

Chapter 5

Role of Women in Development

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It has been a conscious strategy in the project to ensure that the consequences of interventions would, as much as possible, benefit men and women equally, and that both men and women would be participants in project planning and implementation. CDSP has made some significant contributions to the empowerment and emancipation of women. This is of crucial importance as women living in the chars are in an extremely dependent and disadvantaged position. They are vulnerable in many ways - not having enough to eat, living in very poor houses (often subject to tidal inundation), at risk from cyclones and storms, and under the constant threat of physical assault from land grabbers and other thugs. Before CDSP, women were rarely involved in planning, implementation and monitoring of development activities.

There are several difficulties in involving women in project activities. These relate to the men of the area, and are encountered at household as well as community level. Women's participation in activities beyond the home compound is seen as a threat to family values in the coastal char areas. The segregation of male and female is one of the fundamental norms governing social organisation of the char communities. Social respectability depends entirely on the women fulfilling traditionally prescribed social roles, and *Pardah* or the veil system has played a part in this. The movement of women outside the homestead requires the wearing of a veil and permission from the household head. Thus, the char women's ability and opportunity to explore the outside world other than their neighbourhood remains limited. Men in the community often express a lack of trust in women's physical and mental capabilities to carry out tasks, and to identify problems and earn cash. In addition, there is an unexpressed fear of losing authority. The non-participation of women in the public sphere leads to a hierarchical ordering of a superior-subordinate relationship between men and women. This relationship is again reflected in the leadership practice that women in society are dependent on men for any type of decision. This notion of dependency on men stems from the woman's ascribed role in the family and

society that creates values which lead to a secondary, dependent and disadvantageous position for women in the chars (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

However, due to severe poverty, women had to enter the male sphere of work carrying out such activities as the collection of shrimp fry, plantation of seedlings, construction of thatched houses etc. This has resulted in a change in the traditional gender division of labour in the char areas. To some extent, the women have also exercised decision-making power in the family. This is because during the sowing and harvesting season on the mainland, the majority of the char males travel to the mainland for work leaving the char areas with virtually no male population. This happens more than once in a year, and during these times, the chars remain under the supervision of women. Moreover, due to floods or river erosion during this time, it is left to the women to make the decisions, and take the responsibility to move to another place if necessary. As the male members have to go out to earn enough for their livelihood, the women have to face hard days alone. During this time of male out-migration the entire household activities from earning to expenditure is being governed by the female members of the household. However, other than in these limited aspects, the char areas are an example of strong patriarchal society (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

Another practical difficulty related to women's involvement is their unequal access to training, information, and knowledge, which often results in a limited vision of what they can do or may achieve as women. At the beginning of the project, women were not interested in the planning aspects of the project activities, and usually preferred to be involved in activities that served their practical needs. This meant that they lacked a long-term view of the project and its potential benefits (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

To challenge this attitude and to recognize the importance of involving both men and women in its effort to bring an improvement to the lives of the char population, CDSP has adopted gender concepts that concentrate on ensuring participation of both sexes in all of its activities. CDSP-IV, like previous phases, has aimed to improve the position of women and girls living in the chars. This was both in terms of their practical needs for food, water, shelter, income and support services (especially health), and to the status, security and position of women in their households and in wider society (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

CDSP has adopted a strategy where gender issues are not set apart from its activities but are mainstreamed into them. It was realised that an important aspect of mainstreaming gender issues is by ensuring the active involvement of women and men in the planning and decision-making processes. Thus, the gender strategy is aimed at providing both males and females with equal opportunities and access to knowledge and participation in project activities. This is manifested in the project policy to set as a target a 50-50 male and female membership in Water Management Groups, and a 30% target of women in Farmer Forums. An essential achievement of CDSP has been the provision of legal and secure land titles to landless settlers of chars. An important step forward for women in the land settlement process was the fact that they not only are the legal owner of 50%

of the land allotted to the household, but that their signature comes first on the title document (*khatian*) (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

The challenge then became how to work out practical methods for ensuring women's participation. In this respect, women and men's involvement must go beyond participation in equal numbers as beneficiaries, to achieve active consultation and participation. This enables women as well as men to influence the entire development effort with their respective priorities and expectations. To address this issue, emphasis is given to regular and adequate dissemination of information to women as well as men through their involvement in all field level institutions. It seeks to ensure that any information regarding project activity that is communicated to the men is also made accessible to women. The gender strategy for equal information dissemination is also applicable for information collection. Any information required by the different sectors of the project would be gathered from both male and female settlers in the project area. Female field staff facilitate organisation and communication with the women (CDSP II TR17, 2004).

Some of the impacts of gender empowerment activities of CDSP identified by a recent Gender Impact Assessment in 2018 are described below.

Land ownership

Land titles are granted in the joint names of husband and wife having equal shares, with the wife's name coming first on the title deed. This is exceptional in the context of Bangladesh, where women are generally excluded from ownership of land. This often puts them in an extremely vulnerable, dependent, and disadvantaged position. Not surprisingly, receiving an official title to land is of tremendous importance for women, and has far-reaching positive consequences. The practice of having the woman's name first has now been followed in other places in Noakhali district. Divorce rates, polygamy and violence against women have significantly decreased. This can largely be explained by CDSP's approach of transferring the husband's share of land to the wife in cases of divorce, multiple marriages (without the consent of the first wife) and extreme acts of violence. This can be done as the woman's name comes first on the *khatian* deed. In addition, men are less likely to abandon their wives, as the wives now own half the land and hence are of increased 'economic value' to the husbands. Furthermore, women's social status has increased as a result of their land ownership and they now enjoy somewhat more influence in the home. As women are listed first on the *khatian*, they must be consulted and give their permission when an official loan is being obtained with their land as collateral. Last but not least, women have become increasingly aware of their land rights and are now more vocal. Some even report that they have threatened their husbands with taking legal steps to deprive them of their land in cases of torture and abuse. This has usually resulted in a significant decline or complete disappearance of violence against women.

The efforts made by CDSP-IV to change the lives of women has been recognized by the 2017 IFAD gender award for outstanding results and impact.

Economic condition

CDSP has given women of the char areas better income-earning opportunities. NGOs working for CDSP have provided women with access to saving and micro-credit services, along with training and support for agricultural production (i.e. homestead crops, poultry and livestock), and poultry vaccination, alongside non-farm IGAs such as LCS work, tree caretaking, working as traditional birth attendants, hawking, tailoring, making improved cooking stoves, and cap embroidering. This is alongside the increased income of their husbands. Being the legal owners of land, women are now eligible to take loans from banks using the land titles to secure a mortgage. CDSP studies show that most women report that their overall income has doubled as a result of CDSP activities, which implies a significant improvement in their economic condition and hence their overall position as women. They are now less dependent on men for their survival and of greater economic value to their families. This is of crucial importance within the Bangladeshi context, which is characterized by profound gender inequalities and the dependent, subordinate and disadvantaged position of women.



Fig. 5.1. CDSP IV beneficiary women participating in tailoring training organized by PNGOs.

Food security

The recent Gender Impact Assessment shows that now no household goes without food. Women also reported, that apart from three main meals, they eat homemade and purchased snacks and enjoy different '*pithas*' (rice cakes) during the winter.

Fuel security

Most char households now get firewood from their own trees and purchasing of firewood is now rare. Before CDSP-IV, fuel for cooking was a major problem in the new chars, as all mangroves and other trees had been cleared for habitation. As a result, poor people either had to spend significant amounts of money on wood for fuel, or to cook less frequently (once a day or less). Women spent a lot of time collecting leaves, straw and grass to use as fuel, and it was much more work to tend the fire than when using firewood. This scenario has been changed by social forestry on public land and by household tree plantations producing plentiful supplies of firewood. However, the fuel-efficient stoves distributed by PNGOs do not seem to have caught on. It seems that they do not suit the local food culture and may not be very durable. A few wealthier families are now using gas for cooking – these cylinders are now widely available. Most households in the chars now have solar panels for lighting, fans and charging of mobile phones. This has meant that they no longer use polluting and dangerous kerosene lamps.

Access to healthcare

Although health services are of concern to both men and women, lack of access to health care is particularly difficult for women due to their need for reproductive health services, their responsibility for the care of children, and their relative lack of mobility to travel to services located outside of the CDSP area. Before the start of CDSP, there were no health or family planning services in project char areas. The reproductive health situation of women was alarming, with very high birth rates, and no maternal or neo-natal health care. CDSP has made efforts to improve the health situation in the chars. CDSP-IV supported 13 static and 13 mobile clinics set up by a PNGO and provided training and support via Health and Family Planning Facilitators and Traditional Birth Attendants. For each branch three local women were employed and trained to be Health and Family Planning Facilitators. They made home visits and held group Health Forums advising on family health and nutrition especially for infants. However, these have been limited in scope and may not be sustained after the end of the project. Thus, more work is required in health and family planning services to meet the government's standards for rural health provision in all CDSP areas.

Water and sanitation

Before CDSP interventions, there was a lack of safe drinking water and latrines, which often resulted in epidemic outbreaks of diarrhoea and other diseases. As a result, morbidity and mortality rates were high – especially among the female population and children. Domestic and potable water has been provided from Deep Tube Wells (DTWs) and ponds with sand filters, and household latrines and public toilets have been installed. NGOs have raised the awareness of the population concerning health and hygiene issues. These efforts have contributed to a significant decrease in common diseases like diarrhoea. DTWs have also decreased the time spent by women in fetching water, leaving them with greater opportunities to use their time for income-earning activities.

Education of girls

Before CDSP-IV there were no government or non-government schools in any of the five CDSP-IV chars. The project has constructed cyclone shelters in all the project chars and these are being used as schools during non-emergency periods. However, very few of these schools are being supported by the government and thus lack the resources to provide good quality education. Also, there is need for secondary schools in chars. Nevertheless, it can be generally said that the schools are creating aspirations among children to be educated. This is increasing the number of girls going to primary schools and madrasas.