

**LACK OF PROPER OFFICIAL RECOGNITION LEFT WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS AT STAKE:  
SPEAKERS OPINED IN A NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON WOMEN IN FOOD SYSTEMS**

Women play critical roles in ensuring food security and proper nutrition of families. According to the Labor Force Survey (2016-17), women account for nearly half of the work force in agriculture and nearly 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the rural female work force is engaged in agriculture in Bangladesh. Despite their crucial role in delivering food security, women are common victims to malnutrition, unhealthy food consumptions, lack of accessibility to necessary healthcare services among other crises. It is essential to recognize the position and challenges of women and formulate action plans accordingly to ensure a sustainable and inclusive food system for the society.

Experts shared these observations at an independent virtual dialogue titled “**Women in the Food Systems: The Invisible Indispensable**” held on 3 June 2021 organized by CARE Bangladesh in association with BRAC, UNFPA, UN Women and Wave Foundation. This dialogue is organized as part of the preparation for the upcoming UN Food Systems Summit 2021. The event was attended by government officials, development practitioners, academia, experts, media professionals. The discussions from this event will support developing a national vision for the future of women in the food system.

**Ramesh Singh**, Country Director, CARE Bangladesh delivered welcome remarks at the event. He noted that more than 90% of family farms are dependent on their family members' labor; both men and women work in the farms. Often women family members act as *de facto* heads of the family. “CARE Bangladesh wishes to commit its support to complement the efforts of Bangladesh Government, development partners, nutrition actors and others. We firmly believe concerted efforts can help to reach our "Women in Agriculture and Food System" targets in the coming days.”, he added.

**Khaja Abdul Hannan**, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Food, Government of Bangladesh attended the event as Guest of Honor. He said, "Women's participation in labor force and education has increased manifold over the last two decades. The government has undertaken policies and programs to ensure food and income security to women. The Ministry of Food has initiated series of dialogues to incorporate the concerns around food systems which will be culminated at the national dialogue and further shared at the UN Food System Summit to be held in October 2021."

**Mr. A K M Monirul Alam**, Director, Field Services Wing, Department of Agricultural Extension, Government of Bangladesh, **Dr. Nazneen Ahmed**, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and **Dr. Mohammad Mainul Islam**, Faculty, Department of Population Sciences, University of Dhaka attended the discussion as key speakers. They stressed on the importance of women's access to agricultural input and services, ownership and control over assets and products to improve the current status of women in the food system. Furthermore, they also raised the point of reviewing contradictions within the current nutrition policy in respect to women and endorsing right to food as a legally binding commitment of the state.

The dialogue arranged separate discussions focused around impact of COVID-19 on women in food systems, impact of climate change and shocks on women, social protection and sustainable livelihood for women, young girls and women in Climate Change, food systems and sexual and reproductive health rights, access to productive resources for women in agriculture. The following recommendations came out from the dialogue:

- Recognizing women as 'farmer' to ensure access to farm loans, basic services and government incentives/stimulus package

- Women friendly mechanization can help reduce women's workload
- Women friendly transportation can help secure women's mobility
- Consultation with wider stakeholder groups e.g., non-govt. stakeholders may result in better policy outcome
- Ensuring access of women smallholder farmers or agri-entrepreneurs to COVID-19 Stimulus Package with affordable terms and conditions
- Special Package (Finance and Policy Support) for women entrepreneurs needed to inspire and engage them with advanced stages of agri-value chain (besides the production level)
- Ensuring medical education, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and food security rights for gender diverse populations like transgender and marginalized populations like sex workers; there should be designated doctors in every hospital to provide basic medical support to this group
- Integration of SRHR needed into strengthening food systems and climate adaptation strategies
- Inject regulation to reduce labor discrimination, increase women's engagement in the commercial business, bank loan for female farmers and other one stop services

The dialogue started a rich discussion on various issues that needs to be addressed in order to ensure equitable representation of women in agriculture and it is important to take the key discussions of this dialogue and implement them into strategic action points.