

# Gender Roles in Collective Management of Aquatic Resources in Bangladesh



**F**loodplain wetlands are the major common natural resource in Bangladesh. Their rivers, *beels* (lakes), *baors* (oxbow lakes), *haors* (large deeply flooded depressions), and floodplains support some 260 fish species.

Bangladesh wetlands also have over 2,900 local rice varieties, at least 13 species of edible wetland plants, many other plants that are used for fodder, medicine, mat making and fuel wood, shrimps and crabs used as human food, and molluscs that are used as feed for domestic ducks and in prawn culture. Wetland plants also provide natural protection against wave erosion.

About 80 percent of rural households catch fish for food or to sell. About 60 percent of animal protein consumption comes from fish, and of this, 80 percent is from freshwater fish. However, fish consumption declined between 1995-96 and 2000 by 14 percent to 11.1 kg/person/year.

#### SOURCE:

Sultana, P. and P. Thompson. 2005. *Gender and Local Floodplain Management Institutions: A Case Study from Bangladesh*. CAPRI Working Paper No. 57. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

This decline has been attributed to increasing the area cultivated to rice, expansion in irrigation, construction of flood control embankments, and natural siltation. Nevertheless, fisheries remain key floodplain resources, and the restoration of floodplain fisheries through community-based management promises to be a major strategy to improve and make more sustainable the livelihoods and quality of food consumed by poor people.

## Gender Roles in Aquatic Resources Management

Poverty and opportunity have changed practices in fishing, the second most important occupation in the non-farm sector in Bangladesh. In the past, only the men were engaged in fishing, but extreme poverty and growth in shrimp farming have increasingly involved women in the livelihood.

Today, about 80 percent of the workforce collecting “shrimp fry” is composed of women and children. Shrimp fry refers to shrimp post-larvae captured for use in aquaculture. In inland areas, some Hindu women catch fish in the bodies of water near their houses. Women also catch fish by hand in shallow water and paddy fields, particularly in coastal areas. Much of the work in shrimp processing and fish post-harvest and storage are the women’s domain. Women also make fishing gear such as nets and traps, while both women and men take care of the cleaning and mending of nets. In shrimp processing, men confine themselves to the breaking of ice slabs used in preservation, and most work in processing factories is done by women.

The rapid expansion of shrimp and prawn farming has given rise to the snail trade, a very popular business in the southwest of Bangladesh. The snail trade has provided another income source for women who sell snails to duck and prawn farmers or work as laborers paid to break the snails.

### Comparison of Different Beel Management Cases

Since the 1980s, non-government organizations (NGOs) have concerned themselves with and made impressive strides to economically empower and emancipate women. One such NGO, Banchte Shekha, working mainly with women, organized community-based fishery management in some beels in Southwest Bangladesh.

Beels are natural depressions covering large areas of land (from hundreds to thousands of hectares) that are flooded by rainwater and the tides (in coastal areas) during the five to six months of the monsoon each year.

#### Women in Bangladesh

Rural women in Bangladesh are caught between two very different domains, one determined by culture and tradition that confines their activities inside their homes and the other shaped by increased landlessness and poverty that forces them into wage employment.

The role of women in society is subsidiary to that of men. Women are primarily concerned with the household, reproduction, childcare, and family management.



**Women make fishing gear such as nets and traps.**

In three such beels, the Community-Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) model was implemented to improve overall floodplain productivity. The three beels showcase management approaches that were dictated by circumstances such as social norms, culture and religion. For comparisons, these three cases are referred to as BMC-A, BMC-B and BMC-C.



**For additional income, women sell snail to duck and prawn farmers or work as laborers paid to break the snails.**

**1. Beel Management Committee (BMC) “A” was composed of representatives from a mixture of professions in the community, some of whom were members of primary all-female groups organized by Banchte Shekha.** Its group members are representatives of beel stakeholders concerned with adopting fish conservation measures. They save regularly, arrange income generating activities, and have access to credit. The BMC is responsible for coordination with other stakeholder groups and organizations. It makes decisions through participatory discussion.

BMC “A” has succeeded in implementing rules and enforcing penalties to protect beels’ resources. Women and men guard the beel with the support of local leaders. BMC “A” has successfully appealed to the local council chairman to get the lease to a canal without any fees imposed for making it into a fish sanctuary. BMC “A” has a small community center located next to the beel, the land on which it stands having been donated by one of its members.

In 2002, representatives from BMC “A” and stakeholders organized an integrated floodplain management committee that works as an apex body to coordinate the activities of all local institutions. The 15-member committee includes six women from the BMC and the farmer field school.

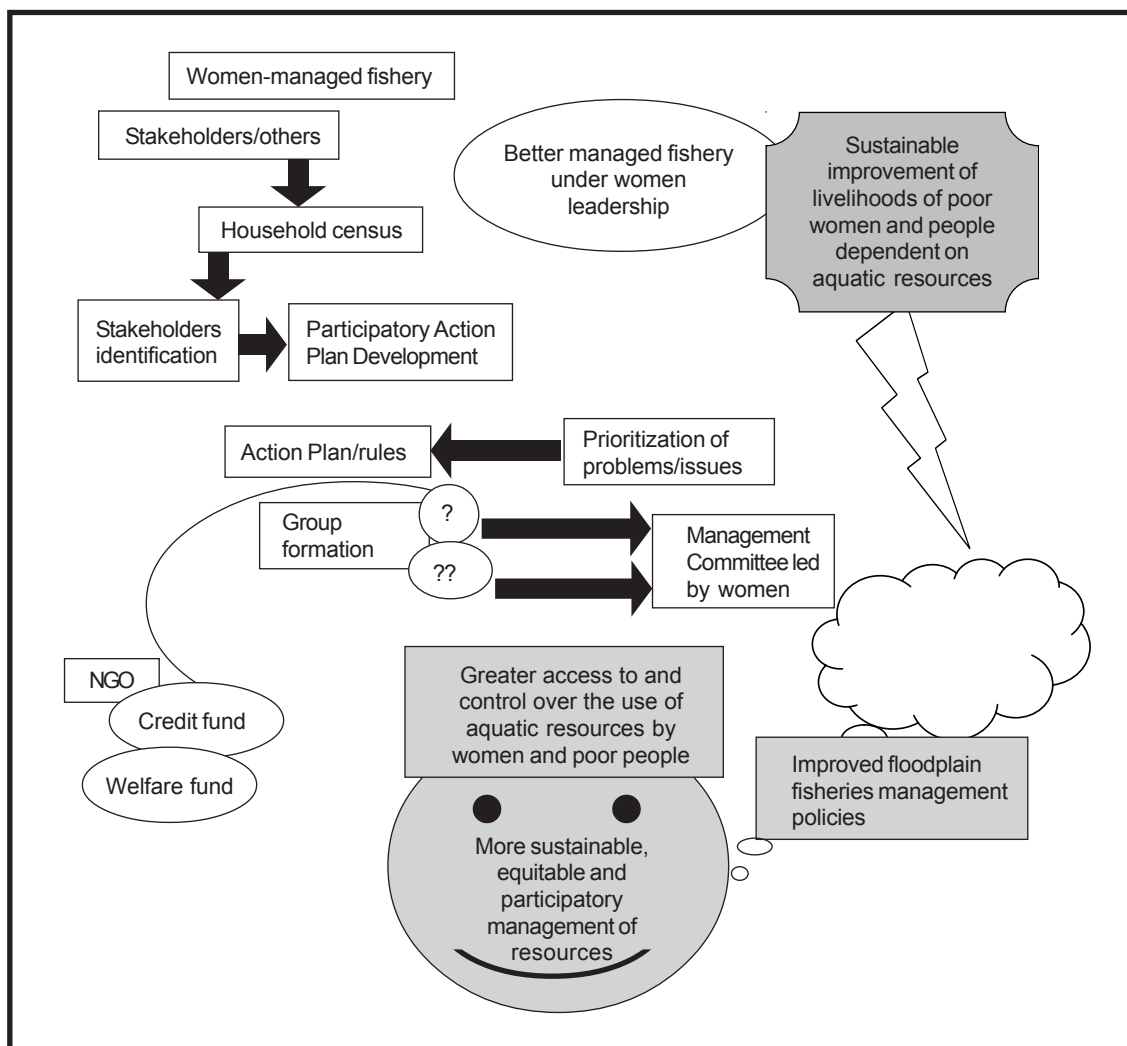
**2. BMC “B” is similar to BMC “A” but only women are members, and they have taken the lead in fishery conservation and management in the beel.** The women first discussed with the men the need to improve fishery management by forming an institution. However, the men were not interested in this proposition. The women then sought the help of respected men from the community to constitute an advisory committee, since they saw that in a male-dominated society, they could more easily persuade men to follow BMC rules with the help of an advisory committee.

The women also enlisted the advisory committee’s help to talk to violators of rules in using the beel’s resources, including those who just wanted to test the authority of the all-women group. Moreover, the committee also negotiated with local government to support water retention and fish sanctuaries, and helped them establish linkages with local experts and officials.

BMC “B” has a legal identity, group savings, access to credit for income generation activities for women, and a fund for the BMC. Its chairperson has been chosen to head a women’s group that fights against repression of women and to act as secretary of a cluster committee of five connected beels including their own beel and Beel “A.”

3. **BMC “C” is all-male, and was established in an area that previously had no local institutions for resource management or experience in any development work.** The community is comprised mostly of Muslims, and women’s voices are not heard. NGOs are not allowed to work freely with the women in the area. When they started the CBFM project, Banchte Shekha faced problems forming women’s groups. The men did not allow women to take part in the BMC and no women were included in any committee, nor were they allowed to take part in any discussions.

BMC “C” has always had all-male decision-making committees. When Banchte Shekha refused to lend money to BMC “C” to fund its project, it finally allowed women to form a few groups. Women are now receiving credit, something the men have gotten used to. Except for a brief time, women never became part of the committee and did not have a role in decision-making.



**Figure 1. CBFM Approach Adopted in Mali.**

## Impacts of CBFM on Fisheries and Livelihoods

In all three communities, both men and women saw gains and improvements in the health of the fisheries resource, even where women did not have a role in decision-making. The BMCs reported



high acceptance and compliance with the limits they set on resource use, although compliance was higher in sites where women had a role in decision-making and men also were active decision-makers (BMC “A”), or where men advised and endorsed decisions (BMC “B”), than in the site where women played no role (BMC “C”). In each case, the number of conflicts decreased over time and the BMCs have been recognized, with their plans accepted by the communities which now follow rules set by the BMCs.

BMC “B” has been more adaptable, slowly introducing and adjusting rules through the years. For example, if the members see small-sized fish or new species in the closed season, they prolong the closed period through motivational work with the community. They tell the community that the fish price will be higher after a month when fish size increases.

The ability to establish community-based organizations where women play an active or leading role is influenced by local community norms and culture and the acceptance of women’s involvement in economic activities outside the home. In the study area, this is greater among Hindu communities than in Muslim-dominated areas, where women do not normally have much, if any, say in public affairs. This is also affected by education levels — in beel “C,” few women have attended school whereas the average education level of women and men in the other two beels is almost equal. There appears to be a compounding effect of education, social norms, economic activity, and mobility which constrain or permit women to have equal roles with men for natural resource management.

The status and recognition given to women by the local community and leaders reflected this experience and was highlighted by the women themselves. In BMC “A” and “B,” women reported increasing recognition of their voices and willingness to listen to their opinions, which in turn led to increased willingness of the women to join local institutions and greater acceptance by men of their decision to do so.

By comparison, in BMC “C,” women have not been given any place in the BMC by the men, who do not recognize the fact that some women do actually depend on using non-fish aquatic resources. Consequently, women have no power or role in decision-making in BMC “C,” and although they now recognize the value to the community of fishery-related rules, the BMC has not addressed many of their concerns.



**Collective action in beel management in Bangladesh has given women the ability to judiciously manage resources such as choosing the right size of fish to harvest.**



**Involving women in decision-making is an important policy direction that has great impact in natural resource management.**

## Conclusion

It is evident that facilitation by an NGO that focuses solely on women's development is not sufficient to ensure their participation in decision-making and community institutions, because their participation is also affected by cultural norms and the extent to which women and men directly use the resources. Hence, it is important for those planning to support and facilitate community-based management of natural resources to follow processes that include women and help both sexes to recognize the uses, opinions, and relevance of those resources.

Where local social norms and culture limit the public voice of women, they cannot be expected to take a lead in resource management and will therefore need a long-term plan for developing their capacity and changing men's opinions. However, it is clear that at least in the context of Bangladesh floodplains, women-led community organizations can improve fishery management. Involvement in fishery management appears to be associated with greater community-wide acceptance of management rules and reduced conflict. Policy should aim for community-wide participation, including an active role for women.

## Suggested Readings

Ali, M.Y. 1997. *Fish, Water and People*. Dhaka: University Press Ltd.

Sultana, P., P. Thompson, H. Ahmed and A. Hossain. 2005. *Better Options for Integrated Floodplain Management in Bangladesh: Uptake Promotion Piloting of IFM Options: Narail Site*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Centre for Natural Resource Studies and WorldFish Center.

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