

Rural Women Empowerment: A Form Of Rural Development In Bangladesh.

Chowdhury Lubna

Research Officer, SSPVAW (Former Multi-Sectoral Programme On Violence Against Women),
Ministry Of Women And Children Affairs, Bangladesh.

Abstract:

Most of the population in Bangladesh lives in rural area. And rural women are valuable part of rural development. The crucial role that women and girls play in ensuring the sustainability of rural households and communities, improving rural livelihoods and overall wellbeing, has been increasingly recognized. Women account for a substantial proportion of the agricultural labour force, including informal work, and perform the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work within families and households in rural areas. They make significant contributions to agricultural production, food security and nutrition, land and natural resource management, and building climate resilience. But still now rural women are the most neglected population in a country. Women empowerment can bring a positive flow in rural development. Enhancing women's capacity building, enrollment in education and employment, Contribution to household income and livelihood, Participation in household decision-making, Control or Access to resources, Ownership of assets, Coping capacity to household shocks, Perception on gender awareness, Political participation, Community based Decision Making can change the entire situation of rural areas of Bangladesh. The country should overcome the social problems for women to face serious challenges as a result of gender-based stereotypes and discrimination that deny them equitable access to opportunities, resources, assets and services. Women can play crucial roles ensuring food and nutrition security, eradicating rural poverty and improving the well-being of their families in Bangladesh.

Keywords: women empowerment, rural development.

Date of Submission: 20-10-2025

Date of Acceptance: 30-10-2025

I. Introduction:

Rural women are key agents for development. They play a catalytic role towards achievement of transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development.¹ The empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights in particular at the individual level, it helps building a base for social change. Women play important roles in the rural economy as farmers, wage earners and entrepreneurs. They also take responsibility for the well-being of the members of their families, including food provision and care for children and the elderly. Women are more likely than men to have long-term COVID-19 because of this unpaid work and unequal opportunity to get service and goods.

II. Rural Development, Women Empowerment, Climate Change And COVID 19 Issues: Rural development in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh, geographically important in South Asia, is a development aspirant rural Based country. Most of the people of this country (about 70%) live in rural areas². Most of the poverty also seen in rural areas. Poverty, gender inequality, climate change, lack of education, lack of communication system, less use of technology and other reasons interrupted development process. Reducing income gap between the urban and the rural people, enhance partnership between women and men and ensure gender equality in the economic area is an important determinant of rural development in Bangladesh.

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2013>

² https://mof.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mof.portal.gov.bd/page/5e31763f_f5b2_4ecb_bf9a_edc8609d2f3f/G-1_07_38_Rural_English.pdf

Situation of rural women in Bangladesh:

Rural women are the most neglected population in the country because of gender inequality made by society. Without the development of women overall development of the country is not possible. Across the country, food systems depend on the daily work of rural women. They play a variety of essential roles, from raising crops and processing their harvest, to preparing food and distributing their products, ensuring that both their families and communities are nourished. The reasons for this disconnect from their right to food include unequal power relations and discriminatory gender norms, for example, resulting in women eating last and least in the household, as well as their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid caregiving and domestic work. In Bangladesh government and NGOs financing various women empowerment programs for rural women. Situations are changing slowly in rural areas. Women are now entering in more paid jobs.

Climate change, disaster emergencies and rural women:

Climate change and disaster affects the availability of food and chances of earning a living. Women and girls already face inequalities and discrimination – because of their gender. Climate change-related events whether slower onset disasters like droughts or sudden ones like flash flood, river erosion, hurricanes or cyclones can mean women's homes and neighborhoods can become uninhabitable. Women and girls face increased vulnerabilities to all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, and other forms of violence. In times of crises, girls are often forced to drop out of school or miss classes because household chores become a strain with fewer family members available to share the pressures at home. When a disaster strikes, girls can be more vulnerable to child marriage than usual. When disasters strike, women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured due to long standing gender inequalities that have created disparities in information, mobility, decision-making, and access to resources and training.

The ongoing flood crisis in Bangladesh began in mid-May 2025, primarily triggered by heavy monsoon rainfall and upstream water flow from India. The situation has worsened significantly towards the end of May when a deep depression formed over the Bay of Bengal making landfall near the West Bengal–Bangladesh coast on 29 May 2025. This weather condition brought torrential rains and strong winds exacerbating the flooding particularly in the northeastern and southeastern regions of the country. As of 1 June 2025, several districts, including Sylhet, Sunamganj, Moulvibazar, Habiganj, Netrokona, Noakhali, Bhola, Khagrachari, Bandarban and Rangamati have been severely affected. The floods have resulted in loss of lives, displacement of thousands, destruction of homes and significant damage to agriculture and infrastructure. Emergency response efforts are ongoing with government authorities and humanitarian organizations working to provide early warning and mitigate further impacts.³

The recent flash floods in Bangladesh have devastated communities across 11 districts, affecting 5.8 million people. Over 1 million individuals were cut off by the flooding, and more than 500,000 were displaced in evacuation shelters. The floods have severely impacted essential access, livelihoods, and over 339,000 hectares of crops. Additionally, 7,000 schools are closed, affecting 1,750,000 primary students.⁴

Heavy rainfall over the month June, 2022 led to increase of water levels and a serious flood in the North Eastern part of Bangladesh. Sylhet and Sunamganj districts have been affected most severely. About 4.1 million People exposed to flooding and most of them are women and children. There are 5 Districts affected by the flood - Sylhet, Sunamganj, Maulvibazar, Netrokona and Habiganj. The vulnerable women and girls of the rural areas of those district need to be empowered more to protect them and their family.

As Bangladesh is one of the Countries most vulnerable to climate catastrophes, there are several initiatives to help local communities, particularly women, overcome the effects of climate-related problems. On May 20, Super Cyclone Amphan made landfall in Bangladesh impacting 2.6 million people in 19 districts in COVID 19 situation. It is estimated that nearly 820,000 women – including over 49,316 pregnant women and 29,133 female headed households – were affected by Cyclone Amphan⁵. It is necessary to develop women's livelihood to cope this problems.

Gender based violence is one of the most common problem in rural areas of Bangladesh. Many rural women experience domestic violence. And this is an important barrier for women development and empowerment. When a family became poor, woman of that family gets poorer and victimize more than normal

³ Situation Report 1- Flood 2025 ; <https://bdrccs.org/situation-report-1-flood-2025>

⁴ Bangladesh: Eastern Flash Floods 2024 Situation Report No. 02, United Nations Bangladesh, 30 August 2024; <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/277637-bangladesh-eastern-flash-floods-2024-situation-report-no-02>

⁵ Rapid Gender Analysis
Cyclone Amphan,2020

time. Empowerment of rural women could reduce/eliminate violence against women and girl, especially domestic violence.

COVID 19 and rural women:

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.⁶ The first case of a COVID-19 patient was detected in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020 by IEDCR.

In Rural areas women take the whole responsibility for the well-being of the members of their families, including food provision and care for children and the elderly. They could not get the opportunity of rest, self-care and healthcare facilities. As COVID hits the rural areas also and tend the families to poorer, women became the poorest person in the family. Lack of money, social distancing, unemployment, lack of food increased domestic violence.

Despite the planet's capacity to provide enough good food for everyone, an increasing number of people are unable to meet their food and nutrition needs. This is especially true in the wake of escalating climate and environmental crises, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted school feeding programmes, interrupted supply chains and severely disrupted the livelihoods of small-scale producers, migrant and seasonal workers and local food vendors. In 2020, some 2.37 billion people did not have access to adequate food. This is an increase of almost 20 per cent in just one year, where those most affected were again rural women and girls.⁷

III. Contribution Of Women In Rural Economy And Development:

Women contribute in rural economy and development by doing paid work and unpaid work. But in rural areas women are encouraged to do Unpaid domestic and reproductive works. Rural women are equally discouraged to do paid work.

Women's Paid work: Women enter into rural economy mainly in three categories:-

Farmer:

In rural areas many women work in farm and grow crops in the firm. But most of the firm owners are the male family members. Women does not have the access to property. Most of the female member of family do the entire agricultural task after cutting crops. Women form about half of the agricultural workforce and are agents of change and resilience builders. Yet the gender gap in food and agriculture remains extensive. Many women work in others farm as day labor.

wage earner

It refers to a person who receives wages or a salary (as an employee) and/or net income from self-employment. There are many women who are the main wage earner in family.

Entrepreneur

Village women are now more likely to do creative works and became entrepreneurs. GoB and NGOs are introducing many livelihood and capacity building trainings and soft loans. Microcredit programmes in Bangladesh is very popular across the country to encourage women entrepreneurs for empowering women.

Besides this, several number of rural women entering into political activities, teaching and other professions.

Women's unpaid work: Women's unpaid work does not get appreciation in rural areas. Most of the time of their life they spent on doing unpaid work for their family and get less access of any Basic needs. They work for the well-being of the members of their families, including food provision and care for children and the elderly. Across the world, food systems depend on the daily work of rural women. They play a variety of essential roles, from raising crops and processing their harvest, to preparing food and distributing their products, ensuring that both

⁶ [Official COVID-19 Information - World Health Organization](https://www.who.int/covid-19)
Ad-<https://www.who.int/covid-19>

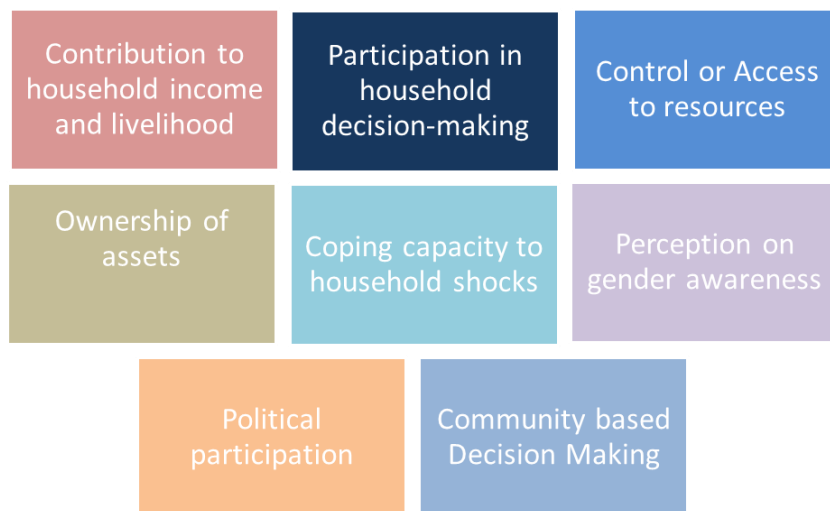
⁷ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/10/statement-un-women-international-day-of-rural-women>

their families and communities are nourished. Yet paradoxically those same women often have less access to food and a higher risk of hunger, malnutrition, under nutrition and food insecurity than their male counterparts. The reasons for this disconnect from their right to food include unequal power relations and discriminatory gender norms, for example, resulting in women eating last and least in the household, as well as their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid caregiving and domestic work.

This unpaid work, valued at an estimated Tk 5.7 trillion in 2021, represents 16.14% of the country's GDP, with women performing 85% of the total. The inclusion of this "invisible" labor is a milestone in recognizing women's crucial economic contributions and is seen as a step toward gender-responsive policies.⁸

IV. Indicators Of Women Empowerment As Well As Rural Development:

There are some ways women participate in family development as well as community development. The development process will accelerate more with more participation of women. This could also be called indicators.



Structural barriers and discriminatory social norms continue to constrain women's decision-making power and political participation in rural households and communities.

Positive efforts towards women empower as well as rural development:

SDGs:

The Sustainable Development Goals includes Zero Hunger (Goal 2) and Gender Equality (Goal 5), which are directly related with women and rural development. Other goals are also related with women empowerment and rural development like: No poverty (Goal 1), Good health and well-being (Goal 3), Quality education, climate action (goal 13) and others. The member countries of UN are trying hardly to combat this problems and bring positive change by fulfilling those goals.

International Day of Rural Women, 15 October:

The theme International Day 2021 was "Rural women cultivating good food for all". Rural Women are the key for a world free from hunger and poverty Achieving gender equality and empowering women is not only the right thing to do but is a critical ingredient in the fight against extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition. On average, women make up more than 40 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, ranging from 20 percent in Latin America to 50 percent or more in parts of Africa and Asia.⁹

Eighth Five Year Plan (July 2020-June 2025), Bangladesh, emphasized on women empowerment:

Emphasized on increasing women and youth participation in agriculture: Globally women have an increasing participation trend in agriculture and Bangladesh is no exception where more than half of the total agricultural labour force is women and their participation is gradually increasing. Likewise, youths are to be attracted in farming and allied activities through provision of introducing of incentives for inspiration like easing loans, and offering training as a new generation entrepreneur. Most of the cases, women are engaged in seedling

⁸ 2021 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) report with support from UN Women.

⁹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/rural-women-day>

and post-harvest activities. The 8FYP plan will focus on productive participation of women in agricultural employment and will seek to address the following issues, amongst others: (1) wage differences between male and female in agriculture, (2) socio-economic backwardness and constraints that women endure in a male dominated society, (3) women's access to institutions and facilities including extension and credit services and linkages with other services such as health and nutrition,, and (4) women's access to markets and high value-added agriculture

Emphasized on Increase women's economic participation and benefits: This related to women's ability to access to income, job market and economic resources. Women's access to or control over productive assets, resources, services, skills, property, employment, income, information, technology, financial services, work environment, entrepreneurship, community resources (land, water, forest etc.) ensures economic benefits. Removal of barriers to women's economic participation and ensuring support services are also critical. Women's economic benefits enhance status and helps for better living of the family.

Improve women's human capabilities: This deals with women's and girls' access to health care, life expectancy, nutrition, reproductive health, education, information, training, and other services that enable women to achieve better health and educational outcomes. This also includes family planning services, water supply and sanitation services. These facilitate women to access labour market and in decision making as well as overcome morbidity, illness, malnutrition and maternal mortality. This also includes women's freedom from violence and coercion.

The cottage, small and medium enterprises: This is a package which is also covering rural women entrepreneurs in COVID situation under 23 stimulus package by Prime Minister Bangladesh.

Climate-resilient farming is empowering women: Many local and international organizations have been making efforts to help the local communities, particularly women, overcome the effects of climate-related problems. Floating Gardens and other initiatives are making this process easier.

V. Recommendations:

- a) More access to education.
- b) Ensuring safety of women and children in rural area and reducing or eliminating all kinds of gender based violence.
- c) Preventing child marriage in rural area.
- d) More involvement in economic activities
- e) Access to Rural community based decision making and household decision-making.
- f) Aware women and girl about their rights on property.
- g) Proper enforcement existing laws to protect women's right.
- h) Encourage rural people to share household activities (unpaid works) equally in men and women.
- i) Ensuring healthcare facilities for women and girls.

VI. Conclusion:

Women are one of the major catalyst for development of a country. There is an urgent need to address the widespread barriers that women face in rural labour markets, so that they are no longer trapped in informal, low-status, low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, without legal or social protection. By providing equal provision of rural services and infrastructure it is possible to facilitate women's access to education, productive resources, and build on their knowledge, skills and abilities.

References:

- [1]. 8th Five Year Plan (July 2020-June 2025), December 2020, Planing Commission, Ministry Of Planning.
- [2]. The Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 2019, Bangladesh Bureau Of Statistics (BBS) [Http://Bbs.Porta1.Gov.Bd](http://Bbs.Porta1.Gov.Bd)
- [3]. Empowering Women In The Rural Economy, (2019), ILO [Https://Www.Ilo.Org/Wcmsp5/Groups/Public/---Ed_Dialogue/---Sector/Documents/Publication/Wcms_601071.Pdf](https://Www.Ilo.Org/Wcmsp5/Groups/Public/---Ed_Dialogue/---Sector/Documents/Publication/Wcms_601071.Pdf)
- [4]. Shahnaj Parveen And Ingrid-Ute Leonhäuser,(2004), Empowerment Of Rural Women In Bangladesh: A Household Level Analysis.
- [5]. Bangladesh: How Climate-Resilient Farming Is Empowering Women | Asia | An In-Depth Look At News From Across The Continent | DW | 03.01.2022
- [6]. [Https://Www.Unwomen.Org/En/News/In-Focus/Rural-Women-Day/2013](https://Www.Unwomen.Org/En/News/In-Focus/Rural-Women-Day/2013)
- [7]. [Https://Mof.Porta1.Gov.Bd/Sites/Default/Files/Files/Mof.Porta1.Gov.Bd/Page/5e31763f_F5b2_4ecb_Bf9a_Edc8609d2f3f/G-1_07_38_Rural_English.Pdf](https://Mof.Porta1.Gov.Bd/Sites/Default/Files/Files/Mof.Porta1.Gov.Bd/Page/5e31763f_F5b2_4ecb_Bf9a_Edc8609d2f3f/G-1_07_38_Rural_English.Pdf)
- [8]. Official COVID-19 Information - World Health Organization Ad-[Https://Www.Who.Int/Covid-19](https://Www.Who.Int/Covid-19)
- [9]. [Https://Www.Unwomen.Org/En/News/Stories/2021/10/Statement-Un-Women-International-Day-Of-Rural-Women](https://Www.Unwomen.Org/En/News/Stories/2021/10/Statement-Un-Women-International-Day-Of-Rural-Women)
- [10]. [Https://Www.Un.Org/Womenwatch/Feature/Ruralwomen/Index.Html](https://Www.Un.Org/Womenwatch/Feature/Ruralwomen/Index.Html)
- [11]. Rapid Gender Analysis Cyclone Amphan,2020