

Policy Brief: Gender in Aquaculture



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Introduction

Fisheries is one of the most productive and dynamic sectors in Bangladesh. While in the early 70's mostly small scale enterprises operated in the capture fishery sector, since the 90's aquaculture has steadily become the main source of fish for the domestic consumers, and of shrimp for export. Bangladesh is now the 5th largest producer of farmed fish and shrimp in the world, and the growth rate of this subsector is expected to increase rapidly in the coming years (FAO,2014). Aquaculture employs more than 3 million people in Bangladesh, 60% of whom are women (FAO website), but their work and contribution to the economy and society is strikingly invisible in official statistics on fisheries, and they remain largely unsolicited in decision-making for the management and development. In reality while women have been playing an important role in the rapidly expanding commercial operations in aquaculture, from hatcheries to producers to processing plants, they have hardly profited from the 'golden boom' in aquaculture, being relegated to lower pay, longer hours, more insecure work, and increasing harassment at work compared to men, whilst their work is not recognised.



With the aim of documenting the work of women fish farmers vis a vis men and how this influences their socio-economic, political, and physical empowerment in the family, village, and the larger environment, the Gender and Water Programme Bangladesh (GWAPB) conducted an empirical research¹ jointly with ULAB-CSD in 2015, in 15 villages of the south west coast. The study looked at women's involvement as fish co-farmers in family 'pocket gher', as self-employed shrimp fry collectors and traders, and as day labourers in shrimp gher and workers in shrimp processing factories. Based on findings from the qualitative study, this policy brief highlights why a gender sensitive approach in aquaculture is crucial to maintaining its contribution to sustainable and gender equitable growth and development in the country, and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Agenda and SDGs.

Messages from the Research

Women's work and skills are vital in keeping the labour-intensive integrated fish-shrimp-crop-livestock farming system in the pocket gher profitable, but they don't enjoy ownership and entitlements from their work.

The study revealed that in privately owned pocket gher, female and male family members worked alongside each other, independently and jointly, in an equal number of specialized tasks for home and market production (see Figure 1). Despite their knowledge and expertise in many activities of aquaculture, they mostly lack ownership and decision-making power about the business aspects of it. As most of the women's work is done in or close to their family gher, it goes largely unrecognized by development agencies and government institutions, and they do not feature in official statistics. As male family members do the market activities, and decide on inputs, most of women's work in aquaculture for subsistence and for the market is unpaid, and therefore hardly gets counted in the GDP. The study also revealed that next to their work in aquaculture, women worked an additional 6 to 8 hours daily compared to men - for collecting water, fuel, domestic chores, horticulture, and tending livestock. See Table 3.

Figure 1: Work of women and men in aquaculture (from study)

Women	Men
Ownership of pond or land	
	Usually men own or lease land, ponds
Preparation of pond or gher	
Carrying mud, preparing dyke, providing lime, repairing dyke, preparing canal	Digging pond, mixing fertilizer, input water, preparing dyke, preparing canal
Nursing	
Preparing nursing food, stocking fry, supplying feed	Preparing nursing food, stocking fry, supplying feed
Management	
weeding, preparing homestead food, monitoring food availability, fish growth, fish diseases and fry	Supplying fish feed, providing security, monitoring fish growth, fish diseases, and fry, testing water
Harvesting	
Preparing cage, making net, collecting fish	Catching fish, preparing cage, making net, collecting fish
Processing	
Scaling for fish grading, sorting fish, de-heading	Scaling for grading, sorting fish, de-heading



Invisibility of women’s work in aquaculture is maintained by socio-cultural restrictions on women’s activities in the public sphere and by their male family members who don’t involve them in decision making regarding the business, market, and money.

While husbands interviewed in the study agree that their wives’ work and specialized skills in aquaculture are necessary, and have led to improving profits (10 to 20%) in their enterprise, they are reluctant to tell this openly for fear that this will reflect negatively on their role as ‘male provider’. However women are bearing the brunt of these ‘double standards’ as they are forced to take on an increasing amount of tasks, including the male tasks due to the out-migration or temporary migration of male family members, but have little knowledge, resources, or institutional support to do all this sustainably. Restricted in their access to the market, finances, and information, women are increasingly forced to take loans from private

money lenders and market intermediaries in the shrimp trade, that tie them up in exploitative labour and selling agreements. They also have to engage their children in work like shrimp fry collection and fish and shrimp processing to make ends meet.

Lack of laws for decent conditions of work in aquaculture is creating a downward spiral for poor women, children, and men where they are working longer hours in large, privately owned shrimp gher and processing factories, in insecure contracts with poor working conditions and very low wages.

In the villages visited most households had little or no access to private land or ponds, and women of these households were often forced to seek daily wage labour or work in shrimp-fry collection. They are the worst exploited in this situation as negative gender stereotypes about women’s work, their restricted mobility and social capital, poor access to extension and inputs, and lack of support in their home-based responsibilities, seriously hamper their power and ability to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Women and girl respondents in the study mentioned how they face physical harassment and verbal intimidation from men during shrimp fry collection from the river, and from male guards, managers, and youth while working on gher, they have little or no rights to sick leave, are fired when they are late, have no toilet facilities near the gher and therefore cannot work during their menstruation. Furthermore, health care facilities are lacking in the study areas and women are not aware of the diseases caused by being in the brackish and chemically treated water for prolonged periods.

During the fieldwork rampant wage discrimination against women was found throughout the study area (see Table 2): women are paid up to 60% less than men for similar work (earth-work, gher dyke repair) and in cases of even harder work (weeding, and working long hours standing in cold, smelly shrimp processing units). Yet despite these low wages most poor women and children take these jobs due to lack of alternative employment, and shrimp gher and factory owners get away with their exploitation as in their words “no one, not even women resist this discrimination”. A study found that among different aquaculture producing countries in the world, wages of women in aquaculture in Bangladesh were the lowest (Weeratunge et. al, 2012).

Table 2: Average daily wages of men and women in the study areas for similar work

Area	Wage/ day in Taka	
	Men	Women
Shatkhira	170-180	120-130
Khulna	220-300	200-220
Bagerhat	300-350	200-250

When women are self-employed in the shrimp market chain, they are not much better off than when they work as wage labour in shrimp gher or shrimp factories:

Poor women and children are self-employed in segments of the market chain, most notably in shrimp fry catching, which requires little or no investment in equipment or cash but is very labour intensive, and is flexible enough to be combined with their domestic duties and other work. Very few women own shrimp farms in the study area as this requires large financial investments, unrestricted mobility, and most importantly, authority, status, and decision-making power – all of which are limiting factors for women to succeed in the shrimp trade. The study found that as women and children fry collectors sell their catch at shore or at home, due to their restricted mobility, they have to agree to whatever rate is offered. Male fry collectors, on the other hand, can travel to trading points where they can compare rates of several purchasers and sell at better prices. Women are often forced to sell higher quality wild shrimp fry (collected seasonally from rivers and canals, with great effort) at a lower price to unscrupulous market intermediaries or wealthy local gher owners, who usually also tie them up in contracts to supply or work only for them, by giving them credit in the lean or crisis periods. Few women in the study area acted as market intermediaries in the shrimp trade (*foria* or *arotdar*), however they (along with children) often provided casual hired labor and unremunerated labour to *foria* and *arotdar* to perform sorting and grading of harvested shrimp. As shrimp fry collection on its own does not generate enough income for them, poor women (and their children) often combine this work, with casual wage labour in local gher, domestic labour, as well as work in shrimp processing factories.

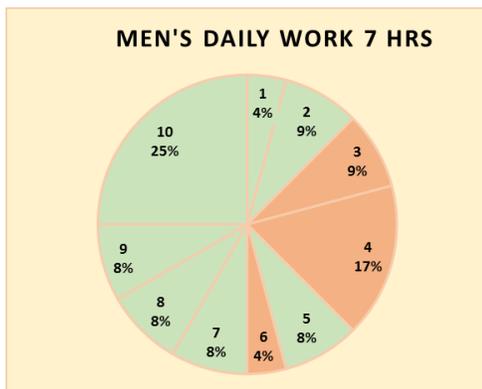
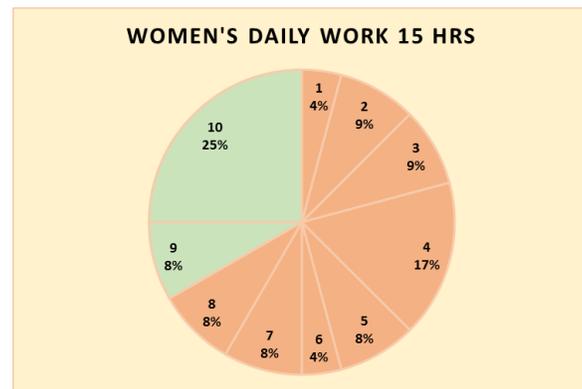


Table 3 Time use



An average day of a man	time	hrs	An average day of a women
Still Sleeping	5.00 – 6.00 a.m.	1	Wake up, sweep, clean house and yard, feed poultry and livestock
Wake up and eat breakfast	6.00 – 8.00 a.m.	2	Prepare breakfast and food for lunch and feed children
Go to the pond/gher	8.00 – 10.00 a.m.	2	Prepare children for School, eat breakfast, go to the pond with husband
Work in the pond/gher, Return from pond, eat lunch with the children	10.00 – 2.00 p.m.	4	Work in the pond, Return from pond, wash and clean utensils, feed poultry and livestock again
Take rest	2.00 – 4.00 p.m.	2	Eat lunch, repair nets and traps
Go to the market	4.00 – 5.00 p.m.	1	Prepare tea, snacks, evening meal and go to the pond to feed fish
Still at market (play cards, watch TV, gossiping)	5.00 – 7.00 p.m.	2	Cook dinner, manage children's education
Eat dinner	7.00 – 9.00 p.m.	2	Serve dinner, eat dinner, clean appliances, arrange everything for next morning
Go to bed and do sleep	9.00 – 11.00 p.m.	2	Go to bed and do preparatory works before sleeping. For example storing left over foods, locked the doors and windows of the house, look after kids again, look after pets etc.
Sleeping	11.00 – 5.00 a.m.	6	Sleeping

Development institutions and NGO's tendency to emphasize low technology and low input systems for women that are an extension of their domestic tasks, downplay their contribution to commercial fish production for the market, and does little to tackle their specific needs and constraints in this area.

While women play the major role in providing fish for feeding their family (through cultivation and/or catching), the study showed that they have specialized tasks and knowledge related to commercial production such as shrimp fry collection, fish feeding, preparing fish feed, disease and growth monitoring in fish, and in post-harvest sorting, grading, and processing of fish. Furthermore they said they were also taking a leading role in day-to-day *gher* operations when their husbands are away from home for short and longer periods. Women mentioned that the interventions of NGOs and MFIs in their area were not suiting their specific requirements i.e. improving their position to demand higher wages, better working conditions from *gher* and factory employers, improved security measures for women fish farmers and day labourers, better health facilities, and suitable credit facilities that allowed them to repay the loan after harvest of fish (rather than on a weekly installment basis).

Conclusion

Both small and large-scale aquaculture in the south-west coastal belt of Bangladesh is increasingly being carried out by women, whose work is resulting in bigger profits for the family business, employer, and for the sector as a whole. Yet, their work goes largely unrecognized in official statistics, and remains deliberately undermined by a male dominated value system that is geared towards increasing short-term profits by exploiting the most vulnerable – poor women and children, by gross wage discrimination and insecure work conditions. The study also reveals that women have a lot of knowledge and skills in this area, and try and use the limited opportunities available to improve their social and economic empowerment. Where there is family ownership of small *ghers*, women's involvement in aquaculture has importantly improved the economic, nutritional, and social benefits for their family. However the poorest households and especially the women in them, who mainly form the base of the pyramid working in this sub-sector, find themselves increasingly marginalized under exploitative work conditions, physical harassment, and the pressure of climate change on their basic requirements of water and fuel. So far there are hardly any specific initiatives of the government and other development agencies to address the specific needs and constraints of this part of the workforce in aquaculture. This brief concludes that if the empowerment of women workers in this sector is supported and encouraged, their capacity could play an important role in achieving the principal aims of the Sustainable Development agenda i.e. "ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all". Here follow a few recommendations for a way forward.

Recommendations

There is an urgent need for gender-disaggregated data in the fisheries sector as a whole, but especially in the aquaculture sub-sector in Bangladesh as there is high degree of involvement of women in it and gross underreporting.

Quantitative and qualitative data is vital for informed, effective and targeted policy making and planning of project activities that promote gender equality and improve economic development and sustainable practices in the aquaculture sector. To assist the research and for planning purposes, development organizations must be encouraged to produce gender disaggregated statistics. For aquaculture projects undertaking gender analysis prior, during, and after project implementation is very important to understand the continuously evolving nature of gender relations, and the work and empowerment of women as this changes over time and local context. Agencies should support research targeting nuanced analysis of gendered impacts of climate change, value chain and markets, industrialization and technological changes (Weeratunge, 2010)

Government institutions and relevant fisheries (related) development organizations must provide the normative, policy, and budgetary framework to increase the active participation of women in the business and public arena of aquaculture.

For example through specific gender policies that recognize and support women aquaculture workers' organizations and collectives; that encourage their participation in co-management mechanisms; which improve their working environment, which promote the wider dissemination of information on gender issues; and which facilitate women's access to markets, gender-friendly technology, extension, inputs, and skills-building in the areas of sustainable aquaculture.

Discrimination of women in employment practices of fisheries and aquaculture industries needs to be scrutinized and penalised.

Laws and rules for decent work conditions and minimum pay specific to the fish- and shrimp-processing industry should be set up with the participation of stakeholders from the government, private sector, and women and men workers' organisations; and an effective regulatory mechanism enforced to see that this is adhered to. Development cooperation needs to highlight that exploitative practices against poor women and children threaten not only the credibility of policy-makers, but also jeopardise the sustainable livelihoods of fishers' families and the economic success of the sector.

Aquaculture projects should be formulated challenging the status of women, rather than taking that as an unchanging given.

Activities should be planned for change of the inequitable power relations and aimed towards social, economic, political and physical empowerment of women. Furthermore, the impacts that the project will have on women (whether participating or



not in project activities) need to be assessed, as well as how the changes brought will affect gender relationships.

Development agencies working in aquaculture areas should adapt their interventions in consultation with women and men to suit their specific needs and constraints, ensuring that the most vulnerable are not left out.

Microfinance institutions need to develop gender-friendly 'seasonal loans' for women and men working in aquaculture that allows them to take bigger loans over a longer period, without the need to pay back in each week. Improving functional literacy in women for use of technology, and financial and business management in aquaculture is

another area that requires urgent attention. Location specific trainings for this need to be organized adopting flexible timings and gender-friendly staff and training approaches. Women fishers and employees also suffer a lot from physical harassment from men, and would benefit from the organization of empowered local 'community watchdog' groups to limit this.

To effectively promote gender equality for sustainable growth in the aquaculture sub-sector there is a widespread need for trainings in gender-sensitization and gender empowerment specific to the context and at different levels.

These are required for women and men working in aquaculture (including women fish farmers, male members of their households, employers, and market agents), as well as staff of government institutions, NGOs, and CBOs working with them.

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