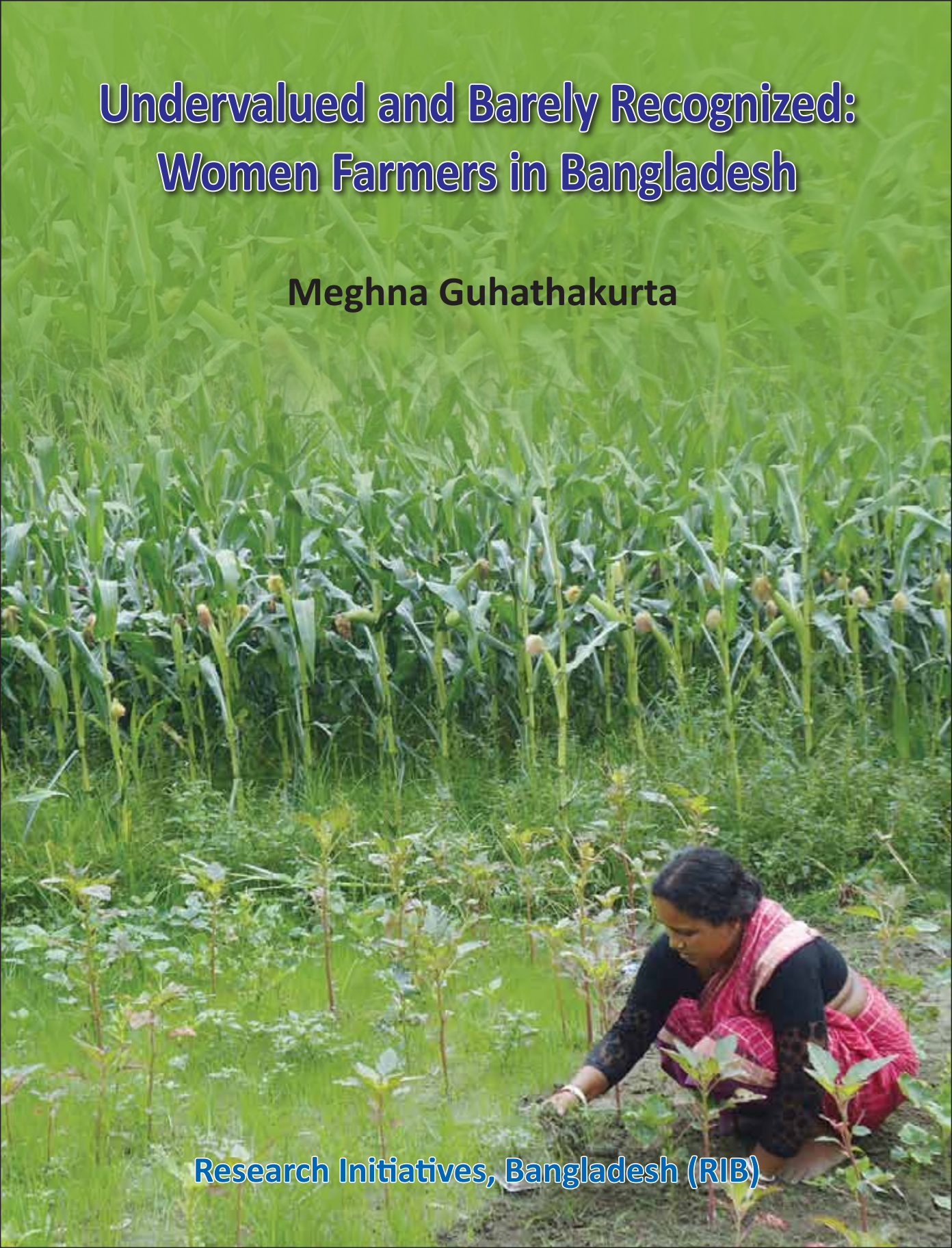
Undervalued and Barely Recognized: Women Farmers in Bangladesh

Meghna Guhathakurta



Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB)

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Cover picture: Mamota Rani working at vegetable field in her courtyard at berakuthi, Nilphamari

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Contents

Introduction		05
Background of the study		06
Methodology		08
Project areas		08
Household sample characteristics		10
Research Findings		18
(a)	The transformation of agricultural work of women farmers	19
(b)	Cost of production; nature of poverty	22
(c)	Wage structure	23
(d)	Access to knowledge	25
(e)	Women's access to land and resources	26
(f)	Social dimensions: health, education, technology	26
(g)	Decision-making and awareness	27
(h)	Regional variations	28
Summary Analysis		30
Way Forward		31
References		32

Introduction

Across the developing world, rural women play a crucial role in agriculture and farming. In Bangladesh, where women exceed 50 percent of the agricultural labour force, this is no exception. In recent times, the participation of rural women in general is increasing in agricultural work due to changes in values and norms. Traditionally women have played an important role in ensuring food security for marginalized rural families. Due to their traditional role in storing and preserving seeds, they also show awareness and competency in storing food for natural disasters and lean seasons. Despite this women tend to be "invisible" in the agricultural sector of Bangladesh owing to the assumption that women are not involved in agricultural production because of cultural norms that value female seclusion and undervalue female labor (Kabeer, 1994, Rahman, 2000).

Nowadays several projects are being implemented by both governmental and non-governmental authorities to extend crop production and allied activities that will involve women in the production and process of high value crops and consequently in the production of food grains. Women are expected to participate in nursery plantation, through vegetable cultivation, production and preservation of seeds, post harvest activities and irrigation through these projects.

A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that increasing women's control over resources has beneficial effects on a number of important development outcomes. Women's share of cash income and assets, particularly farmland is seen to increase budget shares on food expenditure (Hoddinott and Haddad, 1995; Dufro and Udry, 2004). Considerable evidence also suggests that mothers' greater control over resources influence child outcomes in particular, nutrition and education (Hallman 2003;

Background of the study

The current study has been conducted under a broader project on agro-ecology supported by Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and implemented by their partner RIB.

The main objective of this project is to :

- Adopt ecological principles in different ecosystems of Bangladesh as an alternative management approach to agriculture production.

Specific outcomes of the project are the following.

- Changing local agricultural practices through adopting ecological principles is understood.
- Farmers and practitioners are made aware of the recent global and local knowledge of agro-ecology.
- Advocacy and campaign among politicians, policy makers and elite citizens are based on understanding, learning and knowledge.
- Extension of acquired knowledge to other agro-ecological zones of Bangladesh is made possible.

Although organic farming practices alone as a means of supporting the rising global and national population is a matter of debate, agro-ecological research and existing indigenous resources (Folk seed, organic fertilizer, natural pesticide, soil conservation methods) has shown insight into the rewarding aspects of traditional agriculture, such as the ability to bear risk, use of biological methods for production and protection, the efficient use of biodiversity to specific agro ecosystems. More importantly, the application of agro ecology suits the small holdings of specific rural farms where organic input production locally has been proved to be feasible. Local practices include healthy soil management by compost, increasing microbial population, using local streams and conserving rain water, protection of pollinators and introducing beneficial insects (spiders), animals (snails, fish, birds) and keeping the air and the environment clean with anti-air pollutant species. It is, in fact, a process of biologically re-structuring peasant farms which in turn leads to optimization of key agro-ecosystem processes (nutrient cycling, organic matter accumulation, biological pest regulation), and efficient use of labour and local resources. Further, the agro-ecological approach offers an alternative path to intensify agriculture with clear understanding and applied to fit the specific environment. The concept emphasizes on management of diverse on-farm resources and inputs with the incorporation of contemporary understanding of biological principles and resources in farming system.



Group meeting with women farmers

It is in this perspective that a special action research on women farmers was felt necessary. Looking into agro-ecology from below would be bringing in perspectives from marginal and small farmers, food gatherers and producers, deliberating relevance of issues, researching local practices, including women, *adivasis, Dalits* who had historically contributed to agriculture. To summarize agro ecology proposes to:

- Focus on sustainability of agricultural production
- Overcome challenges of environmental degradation
- Diversify crop and food consumption habit
- Prevent land loss to urbanization which is now almost 1% per year
- Divert the working class to earn and maximize the productive potential of their own land and not depend on big landowners.
- Cause indirect benefit to climate change

- Bring women, *adivasis* and disadvantaged people into the mainstream of agricultural production.
- Resolve short term problems and find ways for long term strategies.

Methodology

Four groups of 15 women farmers were formed who resided in the four villages under RIB's agro-ecology project.

A small survey was conducted on all the women participants in order to assess the characteristics of their households and living pattern.

Focus group discussions were held among women farmers in each village to get supplementary information regarding their daily challenges and issues.

Project areas

In the larger project, four project areas were chosen in the districts of Nilphamari, Bogra, Satkhira and Chittagong. For the action research on women farmers four villages were chosen in only two districts. These are: the villages of Berakuthi and Joychandi in Nilphamari and Bongshipur and Dhumghat in Satkhira. The choice of the villages was on the basis of depicting variability in ecology, population and the region (Niphamari in the northern part of Bangladesh and Satkhira in the south-west of Bangladesh) as well as accessibility to the population of concern. Below are brief characteristics of each village which will help in the analysis of the collected data.

Berakuthi, Nilphamari

The village of Berakuthi in Nilpahamari is located about 14 kilometers from Nilphamari Sadar (center). The main economic produce of the village is rice and vegetables with a certain amount of spices like onion, ginger and garlic.

It is a Hindu dominated area. A relative communal harmony exists but it is not totally free from tension between the Hindu and Muslim community.

In colonial times, it used to be known for the cultivation of Indigo. The village is only 4 kilometers away from the Export Processing Zone (EPZ), where most village women work. Artificial hair for women is one of the main products of the EPZ and hence women gets preferential treatment in recruitment. Women of the village also produce floor mats made out of jute as handicrafts for sale.



Group meeting in Berakuthi Village

Joychandi, Nilphamari

The village of Joychondi is located in the Sonaray Union of Nilphamari Sadar Upazila (near the centre). It is situated amidst plain lands. The main produce are rice and vegetables although spices and chilies are also grown seasonally. The Hindu –Muslim ratio in the village is 40:60.

An EPZ is located only 2 kilometers away from Joychondi village and hence both male and female youth of the village is employed there. The wage rate varies from 5000 taka to 15000 taka per month.

Bongshipur, Satkhira

The village of Bongshipur is situated in the Ishwaripur Union located 5 kilometers south of Satkhira town. The majority are Muslims but Hindus form 42% which is higher than the national average. Other communities like Christians and indigenous Munda community also exist.

Being located in the plain land, it is both a rice and shrimp cultivation area. Many are fishermen who go out to the sea to fish. Salinity exists in the soil and it is an area of rich biodiversity. Two primary schools and one fish storage godown is located in the village. The men often migrate seasonally to sell their labour. The women often take up agricultural labour as well as work in the shrimp farms besides doing household work. Being on the fringe of the largest mangrove forest in the world, the Sundarbans, activities also includes gathering and collecting *golpata* (leaves used for thatching houses), wood, honey and crabs.

The area is crisscrossed by rivulets and lakes and hence is a fertile ground for fishing.

Dhumghat, Satkhira

Dhumghat is located 10 to 12 kilometers from Shyamnagar Union of Satkhira. The village is inhabited by indigenous community of the *Mundas*. As many rivers and canals flow through the locality, fishing is one of the main economic activities. Women, especially elderly women fishes in these water bodies. Water scarcity occurs in the *Boro* season and the region suffers from salinity. Villagers also rear local breeds of cattle. The men in the family are engaged in seasonal migrant labour and the women too gives their labour to their natal homes. There is fuel scarcity in the area as well.

The area has been under the influence of the Church. But the long standing Italian Catholic Church through their dedicated priests have done much to improve the education of women from these communities. As a result, many women are found in professions such as teaching and nursing and they are relatively more educated than their male counterparts.

Household sample characteristics

Basic household data were collected from 60 women in four villages in groups of 15 per village through the help of local animators. This was followed by 12 focus group discussions over a period of 6 months.

The women came from families that were mostly male-headed. A total of 11 households, which constituted 18.33 % of all households were female headed. The villages in Nilphamari area had more female household heads than villages in Satkhira (Table 1).

Table 1: Household-head of the respondent's family

Household-head	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Woman	4	3	2	2	11	18.33
Man	11	12	13	13	49	81.66
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

Among the women participants most fell under the age group of 41-50 (Table 2) and the majority were married (Table 3). There were no single women.

Table 2 : Age group of the respondents

Age group of the respondents	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
21- 30	1	1	1	3	6	10
31- 40	6	4	2	3	15	25
41- 50	3	5	8	2	18	30
51- 60	4	6	3	4	15	25
60+	2		1	3	6	10
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100



Group member at Bangshipur village

Table 3: Marital status

Marital status	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Berakuthi	Joychondi		
Unmarried						
Married	9	12	10	12	43	71.66
Widow	5	3	4	3	15	25
Divorced	1		1		2	3.33
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100



Unpaid work of women farmers at Satkhira

As for educational qualification most women were only signature literate across the villages. (Table 4). In Nilphamari there were no women participants who had studied upto class 9 and 10, whereas in Satkhira there were. This was due to the influence of Church education in the latter area.

Table 4: Educational qualification

Educational qualification	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Illiterate	5	6			11	18.33
Signature literate	5	5	5	7	22	36.66
Class 1- 3	2	2	2	4	10	16.66
Class 3- 5	1	2	4	2	9	15
Class 6- 8	2		2	1	5	8.33
Class 9- 10			2	1	3	5
S.S.C.						
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

Most women in all villages termed themselves as homemakers and agricultural labor. Only in the village of Dhumghat a large portion of the added they daily labor to their work. This could be due to the inclusion of the indigenous *Munda* community who primarily depended on wage labor for their livelihood (Table 5).



Signing in the signature sheet at Berakuthi, Nilphamari

Table 5 : Occupation

Type of occupation	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Housewife + farming	9	13	15	5	42	70
Housewife + farming + day labor	6	2		10	18	30
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

The average monthly income of the majority of women participants were between 500 to 1000 takas (the lowest range) and secondly from 1501 to 2000 takas. Two women were found to be in the 5001 to 6000 taka range and they both came from the Nilphamari region (Table 6).

Table 6 : Monthly income

Monthly income (BDT)	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
500- 1,000	8	8			16	26.66
1,001- 1,500			1	3	4	6.66
1,501- 2,000	1	3	1	7	12	20
2,000- 2,500		1			1	1.66
2,501- 3,000		1	5	3	9	15
3,001- 4,000	2		8		10	16.66
4,001- 5,000	3	1		2	6	10
5,001- 6,000	1	1			2	3.33
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

A large number of women (20) owned 7 to 10 decimals of land adjacent to their homestead and a considerable number of participants owned land from 1 to 6 decimals. No land was owned above 66 decimals (Table 7).

Table 7 : Amount of homestead agricultural land

Homestead agricultural land (decimal)	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
1- 3	3	8	1	2	14	23.33
4- 6	5	5	1	1	12	20
7- 10	5	2	8	5	20	33.33
11- 15	2		1	6	9	15
16- 20			2	1	3	5
21- 25						
26- 33						
34- 50			1		1	1.66
51- 66			1		1	1.66
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

Apart from the land adjacent to homestead, 21.66 % of the participants owned family land up to 61 to 80 decimals of land and 13.33 % of the participants owned family land in the 1 to 10 decimals range (Table 8) and a total of 11 participants i.e. 18.33 % of all owned land in their own name (Table 9). Women in Nilphamari owned land in the lower range of upto 20 decimals and women in Satkhira owned land in the higher range i.e. upto 132 decimals.

Table 8: Amount of total agricultural land of the family

Amount of total agricultural land (decimal)	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	Percentage
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		%
1- 10	2	6			8	13.33
11- 20	1			1	2	3.33
21- 40	1	2		1	4	6.66
41- 60	3			1	4	6.66
61- 80	4	1	3	5	13	21.66
81- 100	1	1	2	3	7	11.66
101- 120	1				1	1.66
121- 140		1	3	1	5	8.33
141- 160	1	2			3	5
161- 180	1			1	2	3.33
181- 200		2	3		5	8.33
201- 300			4		4	6.66
300+				2	2	3.33
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

Table 9 : Total amount of agricultural land owned by the respondent

Amount of total agricultural land (decimal)	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	Percentage %
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
1- 3	1	2			3	5
4- 6					-	
7- 10	1				1	1.66
11- 15					-	
16- 20	1		1		2	3.33
21- 25						
33			1	1	2	3.33
50			1		1	1.66
74				1	1	1.66
132			1		1	1.66
Total	3	2	4	2	11	18.33% (100)

Out of 60 only 11 respondents were the owner of agricultural land

Research Findings

The following findings of the research are based on both the short survey of participants as well as from the FGDs conducted during field work. The findings are categorized under the following heads:

(a) The transformation of agricultural work of women farmers
(b) Cost of production
(c) Wage discrimination
(d) Women's access to land and resources, land, market
(e) Social dimensions: health, education, technology
(f) Decision-making and awareness
(g) Regional variations

(a) The transformation of agricultural work of women farmers

We asked how agricultural work had changed for women farmers over the years. Since most of the women participants were middle-aged and above, one could get a clear idea of what was there before and what had changed or were changing.

Many of the transformations were situational and environmental. Women said that the increase of population has resulted in the fragmentation of land. Environmental changes were also visible to many. Rice was cultivated only once a year before in some localities. Now it is cultivated twice a year. Irrigation technology has become more mechanized.

The nature of work for women farmers have also changed. Processing rice, drying seeds in the sun and storing them in earthen pots or transplanted was the usual trend. Now rice is threshed in the mills and stored in polythene bags. Rice tastes different now and not as good as before. Rice is threshed no longer by *dheki* (a wooden tool to grind rice and operated by the tread of women's feet), but by rice mills. Dheki was used to grind grains into rice. It was the task of women. It was known as *Lokhhi* (symbol of fortune) to older persons. Now people use rice mills to do the work.

Women described the kind of activities that they performed now and some of the changes that had taken place over the years in such work.

They usually engage in homestead gardening and cultivating adjoining lands, where they transplant rice, cultivate vegetables like okra, aubergines, arum greens, flat beans, spinach and chilies. They often fish in the local ponds and lakes (beels) for subsistence and rears and grazes cattle and goats and raise poultry. In regions where cattle rearing is a predominant occupation women are involved in milk trade or selling of milk products like ghee (clarified butter). Income from trees such as lychees, mangos, lime and betel nuts are also lucrative.

The introduction of technology has also impacted on their work. Before women were employed during the rainy season for weeding, now [the weeds] are killed with herbicides. There is an increase in the supply and marketing of artificial pesticides, herbicide and fertilizers. But sometimes the pesticides are not effective.

"We learnt from mother that only good seeds need to be preserved because good seeds give birth to good plants and fruit"

Seed conservation was almost the sole prerogative of women. They conserved seeds of rice pumpkin, *dhundol* (a kind of courgette), *jinghe* (ribbed gourd). It was a technique usually learnt from older women in the family and passed on through generations of women.

Now seeds are usually brought in the market and dried in polythene or sacks. Because of the rise of hybrid variety of rice, the practice of seed conservation and storage has declined. Before, seeds were usually stored in earthenware pots.



Group member Bijli at Joychondi

While talking with middle-aged women farmers we learnt of their perceptions about how things have changed. “Women used to grind spices using tools of heavy stone, now they can’t. They used to make many meals and snacks from puffed and flat rice, (*muri* and *chira*), such as rice balls. Now no one knows how to make them. They just sit and watch TV. Because we worked hard we have the strength in our limbs still. “

“We did all work while pregnant, now modern women don’t do these,” others said.

Remarking on the changed nature of their existence, they claimed that there are no longer cattle driven ploughs to be seen. Hence no cows were to be seen, no milk to be produced, no old varieties of rice, vegetable seeds, none of the traditional species of fish, no turtles, no crabs. Women in the south near the Sundarbans said that their fathers used to go to the forest and bring eggs, mangoes and fish.

“Before local rice varieties were available, like *jamaibhog, badshahbhoge* now we eat hybrid” added the women The variety of fish has also changed: before there

were local shrimps, *shole, koui, boal,maagur, ilish* and now we get, silver, *pangash, tilapia, rui, mrigel,* Japanese *puti*."



Local varities paddy field at Dhumghat, Satkhira

"Weather too has changed. Before it used to be very cold during winter and now we have to use a fan, it is so warm". One reason could be because of climate change. Because of the sudden change in weather conditions, people often feel sick.

Before, there were no banks or NGOs. Now there are many NGOs who give microcredit.

Despite these transformations, some women said that their lives changed for the better at least materially.

Dilawara: "I worked unendingly from dawn to the time of Esha prayers. I could not wear a good saree when I married off my son. Now I can afford good clothes."

Arjina: "Before we used to share half kilo of rice among 3 to 4 persons. We eat well now.

My husband gathered bamboo shoots and sold them in the market. We used to raise poultry through *adhi*, i.e. sharecropping

I started to raise cattle and sell them for a profit, I planted vegetables. My husband worked as agricultural labor. We both worked hard and although we have achieved a lot I still ask my husband to work for others. I bought land in my son's name."



Group meeting at Dhumghat, Satkhira

(b) Cost of production; nature of poverty

Poverty has decreased. Now not only the household head, but everyone [in the family] contributes. Women respondents explained, "In the past there were more mouths to feed, now there are lesser mouths to feed. Before a woman's time was spent in cooking, now we have to contribute towards the agricultural work as well. Not to mention raising poultry and cattle."

Many women told of their struggles that resulted from the death of the earning member. "My father died at a young age, my mother raised me up. Before costs were small, now they have increased. The challenge is to find work."

The majority of women in the groups were seen to provide labor in cultivating homestead or adjoining land.

Table 10 : Cultivation of adjoining land by respondents

Persons in farming	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Conducted by respondents only	13	13	12	12	50	83.33
Hired farm labor	2	2	3	3	10	16.66
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

Women have strong survival instinct, those who live in luxury they are the ones who are in trouble. Most women respondents engaged in poultry and cattle raising. (Table 11:).

Table 11: Number of livestock and poultry

Number of livestock	Nilphamari		Satkhira	
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat
Cow	30	40	52	49
Goat + sheep	17	27	44	38
Chicken + duck	106	149	187	179
Pigeon		5	18	22

There is more cash flow now. Before, husbands used to put pressure on his wife to get money from her household. Now that the husband earns more cash from rice and vegetable cultivation he lets his wife keep savings from the poultry-raising.

In a few households men share in household activities including cooking. On the other hand some women complained “I always have to hand a glass of water to my husband even if I have a fever.”

(c) Wage structure

The usual wage rate for women was 150 taka for women in rice cultivation but men got 300 taka for the same work though women thought they worked harder than men. One woman said she cultivated her own vegetable patch. Her husband said he had no time. Women also said that because they found themselves cultivating land, they no longer had time for handicrafts such as quilt-making.



Women's undervalued work in Agriculture, Joychondi

Wages are mostly in cash but sometimes they include 2 meals. This trend however is decreasing. Hindu women prefer to take grain instead of rice from Muslim households.

"Zamindars used to cultivate through plough. They often raised a poor child in their homes for labor instead of wages. Now they work us for wages. Before the rate was 50 to 100 takas, now it is 200 to 300 takas."

In earth work it is the rule that all will be paid 200 taka regardless of gender. But nowadays they have resorted to selection by lottery. Also they say that women cannot use the shovel or the plough the same way as men, therefore women are paid 200 taka and men 300 taka. It is the same during harvest time.

Women and men who work in Export Process Zone (EPZ) in Nilphamari produce false hair for export each worth 5,000 to 10,000 taka . Husband and wife go to work together on a motorcycle or cycle. The mother washes their clothes and cooks for them and performs other household chores. They contribute about 300 to 400 taka as per demand.

(d) Access to knowledge

The majority of respondents were recorded as going to neighboring farmers of agricultural inputs for support. Second came shopkeepers and only a few went to the agricultural officer. (Table 12) :

Table 12: Persons whom they communicate in the cases of agricultural problem

Type of persons	Nilphamari		Satkhira		Total	%
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Govt. agricultural officer	3		4	7	14	23.33
Shopkeeper	10	11	7	10	39	65
Neighboring farmers	14	12	10	5	41	68.33

Women's responses to the question whom they go to for advice on farming brought on the following responses:

"We will ask them (agricultural extension workers) when they come to the village, sometimes we go to the nearest office but do not get adequate attention."

"We get advice mostly from neighbors and shops in the locality selling agricultural inputs."

Women do not know what men discuss. One woman said her mentor in farming used to sit in meetings regularly with others and now he is gone. Another woman said she learns a little from her uncle.

Another woman claimed she knew more than men. She and her mother uses vermi compost for production of their crops. Others said their husbands instructed them to use organic compost which they learnt was a healthy alternative.

Organic farming is not only about organic compost but also about maintaining balance in the environment in a natural way, for example allowing birds to perch in the fields so that they can naturally reduce the number of insects. Ashes are used instead of fertilizers. A woman said her guavas have become relatively free of insects as a result. They also had a good rice crop.

"যার আছে গরু, তার কথা শুরু"

[One who raises cows can be a teacher]

Some women who have gained knowledge on cattle rearing shared it with others. They want to learn more and also go on exposure visits like the male farmers.

Women expressed interest in learning to raise cattle, cultivate vegetables, plant trees and raise poultry, in a scientific way. They also wanted to know more about running a small business.

(e) Women's access to land and resources

It was mentioned above in Table 7 that a large number of women respondents (20) owned 7 to 10 decimals of land adjacent to their homestead and a considerable number of participants owned land from 1 to 6 decimals. No land was owned above 25 decimals Women tended to own land only after the death of their husband or in some cases their fathers gifted it to them. Hindu women did not have any land. All women felt that land gave them power and hence its ownership also tended to make men compete against each other.

"Presence of mind is sometimes greater than formal learning"

Apart from land, women also had access to loans and credit from NGO programs of their locality. The amount of loans they took was varied but understandably more at the lower range than the upper range in both the districts. The sectors that the loan was spent in were also varied. In both districts however the loan was spent in agricultural and construction work. Other common reasons given were leasing of land, mortgaging in land, sanitation work, repaying past loans, family welfare and business. One respondent in the village of Berakuthi mentioned children's education.

(f) Social dimensions: health, education, technology

Along with the physical environment, the society had also undergone changes which in turn had impacted on lives of women farmers with regard to education, health, technology and lifestyle.

Women mentioned hardships in the past when they had to sell their ornaments in order that their husbands receive proper treatment. Pregnant women delivered babies at home. Now they go to the hospital or local clinic. As one woman said, "Before, we treated injuries with turmeric now they have injections, ambulances."

Social change was evident in women's attires. "We never wore shoes, now the situation has changed. We had a few ornaments during our life, but now we see ostentatious wedding ceremonies. Our mothers never wore a petticoat and a blouse, only sarees but now women are also seen to be discarding sarees for maxis in public life.



Group meeting with women farmers group at Bangshipur, Satkhira

Many elderly women described how they had to accept early marriage. One person said that the first set of teeth fell only after her marriage. Another woman claimed that she was so young that she could not even say Kobul, (announce her consent in marriage) the person next to her said it for her! Dowry varied from just bride price to 600 to 40,000 takas.

Technology also had made a difference to their lives.

"Women used to wash clothes by burning banana leaves and using the ashes thereof. Now we use soap."

"Before women were involved in family life and now they gossip through mobile"

Social attitudes have changed drastically. Women say, "Before children used to be afraid of their fathers, now they even ask their father for a cigarette.

However attitudes towards gender have not changed that mutch. Even among our women respondent we heard it being said that women get raped because of their own fault.

(g) Decision-making and awareness

Women's role in decision making is considered to be an important component on her ability to take a leading role in society. There are many areas where traditional beliefs relegate women's role in certain sectors and not to others. For example many of our women respondents thought women should not go to the market. Rather her husband should go. But the attitudes are changing if only gradually. This transition of changing attitudes has brought about a mixed response in many of the women farmers. That only speaks of the dynamic environment that Bangladeshi rural society is going through.

Women's complaints against male control over resources have been prominent. "Men take away whatever we earn from our activities." But they also say that NGOs also take away some of our savings, but they accrue some benefit for themselves.

Husbands and wives have mixed relationships in terms of control of money. A widow remarks that she has no husband who can give her money. But her son too does not give her money; rather he takes away all the money she earns from raising poultry. "But his wife brings in money from working in the EPZ and he takes it from her as well. She is naïve and my son is clever," states the widowed woman.

"Husband decides; I implement! That is the way to make children listen!"
A woman farmer on raising children

Other respondents observe "Wives used to listen to their husbands; now not so much. Sometimes I work according to husband's choice sometimes my own."

"Before women were afraid, now not so. Women resist and protest, they claim their rights. Wife has a right to sell rice crops. The husband does not object," said one woman.

"Before men used to earn daily wages but they were not enough to meet the needs of the family. We also used to contribute. We could not spend anything for entertainment. Now we can't work so much. When we have leisure then we download from the computer and watch movies on our phones. We like to see serials, drama, jatra, (folk theatre), both Bangladeshi and Hindi."



Meeting at Berakuthi

(h) Regional variations

Regional variations were apparent between the two districts of Nilphamari and Satkhira. Some of the more significant are narrated below.

Women responded differentially to whether they conserved seeds or not. According to the following table respondents in Satkhira tended to conserve more seeds than those in the north, especially the village of Joychondi. This could be due to the fact that the village of Joychondi was located only two kilometers away from an industrial area and therefore it was easier to buy seeds from the market than conserve them at home. It could also signify a general lack of interest in traditional practices of agriculture among the younger generations.

Table 13: Information regarding seed conservation practices of respondents

Seed conservation	Nilphamari	Satkhira	Total	%		
	Berakuthi	Joychondi	Bongshipur	Dhumghat		
Yes	11	5	13	15	44	73.33
No	4	10	2		16	26.66
Total	15	15	15	15	60	100

It was evident that education of women in Satkhira flourished there due to the influence of the church. But the general complaints were that girls were not getting jobs. So they felt quite frustrated. The respondents in the Munda village stated that three of their girls were working as nurses. Besides Satkhira also boasted of several social programs. These were: 1 bari 1 khamar (one house , one farm, a government program for the disadvantaged), and non government programs initiated by local NGO Sundarban Adivasi, Father Luigi of the Italian Catholic Church and national programs of CARITAS and Grameen Bank

Summary Analysis

Esha Sraboni, Agnes, R, Quisumberg and Akhter, U. Ahmed in their article, "How Empowered are Bangladeshi Women in the Agricultural Setting? Empirical Evidence Using a New Index" makes an important statement that empowerment gaps are greatest in terms of leadership of the community and control and access to resources. They also make a point about including regional variations and context to any Empowerment Index being constructed to understand women in agricultural settings. The findings of this research on women farmers in Bangladesh, also supports the points that is made above.

In a society that is caught between the forces of technological, environmental and infrastructural change, and a belief system that is deeply ensconced in centuries of tradition, women farmers in Bangladesh occupy a unique position where they are both repositories of traditional knowledge and practices in agriculture, but are also receptive to the forces of change that they find themselves in.

Furthermore the changing context of agro-ecology, has compelled us to revisit many of the developmental presumptions of the recent past in order to handle the major challenges of climate change and sustainability of our lives, livelihood and basic existence. The rethinking of agricultural practices is core to meeting these challenges. The role of women farmers is critical to this rethinking process. But although the National Agricultural Policy of the Government of Bangladesh, 2018 have mentioned them in the context of achieving gender parity in wages, it is not sufficient to address the needs that have been expressed by women farmers themselves in the current research. A much fuller understanding of their potential in holistically reshaping the agro-ecology of Bangladesh is the task that lies before us. The current research has hardly scratched the surface in this endeavour. A few pointers are stated in the following section to indicate the path that needs to be taken.

Way Forward

Women farmers need to have access to knowledge. Agricultural extension services must be geared up to make both content and form of their service more gender friendly. The potentiality that exists in technology that has already been illustrated in the study needs to be exploited to the fullest extent.

Good practices in traditional agriculture especially those that have traditionally been the repository of women farmers like seed conservation need to be supported, documented and disseminated so that the knowledge is spread worldwide.

Women farmers should not only be skilled in new farming practices and knowledge but also involved in innovative interventions that help us to mitigate climate disasters.

A movement to include the youth in reviving environmental friendly agricultural practices must begin in the national curriculum. Exposure visits to both disaster zones as well as areas that have success stories may be introduced to motivate them further.

Gender parity in a holistic sense (inclusive of human security and dignity) has to be established in rural areas among women in general. Critical to such an effort is enabling women to gain control of assets and resources. Special loans maybe established in the short term but long term involvement in restructuring entitlements that enable control over land and other properties must be ensured.

In any policy measures, effort must be made to address regional and local variations such as indigenous cultural practices, geological and atmospheric contexts and social cohesion.



Group meeting at Dhumghat, Satkhira

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