

Demographic and Social Characteristics of the Ultra Poor

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Abstract

This report aimed to understand the demographic, social and economic characteristics of the ultra poor. Analysis of data clearly showed that the ultra poor households were smaller in size than the rural average. One-third of them were female-headed households. Twenty-two percent were absolute landless, another 73% owned only homesteads. Average landholding was only 5.6 decimals. Majority of them depended on wage labouring and significant proportion on others' help. The study found some distinctive features of the female-headed households - smaller household size, lower economic and demographic dependency, higher proportion of elderly population, who had to work for survival. It also gave a clear understanding that the characteristics of the ultra poor in Comilla were different from the rest of the country. Among other regions Rangpur and Bogra were in the worst-off condition where proportionately a higher percentage of destitute live. Fifteen percent of the ultra poor were homeless. Another 30% own low cost houses with current value Tk 500 or less, houses constructed by cheapest and non-durable construction materials. Fifty-two percent of the living houses were roofed by corrugated iron sheets.

Introduction

Extreme poor households tend to be smaller in size. Family break-up after marriage of adult sons instead of an extended family system is a common phenomenon among the extreme poor. Poor asset base, scarcity of agricultural land, out-migration induced by increasing population pressure on the scarce agricultural resources, desertion of husbands or "out-posting" of children as domestic employees in wealthy households are the major reasons for this¹. The management of a smaller family is also easier which could also account for this phenomenon.

This report focuses on some general characteristics of extreme poor households. It includes household size, age and sex distribution, dependency, sex and occupation of household heads, landholding and housing – indicators that have been primarily used in any poverty analysis. Data used in this report were collected in December 1998 from 1,250 ultra poor households residing in five districts under 25 BRAC's RDP Area Offices. These are the households who were eligible for NGO membership but not participated in the NGO activities. In sample selection the list of all ultra poor households living in the villages of all RDP working areas but not participating in NGO activities prepared by RDP local staff in 1997 was used. The five districts selected for this study were Comilla, Jamalpur, Faridpur, Rangpur and Bogra where concentrations of the non-participating ultra poor households were highest. From each selected region five Area Offices (AOs) were sampled based on the higher frequency of non-participating households.

It was found that, on average, an extreme poor household comprised of 3.79 members, 61% of which were female. Twenty-two percent of the population were children below

¹ *World Food Programme (1998), Impact Evaluation of GCCR Schemes 1995/96 Round 1 Study, Rural Development Project, Growth Centre Connecting Roads (GCCR), Bangladesh*

ten years of age and another 10.4% were with 60 or above years. Forty-seven percent were income earners, of them 61% were women. Number of dependents per income earner was found to be 1.7 (Table 1).

Thirty-five percent of the households were headed by females². Average household size of the female-headed households was 2.41 that was almost half of the male-headed ones. Thirty-eight percent of the female-headed households were a one-member family. On the other hand, only 9.6% of them comprised of five or more members, compared to 47.7% among male-headed households. The study did not find any male-headed single member household. This is because we have sampled only females that automatically excluded single member male-headed households (Table 2).

Demographic characteristics of the female-headed households

Demographic characteristics of the female-headed households significantly varied from those of the male-headed ones. Female-headed households were smaller in size and the share of children below 10 years to total population was also nearly half compared to those of the male-headed households where such share was 27%. Smaller household size and lower demographic dependency contradict the notion that the female with a large number of minor children becomes poor (Hossain and Hossain, 1995). Number of dependents per income earner for male-headed households was 2.5 compared to 0.9 for the female-headed households. Around 19% of the total population of female-headed households are 60 and above years of age compared to only 6% among male-headed households (Tables 1). Sixty percent old age population of the female-headed households were actively engaged in gainful employment. The rate of participation of

² Sex of the household head is one of the indicators that can be used to demarcate the deprived and the most vulnerable section of the population from others. In rural society, females assume the role of household heads in the absence of adult male income earners. In most cases, they are either widows or abandoned women with small children or women with

the oldest population among male-headed households was found to be 40%. The old age people, basically the old age females incapable of participating in any positive employment were treated as a burden in the family and thrown out of the family network. These are the most destitute females who had to work for survival. Two-third members of the female-headed households actively participated in the labour force, of them 89% were female. The participation rates among the male-headed households were significantly lower compared to the rates among the female-headed households.

Demographic characteristics of population living in different geographical locations did not differ significantly except Comilla. Average household size in all study locations was almost same ranged within 3.5-3.7 persons while it was 4.6 in Comilla. Share of children aged below ten years to total population ranged from 20 to 21% in all regions while in Comilla it was 29%. In the case of old age population its share to total was 18% in Bogra followed by 11% in Jamalpur and 10% in Rangpur. In Faridpur and Comilla the figure was approximately 7%. Labour force participation rate ranged between 47 to 53% in all regions except Comilla, where it was only 35%. The contribution of females to total work force was quite high in all region, 61% on average. Regarding the prevalence of female-headed households, it varied from 32% to 40% the differences of which were not significant implied that irrespective of area, the proportion of female-headed households among the extremely poor is quite high (Table 3).

Number and sex of income earners

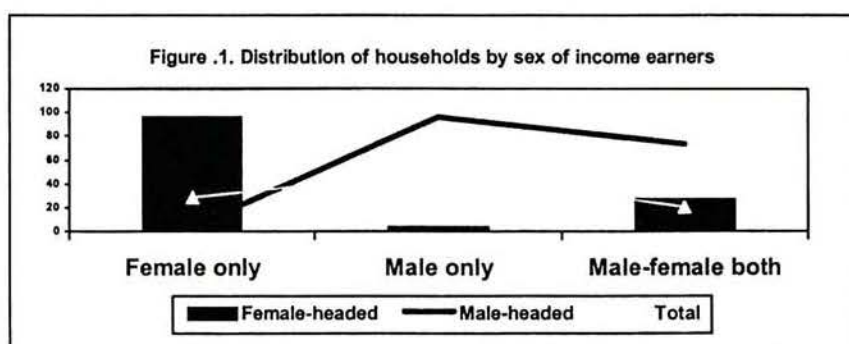
Number of income earners and their sex, age, education and types of their involvement, are indicative of the social position of a household in the community. It

disabled or old age members. They are economically worse-off and isolated from the rest of the society.

is expected that the extreme poor, without any skill and resources, are involved mostly in different wage labouring activities where the scope of earning higher income is limited. To increase income they will have to spare more members if available or to increase the extent of employment per employee. It was found that, on average, 1.41 out of 3.79 household members are involved in different income generating activities (IGAs). A maximum of four persons in a household was found to be contributing to their household resource pool. Thirteen households were without any income earner. Their relatives supported them. Sixty-four percent had a single income earner and another 28.5% had two income earners. The numbers refer to persons who positively contributed to household total earning, irrespective of sex, age and types of activities they were involved in. It also includes beggars.

Sex of income earners

It was observed that about 29% of the total households were without any male income earners and 50.2% without any female. Only 21% of the households were with both male and female income earners. (Figure 1). Most of households without any male income earners were female-headed households. Similarly most of households depending only on male income were male-headed. Nearly two-third of the households, where male and female both contribute were also headed by the male. Analysis of these results further substantiate the idea that in a majority of cases, a person is treated as head of that household if s/he makes some contribution in household income. There may be some exceptions (which are also reflected in the analysis). Four percent of males and females whose contribution in the household income was zero became household heads as the main decision-makers.



Households fully depending on male income were bigger in size. Number of dependents per income earner was also highest for these households. On the other hand, a female earning family consisted of 2.1 individuals, one-fourth of them were 60 and older and another 14% were below 10 years of age. Sixty-nine percent of all members of the female earning family, irrespective of their age, were employed compared to only 30% of male earning households and 58% of households with male and female earners (Table 4).

Household landholding

In targeted credit programmes, landholding is considered to be one of the main indicators for member selection. In rural Bangladesh, land ownership is also considered to be the key indicator for standard of living. It is estimated that with increasing landholding, the consumption of rural people also increases (Husain et al, BBS, 1995). Results presented in Table 3.8 showed that 22% of the extreme poor were absolute landless and another 73% owned only homesteads. Only five percent owned cultivable and homestead land. Only 1.3% of the sample owned more than 50 decimals of land including the homestead (Tables 5-8). Average land size for all sample was found to be only 5.6 decimals.

Female-headed households were relatively more land-poor compared to the male-headed ones. Their average land size was nearly half to that of the male-headed ones. Percentage of absolute landless was significantly higher and percentage of households with both homestead and cultivable land was significantly lower among them (Table 6).

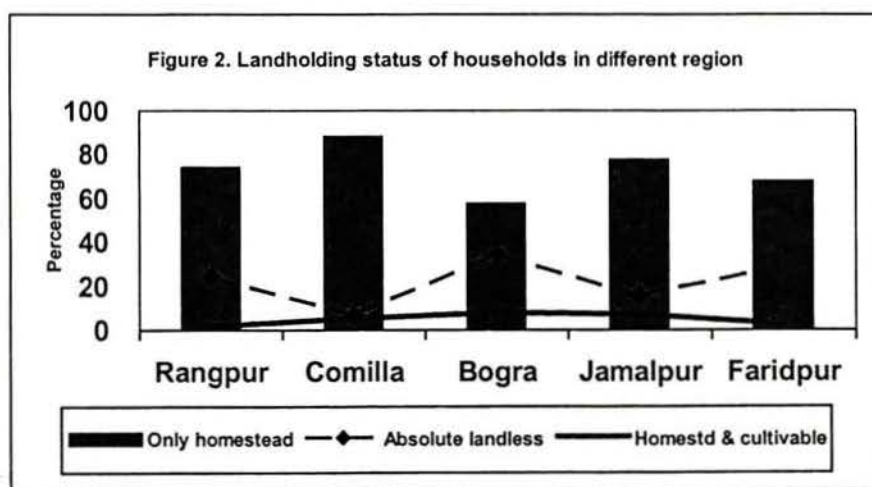
One-fifth of the total sample households live with their relatives, in government *Khas* land and in others' houses. Cross tabulation of living status and landholding showed that 63.8% of the households living with relatives did not possess any land. Similarly, 58.8% of the households living in government *Khas* land were landless. Fifty-five percent of those living in 'others' houses (locally called as '*uthuli*') had their own homesteads (Table 7).

The absolute landless were proportionately higher in Bogra followed by Faridpur and Rangpur region (Figure 2). Lowest number of absolute landless was in Comilla region. Average land size per household varied from the minimum 2.3 decimals in Rangpur to the maximum of 8.1 decimals in Faridpur region.

Occupation of the household heads

Occupation of the household head can be one of the proxy indicators for household well-being. Usually, the household head is the main income earner of a household. His/her level of income depends on the type of activities s/he is involved in, the hours of involvement, the skill and experience of the worker and so on. Distribution of household heads by their occupational status shows that not all the household heads were physically fit for work. Five percent of them were old or disabled people, another nine percent were beggars. A bigger proportion was engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural day labour (26.8% and 18.7% respectively). Types of involvement varied for males and females due to the existing gender division of labour. For example, rickshaw/ van pulling is considered to be a male job where 12.1% of male household heads were employed. On the other hand, 28.1% of the female heads worked in other houses as maidservant. Day labour and pulling of rickshaw/van require more physical labour. Mean age of heads of different occupations indicates that relatively the younger people are involved in such kind of activities mentioned above where requirement of

physical strength is very high. On the other hand, the beggars, disabled, unemployed heads and those, whose main occupation were household works, were the relatively old age people, not capable of carrying out any labour intensive activity. Details on the involvement of male and female household heads by types of activities are presented in Table 9.

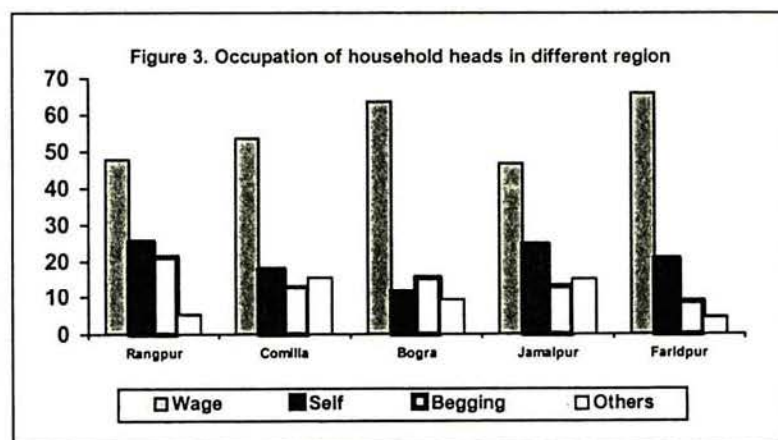


Reclassification of all occupations into four broad occupational groups showed that 57% of the household heads were involved in providing wage labour and another 20% were self-employed. Fourteen percent heads were beggars, disabled or old age population. The latter group was the most vulnerable category with lowest amount of land, 3.8 decimals. One-third of them were absolute landless. The self-employed group owned a slightly higher amount of land compared to the wage-employed group. No significant differences in landholding between these two groups were observed. Significantly higher amount of land of other occupational group indicate their better endowment status. (Table 10).

The employment opportunity in different geographical locations may not be same due to differences in the level of economic development in different region. Therefore, choosing of any occupation may vary across regions. Results show higher involvement

of household heads in wage employment in Faridpur and Bogra and lower in Jamalpur and Rangpur region. On the other hand, more than one-fifth of the heads in Rangpur were beggars, disabled and the old-age people, i.e., the most destitute. Number of destitute was also relatively higher in Bogra region (Figure 3).

Demographic characteristics of different occupational groups show that the begging households were smallest in size. More than one-third of their population were 60 years old or more. Seventy percent of their household population were actively participated in the labour force, 83% of which were female. Results of other groups did not show any significant difference in all respects (Table 11).

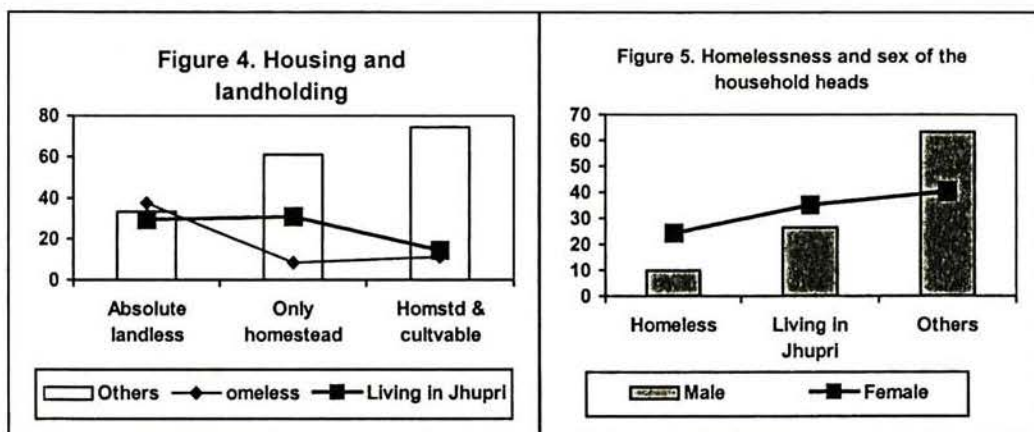


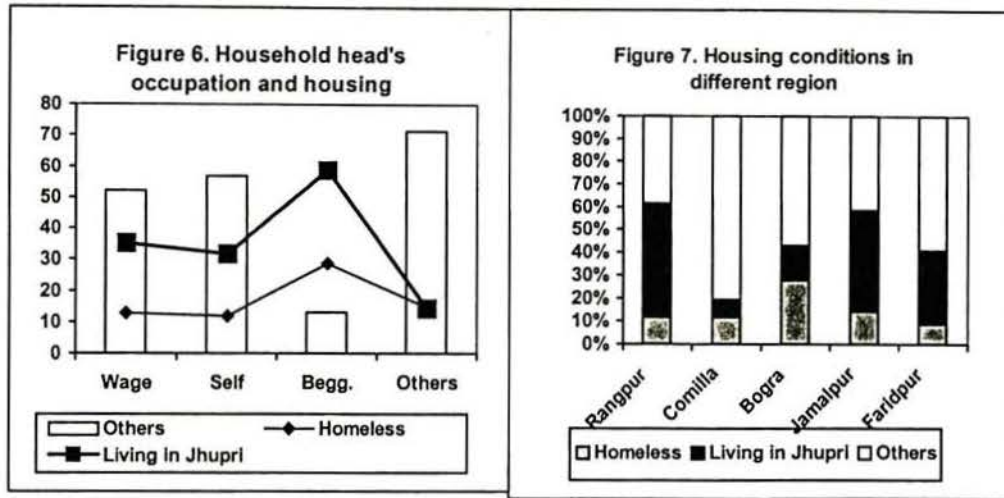
Household living condition

The living condition of a household was measured by ownership of living houses, classification of houses by their roofing and wall construction materials and current value of the houses.

Fifteen percent of the samples were homeless. Another 30% owned low cost houses with current value Tk 500 or less, houses constructed by cheapest and non-durable construction materials. Only about 13% owned relatively better quality houses with current value more than Tk. 5,000. Fifty-two percent of the living houses were tin roofed. The rest were roofed with straw, tali, polythene and other cheaper construction materials. For wall only 3.8% used tin, 49% used straw, 21% used mud and the rest 27% used jute-sticks, leaves of sugar cane, polythene and other cheap materials. Sex of the household heads did not play any significant role in selection of construction materials other than tin (Table 12).

Thirty-eight percent of the landless were homeless and another 30% possess low cost less durable houses which implied that two-third of the landless were vulnerable in terms of possessing living houses. Increasing landholding as a proxy for household wealth increases living condition. Percentage of homeless and those living in low cost houses were higher among households headed by females or illiterate heads or beggars, disabled or old age people (Figures 4-7).





The living conditions of people in different regions varied significantly. The homeless were highest in Bogra (28%), followed by Jamalpur (14%) region. Although the number of homeless in Faridpur was lowest, a large proportion of households owned low cost non-durable houses with current value Tk. 500 or less. Taking together the homeless and those owning low-cost non-durable houses Rangpur was identified as the most vulnerable region. Faridpur stands in the second position after Rangpur. Proportion of houses with tin roofing in Rangpur was only 20% when the total average was 52%. Mean house value in Rangpur was Tk. 664 that was a quarter of the total mean. Second lowest house value was in Faridpur followed by Jamalpur. Living conditions in Comilla was relatively better. (Figure 7 and Table 13).

Conclusions

Analysis of demographic characteristics clearly shows that the extreme poor households are smaller in size than the rural average. One-third of them are female-headed households. Twenty-two percent are absolute landless, another 73% owned only homesteads. Average landholding is only 5.6 decimals. Number of land poor households without any cultivable land was 97% and more in Rangpur and Faridpur region. Dependence on wage labour and others' help was higher in all region.

Analysis of results presented in this chapter clearly shows some distinctive features of the female-headed households - smaller household size, lower economic and demographic dependency and higher proportion of elderly population, who had to work for survival. It also gives a clear understanding that the characteristics of the extreme poor in Comilla are different from the rest of the country. Among other regions Rangpur and Bogra were in the worst-off condition where proportionately a higher percentage of destitute live.

Although homelessness and poor quality of living are important indicators for poverty measurement, high prevalence of tin roofed houses among the extreme poor give an indication that roofing materials, that was previously used as one of poverty indicators, can not be a good indicator for targeting. A special study on extreme poor shows that a large number of those used C.I sheets received them as relief material (Husain & Halder, 2000³). On the other hand, for the extreme poor who do not have easy access to straw and all other cheap construction materials the use of C.I sheets was less costly considering its durability.

³Husain A.M. Muazzam and Halder Shantana R., 'Food Security Through Sustainable Income Uplift and Poverty Eradication Project: A Socio-economic Baseline Survey' Final report, BRAC, December 2000

Table 1. Distribution of sample households by household size and sex of the household head (%)

Household size	Male	Female	Total
One member	-	37.6	13.2
Two member	8.1	23.2	13.4
Three member	18.5	16.4	17.8
Four member	25.6	13.2	21.3
Five or more	47.7	9.6	34.3
Average size	4.53	2.41	3.79

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of male and female headed households

Demographic indicators	Male	Female	Total	Significance level
Household size	4.53	2.41	3.79	p < .01
Number of dependents per income earner	2.51	0.87	1.7	p < .01
Share of children 0-9 years to total population	26.5	14.3	22.2	p < .01
Share of population 60 years or above to total	5.9	18.5	10.4	p < .01
Participation rate of old age population in employment	40.0	59.8	47.9	p < .01
Workers as % of household members	35.9	67.7	47.1	p < .01
Female workers as % of total workers	46.6	88.8	61.4	p < .01
Av. age of household heads (years)	41	46	44.1	p < .01

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of households in different region.

Demographic indicators	Rangpur	Comilla	Bogra	Jamalpur	Faridpur	Remarks
% of FHHs	33.2	34.0	40.4	32.0	36.0	ns
Household size	3.7	4.6	3.5	3.6	3.5	p<.01
No of dependents per income earner	1.5	2.6	1.4	1.3	1.7	p<.01
Share of pop. 0-9 years to total	21.3	29.3	19.8	19.8	20.9	p<.01
Share of pop.≥ 60 years to total	9.7	6.5	17.9	11.2	6.6	p<.01
Workers as % of household members	49.1	35.1	51.1	53.1	47.0	p<.01
Female workers as % of total workers	61.0	58.2	65.4	61.6	60.9	p<.05
Av. no of income earners per hh	1.47	1.29	1.46	1.56	1.29	

Table 4. Demographic characteristics of households for different sex based income-earning groups

Demographic indicators	Sex of income earners		
	Only male n=627	Only female n=360	Male and female both n=263
Prevalence of FHHs (%)	3.8	95.6	27.0
Household size	4.6	2.1	4.3
Number of dependents per income earner	2.97	0.90	0.94
% of population with 0-9 years	26.9	13.6	22.7
% of population with 60 and above years	4.7	23.5	6.1
Workers as % of household members	29.8	69.0	58.2
Female workers as % of total workers	-	100	48.9

Table 5. Distribution of households with landholding and sex of the household head

Landholding status	Male n=811	Female n=439	Total n=1,250	Av. land size (dec.)
Absolute landless	17.0	31.2	22.0	-
Only homestead	77.1	65.6	73.0	4.6
Homestead and cultivable	5.9	3.2	5.0	44.6
Av. Land size (dec.)	6.7	3.5	5.6	

Table 6. Distribution of households by sex of the household head and their landholding category

Landholding category	Male n=811	Female n=439	Total n=1250	Remarks	Av. land size (dec.)
Absolute landless	16.9	31.2	21.9	p<.01	-
1-10 decimals	70.9	63.3	68.2	p<.01	3.6
11-25 decimals	7.3	3.6	6.0	p<.01	15.2
26-50 decimals	3.3	1.1	2.6	p<.05	35.6
>50 decimals	1.6	0.7	1.3	ns	103.3
Remarks	p<.01	p<.01	p<.01		5.6

Table 7. Distribution of households by living status and sex of the household head

Indicators	Absolute landless	Only homestead	Homestead and cultivable	Total
Living with relatives	63.8	34.8	1.4	11.0
Livings in govt. <i>Khas</i> land	58.8	41.2	-	4.1
Living in 'others' houses	45.0	55.0	-	4.8
Else	13.0	81.0	6.0	80.1

Table 8. Distribution of Households by household landholding and regions

Regions	Absolute landless	Only homestead	Homestead + cultivable	Av. Land size
Rangpur	24.4	74.0	1.6	2.3
Comilla	6.8	88.0	5.2	5.7
Bogra	34.4	57.6	8.0	4.9
Jamalpur	15.2	77.6	7.2	7.1
Faridpur	29.2	68.0	2.8	8.1

Table 9. Distribution of households by sex and occupation of the household heads (%)

Occupation category	Male n=811	Female n=439	Total n=1,250	Av. age of hh heads
Agri. day labour	40.4	1.6	26.8	41
Non-agri day labour	18.6	18.9	18.7	38
household work	0.5	11.2	4.2	53
Rural transport	12.1	-	7.8	35
Disable/old age	4.6	6.6	5.3	60
Begging	2.2	21.6	9.0	55
Small business	11.0	6.2	9.0	41
Maid servant	0.1	28.5	10.1	39
Service	3.5	1.6	2.8	40
Self employment	3.2	2.7	3.0	43
Unemployed	0.7	0.5	0.6	63
Others	3.1	0.7	2.2	39
Remarks				

Table 10. Distribution of households by occupation of the household heads and household landholding (%)

Occupation category	Absolute landless	Only homestea d	Homestea d + cultivable	Total	Av. land (dec.)
Wage employment*	20.6	76.4	3.0	55.6	4.4
Self employment**	20.2	74.6	5.2	20.2	5.4
Begging, disable/old age	34.6	62.6	2.8	14.3	3.8
Others***	15.3	66.1	37.1	9.9	15.2
Total	22.0	73.0	5.0	100	
Av. Land size	-	4.6	44.6	5.6	

* includes agricultural, non-agricultural wage labourers and maid servants

** includes small business, rickshaw/van pulling and other home based activities

*** includes service, unemployed, household works and etc.

Table 11. Demographic characteristics of different occupational groups.

	Wage	Self	Begging	Others
household size	3.93	4.27	2.44	4.0
Number of dependents per income earner	1.97	2.56	0.86	2.14
% of population 0-9 years	25.1	26.8	7.5	18.1
Number of income earner	1.48	1.35	1.30	1.36
% population 60 and above years	5.1	6.1	35.1	12.7
Workers as % of household members	45.5	37.3	70.2	42.3
Female workers as % of total workers	59.1	53.4	82.8	59.9

Table 12. Distribution of living houses by wall materials and sex of the household head

Wall materials	Wall		Roof		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Wall	Roof
Tin	4.9	1.2	54.9	45.8	3.8	52.1
Straw	49.0	47.6	39.6	44.0	48.6	41.0
Mud	19.9	22.9	1.5	2.4	20.8	1.8
Others*	26.2	28.3	4.0	7.8	26.8	5.2
	p < .10				p < .10	

* include bamboo, jute-sticks, leaves of sugar cane, polythene and other cheapest materials

Table 13. Distribution of households by ownership of living houses and regions

Ownership of living house	Rangpur	Comilla	Bogra	Jamalpur	Faridpur
Yes	88.0	88.0	72.0	85.6	91.2
No	12.0	12.0	28.0	14.4	8.8
% Of houses with tin roofing	20.0	64.5	63.9	47.7	65.8
House value	664	6,173	3,030	1,479	1,104
House value for all population	584	5,432	2,182	1,266	1,007