

## **Bangladesh: Women, Men and Water-Pumps**

Innovations in mechanical irrigation equipment have led to a rapid expansion of irrigated agriculture in rural Bangladesh. This technology has been taken up chiefly by men who use the pumps to irrigate their own land and/or to sell the water.

To increase women's participation in this income-generating activity, some NGOs have started female and mixed-sex irrigation groups that own and manage a pump collectively.

The aim is to enable the rural poor to gain control over both the material and social resources essential to enter and compete in the water market. There are four different approaches:

- the household approach aimed at increasing household income;
- the empowerment approach, aimed at improving women's status through income-generating activities which enhance women's own incomes, eg. supporting women to manage and operate a pump autonomously;
- the poverty alleviation approach, e.g. helping the poor to engage in profitable enterprises such as water sale;
- and the shareholders approach in which individuals (not the irrigation group) are responsible for loan-taking and repayment.

If irrigating own household land is an important aim, men's own interests are likely to prevail; whereas, if water sale is the main aim, the opportunity is greater for women to mobilize funds and labour independently. Only a strong female irrigation group that is cohesive, effective in decision-making and problem solving, and able to mobilize its own funds and labour can manage and keep control over an irrigation activity itself.

Results from case studies show that for the majority of female irrigation groups (FIGs) operating in Bangladesh, related men's interests provide the initiative for the irrigation group (IG) to take an NGO loan to purchase an irrigation pump, and that water-selling emerges as a more common aim due to limited access to land for own crop production. Women's limited economic gain from participation in mechanized irrigation is seen mainly in water-selling IGs, in strong groups and in female-managed households.

To assess the impact of women's involvement in irrigation on their status, two FIGs under an empowerment and poverty alleviation approach and two mixed-sex IGs under the shareholders approach were studied. The strong FIG of Shyampur, through managerial and technical skills training, succeeded in independently starting and managing a collective water-selling enterprise with a sound perspective on managerial and financial sustainability. Women's social status definitely improved as a result of their involvement in the enterprise, their familial status in male-headed households improved in  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the cases, and their relations with their husbands in  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the cases.

A case in Fuljhuri shows that women must have more control in management at the earliest phase of a new enterprise in order to ensure their continued participation. Six years ago, a group

of men in Fuljhuri convinced a female cashier working at Grameen Bank and the Women's Centre to take a DTW (deep tube well) loan, accepting the conditions that the loan be taken in women's names, that a female manager be chosen and that women undertake some activities in the fields. However, behind these appearances of women's management, men were the real managers of the DTW and in the end installed an exclusively male management committee. Despite this, women's social status in the village and their public behaviour have improved, and they have obtained a better self-concept and increased mobility within the community.

A BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) sponsored DTW scheme in Jiban Nagar involved a mixed-sex irrigation group in a shareholder approach. The poor shareholders, mostly women, regret that they became shareholders but they cannot withdraw from the scheme until the capital loan is fully repaid without losing the money already put in. In BRAC's approach the gender-composition of the shareholders is not reflected in the IG's decision-making, which remains male-dominated. In the IG, only by virtue of the female manager's ambition, intelligence and socio-economic class, her earlier experience in the scheme committees, the electoral support of most women shareholders (the majority), and the support of her husband, could she become manager in spite of serious opposition from men and the norm rigidly adhered to in the village of women not going into the fields. In general, changes in women's status were negligible.

In a DTW enterprise in Jankhali, the female and male managers represent the two groupings of poor sellers and rich buyers and the power balance between them. The female manager was forced to withdraw after one season by the richer men of the other grouping who wanted to get back their own control over the enterprise.

**What the case illustrates:**

- Women are well able to take up irrigation management effectively, especially under an empowerment approach.
- BRAC's shareholders approach does not encourage women to fulfil more responsible and paid management functions.
- Although women's own control over economic gains is uncertain, personal, familial and social status of members of FIGs improves considerably.
- The indirect economic gains and improved status for women acting as intermediaries for loans to their male relatives should outweigh possible burdens.
- Provision should be made for poor women shareholders to leave unprofitable enterprises and get back capital instalments already paid, or get partial ownership rights recognized.

Source: Unknown. If you the reader know the source of this case study, please do let us know.