

Does Aquaculture Sector Concern about Women Empowerment with Sustainable Development? : A Situation Analysis of Coastal Regions of Bangladesh

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Women Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development cannot be achieved without a more equitable distribution of resources. This requires action on three fronts: social, economic and environmental. Women play a vital role in achieving sustainable development as reaffirmed by Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals, which makes commitments to ensuring women's equal rights and opportunities. Moving forward requires the empowerment of women and elimination of discriminatory barriers in diverse areas, such as agriculture, energy, health, education, employment and disaster risk reduction (Antonopoulos, 2010).

Background

Bangladesh is considered as one of the most suitable countries in the world for fresh and saline water aquaculture, because of its favorable resources and agro-climatic conditions (Alamgir, M. 2011). A large number of rural women are involved in various aspects of aquaculture activities but their contribution is often remains

unrecognized. This article uses the findings of empirical qualitative research, conducted in 15 villages of three Upazillas namely Dumuria, Chitolmari and Debhata under respective the coastal districts Khulna, Bagerhat and Sathkhira respectively. Primary data was collected through interviews individual and group (40), key informant interviews (30), focused group discussions (12) and a case study (6) using a set of checklist and guidelines with maintaining sound gender ratio.

This article elaborates on how women play an active role in aquaculture and their efforts remain unrecognized. Women's participation in aquaculture activities are often opposed by their husband or other men in their household, however their leadership, decision making power and control over assets are not recognized. This article attempts to discuss the issues related to recognition of women's role and their empowerment in aquaculture. It also presents that women's leadership and empowerment in aquaculture are hindered by several socio-economic constraints and certain policy and infrastructure related

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issues. It assesses the context of women leadership in aquaculture and promotes appropriate guidance towards mainstreaming gender in aquaculture sector of Bangladesh (Begum, R., 2011).

Key findings

Socio-cultural empowerment

Women in Bangladesh working in *gher*¹, but predominantly only due to their economic hardship and insecurity. Most of the male respondents in Satkhira district said, “It is not possible to meet household expenditure by one’s income. So we sent our wives against our will to work in the *gher*.” One of the key informants in Bagerhat said, “Society sees it as undesirable that a female works in *gher* or a fish farm.”

With regard to the decision making in the family and household, men’s perception points towards men’s superiority over women. During the focus group discussion (FGD), men said that they think men have the right to dominate and control the family decisions. As they place men over women, they believe, it is men who should think about the status and welfare of the household. As women are not the descendants of the husbands’ lineage, they should not have say about the welfare of the family. Women, during FGD in Khulna, also reinforced men’s perception. For example

¹ *gher* farming is a traditional agriculture system in Bangladesh. A pond is dug into a rice field to use for fish farming, with the dugout soil used to create dykes around the pond for growing vegetables.

many female respondents stated: “A man should maintain his family perfectly as he is the head of the family and so he should hold all the responsibilities as well”.

Economic empowerment

We found that, men and women do not get the same wages for the same work. In some work (weeding, moving soil), women’s performance is equal to men’s and on occasion even perform better than men’s. However, they do not get same wages for the same work. One of the male respondents assertively said, “Women do not work like men. They are weak and they are very slow in working.”

This study found that the people of the study areas think that men have the responsibility to maintain their family livelihoods for example education of children, food, accommodation, etc., and the income of the women is treated as bonus. One of the female respondents said that: “If women earn more than men, they will reach to a higher position than that of their husbands. It is a symbol of disrespect to their husbands, which will be treated as a sin in the eye of society whilst women should treat husbands like God”.

Women do not feel comfortable doing heavy or hard labour like evacuating soils, dyke preparation, weeding but they are compelled to do so when there are no other options left for maintaining their livelihood. The husband of a female worker said, “If women work in the *gher*, their beauty will fade and the

complexion of the body will be spoiled. They should stay at home and provide service to their husband". Most of the female workers said, "I work in the *gher* to reduce the economic hardship of my husband."

It was seen from this study that, both husbands and wives participate in the decision making process of the income and expenditure of the family but still the husbands' play a dominant role. One of the respondents stated, "The men who take the suggestion of their wives are unintelligent men (*HublaPurush*)."

Men's perception with regard to access and control over resources reinforces male superiority over female. Men in the study areas think that wives should have less control over resources and households should be maintained by the earnings of the husbands only.

Political empowerment

Men and women both take part in voting but the ratio is not the same. Some females cast their vote on their own will but most of them do so after discussing with their elder family members (father-in-law, mother-in-law, father and elder brother) or their husbands. "Before casting my vote I consult with my husband", said one of our female participants.

The majority of men identified their wives' participation in development work as a mode of developing tension in their existing relations with their wives. They believe that women may participate in development activities if it is within their own village. The

study indicates that most men think their wives should participate in development activities if they consist of only women. Similarly, most men surveyed stated the belief that women working in a leadership role where they are above male members cannot perform better than men due to their low intelligence and weak physical structure.

Physical empowerment

Health is one of the major issues for those who are working in the *gher*. In this perspective, women workers are more susceptible to waterborne diseases. Health care facilities are not provided by *gher* owners for workers. One woman worker said, "*Gher* owners never care about our health, they just want us to work." It is found that the three study areas i.e. Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira have huge water problems. The water of these areas contains arsenic and has high levels of salinity. In these areas, women fetch water from long distances and men do not help them with it. One male respondent from Khulna said, "I do not have time to fetch water; I am busy with earning income." In study areas, most of the respondents use sanitary toilets provided by the government but there are none in the workplace of the women. During menstruation, women do not work at the *gher*. One female respondent said "we cannot work at *gher* because there is no toilet facility around *gher*." In addition, people of study areas think that the *gher* is a holy place, women pollute during menstruation, so they should not do work in this time."

Men's perceptions about sexual and reproductive health care during pregnancy suggest more caring attitudes towards women. During the FGDs most of the younger women reported that their husbands are more caring with regard to their health during pregnancy. For example, they stated that most of their husbands accompanied them to go to the health clinics or doctors. However, women who were older (above 50) said that their husbands consider pregnancy as a natural phenomenon, so they are not too bothered about this. They think women should perform their regular activities during pregnancy as they would when they are not pregnant.

It seems that men consider wife battering an acceptable way to exercise their power. During the FGDs most men said that husbands have the right to beat their wives for any wrong doing. Husbands think that if wives are not battered, they do not obey their husbands. A female respondent and many other respondents gave the same opinion: "Women should obey their husbands...the husband has the right to protect as well as to rule over his wife...and most of the time problems arise when both the husband and wife argue with each other...in such situations one should keep silence...the wife should do this...".

Conclusion

Women do a lot of work in aquaculture. This encompasses social and economic activities and duties, both within and outside the family. In spite of this, the contribution of women to decision-making, both within and outside the household is negligible.

In concluding remarks, aquaculture is one of the most important sectors in Bangladesh as FAO (2005) ranked Bangladesh as sixth largest aquaculture producing country with its estimated production of 856 956 tons in 2003 (FAO, 2005). It is urgent to overcome gender discrimination in this sector in order to ensure empowerment of women and long-term sustainability.

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