lessons from a rapid learning exercise

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Recommendations

Aid agencies need to think through why they use female-headed households (FHHs) as a group in any assessment, analysis or programming. They also need to justify why such a group is an appropriate recipient of the specific interventions in question.

Evaluators should question carefully any such use of a FHH category, and critically examine on what assumptions it was based, how far its use corresponded with the reality of the client population, and how far it is a meaningful proxy for gender analysis.

A follow-up study should be conducted in Somalia to investigate in which circumstances women are asserting their status as household heads, and the implications for women's empowerment.

The use of mini studies within project implementation warrants further testing and must look to answer precise and straightforward questions that generate learning of wide-ranging importance.

Ways to invert the usual relationship between programme staff and experts should be explored, so that expert resources, such as gender advisors, work under the direction of programme staff to help them answer the issues they prioritise.

There may be wider implications for the wisdom of using other labels (e.g. 'people with disabilities') in targeting or designing assistance, where this is not clearly related to the actual situation of the people being targeted.

HPG Humanitarian Policy Group

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BRCiS Building Resilient Communities in Somalia

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Introduction

Between 2013 and 2016 the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) worked to support the Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) consortium of international non-governmental organisations to implement and learn from a variety of projects in seven regions of Somalia that aimed to reduce the underlying vulnerabilities of communities.[1] BRCiS's monitoring system was built around regular in-depth surveys. HPG tried to complement this with a different kind of learning: to facilitate a more reflective way of working with populations by helping staff to question what was happening in communities and in the lives of people they work with. In 2016, HPG piloted the idea of 'mini studies', helping BRCiS programme staff to identify narrow questions whose answers might be important for adaptive management and which could be answered quickly with a simple methodology.

BRCiS staff wanted to know more about surprising findings in the BRCiS 2014 baseline survey (BRCiS, 2014) and the subsequent 2015 survey (BRCiS, 2015) on the prevalence of female-headed households (FHHs). Across the regions where BRCiS works, more than half of all households sampled were female-headed. The prevalence had also shown a very large change from 2014 to 2015: in Banadir, for example, it had jumped from 50% to 77% in the space of one year, while in Mudug it had dropped from 67% to 44%.

BRCiS staff wanted to understand these numbers for several reasons. Conventionally, FHHs are classified by the aid sector as a vulnerable group, and such a high percentage of vulnerable households in a community would be a major cause of concern. If, as seems plausible, FHHs had (some) specific vulnerabilities or needs, this would potentially affect not only the targeting of assistance but also its fundamental design. The rapid change in the number of FHHs might also be important, if it indicated a significant demographic, social or economic change of concern (e.g. something causing an urgent need for men to migrate or the separation of families).

For adaptive management, BRCiS needed to understand the following questions:

1. Why are there so many FHHs in the project area?
2. What do people mean when they say that a household is female-headed?
3. Is there any reason for the large change in numbers from 2014 to 2015?
4. Do FHHs have specific vulnerabilities because they are female-headed? Are there different types of FHH, some of which have different needs or vulnerabilities?

HPG worked quickly with BRCiS to design a study that could quickly, simply and cheaply shed light on these questions. The study was completed in 2016, and this report written for BRCiS's internal purposes. In the light of HPG's current engagement with issues of inclusion and of gender

1 These regions were Banadir, Bay, Gedo, Hiraan, Lower Juba, Lower Shabelle and Mudug.

(HPG, 2019), HPG and BRCiS feel that the study may be of interest to a wider audience, both because of its subject matter and to illustrate the potential of rapid and simple learning exercises if clear and narrowly focused questions can be identified. HPG and BRCiS are therefore publishing this report, largely as it was originally written in 2016, and with a short postscript on how the project adapted interventions in the light of the findings.[2]

Methodology

The formulation of research questions (above) was critical; they had to be answered quickly and simply, and the authors facilitated the analysis with the BRCiS management team. The intended methodology combined quantitative and qualitive components. A mini survey for quantitative analysis could be completed in just ten minutes by phone, taking advantage of the existing third-party monitoring system established by DFID for the project, which used a call centre in Nairobi and which had a database of the telephone numbers of respondents from the BRCiS 2014 and 2015 surveys. Unfortunately, due to implementation pressures, the consortium did not undertake the qualitative interviews in Somalia, and so the study relied entirely on the mini survey answers. (To avoid confusion, we refer to the short survey for this study as the 'mini survey': the term 'survey' will always refer to BRCiS (2014) or BRCiS (2015)). HPG wanted to pilot the mini study as a tool for adaptive management, and the study design therefore had to enable analysis that could be done without particular statistical expertise. All analysis was therefore conducted using Excel and only basic calculations. Tests for statistical significance were not used.

In the second BRCiS survey (2015), 197 households had been identified as headed by a woman and the mini survey used exhaustive sampling to interview all of these women. Of these, only 143 could be contacted, of whom 17 declined to be interviewed. Therefore a total of 126 women were interviewed, almost two-thirds of the intended sample.

Findings on female-headed households

Of the 126 women respondents, 24 said that they were not in fact household heads. Of these 24 women, five explained that their status had changed since the 2015 survey, leaving the status of the others who had previously been identified as female household heads in question. Most claimed that they had not been asked in the 2015 survey about whether or not they were female household heads; others denied that they had ever claimed to be household heads; and the rest said that they had never been interviewed at all. Any doubt that this threw on the overall validity of the surveys is not the topic of this study; the mini study was analysed with a sample of 102 women who self-reported as female household heads in the original survey and who continued to maintain this status.

2 Some of the broader findings on the use of surveys by BRCiS have also been edited in this published version.

Most female household heads are married

It is commonly assumed that when a husband and wife live together in a marriage, whether monogamous or polygamous, the man is regarded as the household head. This is especially true in settings such as Somalia, which may be described as conservative or patriarchal. However, this study suggests that this may not always be the case.

Three-quarters (77/102) of the women who self-identified as female household heads reported that they were married. Most (69%) married women were living with their husbands in monogamous marriages, and they made up more than half (52%) of all the female household heads. Eight of the 24 women in polygamous marriages were also living with their husbands, so married women living with their husbands made up almost 80% of married female household heads and 60% of all female household heads.

This challenges the rationale of using FHHs as an indicator of vulnerability, underpinned by the frequent cultural norm in Somalia that young women leave their parents' household only when they marry or give birth. FHHs may then be presumed to be largely the aggregate of widows, divorced and separated women, and unmarried mothers who are living independently. This does not correspond well with those identified as FHHs in BRCiS (2015), where the actual prevalence of households matching this description was very much lower (see Table 1). Humanitarians would expect to see rates of FHHs similar to those in the bottom row of Table 1 (around 13–19%).

Table 1 Percentages of female-headed households: by self-definition versus unmarried women only

Definition	Banadir	Bay	Gedo	Hiraan	L. Juba	Mudug	Total
FHHs as self-defined (BRCiS, 2015)	77%	81%	62%	25%	75%	44%	**61%**
Women household heads who are married	83%	82%	71%	50%	65%	70%	**70%**
FHHs on assumed definition in aid sector[i]	13%	15%	18%	(13%[ii])	26%	13%	**19%**

i Self-identifying female household heads who also said they were not married.
ii The sub-sample was very low.

Household power and economic power

The study then asked women directly why they considered their household to be female-headed. Several explanations were offered but almost all had some economic justification (see Table 2). Half of the married female household heads (38/77) reported that their husbands did not work or were unemployed. Others said that their husband earned little, or that they, the woman, provided as much for the families as the men did, which made them the household head. Significantly,

though, half of married women claiming to be household heads did so despite their husbands being economically active to some degree. Being a household head may commonly be considered to be a question of social status, and one determined largely by gender. For many Somali women, though, this mini study suggests that the status of being a household head is at least partially derived from their economic power within the household, a more powerful claim than gender.

Table 2 Percentage of married women giving different reasons for their household being female-headed

Why do you say that you, the woman, are the household head? (multiple answers possible, *n* = 102)	
Answer	**Number of answers**
I am the main breadwinner in the family or husband doesn't always work	47
My husband is unemployed	33
I am the only adult in the family	9
Easier access to assistance	9
Husband is old, disabled or otherwise incapable of working	8
I am the senior adult in the family	3
Husband is not always around	2
No answer	42

As discussed above, the design of the study intended qualitative interviewing to complement the telephone survey. The lack of qualitative interviews meant that the report had to use data to 'suggest' certain conclusions, leaving some critical issues unaddressed. For example, it would be useful to understand in which circumstances, and in speaking to whom, a married woman would claim to be the head of her household, how far that is accepted by their husbands and family, whether that status is accepted by wider society and, if so, whether that brings women the same advantages of social status as it does for a male household head.

It might appear likely that many women claimed FHH status in order to attract more assistance, but this is unlikely to be a major factor for two reasons. First and foremost, the mini survey respondents, in claiming to be household heads, spoke openly of the fact that they were married and living with their husbands. Somali society has a sophisticated understanding of aid and it is unlikely that they would openly talk about their husbands if they had been using their claimed status simply to advertise vulnerability (although nine women openly acknowledged that identifying as a FHH was at least in part to help in accessing aid).

Why are there more reported female-headed households?

As discussed above, the rapid change in the numbers of FHHs could represent an important but unidentified stress or vulnerability facing many households. Claiming to be a FHH in order to

attract aid is an unlikely explanation of the changes between 2014 and 2015 as Somalia has had decades of exposure to the international aid system, and any such tendency would already have been apparent in 2014.

Women were asked if they thought that there was any change in the number of FHHs, and most felt numbers were increasing (see Table 3).

Table 3 Responses to whether the number of female-headed households was changing

Response	Number of answers	Percentage
Increasing	51	54%
Staying the same	33	35%
Decreasing	10	11%

Their explanations for the change – all unprompted responses to an open question – did not suggest any new, unidentified shock, but rather reflected the findings discussed above: the increasing economic responsibility of women. This could either be interpreted as an increasing *stress* (i.e. rather than a *shock*) or as an improving situation that was giving women more independent economic opportunities. Very few interviewees referred to the number of widows increasing. Although 40% said that divorces were on the rise, neither BRCiS survey found that the rates of divorced women were a significant contributor to the number of FHHs. The biggest single explanation (42%) offered was a rise in unemployment among men, either attributed to the economic situation (lack of jobs) or in some cases (6%) to men chewing *khat*[3] instead of working.

The identified changes thus related to the economic responsibilities taken on board by women rather than a demographic shift. It is unclear, though, how far the broad rise (i.e. beyond the short 2014–2015 period) in FHH numbers does indeed indicate any economic change. The planned in-depth qualitative interviewing would have investigated an important remaining question: how far is the rise in women regarding themselves as household heads a consequence of economic change (i.e. women taking on a greater economic role) and how far is it a reflection of social change (i.e. women who have taken on a greater economic role becoming more assertive about their social status)?

What does being a female-headed household entail?

The tendency in the aid sector to regard being a FHH as a strong indicator of vulnerability is rarely justified explicitly, but there are three plausible mechanisms by which vulnerability and female household heads could be linked. Economically, FHHs may be presumed to lack the male labour of the husband/father and the woman may lack access to many of the economic opportunities

3 The leaves of the plant Catha edulis, which are chewed, contain an amphetamine-like stimulant. Use of the drug is widespread across Somalia, Yemen and Ethiopia.

open to men. Legally, women's claims on assets may be more insecure, particularly inheritance and land rights, and socially, they may be discriminated against in many ways. The Somali women interviewed do not fit into this picture in a consistent way.

More than half of those interviewed were married women living with their husbands. The presence of a man would be expected to give them the same social and legal situation as male-headed households, regardless of his level of economic activity or the self-identification of the women providing for these households. Male labour power was not consistently lacking: nearly two-thirds of the married female household heads interviewed reported having men in the household who were physically able to work, whether or not they were actually bringing in any income. These husbands' unemployment was an economic weakness for the household, and would seem to be the *reason* for the women identifying as household heads rather than a *consequence* of the household being female-headed.

The research narrowly focused on understanding who the women were who identified as household heads and so nothing can be concluded about differences between FHHs and other households in this respect. Many other women may also be carrying the same double burden of main economic provider and main bearer of domestic responsibilities, but without claiming the status of household heads. A far more reliable indicator of vulnerability might then be male unemployment in the household rather than the gender of the household head.

It has always been understood that communities are not composed entirely of 'ideal types' of family structures, whether monogamous or polygamous. Although aid agencies may sometimes think in terms of archetypal households that are 'normal' or 'vulnerable',[4] this does not reflect a belief around how societies are composed and instead is a simplification for practical purposes. However, such a simplification does still depend on an assumption that these archetypes do at least represent a significant proportion of the population. This mini study suggests that in Somalia, the diversity of household profiles and the prevalence of non-standards is such that aid agencies should not be thinking about the standard archetypes at all.

4 For example, the normal household consists of a male breadwinner (father, husband); his female partner (wife, mother) with secondary economic and primary domestic responsibilities; and children. The minority, vulnerable model, is the same household but where the male breadwinner is absent.

Implications and recommendations for an operational agency

Using female-headed households as a targeting criterion

Aid agencies need to think through why they use FHHs as a group in any assessment, analysis or programming. They need to be clear, and to make clear, what they consider this group to be and on what evidence this is based. They also need to justify why such a group is an appropriate recipient of the specific interventions in question.

Although many aid agencies use FHHs as a classification globally, in the Somalia context this category did not appear to have any unifying features that would constitute common vulnerabilities and thus make it useful for designing or targeting particular interventions. This mini study did not investigate correlations between FHHs and poverty, but even so there are no obvious common causal links between their household status and their poverty. This suggests that the label of FHHs is not useful when targeting assistance measures, particularly for resilience-building, since it is hard to think of a set of interventions that would be specifically appropriate for such a mixed group of households (including, for example, everything from households headed by widows and divorcees to the wives of *khat* addicts – but only when these women chose to identify as household heads as a result).

Evaluators should question carefully any such use of a FHH category, and critically examine on what assumptions it was based, how far its use corresponded with the reality of the client population, and how far it is a meaningful proxy for gender analysis.

FHHs are a convenient group for aid agencies because targeting them meets two agency needs: it appears to be a straightforward targeting criterion that links need or vulnerability with an objective (and, in theory, verifiable) characteristic, while also providing a simple way to comply with demands to 'incorporate gender' into programming. This mini study suggests that in Somalia, at least, it may fail on both counts.

Like gender, female-headed households are about both women and men

A follow-up study should be conducted in Somalia to investigate in which circumstances women are asserting their status as household heads, and the implications for women's empowerment.

The mini study was not designed to understand male unemployment, but it has made clear how the same economic factors can affect the social status of both men and women. As discussed, men were being seen less by their wives as household heads largely because there were so few jobs for them. Employment for both men and women is a crucial gender issue that cuts more than one way. When there is no work for men, they may lose status in their family and socially; at the same time, this may enable women to claim greater status, though also places a greater burden on them to provide for their families. The importance of supporting income generation for men and/or women

depends very much on understanding the longer-term implications (for men, women, families and communities) of such changes in status and economic responsibilities. The reasons behind the failure of so many men to provide for their families have not been investigated: some of their wives appeared to believe they were not trying hard enough. The role of the drug *khat* deserves much greater attention by aid agencies, including how far it is a symptom or a cause of unemployment. This usefully illustrates the importance of a relational approach to gender that understands how the situations of men and women are interlinked, rather than (as often happens in practice) focusing solely on the welfare of women.

Lack of qualitative interviewing meant that the mini study could not reflect on how far women's claim to be household heads is simply a change in economic circumstances or whether there is a change in their assertiveness as a result of their economic power in the household. We do not know, for example, how others perceive women who regard themselves as household heads, whether the women present themselves as household heads outside their own households, or even whether the women who so self-identify see this as a positive and empowering step, or if it is an admission of desperation in the household and even a source of shame. The mini study did, though, bring these questions to light, and showed how operational agency staff could answer them with a relatively straightforward set of interviews. Societies change and evolve. Widely held preconceptions of Somali society as being conservative and patriarchal may need nuancing, and this critical task can be achieved through the use of limited resources for carefully crafted mini studies.

Learning with limited resources

The use of mini studies within project implementation warrants further testing. These mini studies need careful crafting to ensure they look to answer precise and straightforward questions that generate learning of wide-ranging importance.

This study was designed to test a different way of bringing research into programming to support adaptive management. The costs involved were small, because the mini study consisted of just over 100 telephone interviews, each of around 10 minutes. The use of professional researchers was strategic: facilitating the identification of the important issue that the project needed to understand; framing it as a set of simple and answerable questions; and undertaking a simple analysis and writing up a short report.

This report has shown the potential and the limitations of a purely quantitative mini study. It has generated answers to questions of interest to operational agencies – but in the absence of qualitative interviewing they remain limited, and often suggestive of *possible* explanations. This is still a useful function, helping to clarify further questions that could subsequently be followed up with a different kind of interviewing – in respect of the questions raised in this report, open-ended questions in qualitative interviews.

Ways to invert the usual relationship between programme staff and experts should be explored, so that expert resources, such as gender advisors, work under the direction of programme staff to help them answer the issues they prioritise.

The study has deliberately avoided all reference to theory or to other empirical research on the nature of FHHs. Bringing in learning from other sources would obviously enrich the understanding of FHHs in Somalia, but the purpose of this work was to illustrate how much people managing interventions can learn about the issues facing them, even without a great deal of theoretical or academic knowledge. Any future follow-up work exploring the questions raised in this paper would clearly benefit from guidance based on the experience and expertise of others. It has not always proved easy to find a way to put such expertise at the service, and under the direction, of those who need it for practical purposes.

One objective of the mini study could not be met because field staff did not have time to be involved. Telephone mini surveys may prove useful in throwing up knowledge, but because agency staff were not able to participate in the analysis, the mini study was unfortunately not a vehicle for deepening reflective practice. Whether or not greater engagement by 'frontline' aid agency staff could, as was intended, increase the level of analytical reflection by field staff and their ability to influence higher-level management decision-making remains to be tested.

The creation of vulnerability

There may be wider implications for the wisdom of using other labels (e.g. 'people with disabilities') in targeting or designing assistance, where this is not clearly related to the actual situation of the people being targeted.

This study found that a label commonly used as a marker of vulnerability for the purpose of targeting assistance instead masked a much more complex mix of economic constraints and empowerment, the combination of economic responsibilities for women and at least some success in meeting them. There is no suggestion that the households interviewed were all coping well and did not need assistance: only that their status as FHHs did not in itself tell us to what degree they needed assistance and, if necessary, what kind of assistance would be helpful. The use of categorical targeting by aid agencies is not confined to FHHs; other labels are also used as proxies for need or vulnerability. It is highly likely that a similar study of people with a registered disability, a certain age, a particular identity or with any other visible markers of 'vulnerability' would demonstrate that these labels, too, are used for a variety of reasons and mask a wide diversity of situations and needs. The weak correspondence between the ways in which the aid sector labels vulnerability and people's actual needs and abilities is a cause of wide and pressing concern.

Postscript[5]

This report was written as an internal document for BRCiS in 2016. BRCiS used the report to make some immediate changes in three areas: in survey design and monitoring and evaluation; in the targeting of programming activities; and in thinking about what counts as vulnerability.

- Subsequent surveys and monitoring exercises added questions about male labour in the household and whether men were working, in order to better understand the economic situation of households rather than judging this from the gender of the household head.
- Programme staff went through a process of rethinking what a FHH meant. They characterised the traditional Somali understanding as families where the woman is single or a widow, and if they reported that there was no male contributing to household income. They were able to bring this more local understanding into the programme mainstream. This recognised family splitting as a livelihood strategy, where husbands and wives live apart but maintain ties, and such households were no longer classified as FHHs for targeting purposes. As a result, the percentage of households targeted as vulnerable on female-headed grounds went from around 50% to between 5–10%.
- Breaking the link between the gender of the household head and vulnerability identification also brought a gradual cultural change into the consortium, with a woman head no longer signalling weakness.

Although, as the study authors wrote in 2016, there were some concerns around the inability of agency and field staff to properly engage in the analysis of the study, which might prevent it from serving as 'a vehicle for deepening reflective practice' (see above), BRCiS staff were ultimately able to reflect on the analysis and find what was relevant for the management and improvement of their project. This later update provided an opportunity to end on a brighter note for the possibilities of well-informed adaptive management.

5 Information provided by BRCiS in 2021.

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