

# Gendered Journey

**Exploring Women's Position in Small-Scale Fisheries of Bangladesh**

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*Women working in a fish drying yard from Nazirartek, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.  
(Photo: Sabrina Jannat Mitu, 2019).*

*Women play an important role in the small-scale fisheries of Bangladesh, yet their contributions remain inadequately recognized and underreported in both governmental and academic sectors. To date, women's contributions in the country's small-scale fisheries have been poorly studied, thereby available literature offers an incomplete illustration of the precise magnitude and type of participation of women in this sector. This chapter examines women's visible and invisible roles in Bangladesh's small-scale fisheries through literature review. This study illustrates how women in the fishing communities are deeply involved in both household and fisheries-related activities. They oversee a variety of household tasks, including caring for children and family members, preparing and serving food, fetching water, cleaning and maintaining the home, washing dishes and clothing, and raising livestock, to mention but a few. In addition to direct participation in catching fish, they are also actively engaged in a wide range of pre-and post- harvesting activities such as making and repairing net and boat, sorting, washing, grading, processing, packaging, transporting, and marketing. This chapter also explores how fisherwomen help their families cope with crises. Furthermore, the difficulties experienced by fisherwomen and the factors that affect them adversely are also outlined, accompanied by suggestions on how to alleviate these problems, and increase women's productivity in small-scale fisheries.*

## Introduction

Men are usually considered providers (i.e., hunters and fishers), whereas women are thought of as caregivers who reside at home and care for the family. However, today's women have been actively engaged in the labor force in various industries and thus function as both providers and caregivers, making such assumptions rather obsolete (Harper et al., 2013). Similarly, men's and women's traditional roles in society have contributed to the belief that women play a minor role in the fisheries sector (Koralagama et al., 2017; Herrera-Racionero et al., 2021). However, women are actively involved in many fisheries, taking part in capture, processing, and sale of fish, and they

represent 47 percent of the world fishing workforce (World Bank, 2012; Mangubhai & Lawless, 2021). Yet, many of these contributions are often overlooked and underestimated and continue to be under-appreciated in fisheries research, management, and policy formulation (Weeratunge et al., 2010; Harper et al., 2020; Tilley et al., 2021).

As it becomes evident that women are increasingly employed in fishing worldwide, one of the most pressing questions is why is gender-specific data still lacking. A part of the explanation lies in how fishing is defined, i.e., who is considered a 'fisher' and what constitutes 'fishing' (Kleiber et al., 2015; Smith & Basurto, 2019). Traditionally, fishing has been described as catching fish from a vessel using specialized gears, which is done mostly by men. Meanwhile, collecting seafood and small fish from the shore, done mainly by women and children, has rarely been referred to as 'fishing' by male fishers, often falling under the category of 'gathering' and general food provisions (Kleiber et al., 2015; Harper et al., 2017; Smith & Basurto, 2019). The majority of women's work is unpaid, part-time, informal, or viewed as a supplement to their domestic duties, which is also cited as a reason for their ignored contribution (Harper et al., 2017). A biased sampling method for data collection is another important rationale for the omission of women's data on fishing activities. To describe women and men, nearly all the previous study used gender-neutral words like 'fisher' or even gender-specific terms like 'fisherman.' Furthermore, it has been noted in the literature that only data on men is collected, which may be conducted on deliberately or inadvertently employing techniques that restrict participants to only men (Weeratunge et al., 2010).

Bangladeshi rural women are active participants in the small-scale fisheries of the country, but their contributions remain inadequately recognized and underreported in both governmental and academic sectors (Deb et al., 2015). Women's positions in the functional aspects of small-scale fisheries in Bangladesh are poorly studied. Existing literature provides an incomplete portrait of the precise magnitude and type of women's engagement in small-scale fisheries. The positions of all social groups, including women, must be acknowledged and appreciated for the small-scale fisheries sector to grow

in a fair, inclusive, and sustainable manner and for a better understanding of how it operates (Deb et al., 2015; Islam, 2018). This chapter presents an overview of women's role in small-scale fisheries of Bangladesh, based on a review of a large proportion of the literature and data available on female involvement in small-scale fisheries. Additionally, the obstacles encountered by fisherwomen and the factors that negatively affect them are highlighted, along with recommendations for resolving these issues and increasing women's productivity in small-scale fisheries.

## Fishing family dynamics and women's roles

Like any other traditional rural community in Bangladesh, women in the fishing community spend a significant amount of time on household-related activities. They usually invest their time in caring for their families and communities rather than engaging in economic activities. Since both the government and the research communities pay little attention to assess the contributions of women in the fishers' households, data on their roles in household activities is scarce. Nevertheless, they are responsible for a range of activities in families, the most important of which involve caring for children and other family members, processing and cooking food, serving meals, and reproductive practices (Deb et al., 2015). Besides, they devote a considerable amount of time in washing dishes and clothing, bathing, fetching water for household use, and collecting water for the cattle. They are also in charge of other duties like cleaning and maintaining home and homestead, gathering firewood, and other biofuels for domestic use. Additionally, they do homestead gardening and livestock rearing, which entails growing a variety of vegetables and fruits and raising chicken, duck, goat, and cow for personal consumption and sometimes for sale at markets (Farid et al., 2009).

Men in fishing community provide most of the financial support for the family as well as manage the heavy workload. On the other hand, women attend to all of the family's concerns and needs, keep and distribute the husband's meager earnings, and control the household budget (Islam, 2011). Women also take part in a variety of activities to assist their families during

crises. Reducing food consumption is the first tactic employed by some fishing households to cope with income crises where women and girls bear the burden (Islam & Herbeck, 2013). For instance, during times of food scarcity in nomadic fishing communities, women and girls are typically given less attention than their male counterparts when it comes to food consumption. As a result, they develop saving habits and make their own spending decisions (Islam, 2018). A common technique used by fisherwomen to smooth consumption is to borrow rice and other daily necessities from their neighbors (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Women, rather than men, have a reputation for maintaining the savings tradition. They often save money in secret as a form of protection against misfortune. Women supplement their income by growing vegetables and fruits in their yards, for example.

Some women work in fish marketing, while others make and mend nets to help their families. Almost all women and most young girls in fishing families of the Sundarbans area take part in income-generating activities such as collecting shrimp and prawn fry and crab, harvesting *Nypa palm* (*Nipa fruticans*) leaves, gathering fuelwood, and building a boat (Mozumder et al., 2018). Fisherwomen also work in shrimp farms, weed grass agriculture fields, collect paddy, mend and prepare nets, collect mangrove leaves for fuel, sew traditional quilts, and prepare and sell mangrove wood charcoal (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Thus, in some cases, women have become the primary source of income for fisher families. Many young girls from fishing families work in readymade garment factories or the Export Processing Zone in the Chittagong district. As an investment, some women raise poultry and other livestock. This is used to meet daily needs during lean times or tackle unexpected shocks such as sickness and disaster, necessitating additional expenses (Islam, 2011). Another prevalent coping mechanism is to take children out of school; both boys and girls are forced to work in fishing jobs, despite being paid less than adults (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013).

Women consider themselves as helpers rather than leaders, and they are willing to put their own needs aside to fulfill their household obligations. When household incomes are insufficient, women obtain informal loans from relatives and neighbors via casual community or family connections.

Although banks and other formal credit institutions accept men as borrowers, in many cases women are the ones who make the loans. To satisfy urgent needs, they seek out micro-credit loans from various NGOs. However, since they are predominantly uneducated, they unknowingly take on loans that provide only short-term benefits; they often become highly indebted in the long run when they cannot repay them (Islam, 2011). Some households, however, use microfinance to augment their income from fishing and other sources of income. In addition, women commonly use microcredit to begin a range of income-generating activities, such as purchasing livestock, sewing machines, and procuring goods for the shop. Microfinance is also indispensable for social needs such as improving their quality of life and smoothing consumption patterns, especially during lean and off-seasons when little to no income to buy food is available (Karmakar et al., 2011). Microfinance savings may also help families in developing countries deal with the financial costs associated with major illnesses, such as the cost of medical treatment and loss of income due to sickness (Gertler et al., 2009).

## Gendered participation in small-scale fisheries

Women in Bangladesh play many different roles in the fisheries sector, with a significant representation in small-scale fishing. Though there is no recognized definition of small-scale fisheries in Bangladesh, the word ‘artisanal’ is frequently used to describe small fisheries in scale. Fishing was historically a profession of caste-based Hindus in Bangladesh, and only men in fishing communities were involved in catching fish. However, a growing number of women, regardless of caste, age, or marital status, are now found engaged in the fisheries sector across the country (Ahamed et al., 2012), and full-time engagement of women in fisheries is no longer a rare scenario (Ahmed & Solaiman, 2006).

Women’s roles in Bangladeshi fishing communities are primarily related to small-scale fish processing and fresh fish marketing. Elderly or divorced women dominate the fresh fish trade, almost all of whom are members of Hindu fishing groups (Deb et al., 2015). Before and after fish harvesting,

women's involvement has attracted limited consideration culminating in their near-invisibility as contributors to this industry. But the economic and social importance of these pre-and post-production activities is enormous. Fisherwomen are actively involved in pre-and post- fishing processes such as making and repairing net and boat, sorting, cleaning, grading, drying and salting harvested fish (Rabbanee et al., 2012). Women generally contribute to these tasks mainly as family labor. In addition, they also make up the majority of workers in shrimp processing plants in Chittagong and Khulna (Islam, 2011).

Fish drying is an essential activity in the dried fish industry, and it is usually performed by female fishers or wives and children of fishers. Sorting and grading, washing, salting, packing, storage, transportation, and cutting are some of the other activities they perform (Mitu et al., 2021). They also carry out fish and sell as hawkers, stall keepers in permanent marketplaces, and weekly bazaars. In coastal areas, many women work in fish fry collection, transportation, fingerling marketing, and dry fish marketing (Rabbanee et al., 2012). There is also evidence of women mending fishnets and assisting with boat cleaning and maintenance (Islam & Herbeck, 2013). Furthermore, divorced or single women in Hatiya Islands collectively construct nets for local boats. Together with their male counterparts, women are engaged in activities like making fishing nets, gears, repairing or maintaining the gears, sorting of fingerlings, fish processing, transportation, and marketing (Frangoudes & Gerrard, 2019).

Women in Bangladeshi fishing communities are also actively involved in catching fish and seafood. In coastal regions, collecting shrimp and prawn fry and crab is a popular activity carried out primarily by women and children. Women and young girls of Sundarbans mangrove forest are reported to catch post-larvae (PL) of prawn and shrimp and crab (Ahamed et al., 2012). In the Sundarbans, women also enter the forest to catch crab with their family members (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Children and some women in Noakhali catch prawn/shrimp fry from the river during the spawning season. Women in southwest Bangladesh catch snails and fish from the *beel* and its interconnected canals and rivers (Sultana et al., 2001). Ahmed et al.

(1999) documented tribal women around the Kaptai reservoir are involved in setting up brush shelters (as fish aggregating devices), collecting fry with push nets, harvesting and retailing fresh fish, and sorting, icing, and drying fish. Women can be seen catching a number of small fish in the districts of Barisal and Rajshahi. As a source of protein for their family, they capture fish with hooks, lines, nets, or traps from various sources such as estuary, canals, *beel*, and rivers (Dubey & Kohli, 2001). Besides, coastal areas residents have been actively involved in cultivating various types of fish for commercial purposes in their own ponds or leased ponds within or near their homes (Ahmed et al., 2012). Thus, the role of women in fisheries encompasses social and economic tasks both within and outside the family to sustain the activities of fishing communities (Ahamed et al., 2012).

Men and women go fishing together in nomadic fishing communities, and women are also engaged in selling fish from door to door in some areas (Islam, 2018). Women equally participate in the hard fishing activities, such as paddling the boat to the fishing grounds, hauling nets from the river, and net mending. Both men and women of nomad fishing society have expert knowledge of fish habitats and the connections between fish availability and seasonal changes, winds, currents, tides, and lunar cycles (Islam, 2018). Nomadic fisherwomen usually work the hardest, and crises usually place greater hardship on women than on other family members (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2018). The majority of nomad men focus primarily on fishing and selling their catch to make a living while the women are in charge of the remaining duties. They do household chores, care for the family, raise children, and so on, in addition to assisting the men in fishing. In essence, it seems that women are responsible for the entire family.

## Problems and challenges

While playing a critical role in Bangladesh's fishery sector, women in the fishing community face a variety of challenges, ranging from male supremacy in the family to a lack of decision-making power, limited empowerment to inadequate wages, social customs to social insecurity, poverty to illiteracy,

child marriage to dowry (Islam, 2011). Fisherwomen are frequently deprived of their fundamental human rights and basic livelihood amenities as a result of these severe issues. Fishing is often perceived as a gender-specific occupation in Bangladesh (Islam, 2018), with a heavy division of labor between men and women, similar to the rest of the world (Harper et al., 2020). Women harvesting fish is still culturally taboo in many parts of the country. In addition, the women's movement is limited by the *purdah* tradition (Deb et al., 2015). Fisherwomen face a double workload because they are responsible for both fishing and domestic chores, as in the case of nomadic fishing communities. They are usually deprived of any rest; even during pregnancy, they continue fishing. Most of them are burdened with a workload of more than 12 hours a day ('time poverty'). Some of their work is particularly strenuous. For example, during winter, when saline water intrudes into the river, women have to travel a long-distance overland to collect fresh water for daily use. As a result, the majority of women feel that they look older than their actual age (Islam, 2018).

Poverty disproportionately affects women, especially those who are the sole breadwinners in their households. Owing to a lack of resources for income generation and wage discrimination, women-headed families in fishing societies have the lowest income (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Even though women claim to do the same physically demanding work as men, in the Sundarbans, women are traditionally paid 70 percent of what men earn (Islam, 2011). The most common acts of violence against fisherwomen include dowry, physical abuse, threats of divorce, polygamy, infidelity, and mental abuse (Parveen, 2007; Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2018). Girls become a family liability as a result of the dowry custom. Almost every family is forced to pay dowry in the form of productive assets like nets and boats and cash and ornaments (Islam, 2018). The cost of a wedding may also put a family in financial distress. As a result, having more daughters in a family raises the vulnerability of the family. Due to dowry and other factors, including childhood marriage, divorce and wife abandonment are on the rise in fishers' communities (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Early marriage is also common in the nomadic fishing community, with nearly all girls marrying when they

are 12 or 13 years old. Early marriage and pregnancy have a long-term effect on women's health (Islam, 2018).

Women in the fishing community have a substantially higher prevalence of diseases than the general population. Water-borne diseases like diarrhea, dysentery, cholera and typhoid are prevalent, indicating poor health and sanitary conditions. For example, in coastal fishing societies, women and children who use drag nets to capture shrimp and prawn post-larvae (PL) must spend five to six hours a day in the water. Water-borne and skin diseases and gynecological problems have been reported in women and young girls who serve as collectors (Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Malnutrition is prevalent in the fishers' community, with malnutrition rates among girls and women being higher. As a result of this situation, the number of active working days and women's life expectancy decreased. Their health problems are further compounded by a lack of access to adequate health care facilities. Typically, they seek medical attention from a nearby quack and traditional healer known as *kabiraj* (Himu et al., 2020).

Women's problems in the fishing community are much too complicated to be solved in a few steps. Since there is still a significant gap between efforts and real needs, a comprehensive and holistic approach is needed to address these challenges. The following crucial measures should be prioritized to assist in the socio-economic advancement of fisherwomen: offering universal basic education, targeted and need-based training to strengthen their skill and capability, and adequate health care facilities, facilitating credit services from banks and NGOs, and integrating gender issues into all development initiatives. First and foremost, women's formal and informal contributions to the fisheries sector must be acknowledged for these initiatives to succeed. Besides, their access to resources and markets should be increased by establishing self-help groups, voluntary agencies, and social welfare organizations and linking them to financing programs. Integration among government and non-government entities is also very crucial for these initiatives to succeed. Last but not least, social awareness of violence against women should be increased through campaigns, advertisements, and workshops, among other strategies.

## Conclusion

The direct and indirect contributions made by women to small-scale fisheries of Bangladesh are often overlooked in fisheries planning and management and policy decisions. Although there are plenty of evidence that women play a vital role in the small-scale fisheries, ranging from catching and processing fish to sales and other financial aspects, there are still gender gaps in this sector. Apart from performing most of the household chores of their family, fisherwomen play a critical role at times of hardship through various measures, including borrowing food and money from neighbors, sacrificing meals, carrying out income-generating activities, and taking loans from banks and NGOs, among other things. Quantifying and ultimately acknowledging this contribution would foster women's empowerment and increase their involvement in the management and stewardship of the fisheries sector. However, they also face a host of challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to resources, gender inequality, lack of decision-making power, dowry, child marriage, violence, abuse, etc. To mitigate these issues, governments and non-government organizations must take a systematic and robust approach.

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