

# research highlights

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## The Changing Role of Women

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**What roles do women play in agricultural production, in the livelihoods of their households and in the wider community? How do these vary, and how are they changing? What does all of this imply for women's current status and for development activities designed to enhance their position?**

### Introduction

For more than a decade, CARE has been working through farmer field schools in Bangladesh to promote sustainable livelihoods for poor rural households. Attempts are now being made to broaden and strengthen this approach, and to give particular emphasis to improving the position of women. This paper, which summarises a more extensive literature review, explores the roles women perform and asks how these are changing (see Boxes 1 and 8).

The task is not straightforward. Although Bangladesh is predominantly Muslim and for the most part low-lying and deltaic, there are rather different environments at the margins and substantial ethnic minorities, both of which may be associated with variations in gender roles. Significant variations may also sometimes be found between different regions of the Muslim heartland, as well as between women of higher and lower social class or of different ages in common locations.

Additional complications arise from the fact that this is a society undergoing rapid change. High rates of population growth, with attendant shifts in person to land ratios and production relationships; technical change within agriculture and beyond; new opportunities in micro-credit and self employment created primarily by NGOs; shifting patterns of demand associated with increasing urban populations; changes in communications; and growing links to the global economy have all served to re-define what men and women may do, and how they relate to each other.

These problems of analysis are compounded by the fragmentary nature of the available literature, much of which consists of small scale, "snapshot" investigations of variable quality that lack any common overall frame of reference. But whilst more systematic and consolidated research would undoubtedly be desirable, there are still a number of more substantial sources, on the basis of which it is possible to arrive at something approaching a consensus about what is happening (see end references).

What follows looks first at the different types of domestic work that women perform and their role in relation to crops, livestock and fishing. Next, non-agricultural occupations are reviewed, together with the significance of micro-credit, and the nature of women's involvement in markets. Concluding sections then deal with implications of changing roles for women's status and well-being, and ask how external agencies might assist in promoting further change.

### Box 1

CARE Bangladesh is transforming itself into a rights-based organisation that will identify and address the underlying causes of poverty. This is one of several studies designed to aid the transition by clarifying the nature of the context in which the organisation works and showing how this affects the activities undertaken. Further details of the series appear in Box 8.

### Domestic work

Individual circumstances can vary a great deal, but for most women, domestic activities take up more of their time than anything else. This category - which embraces the preparation and serving of food, the care of children and elderly relatives, collecting and drying cow dung for fuel, fetching water, cleaning, washing and house maintenance - may account for anything between 40 and 70% of all work time. Whilst not the focus of this paper, it is critical in shaping the extent to which women participate in the agricultural activities and other occupations that will be considered.

### Rice production

The cultivation of rice, which remains by far the most important crop, is mainly men's work, although women take charge of a number of specific processes, and show an increasing tendency to be involved in all aspects of production.

Women have always been mainly responsible for cleaning, storing, soaking and incubating seeds at the beginning of the production cycle, whilst men have tended to prepare the seed beds, and later to uproot and transplant the seedlings. Until recently, women's role at this stage has been confined to helping to protect the young plants from birds, but many, including some Muslims from less conservative regions, are now starting to participate in other aspects of seed bed management.

Subsequent field operations have again been a predominantly male preserve. But women have sometimes contributed to transplanting, weeding and harvesting, especially where plots lie relatively close to the homestead, and a minority are now getting involved in irrigation and in certain aspects of land preparation.

Women have always been mainly responsible for post-harvest operations, where they have conventionally done nearly all of the threshing, winnowing, drying, storing and parboiling; although milling, an arduous and unpleasant task which was previously performed manually by women using a *dheki*, has now become mechanised and passed largely into the male domain. More recently, mechanisation has also begun to have a similar effect on threshing and winnowing.

The increasing participation of women, especially those from poorer and female-headed households in field based operations may to some extent be explained by these changes in processing technology, as displaced workers have sought alternative sources of income (Box 2). Some observers have also suggested that it reflects a more general process of pauperisation, brought about in part by growing population and increasing landlessness. Others point to the growing incidence of female-headed households as a factor driving women into new forms of work. Others still see the phenomenon as primarily a function of increasing shortages of male labour, which have, in turn, been brought about by the intensification of agriculture and a growth in off-farm employment opportunities. The fact that women's real agricultural wage rates have not declined over time, either in absolute terms or relative to those of men, suggests that this is the more powerful explanation.

#### Box 2: A widow works as an agricultural labourer

Sultana is 56 and has been a widow for ten years. She has four sons. Two have married and moved away. The other two have remained at home and work as labourers for richer households. The household previously owned a small amount of land, but this all had to be sold to meet medical expenses arising during the extended period of ill health suffered by her husband prior to his death. It was at this time that Sultana was first forced to seek employment, and she has continued ever since. When opportunities are available, she works as an agricultural labourer. Sometimes she is employed individually, receiving breakfast and 1 kg of rice a day. On other occasions, she forms a group with four or five others, which then negotiates a rate for the performance of a particular piece of work. During quieter times of the year she switches to hired domestic work.

### Other crops

The gender division of labour for other field crops follows a similar pattern to rice. With jute, women work alongside men in post harvest activities such as stripping fibre from stalks and the processing of fibre into ropes and other products. With wheat, women again do most of the post harvest work, including much of the threshing. The same

is largely true for pulses and oilseeds, where additionally they can be quite heavily involved in harvesting. As these crops are not transplanted, and are generally grown with lower level of inputs, much less male labour is involved in field cultivation, and the proportion of total labour contributed coming from women is therefore considerably higher than for paddy. Women are also becoming increasingly involved in the management of nurseries, and take the lead in all the processes of sericulture and silk production.

With homestead vegetables, women do most of the work and make most of the decisions, although men may sometimes help with land preparation. Output here is mainly consumed, but where there is a surplus, women will either sell door to door themselves or send produce to market with their children, and then retain any income accruing.

Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the cultivation of vegetables as a commercial field crop, as communications have improved and demand from an expanding economy has grown. Where vegetables are cultivated on a more extensive scale beyond the homestead, men's involvement increases, especially in marketing, but women continue to play an important part in harvesting and other operations.

Unlike the domestic responsibilities discussed earlier, where work is fairly evenly distributed throughout the year, women's crop related activities are mainly concentrated in particular periods (*Box 4*).

One study, which may not be entirely representative, found particular peaks from late March to early May (collecting straw and drying and storing paddy and straw for the rainy season); from late June to early July (processing the aus crop and preparing molasses); from late August to early September (post harvest activities and the washing and separating of jute); from late December to early January (drying, husking and parboiling amon paddy), from late December to early January (planting vegetables) and from late February to early March (working in the paddy fields an processing pulses and gourds). Total labour inputs at these times of the year could typically exceed quieter periods by a factor of four or more.

## Livestock

Women are heavily involved in all aspects of livestock management, often working in conjunction with older children, although this source of help has latterly been depleted as school enrolment has increased. They take almost complete responsibility for the more routine and time consuming aspects of care, including the gathering of fodder and other aspects of feeding and cleaning. Men may milk cattle, and assist in the construction of any shelters, as well as arranging any vaccinations that are required, since these will normally involve contact with male veterinarians. Critically, they often also control purchases and sales.

Women play a particularly important part in the management of smaller stock, which include goats, sheep and poultry. They will normally be able to retain cash secured from egg production and milk and often have independent ownership and rights of disposal by sale. As with vegetables, commercial opportunities in these areas for women from land owning households have increased significantly of late with the growth and greater accessibility of urban markets. Poorer women, on the other hand, may earn income from the longer established practise of tending the cattle or goats of the better off on a share basis.

## Fishing

Fishing, like field crop cultivation, is a predominantly male activity, but women may again play some part and perform support functions, although this is more common among Hindus and Adivasi than among Muslims.

In pond aquaculture, it is normally men who will carry out any earthwork, buy fertiliser and oil cake for feed, purchase fingerlings and catch the fish, especially in larger ponds where seine nets must be used. Apart from small ponds close to the homestead, which they may manage by themselves, women's role is mainly confined to the domestic production of rice bran and dung as a complementary source of feed. They will, however, negotiate for and purchase fingerlings when men are absent, and often play a key part by obtaining the credit required for investment. Instances of women using credit to establish their own fingerling businesses have also been reported.

Capture fisheries have traditionally been a mainly Hindu activity, although many Muslims fish for subsistence. Until recently, there has been relatively little scope for women to become involved. For most, the main contribution has been in making nets and in sorting and drying fish, but some older and widowed Hindu women in the south catch fish for their own consumption and sale using rods and hooks. There has also been a tradition of poorer women catching fish in shallow water and paddy fields using small bamboo traps. In the last few years, the catching of shrimp fry in the coastal area has become an important occupation for poor women and children, offering earnings in the region of 5000 taka<sup>1</sup> a season.

#### Other work

Women's activities beyond agriculture and fishing may take a number of forms, and are often undertaken in the periods when there is less agricultural work to do. As in agriculture, most women have conventionally tended to gravitate towards homestead-based occupations, such as handicrafts - which includes basket making, bamboo work, and embroidery - and outwork for the textile industry. Some women, together with children, have also been employed in the local cigarette (*bir*) industry, although this is now declining in the face of competition from manufactured products. Others may have linkages with raw material suppliers or marketing organisations, for instance being supplied with palm leaves to make mats. Some Hindu communities specialise in particular craft industries, such as pottery, where men and women work together.

Work in the handloom textile sector is rigidly divided on the basis of gender. Men operate the looms, whilst women, together with children, specialise in yarn processing, which covers winching, starching, drying and bobbin reeling. Studies differ as to which of these two aspects of production absorbs the more labour. It is, however, clear that the industry is in decline, and this has been accompanied by a fall in the real value of women's wages, whilst those of men have increased. Earnings in all cottage industries are very low, but home work has the advantage of being flexible, fitting in around other domestic and agricultural tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 taka = \$0.02

Poorer women have been more inclined to work beyond the homestead, gathering firewood and stones, or performing manual work in brickfields, or earthwork on roads and other construction sites, although again here mechanisation has reduced demand for certain types of work. Some have found employment in rural industries such as shrimp processing and rice mills. Where no other options have been available, very poor women have served as domestic helpers in other people's houses, receiving their meals, but little else, by way of payment.

The rise of the export based urban garment industry over the last decade has significantly improved the prospects of those seeking outside work. By 2000, this was employing 1.25 million workers, 85-90% of whom were women, and 85% of whom came from rural areas, mostly from landless households. The work is hard, but the entry-level salary of 1000tk./month is around five times as much as average female earnings from formal and informal work in the villages sending garment workers, although this takes no account of higher urban living costs. Recent years have also seen a significant increase in the opportunities for more educated women to get jobs with NGOs, government and other development agencies as field workers, teachers, or in other capacities.

#### Credit and small-scale enterprise

Whilst all of this has been going on, the growing availability of micro-credit has created a range of new business opportunities for poorer women remaining in the rural areas, and anecdotal evidence suggests that, as a result, richer families now find it increasingly difficult to find poor women prepared to work as domestic servants for minimal wages.

The majority of borrowers invest in activities such as processing and trading. These offer welcome but relatively small returns, and make modest practical improvements in the lives of women and their families, but have little wider impact on gender relations. In a significant minority of cases, however, loans are used to embark upon more ambitious ventures involving the acquisition of new assets, including land, machinery, livestock and ponds, which women themselves can then control (*Box 3*). In other instances, women have gained access to productive resources via the offices of an external

intermediary acting on their behalf. Examples here include *khas* (government) land, and ponds taken on extended lease, but such arrangements require long term support if they are to avoid capture by more powerful male interests.

**Box 3: Women's entrepreneurial activities**

Gul Nahar was poor and landless but has now been able to build up a thriving candle making business with support from a local NGO. She has received training in business methods and a series of progressively larger loans, the most recent of which was for 30,000 taka. She now has seven machines, employs three other women, and produces 50 candles a day. The candles are sold on commission at local markets through agents, and generate a monthly profit of 8,500 taka on a turnover of 75,000 taka. Her business success has enabled her to purchase a half acre plot of land for her daughter, and gained her recognition in the local community, culminating in her recent election as a ward commissioner in the municipal government.

Jahanara has also benefited from NGO support. Initially, she was trained in tailoring and then given a loan of 3,000 taka that was used to buy a sewing machine. This was duly repaid, and with a second loan of 4,000 taka, she then invested in poultry rearing. Subsequently, she was able to buy a cow for 12,000 taka. Most recently, she has received a much larger loan of 25,000 taka to expand her tailoring business. This has enabled to engage five other members of her NGO group on a contract basis. The clothes they produce are sold at a weekly market and generate a net monthly income of 5-6,000 taka.

The new credit programmes do not, however, always benefit women as much as they might, and critics have pointed out that many loans obtained by women pass directly to their husbands, who then utilise them for their own purposes. But whilst undoubtedly true, this overlooks the fact that their position as the source of loans, and their possession of the ultimate sanction of refusing to take loans if their views are not properly taken into account, still gives women a more prominent role in decision making and greater bargaining power than would otherwise have been the case.

An additional advantage arising from the spread of micro-credit comes via membership of the groups through which it is administered. Although these generally do not directly manage saving and micro-credit loans themselves, the regular weekly meetings build solidarity between members, who can then provide mutual encouragement for enterprise and risk taking, or support in dealing with domestic violence, marital discord and the threat of divorce. Common group membership may also provide a basis for launching collaborative enterprises involving the leasing of land or the acquisition of a joint asset like a power tiller, which individual women would not have the confidence to undertake by themselves. Very poor women have, however, found it difficult to join and benefit from NGO groups (see Box 4).

**Box 4: A very poor woman who lacks the confidence to take loans**

Khodeja is a deserted woman with two children. Her only significant asset is a house constructed on somebody else's land. She has no source of safe drinking water and no latrine. She ekes out an existence doing different types of agricultural work.

In Baisakh and Jaistha she harvests the boro crop, getting between 5 and 7 kgs. each day for up to 20 days. During this period, she also share harvests chilli, obtaining 20-40 kgs which sell for 30-40 taka/kg. In Asar and Sraban she harvests aus, getting 3-5 kgs./day. In Bhadra/Ashwin, the only work available is jute processing. The income is insufficient to support the family and they mainly live on their previous earnings and seasonal vegetables. In Kartik she earns nothing at all and barely survives by selling the chillies retained from the earlier harvest. In Agrhayan she share harvests amon, getting a total of 80-120 kgs. In Poush/Magh, no agricultural work is available and she work as a maid in other people's houses, receiving meals, but no cash payment. In Phalgun/Chaitra she harvest different types of pulse and gets a total of 20-40 kgs.

When Khodeja faces crises such as illness, she finds it difficult to borrow since she has no assets to provide security. Lacking any regular source of income, she feels unable to take a loan from an NGO, for fear that she would default.

### Participation in markets

There has been a traditional taboo against women going to markets. Those who attend lose status and may be subjected to various forms of abuse, from aggressive “male gaze” and rumour mongering, through to pinching or other types of harassment.

Men still do nearly all of the shopping for household items and most marketing of agricultural products, and a recent survey suggests that few women will visit even local shops on a regular basis, although the figure rises somewhat among poorer households. But in other respects, things are beginning to change. Whilst it does not apply to all women, increasing numbers now expect to participate in the purchase of occasional items such as clothes, jewellery and cosmetics that are directly for their own use, and of school books and other materials for their children. They will, however, tend to avoid doing this at busy markets, generally opting to buy at quieter times or from periodic fairs.

#### Box 5: Women market vendors

Moroni is aged 40 and is married with one son and two daughters. She and her husband are from a fishing community, and they have been trading fish for the last eight years. They buy at the river and sell at different markets. At one market, Moroni has a fixed spot in front of a shop. She paid the shopkeeper 300 taka to make a concrete slab for her, and pays the lease holder 4 taka a day, and a cleaner a further 2 taka. She arrives at 8.00 am and sells all her fish by 1.00 pm. Everyone in the market knows and supports her, including the Bazaar Committee. She is illiterate, but neighbouring shopkeepers help her with her accounts.

Hamida, Farida, Anowara, Sahera and Shiuly all sell vegetables in a market. Anowara has been in the business for 20 years; Hamida, Farida and Sahera for 10 years; while Shiuly started more recently. Each day, they collect vegetables from their own land and from neighbouring villages and take them to the market by rickshaw. They pay 5 taka a day to the lease-holder and sit on the main vegetable platform alongside the male vendors. Although they sell independently, they travel together for security, and say that working together gives them strength and courage.

The barriers to women selling at markets remain higher. It is not uncommon for women to deal directly with door to door traders, where they are prepared to accept rather lower prices in order to retain control of the income generated, and some may also sell from village to village themselves, but at present, women only run approximately one per cent of all market stalls. Numbers are, however, beginning to rise as a few younger women start to venture out and join a more established group of divorced, elderly and widowed vendors (Box 5). In certain places, special arrangements are being made to support this trend, for example through the establishment of special depots where eggs can be sold. There are also a number of instances where special women’s sections have been constructed, with their own toilet and other facilities.

### New roles, status and well-being

Our account has revealed many changes in the roles that women perform. They play an increasing part in agriculture, and are increasingly likely to take part in field-based operations, whilst many have set up their own homestead-based enterprises. Opportunities for off-farm employment have also increased, and many rural women now find work in the urban garments industry. But what does all this imply for their status and more general well-being?

The answer is not entirely clear-cut. Traditionally, there has been a close connection between *purdah*, patriarchy, social status and the choices that women have made regarding work. The poorest women have been forced to break, or at least stretch, *purdah* norms in order to survive, whilst the better off have been able to maintain *samman* (dignity/respect) by not working outside the homestead. Against this background, certain changes, such as increased participation in arduous field-based tasks, may be perceived as diminishing women’s status. By the same token, the mechanisation of processing tasks, although undermining a previous source of work, may in some respects have been welcome, since it removes a particularly hard and demeaning form of manual work.

Notions of status are, however, more complicated than this might suggest. In the first place, what has constituted *samman*

has always varied between classes, with richer women being able to take more prestigious types of outside work and still retain respect. Social norms have also varied between communities and regions, being more relaxed in Adivasi communities and somewhat relaxed among Hindus, and it has always been somewhat more acceptable for older women to work outside the home. But it is also apparent that the way in which status is perceived is itself changing, as many of the new roles that women are now performing, whilst perhaps in violation of *purdah*, serve to improve their standing in other ways.

Women's greater contribution to household livelihoods has, for example, made it more likely that their voice will be heard in family discussions, and they now routinely expect to have their say in decisions regarding saving, sanitation, health and education. It has probably also helped to reduce domestic violence, especially in poorer households, where it was formerly very prevalent. Where women buy, or otherwise achieve effective control over productive assets or jewellery and other valuable items in their own name, this also strengthens their position in the household and the wider society. The range of choice in marriage is increased through the capacity to contribute significant resources (*Box 6*).

Their sense of self-worth is enhanced, they command greater respect, and their marriages become more stable. Men are more inclined to buy them gifts than was previously the case. Their position has also become stronger under circumstances where marriages still breakdown. Contact with natal families has increased and women are now more able to make small gifts and otherwise maintain relationships that can be called upon in difficult times.

This, in turn, reflects a more general trend towards growing mobility and a greater capacity to form independent contacts with external institutions, including schools and government or non-government service providers. Ugly phenomena such as acid attacks on women show that these changes are by no means universally accepted, but for increasing numbers of women, honour now lies increasingly in education, being mobile, and being able to work outside the house, and has progressively less to do with not being seen in public.

#### Box 6: A woman gains more status

Jameela belongs to an NGO group, whilst her husband drives a tempo. Since becoming a member, she has taken out a series of loans. The first, for 2000 taka, was used to buy a second hand rickshaw that is rented out for 20 taka a day. The second, for 4,000 taka, was used to buy a milk cow. The third, for 6,000 taka, bought a new rickshaw, which is rented out for 25 taka a day. The fourth, for 7,000 taka, has been used for beef fattening.

Before she took out her loan, Jameela's household was very poor, and her relationship with her husband very tense. He was consistently bad tempered and looked down on her. Now things are much improved. In her own words, she explains: "Now I am the owner of two rickshaws and a calf. I have improved my house. I get income and spend it on my family. I feel I contribute to the welfare of my husband, my children and my family members. Now I am somebody in the family and in society. People now ask me to settle disputes within the village. This gives me immense satisfaction."

With better livelihoods and a general improvement in women's position, discrimination against girls has started to decline. More food is available, and girls now get eggs or milk as frequently as boys do. The number of girls enrolling for school now exceeds that for boys, and at least in part reflects the new value put on women as contributors to the household economy.

The emerging picture is not, however, entirely positive. Women are even busier on account of their new economic activities, but it is only in isolated instances that men have been prepared to take on additional domestic work in support.

It is, on the other hand, now accepted that women should be allowed time to attend meetings or training courses and one third now belong to micro-credit groups. This provides a first step towards them being able to perform more communal roles. At a higher level, they are now formally representation on Union Parishads, but these remain male dominated institutions where women have so far only very rarely been able to secure positions of real authority (*Box 7*). Some participation has been noted in other fora, including *shalish*

(informal local adjudications), but such instances, for the time being at least, remain rare.

#### Box 7: A male member's view of women Union Parishad representatives

"The women come to participate but do not talk. Their face is covered in a veil and they sit quietly. They need money to cover local transportation. They need to be motivated to come for the meetings. In the meetings they are scared to talk and express their views. The women should be made to sit separately for their own meetings. They can think, discuss and plan among themselves if they get an opportunity to sit separately. They also need a letter by name informing them about the meeting".

#### Implications for development initiatives

To achieve maximum impact, future development initiatives need to focus on occupations that are acceptable for women, while also enabling them to move out of their traditional and underprivileged domestic roles.

Activities such as vegetable gardening, backyard poultry and handicrafts, while being permissible for women and so unlikely to be captured by men, do little to improve women's overall position in society. At the same time, getting women to take over male tasks, such as field work in agriculture or market trading, may disadvantage them in terms of status.

The best options for women would seem to be those that extend existing functions in ways that build technical and managerial capacity, provide additional income and strengthen social networks.

Women becoming poultry workers, who are trained to provide vaccination services, provides one example of how this already happening, and similar developments are taking place in commercial scale vegetable production and egg wholesaling.

In future it may also be possible to develop women's capacity to produce seed for sale, to engage in fish fingerling production and to provide integrated pest management services.

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