

Pragmatic Approaches to Sustainable Development through Rural Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh can reduce gender inequality and improve their social status. Despite its significance, the issue cannot be done with solved easily as there are many factors that tend to debar its progress. In this regard, this paper aims to consider the multi-layered actuality of issues in the rural women empowerment concerned with gender equality in Bangladesh. This paper sought to identify the determinants of empowerment of rural women in Bangladesh. Analysis of some selected factors was performed to identify the empowerment factors. It focuses on the empowerment of rural women, including in relation to access to micro credit, Information Communication and Technology (ICT), agriculture etc.

Keywords: Agriculture, ICT, Micro Credit, Poultry, women empowerment

1. Introduction

Women in Bangladesh experienced a long history of exploitation being a member of a society based on caste, color and gender discrimination. Rural women especially the agricultural force who were nourishing the seed bank selecting from the best varieties are losing their strengths as the commercialization of the terminator seeds has taken place holding slogan of the 'development'. Many of the rural women have migrated to the cities and working for garment and other industries for a minimum wage. Women as a social category had a limited scope of economic movement in a society like Bangladesh. Within the context of globalization, macroeconomic policies, including those related to economic stability, external debt, taxation, investment, employment and markets, have a direct influence on the livelihoods of rural women, in both the formal and informal sectors. Development of macroeconomic policies must take into account the impact of those policies on rural women to ensure their equal access to resources, services and economic opportunities and to enhance their productivity.

2. Methodology

The main evaluation was undertaken in two parts. The first mission was to evaluate current situation and the second mission was to identify the strategies which may be taken. Secondary data by several sources have been employed in this study.

3. Women's Participation in Agriculture

Boserup (1970) distinguished three types of agricultural systems: female, male, and mixed. Female farming systems in some countries in Africa and Latin America and in certain areas of India are characterized by slash and burn agriculture, communal land ownership, and the use of the hoe. Except for land clearing, most of the work is done by women, who support themselves and their children. These women tend to be economically independent and mobile. If they generate an agricultural surplus, they engage in trade to supplement their subsistence earnings with cash income. The female contribution to the overall economy, particularly in agriculture is high throughout Asia. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Vietnam have particularly high percentages of women employed in the agricultural sector, with estimates ranging between 60 and 98 percent (FAO, 2003). Size of adult labor force (15 years and above) during the periods from 1995-96 to 1999-2000 has increased from 36.1 million to 40.7 million implying growth rate of 3.2%. However, growth of female labor force compared to male was found to be very high. During the period, the growth of female labor force was 14.4% compared to only 1.2% for male. The same trend was observed as revealed from Labor Force Surveys (LFS) in 2002-2003 and 2005-2006 (Table- 1).

Again, participation of female labor in agriculture compared to male also increased over time. During the period from 1999-2000 to 2005-2006 adult labor force has increased from 39.0 million to 47.4 million (Figure – 1) an increase by 21.53%. During the same period, while female labor force has increased by 43%, male labor force has increased by 16%. Particularly, for agriculture, there had been absolute decrease in male labor force. Agricultural male labor force decreased from 16.2 million to 15.1 million during the period from 1999-2000 to 2005-2006, a decrease by about 7%. On the other hand, during the same period, female labor force in agriculture has increased from 3.8 million to 7.7 million, an increase by about 103%. Comparative positions of men and women participation in agriculture in recent past can be seen more clearly from Figure – 2

Participation of male labor force in non-agricultural activities, on the other hand, has increased from 14.9 million

to 21.0 million from 1999-2000 to 2005-2006 which means an increase of about 41% while female participation in non-agricultural activities has decreased by 12% during the same period. Percentage of adult male participation has decreased over time while this has been increased for women. For men the percentage of adult male participation in agriculture has decreased from 51.9%, to 41.4% and 31.9% according to the LFS of 1999-2000, 2002-2003 and 2005-2006 respectively. On the other hand percentages of women in agriculture increased gradually from 48.1% to 68.1% according to LFS of 1999-2000 and 2005-2006 respectively (Figure – 3).

4. Participation of women in Poultry

In many developing countries such as Bangladesh, female members of rural families do not have opportunities to work in value adding economic activities, except homestead poultry rearing. Women and girls are undervalued, especially in developing countries, and only half a cent of every international development dollar goes towards helping girls (Levine, Lloyd, Greene & Grown, 2008). A rural woman spends her time taking care of her husband, children, elders and other members of her family. Rural women are unable to work outside their home or beyond their homestead because of family restrictions, social and traditional barriers. Therefore, their potential often remains unutilized or underutilized. Most rural families have insufficient food, clothing, shelter, medication etc. Given these difficult circumstances, homestead poultry rearing is considered the best way to utilize the capabilities of women to be productive and add value to the household. Rural women have the opportunity to rear poultry in their homestead because it requires minimum land, small amount of capital and uses traditional technology. The market for poultry products is usually within the vicinity of the homestead. Consequently, home-based poultry is now one of the main sources of income for the rural women of Bangladesh. Poultry also provides meat for the villagers of Bangladesh. Rural women have the discretion to use money earned from the home-based poultry firm. They spend those earnings on the welfare of their children and for special occasions such as, Eid, Puza or Christmas (religious festivals). They buy clothes for their children and for themselves from this income. Profits are often used for educating their children and for buying medicines for family members. This income also helps during family emergencies. Through these traditional poultry rearing practices, rural women are empowered by being involved in the decision making process of their households. The increased involvement in decision results in the improved status of women in relation to the husband and the family. They can spend money for themselves, which gives them independence to take part in making family decisions. Greater financial independence for rural women increases their bargaining capacity, reduces violence against women, and enables them to gain more influence over decision-making in the family (Hadi, 1997). Consequently, the importance of involving women in economic activities is increasing in developing countries (McNamara, 2003).

5. Women's participation in Information Communication system

ICT is a combination of physical backbone and intellect. Basically information – handling tools- a varied set of goods, application and services that are used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information. They include the 'old' ICTs of radio, television and telephone, and the 'new' ICTs of computer, satellite and wireless technology and the internet. The trained human behind the backbone are the intellect. ICT is often categorized into two broad types: the traditional computer based technologies; and the more recent and fast growing range of digital communication technology.

The flow of information from and to the rural women is an essential precondition for the development of rural areas. The recent development of information communication technologies (ICT) greatly facilitates the flow of information. ICTs are now widely recognized as a critical tool to tackle development issues in developing countries like Bangladesh.

There are distinct differences between men and women in their access to resources, information and support structures. Women usually face higher barriers to the kinds of applied training that can equip them with computer literacy or engagement in ICT-related employment than men. As well, compared to men, women have less time in which to balance out the tension between earning an income and household and childcare .

The history of ICT use in Bangladesh Agriculture is not so rich. In 2003, Support to ICT, taskforce program launched by the Ministry of Agriculture. In Bangladesh, private sector operators are the main providers of ICTs (mobile phones, computers and internet, television channels, radio, and fixed-line telephony on a limited scale), whereas the state controls the fixed-line telephony and two national TV channels and 10 radio centres.

5.1. Access to phones:

Unlike any other technology, acclimatization to mobile phone usage in general people is mostly dissimilar to their acquired literacy level. Mobile phones with their built in friendly operability have a distinct eminence of becoming familiar in a rapid manner. This is why in comparison to many other ICTs, mobile phone adoption trends have evolved in a unique fashion – especially in developing countries. It is very important to mention that the other relevant technologies are also availed by mobile phone services especially in rural areas of developing

countries whereas a mobile phone costs much less compared to a computer making the technology accessible to the cluster of low income population around the world. In Bangladesh Complex Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) for fixed telephone lines is 10.9% and for mobile subscriber is 97.8%. The market share of mobile of total telephone in various countries and in case of Bangladesh, the CAGR is 8.6%. These data were extracted from UNESCAP Statistics Division (Table-2)

5.2 Access to Computer:

Table 3 reveals an increasing tendency of using computer facilities in the rural areas of Bangladesh. The most prominent information from the survey is that though mobile phone has been introduced in the country in early nineties, there has been substantial growth of mobile phone usage in the rural community along the city dwellers. The use of Internet has considerably increased both in urban and rural areas as focused by that survey. Understandably, the use of the ICT facilities is much higher in urban areas compared to rural.

6. Rural Women and Micro-Credit

In recent years, governmental and non-governmental organizations in many low income countries have introduced credit programs targeted at the rural women. They have very limited access to income generating as well as social activities due to number of social, cultural and religious barriers. Participation of rural women in decision making regarding family matters is very low. For these reasons, many of these programs specifically target women .

The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh is perhaps the best-known example of small-scale production credit programs for the poor, and over 90 percent of its clients are women. When it started its micro-credit operation in mid 1980s, 65% of its borrowers were female. By 1995, they represented 95% of all borrowers of microfinance (Khandker et al, 1995). This expansion through women is also noticeable among other NGOs that provide micro-credit, such as BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), ASA (Association for Social Advancement) and PROSHIKA. However, donors and implementing agencies need to significantly improve the design and monitoring of microfinance programmes to ensure that they support the empowerment of women. Empowerment of rural women uplifts their capacity to participate into socioeconomic activities, decision making and poverty alleviation and ultimately improve their livelihood situation 1 (Basher, 2007).

Micro-credit has increasingly been used as a strategy for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment (Bernasek, 2003; Bhatt, 2001; Khandker *et al.* 1998; Leach & Sitaram, 2002).

Micro-enterprise loan delivered by GB in 2005-2007 has been presented in table 4. It is observed from the table that as many as 272308 micro-enterprise loan was delivered to women in 2007 which was lower than the loan delivered to 332644 micro-enterprise in 2005. In 2007, 10651 men were given with micro-enterprise loan compared to 19444 in 2005. The average amount of loan in 2007 for women was Tk 22842 and Tk 22706 in 2005. The loan amount was used for services the highest number of loans by women in 2005 but in 2007 it was used for livestock and fisheries case of men, the highest loan was used for trading.

7. Obstacles of Rural Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

7.1 Family Restriction

Most of the families in the study area are Muslim. So, it is restricted for the girls to go to school.

7.2 Religious Legislation

In Bangladesh some girls are victim of religious legislation as well as social legislation. Some guardians consider that girls do not need higher education. So, women were victimized of social and religious legislation and their study had been stopped.

7.3 Early Marriage

Early marriage is one of the major obstacles in Bangladesh for women empowerment and education.

Guardians think that girls are their burden. So, they always try to marry them.

7.4 Illiterate Guardians:

Some guardians are illiterate as well as ignorant and for this reason some guardians are not willing to send their female child to the educational institutions.

7.5 Lack of Social Awareness

Though some NGOs are arranging awareness programs among the guardians, they, in fact, are not getting aware of sending their female children to the educational institutions. They think that women education is not essential. So, for their lack of awareness some women still remain uneducated in the study area.

7.6 Economic Status of women in Bangladesh

Economic development is the pre-requisite of sorts of development. It is supposed to be considered that women lead their life in economic hardship as they are not engaged in earning activities. They are engaged in doing some household works.

8. Future directions

1. Micro Enterprise development should be expanded. Because it is related to
 - a) agriculture and allied agricultural activities like cultivating to organic vegetables, flowers, oil seeds and seed production
 - b) livestock management activities like dairy farming, poultry farm, livestock feed production and production of vermi composting using the animal waste can be an important area in which women can utilize both her technical skills and raw materials from the farm and livestock to earn substantial income and small scale agro-processing units.
 - c) household based operations like knitting, stitching, weaving, embroidery, bakery and flour milling, petty shops, food preparation and preservation
2. Provide trainings and resources for some rural women to gain skills and knowledge to support themselves and their families.
3. Strengthen organizational participation and women's leadership at the regional level through training and establishment of spaces that empower women in the vindication of their rights, with the goal of generating equality in community development processes.
4. Give them technical and organizational tools to empower them and help them gain access to decision-making spaces
5. Create spaces for women leaders and encourage rural women's participation in community organizations.
6. Support some family vegetable gardens for the rural women, in different communities
 - a) Provide many types of vegetables
 - b) Provide fertilizer
 - c) Supplies and training to set up the gardens, facilitated by agronomists
 - d) Training in vegetable types and diseases, soil types and organic fertilizer
7. Support some eligible rural women with scholarships for technical training: in mobile and in computer skills.
8. Promote the elaboration and approval of gender policy, involving support and resources from different organizations that work in women's development in the municipality, including the local government.
9. Support the formation and function of the rural women's cooperative
 - a) Articulate and strengthen women's productive initiatives already in place
 - b) Regional focus, supported by the Agricultural and Livestock Ministry
 - c) Different workshops on cooperatives for some women founders
 - d) Women trained will relay the information to others in their communities, and will be the ones to supervise and follow-up on the project.
10. Expand Non-formal primary education for rural girls
11. To organize educational and empowerment programmes for rural girls and women
12. To train resource persons, animators and trainers for implementing activities visualized in the objectives.
13. To conduct and promote experimentation, innovations and research in the problems and programmes of empowerment of rural women.
14. To integrate socio-economic activities with concern for health and environment protection, in the light of the rural women's cultural contexts.
15. To invest science and technology in rural women's education and empowerment programmes to enable them to acquire scientific temper and to enable their family and community to engage in the process of sustainable development through the 'reflection-action' process.
16. Formulate Rural Women's Self-help and Savings Groups.
17. Conducting innovative vocational education programmes for rural adolescent girls and older women (ages 15-45), with assistance from the Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh.
18. 18. Conducting a health and personality development programme for rural women and adolescent girls through camps, dramatics,, health information communicated by medical personnel, developing a women-run pathology-laboratory, a population education programme, and promotion of women's sports, games, creative arts, with help from various resource organizations and resource persons.
19. Promoting investigation of indigenous knowledge systems, rural cultural practices, arts and crafts, so as to build rural women empowerment-action on the foundations of the people's own stock of useful knowledge and technologies.
20. Implement effective law to stop early marriages in rural areas.

9. Conclusion

In Bangladesh, impressive achievements have been made over the last decades in gender equality and rural women's empowered, particularly in areas such as access to primary education, ICT, employment and availability of micro-credit. This has led to significant advances in the status of rural women and in poverty reduction overall. At the same time, greater efforts to decrease inequalities and invest in rural women will translate into even higher achievements for the government and people of Bangladesh. It is not only a major challenge but also a major opportunity for progressive and sustained change. The pursuit of women empowerment is not possible on the part of the government alone. All must play their respective roles from their respective positions to generate momentum especially rural women, an integrated move and to achieve collective benefit of all concerned.

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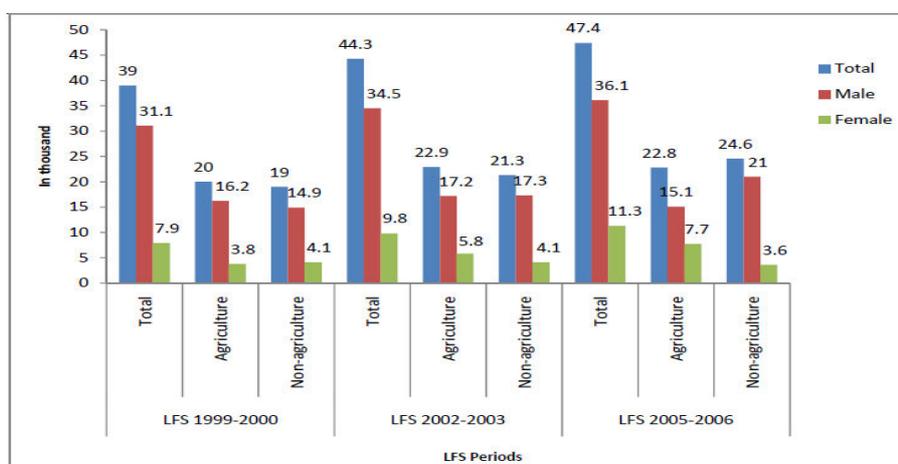
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Table- 1 Annual average labor force growth rate over time by gender: Bangladesh

Periods	Both sexes	Male	Female
1995-96 to 1999-2000	3.2	1.2	14.4
1999-2000 to 2002-2003	4.4	3.8	6.5
2002-2003 to 2005-2006	2.21	1.23	5.45

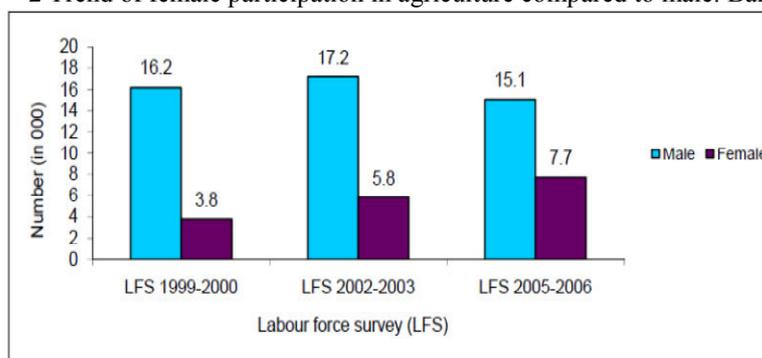
Source: BBS (2002), BBS (2004) and BBS (2008)

Figure- 1 Trend of labor force participation in agricultural and non-agricultural activities by gender overtime: Bangladesh



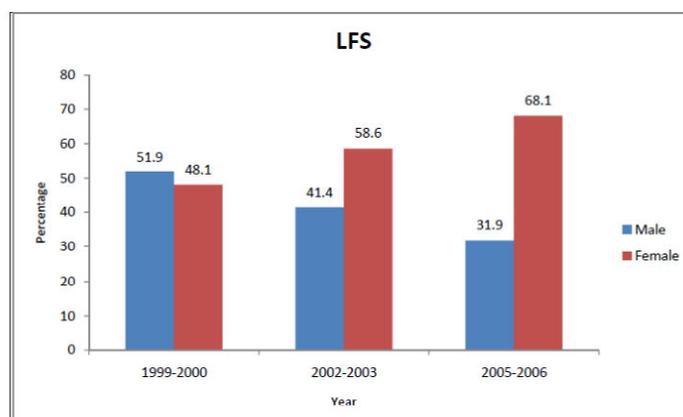
Source: Labor Force Survey (LFS) 1999-2000, 2002-2003, 2005-2006,BBS

Figure – 2 Trend of female participation in agriculture compared to male: Bangladesh



Source: Labor Force Survey (LFS) 1999-2000, 2002-2003, 2005-2006,BBS

Figure -3: Percentage of adult male and female participation in agriculture overtime: Bangladesh



Source: Labor Force Survey (LFS) 1999-2000, 2002-2003, 2005-2006, BBS

Table 2: CAGR Country Rating of Mobile Use

Country Name	2003	2008	CAGR (%)
Australia	72.1	105	7.8
Japan	68.1	86.7	5.0
Republic of Korea	71.2	94.7	5.9
Bangladesh	0.9	27.9	97.8
Nepal	0.3	11.3	105.0

Source: UNESCAP Statistics Division

Table 3: Number of Users of Facilities

Type of facilities	National		Rural		Urban	
	2010	2005	2010	2005	2010	2005
Telephone	2.07	2.87	0.70	0.33	5.79	10.36
Computer	3.01	1.36	0.97	0.17	8.58	4.88
Mobile	63.74	11.29	56.77	6.05	82.74	26.73
E-mail	1.39	0.20	0.39	-----	4.10	0.81

Source: Household income and Expenditure survey, 2005 and 2010, BBS

Table 4: Disbursement of micro-enterprise loans under categories of activities by sex, 2005-2007

Categories of activities	Women		Men	
	Number of loans	Average amount of loans (Taka)	Number of loans	Average amount of loans(Taka)
2005				
Total	332644	22706	19444	18894
Services	100049	8257	1565	11071
Processing and Manufacturing	23769	32254	2580	16906
Shop keeping	53134	29586	4441	19431
Trading	73352	28335	5090	21876
Livestock and fisheries	53143	27998	3405	20098
Peddling	5393	25341	55	30060
Agriculture and Forestry	23804	28790	2308	16766
2006				
Total	357512	20084	15468	17387
Services	101398	7968	1941	9056
Processing and Manufacturing	77333	24616	3579	19467
Shop keeping	33927	23060	2054	17481
Trading	23815	25039	1891	16784
Livestock and fisheries	59005	21551	2565	17463
Peddling	55184	29668	3148	20542
Agriculture and Forestry	6850	26464	290	15848
2007				
Total	272308	22842	10651	22212
Services	32696	10528	716	10479
Processing and Manufacturing	22574	24469	1340	20297
Shop keeping	47525	30830	1852	32765
Trading	66561	25849	3066	23893
Livestock and fisheries	69042	18935	1949	15828
Peddling	3437	26437	127	18353
Agriculture and Forestry	30473	24266	1601	21713

Source: Grameen Bank Annual Report, 2005, 2006 and 2007

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