

PROGRAM REFLECTIONS

Climate Change Adversities and Gender Inequality in Bangladesh

This program reflection was produced under the Coastal Livelihoods and Mangroves Project - implemented by Shushilan, an NGO in Bangladesh, with Landesa support. Snigdha Ghosh (Advocacy Officer, Climate Resilience, Mangroves Project, Shushilan) reflects from experiential learning and non-participant observations from fieldwork implemented in four pilot mangroves communities in two districts of Satkhira and Khulna. The identities of some characters featuring in the document are changed.

Women and girls in the mangroves community experience adversities of climate change disproportionately and differently from boys and men. Gender norms and inequalities affect their ability to participate in discussions and decision-making processes, or to initiate action toward solutions to combat climate change impacts. The climate crisis is not "gender neutral"; instead, it disproportionately impacts women and girls, amplifying existing gender inequalities and posing unique threats to their livelihoods, health, education, and safety. It also places women and girls at increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV). Addressing climate change from a gender-sensitive perspective is crucial to ensure that the needs and rights of women and girls are recognized and prioritized in climate policies and actions. Globally climate change exacerbates inherent gender inequalities and Bangladesh is no exception.

In the Shushilan-implemented project areas in Bangladesh, men enjoy access to forest resources in far reaches of the Sundarbans, whereas social norms restrict women's access to these areas. However, women are reaching out to the peripheral forest areas for collection of fuel wood, dry leaves, and fish minnows, which are crucial for their families' sustenance. Women are limited in their access to these specific types of resources due to a variety of reasons. For one, they are likely to face challenges in enjoying mobility outside the home and traditionally are allowed only to collect fish minnows from the river adjacent to the mainland rather than further away. Further, social limitations keep them from accompanying male members of their families to collect forest resources by venturing directly into the forest.

For example, Suchitra Mondal expressed her frustration as she couldn't obtain a legal permit for fishing on her own in the forest due to prevailing gender norms. She needs this permit because her aged husband, suffering from several ailments, is unable to fish in the forest these days. The family is in a dire straits as Suchitra is desperate to earn an income from fishing but could not garner courage to defy the social norms and apply for a permit to enter the forest. Women endure a disproportionate burden when it comes to securing food, fuel, and water during a climate event impacting the community. In low-income families of coastal regions, women are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, facing greater risks due to poverty, limited education, and restricted decision-making power.

The document is divided into several segments, each highlighting a set of challenges confronting women and girls in the context:

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1. Climate Change in General Affecting Women and Adolescent Girls

Women and girls often endure the worst effects of climate-related disasters commonly faced by the mangrove-dwelling community, such as floods, cyclones, salinity intrusion, storm surges, and heatwaves. They bear an unequal responsibility for securing food, water, energy, and other vital resources as well as caring for the young and elderly. Mangroves-dependent families face heightened financial instability during such events, as they are forced to borrow money from moneylenders for survival at high interest. Child marriage is practiced to ease the economic burden of caring for girls. In Bangladesh, according to UNICEF findings, 51% of girls are married off before attaining the age of 18 years¹, which is the minimum age for marriage stipulated by legislation for women. There is unequal food consumption within the households during the crisis time because women and girls are the first to go hungry due to the belief that males need more food for doing harder physical work.

Extreme weather events disrupt education and in impacted areas girls are often pulled out of school during times of crisis. This limits opportunities for their education and empowerment, which leads to cascading loss of human capital in the form of early marriage, early pregnancy with pre-mature deliveries, domestic violence, and long-term socioeconomic disadvantages. When cyclones hit, women face higher injury risks due to gender inequalities in participating in awareness generation events and accessing information on immediate response actions to protect oneself and other vulnerable members like young and aged persons. In the aftermath, they often struggle to obtain relief and are more vulnerable to sexual abuse in shelters, leading many to avoid these facilities altogether.

For example, Rabeya Begum shared about her ignorance to seek shelter during one previous cyclone event. That time her husband was away in the city for wage earning. She also feared that the deserted house might be occupied by others during the period of absence. She stayed back in her nipa leaf thatched house which collapsed during an intense storm, causing serious

¹ UNICEF. (2020). *Child marriage in Bangladesh: Findings from a national survey 2019*.
<https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/media/4526/file/Bangladesh%20Child%20Marriage%20report%202020.pdf>

injury to her neck and left arm. Later she realized that a cyclone preparedness session was organized just before the event struck, where male members mostly attended and she did not receive information to attend the discussion.

Agriculture and Land Rights

Agriculture is the main livelihood and daily employment sector for women in the mangroves project areas. During cyclones, river erosion, and erratic rainfall, women work harder to secure resources for their families, often forcing girls to leave school to help manage the increased burden. Due to river erosion, forest-dependent people lose their homestead land and houses. These families are forced to shift for shelter and may end up in more hazard-prone areas away from the mainland and be exposed to more risks with diminished food security, lack of sanitation, and enhanced exposure for women to sexual exploitation. Some families are forced to build houses on their agricultural land because that is the land remaining after erosion.

Mariam Begum was forced to shift near a river slope after her shelter went into the eroding river approaching the mainland. She fears the current ramshackle structure will face a similar fate during the next cyclone.

In Munshigonj and Burigoalini unions of Shyamnagar sub-district under the project area, farming communities are more likely to convert their agricultural land into fish or crab farming ponds, locally known as *ghers*, sheerly to satisfy the urge for enhanced earnings, thereby increasing brackish water aquaculture practices and exacerbating salinity intrusion. The negative environmental impact of this change in land use is hardly highlighted in any community or development discussion. As more agricultural lands are converted into brackish water aquaculture practices, besides heightening climate-related risk, the scope for agricultural wage-earning diminishes further and women are impacted disproportionately as they are considered unfit for hiring as laborers in aquaculture.

Najira Begum, a 38-year-old forest-dependent woman, has been suffering from skin disease (skin burn) due to long-time exposure to saline river water under the scorching sun for collecting fish minnows. At the age of 28, her husband abandoned her, stating that she was not as attractive as before, which was insulting and hurtful to her. Earlier, Najira worked as a day laborer in agricultural fields, where she used to receive lower wages than men. With rapidly mushrooming gherms replacing agricultural lands with changed use, her wage-earning scope has shrunk further.

Women have less access to resources and opportunities than men, and land rights for women are a rare occurrence in the project areas. Men are less likely to transfer land ownership to their wives or daughters; instead, they typically assign it to their sons. When a man is thoughtful enough to consider granting land rights to a woman, he often faces discouragement from family members, especially his mother. Social pressure and harmful beliefs may discourage him. For example, family members may argue that if his wife gains land rights, she will gain too much authority over him or might even elope with another man.

Health and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

In project areas, the impacts of climate change is worsening the health of women and girls, including a rise in gynecological diseases, nutritional deficiencies, and mental health issues. Extreme weather events disrupt access to essential sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services by damaging or destroying facilities and infrastructure, as well as disrupting medical supply chains. This puts many women and girls at greater risk, as they may have to walk longer distances to access services or may not be able to access them at all.

Disruptions to healthcare during climate-related disasters lead to unplanned pregnancies and reproductive health issues. Climate change also impacts women's health by affecting food security and access to clean water, increasing rates of anemia and other health problems. Pregnant women face greater risks of miscarriage, pre-mature delivery, malnutritional childbirth due to heat stress, and related health problems. Adolescent girls who are facing early menstrual cycles between the ages of 10 and 12 often face pressure for early marriage, as the community believes they should be married within two to three years of menstruation onset.

Shahida Begum spends most of her day collecting fish minnows in the saline river. Due to her heavy exposure to brackish water her hair is discolored to pale brown and she has developed a uterine infection, and thus a fragile health. Shahida also confirmed that several women from her community are reportedly suffering from the same skin and gynecological diseases due to long-term exposure to the saline water. Shahida's husband viewed her as a burden and refused to cover her treatment expenses. He later abandoned her along with their four children, marrying another woman and not contributing to their children's expenses.

This prolonged submergence in brackish water leads to several health issues, including dry and itchy skin conditions, waterborne diseases, and impacts on menstrual hygiene and the reproductive system. This salinity exposure in the bottom portion of the body reportedly sadly ends up in hysterectomies. Many women and teenage girls use cotton cloths during menstruation, rinsing them in saline water, which contributes to urinary tract infections, vaginal infections (Leucorrhoea) and gynecological complications.^{2 3}

Jyoti Gaian, a woman of deteriorating health condition, is suffering from a uterine tumor, which was diagnosed as cancer last year. She is ultra-poor and cannot afford the medical expenses for this expensive treatment.

Bishnu Chakraborty and his wife have been trying to conceive a baby for the past few years, but without success so far. Their doctor opined that her reproductive capacity is compromised due to prolonged, daily bottom body part exposure to saline water for catching shrimp spawns.

² Sinha, S., Ahmad, R., Chowdhury, K., et al. (2024, August 16). The impact of saline water on women's health in the coastal region of Bangladesh: Special attention on menstrual hygiene practices. *Cureus*, 16(8), e67032. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.67032>

³ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. (2023, August 2). *Bangladesh's coastal women: Living on the frontlines of climate change*. <https://asia.fes.de/news/bangladesh-coastal-women.html>

Biodiversity, Forest Conservation, and Natural Resource Management

Climate change significantly threatens the Sundarbans and local communities by damaging the vital mangrove forest critical for survival of the community. This impacts the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, which rely on fish, crabs, the nipa palm tree's leaf locally known as *golpata*, and honey collection from the forest. As these resources dwindle, illegal activities increase. Frequent climate events like cyclones and river erosion worsen the situation, compounded by limited awareness of mangrove conservation's importance for climate resilience. Women often have less say in decision-making processes related to climate adaptation and mitigation. This lack of inclusion leads to policies that do not adequately address their needs and perspectives, further entrenching inequalities. Young girls often leave for work in city houses as house-help. They become child laborers, with increased exposure to sexual and physical abuse, which severely affects their mental health.

Halim Gazi and Amena Begum, a forest-dependent couple, used to collect fish and crabs from the forest. Biodiversity degradation caused by climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, and illegal activities had impacted their livelihoods. These factors forced the couple to move to a city about 30 miles away from their village in search of work. They are now living in a very congested slum area. Amena is facing sanitation problems and occasionally exposed to social violence. Despite all this, they are trying to adjust to this place because there are more livelihood opportunities. However, they have a daughter who they have left behind in the village with their relatives because they do not feel safe keeping their daughter with them. Eventually, their daughter dropped out of school while studying in standard five at the age of 12, due to poverty and improper guidance.

Gollam Quddus relies on the Sundarbans for his livelihood; however, the cost of a forest entry permit and the effort required to obtain it has increased manifold. This is due to a recent increase in the entry fee and because several visits to offices are required to obtain the permit, which is only possible after the payment of an exorbitant 'process fee' charged by the middlemen. A frustrated Quddus has reduced the number of entries he can make to the forest for fishing and crabbing purposes which has impacted his earning. Quddus's wife Selina Begum attributes her husband's stress to his frequent emotional outburst and bad temper. She reported that domestic violence and even beating by Quddus is a resultant effect of the stress created by plummeting income these days. Quddus did not deny the fact and stated that he beats his wife when she mentions any household expenses. Due to his impoverished situation, he withdrew his daughter from school and later married her off while still a child of 15 years.

2. Water and Sanitation

Women and girls are generally tasked with getting water for their families. Climate change intensifies water scarcity, forcing them to travel farther to fetch water, which increases their workload and reduces time for education and income-generating activities. Lack of access to clean water impacts hygiene and sanitation, making them more vulnerable to diseases. Low-income women and those living near rivers face significant challenges in accessing clean water. During severe weather events like cyclones, they often endure food shortages and have to travel longer distances for resources, risking the possibility of physical and sexual violence incidences and missing school. Women and girls who live beside riverbanks are particularly vulnerable to a lack of safe drinking water and diseases associated to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

During storm surges, drinking water sources can become contaminated by saline river water. When coastal embankments breach during heavy rainfall, water-borne diseases like diarrhea and cholera spread. In 2019, a part of the embankment at Singharatali washed away, flooding the village and affecting about 150 families. This contaminated water led to disease outbreaks such as cholera and hepatitis A and E (as informed by the community). Forest-dependent people could not access their latrines in the morning due to flooding and had to wait until afternoon when the water receded during ebb tide. Following the Remal cyclone which hit the area in 2024, most families in these areas experienced a rise in instances of waterborne diseases. Women and girls were especially affected due to the unhygienic conditions and lack of privacy at sanitation facilities. In the Burigoalini union, there are only two freshwater ponds available as source of drinking water, and both were contaminated by saltwater intrusion. As a result, women from this union had to travel long distances (2-3 km) to collect clean water, and many were left with no choice but to drink the salty water, leading to water-borne and enteric diseases outbreak like diarrheal infection, abdominal pain, high blood pressure, and typhoid fever.

3. Climate Migration Estranged Spouse

Climate change-induced displacement and migration at times force the impacted families to disintegrate resulting in temporary separation and even long-term detachment from their family members. The eventuality might invite more exposure for women and girls to societal exploitation and gender-based violence.

Debabrato Roy sent his wife and only son to India for a better life and now lives alone. He is deeply in debt and initially planned to join them soon, but a year has passed without him being able to afford it. He is now leading a lonely and miserable life while trying to pay off his debts.

Last year (2024), due to river erosion, the entire Jhulanto Para of Kalabogi village was submerged in the river, and 120 families lost their homes, livestock, and everything they owned. They are now living a life of climate refugees.

Noman Ali, a forest-dependent man in search of a better job in the lean season, started working in a brick kiln in Khulna last year. After about six months, he visited home, to find his wife Rahima had entered into an extra-marital affair with another man, who is stated to be the leader of a forest bandit gang in Sundarbans, and later was forced into marrying him under the pressure. Currently, Rahima Begum is living with that robber, leaving behind hapless Noman Ali and their two children.

Karim Gazi started working in the industry in Chittagong in 2024 as a laborer. He left behind his wife, Rubaya Begum, and one child, in his village. But later he married a woman in Chittagong and now no longer supports Jabeda Begum and her child.

4. Deep-rooted Gender Discrimination

Empirical evidence suggests women play a crucial role in community resilience and climate adaptation actions. Their knowledge of local ecosystems and the sustainable practices they follow to protect nature is vital in creating effective climate interventions. Empowered women lead to better outcomes for communities as a whole. There exists an inherent apathy in the strong patriarchal mindset to exclude women from the forest-dependent community, participation in climate discussions, and contribution to decision-making processes to mitigate the challenges. This attitude even extends to not allowing or supporting the women to speak out, make decisions, or hold leadership positions in community institutions. Women farmers are particularly sensitive to the effects of climate change since they frequently operate on small farms and depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. In addition, women farmers have little access to information and resources that could help them adjust to the changing climate, including technology, land ownership, and loans. Land rights are essential for women in these areas because land rights empower women to participate in climate decision-making and invest in sustainable agriculture, enhancing community resilience to climate change.

Fatima Begum is working as a Community Patrol Group (CPG) member to protect the forest from illegal tree-felling and poaching. She often faces abuse and social pressure from the community to quit the job as a woman CPG member does not match common social perception. They even pass derogatory remarks and accuse her of becoming more arrogant once she joined the CPG.

Sheuli Begum is working as a CPG member. Whenever she tries to stop the locals from doing any kind of immoral and harmful activities in the Sundarbans, the perpetrators gang up to abuse and even beat her.

Women face defamation and pressure in trying to raise their voice on participatory forest governance and natural resources management.

Greasy Chitra, a Cyclone Preparedness Program (CPP) member, often faces social barriers when she works to distribute water and relief materials during disasters.

Opportunistic men exploit this perception, threaten, and coerce her in claiming share of relief items, despite not being affected by disasters. She wears a CPP vest during field work to make herself a conspicuous presence. Some men try to undermine her role during emergency, pass derogatory comments, and verbally abuse at her. She maintains a low profile in such trying situations, self-restricting her movement within identified communities to avert denouncing comments. Additionally, her assertive leadership and public announcements during disasters as CPP draws flak with insulting remarks from both community men and from a section of her male field colleagues.

Shushilan implemented mangroves project endeavors to mitigate some of the gender and climate challenges

Shushilan, a national NGO in Bangladesh, with support from Landesa, has developed a specific program strategy looking at the gender discrimination and climate adversities encountered by the women in mangroves community.

Since 2004 the Government of Bangladesh has introduced a co-management system to better protect and conserve mangroves with active community participation. The lowest of the three-tier system has a Village Conservation Forum (VCF) formed by the Forest Department (FD) by including forest-dependent communities from each village within a five-kilometer radius of the forest. Any meaningful discussion and participation of minority power groups seemed improbable as VCFs had a very large number of enlisted members, mostly menfolk.

- a. Observing very negligible participation of women in VCFs, in 2023, Shushilan, in consultation with the FD, has gone ahead with sub-dividing VCFs in four pilot communities into smaller sub-VCF units to create space and scope for women to participate in mangroves and climate change discussions. Within the pilot coverage area, seven VCFs were subdivided into 25 sub-VCFs to enhance program operational efficiency. Over a period of less than one year, the women's participation increased significantly in the sub-VCF discussions (sometimes more than 73%).
- b. For fortnightly sub-VCF discussions, a list of issues was selected in discussion with FD. The important topics for discussions and facilitation by identified trained women from the forest dependent community included mangroves conservation, climate change and mitigation, alternative livelihoods, disaster preparedness, gender sensitization, women's leadership development, land tenure security, and climate adaptive farming practices. The community members became aware of government extension services provided by line departments for livelihoods augmentation. The resolutions adopted in fortnightly meetings at the community level were documented by women and shared with the higher tier of co-management institution. After two years of pilot intervention and with proper facilitation, the local community has shown inclination to accept women's leadership and recognize

their important contribution in decision-making processes, including local level planning to mitigate distress of the community, with gender issues receiving priority.

- c. During regular engagement and advocacy with the local government, the FD and other sectoral agencies and the Shushilan team project women with proper capacity development could best be seen as community change agents. The identified women from the community are oriented by Shushilan on the efficacy of the participatory forest conservation mechanism, whom and how to approach in the government system to follow up and the pursue specific agenda discussed in the sub-VCF meetings, and promoting women's economic empowerment with skill development. The women gained confidence and gradually overcame social barriers to approach or speak with the government officials and local government representatives to leverage the extension services provided by several departments. This is a significant change. The officials and elected representatives are reciprocating by welcoming women approaching them for any support to mitigate the climate distress in a gender equal approach.
- d. Shushilan is developing strategies and implementing all activities by following a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) approach. Recently, by working with the local government and revenue department, a significant breakthrough was achieved: *khas* (public) land was allocated with short-term tenure security to 16 forest-dependent landless families, and 15 of those were allocated solely in the name of women. Encouraged by this outcome, Shushilan is further working with the government system to identify landless mangroves dependent families and *khas* land available for settlement with these families.
- e. Shushilan has carefully integrated use of folk-media to influence community behavior and improved understanding on mangroves conservation efforts with women as equal partners. The issue of gender equal access to forest and natural resources is promoted during the folk media performances. They also emphasize the importance of developing women's leadership to function as change agents.
- f. Going forward, the moderate scaling phase envisages systematic capacity development of identified 60 women community leaders to act as community change agents for pursuing program implementation with robust GESI integration.

5. Recommendations and Way Forward

Shushilan rolled out a moderate scaled-up approach starting in 2025 to cover 32 villages with 59 VCFs, sub-divided into 226 sub-VCFs in four unions. Internal review meetings within the Shushilan team and advocacy engagements with all stakeholders prioritize highlighting gender discrimination and adversities faced by women and adolescent girls as key priorities.

Recommended action points:

- Through program activities, raise community awareness, particularly among men, to create space within the patriarchal mindset underlining a gender equal approach to mangroves conservation and women's leadership, all targeting a change in social norms.

- More focused work on improving land tenure security for women to enhance women's social position, inclusion in the process of decision-making, and women's climate resilience building.
- Sensitize around and promote land literacy, especially among women, to capacitate and empower them.
- Promote gender-responsive participatory forest governance by mobilizing the three tiers of the co-management system. Pursue legal inclusion of women in co-management through policy reform to improve women's participatory contribution in natural resource management.
- While Shushilan and Landesa do not have WASH expertise, it is clear that project communities, especially women, face extreme problems related to WASH. As such the project proposes to identify a suitable NGO working on WASH issues to encourage them to work in project areas on promotion of safe drinking water, personal hygiene, and sanitation issues with self-health protection awareness. Similar partner organizations may be identified who are working on GBV reduction, promotion of girls' education, and child protection.
- In a coordinated approach, work with sectoral agencies in the government to reduce the livelihood dependency of the community on forest resources and to promote sustainable and participatory forest protection.