

# Poverty-gender-agriculture nexus in the northern region of Bangladesh: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Sadika Haque, Md. Sahed Khan, & Dr. Deepa Joshi

## OVERVIEW

Northern Bangladesh was for various reasons a late entrant into Bangladesh's Green Revolution. Mechanised and intensive agriculture did catch on, however, in northern Bangladesh after road links across the Jamuna river were established in the late 1990s. Yet, the region remains "ultra-poor." There is a local saying that fortunate people live in Dhaka and Chittagong in the south of the country and the most distressed people live in North Bengal (a region that includes northern regions of Bangladesh). North Bangladesh presents a paradox of being too close to the Indian border. It's location in the past facilitated trade and commerce in an undivided colonial Bengal. Post-partition and post-liberation, however, Dhaka has become the nerve centre of policy, decision-making and politics for the country and is far away from northern Bangladesh. This "political distance" persists despite the construction of the Bangabandhu Bridge

in 1996 which traverses the Jamuna River and connects the North to Dhaka and other agri-commerce centres. A vast majority of the region's farmers (60-65%) are capital-deficit, poor and marginal with fragmented land holdings. These farmers failed to become integrated into the promises of a "high yielding variety (HYV) 1 seed-fertilizer-irrigation-mechanisation" Green Revolution package.

Northern Bangladesh's "poor" population relies mainly on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood. For decades, September to October has persisted as the dreaded "monga" period (also known as 'Dead October'), which is characterized by severe food insecurity as well as distress-sale of livestock, land and household assets. More recently, poverty initiatives like governmental social safety net programmes, cash-handouts and pro-poor market initiatives like micro-credit have marginally alleviated duress during these high-stress periods.



A FARMER IN BANGLADESH HARVESTS CROPS IN A PADDY FIELD

## Recommendations

- The core focus of development initiatives need to be on the "people" and on the "social construct of inequalities" (between and among women and men) and not on "sectoral interventions."
- Solutions addressing poverty and gender inequality require thinking out of the box. E.g. A focus on non-farm employment opportunities is key for the poorest, including landless rural women and men.
- There is a need for sustainable farm and non-farm economies in rural areas to create employment opportunities.
- There are few mediated negotiations to ensure lawful access to property by rural women, which must change.
- Set up local level farmers' associations to enable farmers to generate their own development strategies.
- Strengthen agricultural policy, such as the Output Price Policy and Land Zoning.
- Promote gender sensitivity among practitioners, academics and policy makers through specific hands on training and reshaped national curriculum. A template for effective gender sensitive education has been initiated by this research.

## RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

WLE's Poverty squares and gender circles project aims at better understanding why there is persistent and enduring poverty in the region of North Bangladesh. The overall assumption is that poverty persists because development initiatives in agriculture and irrigation are not appropriately designed to target the poorest marginal farmers with small fragmented landholdings and/or for the large populations of the landless poor, who make up the largest farmer groups in the region. In addition, although most initiatives claim to address gender, very few focus on the multiple reasons (religion, culture and tradition), which make women less equal to men.

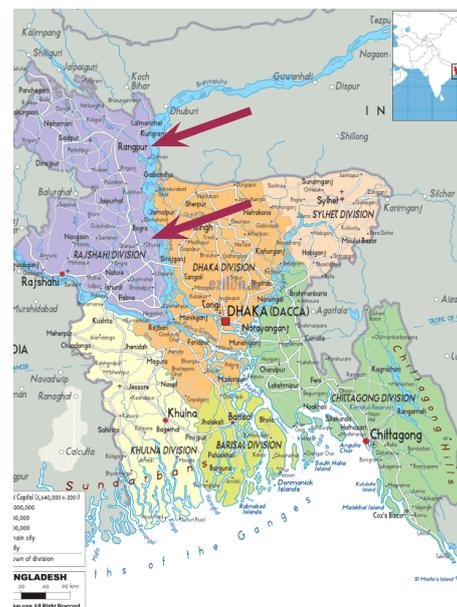
Given the widespread poverty and gender inequality in northern Bangladesh, researchers from Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) closely analysed the Integrated Water Management (IWM) project implemented by the Bangladesh

Rural Development Authority (RDA) in the Rangpur district and the Irrigation Project implemented by the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) in the Rajshahi district. The following research questions were addressed:

### Key Questions

- How are the interrelations between poverty and gender understood and addressed by the project actors and stakeholders?
- Who is included and who is left behind by the interventions provided?
- Are the projects enabling a “transformation” in gender, poverty and inequality?

Both RDA and BMDA are premier development and research institutions in Bangladesh operating under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Both institutions are credited for transforming the poor in Northern



Bangladesh. They connected the northern districts to the national agrarian economy and reduced the poverty of resident farmers in these regions. These projects as well as the institutions have “gender equality” written into their portfolios. In this study, the researchers also analysed how gender is interpreted and practiced in these two institutions.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Poverty and gender inequality persist and are difficult to resolve

The northwest region continues to be the poorest within Bangladesh (Zahid, 2014). 2010 statistics placed Rangpur and Rajshahi as the 2nd and 3rd poorest districts in the country, following the Barisal division. Although poverty declined in these two districts between 2000 and 2010, a famine-like situation is still reported by the poorest households especially from mid-September to mid-November, despite multiple developmental interventions.

### The Green Revolution has worsened the wealth inequality gap

The Green Revolution required “modern” knowledge, skills and technology and resulted in the setting up of centralized research institutions such as the RDA and BMDA. To what extent these institutions reach out to the poorest is not evident. Furthermore, the cultivation

of HYV crops required reliable irrigation as well as fertilizers and pesticides. High inputs excluded the poorest farmers. Many of the elderly respondents in the research locations speak of a more equitable land ownership, production and consumption prior to the Green Revolution. The Green Revolution required and facilitated a consolidation of land, capital and a switch to monocropping. This also explains the widespread landlessness of cultivable land.

Agriculture productivity did increase for some through cash crops like paddy, tobacco, maize, etc., however, there was increasing ecological degradation of the land and water caused by indiscriminate use of ground water and chemicals. This was the beginning of multiple, co-related negative impacts. In the long-term, water quantity and quality as well as health and nutrition (particularly from hybrid white rice diets)

have decreased.

### Entrenched poverty is difficult to alleviate through mainstream approaches

The Bangabandhu Bridge (1996) and the Lalan Shah Bridge (2003) have greatly improved agri-transport with thousands of trucks every night carrying agricultural produce from the North to the rest of the country. Unfortunately, research has found that the agriculture productivity gains have benefitted only a small minority (8-10%) of the rural population in northern Bangladesh - those who owned cultivable, irrigated land. The majority (65-70%) of the rural population in this area do not own any cultivable land. A small population (20-25%) have user rights through lease/rent/mortgage arrangements with absentee landowners. This unequal distribution of cultivable, irrigated land is the major hurdle trapping many in a

vicious poverty cycle.

### **Migration flow to Dhaka is not the choice for all rural poor**

The research findings note that along with agriculture produce, the infrastructure connections to Dhaka and the southern regions have facilitated a mass-out migration from the North. Most migrants are engaged in low and insufficiently waged employment in urban Dhaka. This gives little respite from poverty and many respondents said they would prefer to live in the village if only they had some land. This could explain why a significant number (85%) of the rural poor in the Rajshahi district choose not to migrate and continue to remain poor, battling hunger and distressed.

### **Gender inequalities: limited land rights, social mobility, and wage gaps restrict women's opportunities**

The gendered dimensions of land ownership are debilitating, as few women are able to or want to exercise their right to own land in the existing socio-cultural context. Owning land implies breaking social ties and bonds which are often critical support networks for women. An intensive cultivation of rice, wheat, maize, vegetables, tobacco, etc., has increased the demand for labour, but the research found a steep gender divide in agriculture wage labour. Women are paid half (\$1.5-2) of what men get paid (\$2.5-3.5) for the same tasks. These are not the only constraints to women; domestic reproductive responsibilities continue to hold women back as do the cultural norms of purdah which segregate gender for work in the public domain. Research shows that that popular claims of a feminization of agriculture overlook these complex realities.

In Bangladesh, culturally imposed controls on social mobility create unequal coping strategies among women and men. Out-migration, change in livelihood, informal trading and small business and commerce are restricted

to men. In Rajshahi, except for tribal Santal women, there are numerous constraints and challenges for Muslim women working in the field or wanting to migrate to cities. For those women who do, they are usually pushed to do so only out of extreme vulnerability and desperation and does not indicate empowerment.

### **Development initiatives' claims to reduce poverty and empower women are unfounded**

Poverty and gender inequities combine in complex ways and are unique to different communities and households. Initiatives which claim to address both rarely affect the nexus of material and social dimensions (religion, culture, tradition) of poverty. Most projects do not address the causes of gender inequality embedded in social norms and thus do not bring about transformative change. For example, decades of a poverty-driven male out-migration in these regions have not resulted in a 'feminization of agriculture' as cultural norms restrict women from taking on the roles out-migrated men had held on the farm. When male out-migration occurs, only partial feminization of the agricultural labour force occurs.

Project and programme strategies contain a lot of rhetoric relating to "involving, engaging, empowering" women in agriculture and irrigation projects. For example, BMDA has a women-led 'Smart Card' irrigation management initiative. This initiative supposedly provides women with the authority to provide and collect fees for (electricity-powered lift) irrigation. But, this research found a lack of empirical evidence on how women are empowered by engaging in this task. Engaging women in irrigation Water User Associations/ Groups (WUA) also does not necessarily translate into meaningful representation. WUAs are required to own land and most women are not proprietor land owners. Furthermore, social norms and traditions limit women from effectively making and taking on

irrigation decisions once a part of the group.

There are several government schemes promoting social welfare for women, including the elderly and marginalized. Such initiatives are similarly constrained by the bureaucracy and corruption that is required for women to access these services/ benefits.

It has long been argued that there can be no social empowerment without economic empowerment. These research findings show the reverse is true; there can be no economic empowerment without breaking down entrenched social barriers.

## Recommendations

- The core focus of development initiatives needs to be on the "people" and on the "social construct of inequalities" (between and among women and men) and not on "sectoral interventions." Only after this is achieved will the potential for women in the Eastern Gangetic Plains to take on new entrepreneurial roles emerge.
- Solutions to addressing poverty and gender inequality require thinking out of the box; e.g., a focus on non-farm employment opportunities such as decentralized agro-industries, garment industries, etc., is key for the poorest among rural women and men.



URBANIZATION IN BANGLADESH

## A WAY FORWARD

A long-term commitment to gender sensitive education is key to change the mindset of future development professionals. This research project has enabled gender, poverty and ecosystems to be integrated into 6 academic courses (4 at BAU). Gender and political ecology training and sensitization has been carried out for more than 15 BAU faculty members as well. A continued dialogue is needed among key actors, practitioners and stakeholders in RDA and BMDA on gender inequities and their linkage with poverty and how development initiatives can best reach the most vulnerable. An annual three-day workshop will be hosted by Bangladesh Agriculture Department's newly instituted Interdisciplinary Centre for Food Security on the topic of poverty, food security and gender.

A concrete agreement and collaboration will be established between BAU, RDA, BMDA and CGIAR institutions and other relevant donors operating in Bangladesh to: i) bring

the "field" to the "class" through invited expert guest lectures and ii) take the "class" to the "field" through coordinated field learning sessions, student thesis research and internships. Both activities will focus on exploring and understanding the links between gender, poverty and agriculture.



BANGLADESHI FARMER PLOUGHS FIELD

but it masks many failures - disparities in land ownership, agrarian labour, gender inequality, agriculture and irrigation decision-making and distress pull-out from agriculture of the most vulnerable among the agrarian communities. The research found the claims of agrarian and irrigation projects to "reduce poverty" and "empower women" to be unfounded. These initiatives were sectoral interventions which were not addressing the reality of landlessness and marginal ownership of land as well as social, cultural and political dimensions of deep-rooted gender inequities. The study calls for careful choices in the context of the national goal towards agrarian productivity and food security. What crops and what technologies will redress the issue of the growing ecological degradation, poverty and gender inequity in relation to agriculture? Comprehensive and coordinated changes are required at multiple institutional levels: policy, institutional structures and cultures, community and household level interventions.

## CONCLUSION

The steady continued agrarian growth and productivity in Bangladesh is commendable

## ABOUT THE BRIEFING SERIES

The WLE Briefing series presents WLE research outputs in an accessible format to different users (policy makers, developers practitioners, investors or regional managers). The focus is repackaging research down to its essential points and appeals to the needs and interests of specific groups of decision-makers. Each brief offers evidence and gives the minimum required background. They briefs also provide concrete recommendations as to what can be done and is actionable.

## ABOUT WLE

The CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) promotes a new approach to sustainable intensification in which a healthy functioning ecosystem is seen as a prerequisite to agricultural development, resilience of food systems and human well-being. WLE combines the resources of 11 CGIAR centers, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the RUAF Foundation and numerous national, regional and international partners to provide an integrated approach to natural resource management research. This program is led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and is supported by CGIAR, a global research partnership for a food-secure future.

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## CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems International Water Management Institute (IWMI)

127 Sunil Mawatha  
Pelawatta, Battaramulla, Colombo  
Sri Lanka

Email: [wle@cgiar.org](mailto:wle@cgiar.org)  
Website: [wle.cgiar.org](http://wle.cgiar.org)  
Thrive: [wle.cgiar.org/thrive](http://wle.cgiar.org/thrive)

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