

Fishing Labour and Working Conditions in Small-Scale Fisheries of Bangladesh

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*Fishing labourers at the southeast coast of Bangladesh organizing fishing gears
(Photo: Muhammad Hasan Jamil Sakib, 2019).*

The fishery sector of Bangladesh employs 9 percent of the country's workforce, with over 17 million people, 1.4 million of whom are women. Labourers perform a variety of jobs: they work as fishing crew members, boat skippers, dry fish processing workers, shrimp and fry collectors, etc. Because of technological advancements, capital intensification, and integration with distant markets, fishing activity has increased rapidly and so has the number of fishing labourers. The worker is hired at a predetermined wage rate by the boat owner or *majhi*. In the dry fish industry, two separate groups of labour (i.e., *kuliya* and *dhulabanga*) are recruited under different conditions. Besides, many children contribute to the fishing industry where they represent cheap labour. These labourers, including the children, work in very precarious workplace environments, both on land and on the sea. On land, in the dry fish processing area, they often get exposed to harmful pesticides on the sea, they spend long periods of time in rough weather. There are no formal job agreements nor any insurance coverage. Small-scale fishers and labourers in the processing industry have little to no right to bargain or to set their wages and working hours. Some of these conditions could be described as a modern-day slavery. The government should take steps to protect the rights of workers, monitor the child labour and reduce the gender wage gap in the small-scale coastal fishery of Bangladesh.

Introduction

The fishing industry of Bangladesh employs 9 percent of the country's total workforce, represented by more than 17 million people who directly or indirectly work in fisheries. This includes approximately 1.4 million women who rely entirely on fisheries for a living through open-water fishing, culture fisheries, handling, and further processing activities (BFTI, 2016; Islam, 2018). This workforce is expanding by 3.5 percent every year. Small-scale fishing often serves as an 'activity of last resort' for poor people in the aftermath of a natural disaster such as a cyclone or riverbank erosion once the source of income is lost (Islam, 2018). In the moments of crisis like, for example, in cyclones, coastal people find fishing a viable option to earn their

livelihoods. They become involved in multiple fisheries-related activities, including fish farming, harvesting, handling and processing, and marketing-related activities.

Coastal and marine fishing accounts for 38.9 percent of all fishing labour, followed by 25.1 percent in fish marketing, 19.1 percent in processing, 9.8 percent in fishing in the Sundarbans, and 7.1 percent in fish farming (BBS-ILO, 2011). Notably, women account for 94.6 percent of the fish processing and marketing workforce (BILS, 2015). As a single, most important fishery, the hilsa shad fishery employs the greatest number of fishing labour: approximately 1 million fishers rely directly on hilsa fishery for a living, while another 3 million people rely on hilsa indirectly through trade, transport, marketing, and processing (Islam et al., 2016). In the fish processing sector, the projected total number of employed people in the fish drying industry is about 54,980. Of these, 7,719 (14 percent) are children, and 26.1 percent are female (BBS-ILO, 2011).

However, fishing in coastal Bangladesh is not safe due to a lack of safety gear and dismal working conditions. In addition, there are various forms of discrimination in the processing sector. For example, most of those who work in fish drying activities in the Sundarbans consider their situation as ‘very bad’ or ‘hell’ (BILS, 2015) that make them socio-economically marginalized. Although fishing labour constitutes a large portion of the working class of Bangladesh, studies about them and their working conditions are limited (BBS-ILO, 2011). Based on a review of scientific articles and grey literature, supplemented by insights from the fieldwork, this study illustrates the situation of fishing labour and working conditions in Bangladesh’s small-scale fisheries.

Labour in small-scale fisheries

In Bangladesh, workers in the fishing industry can be classified into four types; (i) Traditional lower caste fishers, (ii) Non-traditional fishers, (iii) *Jalmahal* leaseholders (inland fisheries), trawler or mechanized boat owners (who are not fishers), and (iv) other common people who capture fish for subsistence

income (BILS, 2015).

Since 1983–84, the overall marine capture fisheries have been increased from 1.65 lakh MT to 6,599 lakh MT in FY 2018–19 (FRSS, 2018–19). Compared to the last few decades, fishing activities have increased due to technical development, capital intensification, and integration with distant markets. Small-scale fisheries in coastal Bangladesh operate in up to 40 meters depth, covering an area of 55,400 km² (USAID, 2016). Small-scale fisheries land nearly all of the marine catch and employ a large number of small-scale fishers. However, the majority of fishers work for others since they can't afford to buy their own boat and fishing gear. About 44 percent of fishers have no fishing boat, while over half of all fishers (65 percent) work as fishing labourers or crew. The people who have boats and fishing gears (locally known as *bohaddar* or *mohajon*) hire small-scale fishers for meagre wages. They are also known as *dadondar* based on their credit support (known as *dadon*) to fishers. Small-scale fishers borrow money from the *dadondar* in advance, especially during the off-season, as a way to meet their family needs. In some cases, small-scale fishers catch fish on a catch-share (profit-share) basis with boat owners.

Along with the fishing activities, around 0.42 million people are involved in collecting shrimp and prawn post-larvae from wild sources, and over 50,000 people, especially women and children, are involved in post-harvest processing activities (USAID, 2006). While the majority of fishers are men, a major workforce in the post-harvest supply chain are women (Nuruzzaman et al., 2014). In the post-harvest drying industry, the men's tasks include washing fresh fish, using pesticides to keep flies away, hanging fish to dry on scaffolding, weighing and packaging dried fish, and loading it onto vehicles for transportation. Women are typically in charge of sorting and grading fish before and after drying and packing them. In addition, thousands of individuals, including men and women, work in fishing gear manufacturing and maintenance.

Recruitment practices

The boat skippers and crews are hired depending on fishing intensity, professional skills, and years of expertise. There is no formal agreement and the terms and conditions are verbally agreed between the parties. Workers are employed at a predetermined rate by boat owners or *majhi*. Labour is usually structured according to the 'catch share or catch bonus' scheme rather than wage in the inshore gill net or bag net fishery. In many places, both fishing boat workers and skippers have formed organizations that help resolve any issues arising from disputes with their employers.

During the Hilsa fishing season, migratory fishers, primarily from neighbouring or inland districts, move towards the coast. People from the inland areas migrate to capture hilsa fish as seasonal workers. Most migrant fishers are not just seasonal fishers or agricultural workers but individuals who have been uprooted or are 'drifting'. In many cases, they move towards the shore during the rainy season due to a lack of income-generating activities in their territory or because they have lost their assets due to river erosion (Islam and Herbeck, 2013). *Bohaddar* frequently recruits migrant fishers due to their bravery, willingness to take risks, and better skill at deep-sea fishing compared to the locals.

Two distinct communities of workers (locally known as *kuliya* and *dhulabanga*) are employed for fish drying activities. *Kuliyas* are primarily recruited by fishing camp administrators as their employers belong to the same fishing communities. This group includes children as young as ten years old. *Bohaddar* decides the number of *Kuliya* they need and offers a specific amount of money in advance to confirm *Kuliyas'* recruitment. *Kuliya* gets a portion of their salary in advance in return for agreeing to work for the whole season. The common ancestry ensures mutual liability.

On the other hand, *dhulabanga* are individuals from outside towns, primarily from the 'floating population,' who are impoverished, landless, jobless, and sometimes homeless. Before each season, *bohaddar* issues instructions for recruiting *dhulabanga* to labour chiefs (*dhulabanga mahji*). *Dhulabanga mahji* recruits some of their own labour, but sometimes they face difficulty hiring

the adequate number of workers. In such a situation, they are assisted by brokers (locally called '*dalal*') in recruiting the workers. *Dalal* recruits with promises of well-paid job with decent circumstances, and transports them to fishing villages where they are sold to *dhulabanga mahji* in returns of USD 6-8 per child, which is literally termed as 'vending a kid' (locally called '*puya bikri*') (Belton et al., 2018). Most children work in the dry fish industry so that their parents can get advance money from their employers. This practice indicates the significant demand for child labour in the dry fish industry (BBS-ILO, 2011).

Employment conditions

In inshore fishing, a boat skipper or *mahji* establishes a team of 10-12 fishers, depending on boat size. The crew members of each fishing trip bear the costs associated with the trip equally. In the case of offshore fishing, labourers receive their pre-agreed wages during the contractual term, regardless if fishery is taking place or not. An offshore fishing fleet typically consists of 18-20 fishers. Half of the earning from each offshore fishing trip is taken by the boat owner, and the rest is equally distributed among the crew members.

A significant number (18.6 percent) of fishing labourers work in the fish processing sector on a daily basis. Among them, 43 percent work on a monthly basis, 25.6 percent on work volume, 9.3 percent on contract and 3.5 percent work under alternative terms (BILS, 2015). However, none of the workers in the harvest and processing sector receive any additional benefits, such as bonuses for festivals or vacation pay.

The patron-client relationships between fishers and moneylenders (*dadondar*) play a significant role in making small-scale fishers bound to the moneylender. Small-scale fishers take credit support from the money lenders during the off-season to fulfill their family needs. Also, they seek monetary support to repair the net and boat. In such situations, *dadondar* provides fishers with the money they need. In return, small-scale fishers become bound to *dadondar* to sell their catches at lower rates than prevailing market prices. This kind of relationship between fishers and money lenders based on

credit support is still in practice.

Child labour

Children perform many tasks in the fisheries industry, such as trip preparations, fishing, post-harvest activities (e.g., handling, processing and marketing), boat building, net manufacturing and repairing, among others. In general, boys are more engaged in fishing, whereas girls mostly do post-harvest activities or shrimp fry collection. There have been reports of enslaved children, under 15 years of age, being employed in fisheries-related activities, for example, loading and unloading fish trucks, and operating fixed bag nets in the Sundarbans mangrove forest. Children are frequently forced to work more than eight hours a day in fish processing industries. Child labourers are paid much lower than adult labourers since there is no labour wage regulations. Thus, many fish farms and traders at the fish landing centers take advantage of lower wages by hiring child labour, which is oftentimes coupled with debt bondage and mistreatment. A drying fish yard owners typically assign several child workers (ages 5 to 10) to sort and prepare fish at a rate of Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 2.00 per kg. On average, a child worker makes 25,000–35,000 BDT per season, while an adult male worker earns 40,000–45,000 BDT per season.

Furthermore, child labours are more vulnerable to workplace-related hazards than adults. They work in enclosed spaces with hazardous materials and often face verbal abuse from their employers. In the fishing industry, child labourers are enslaved on fishing boats, landing centers, fishing platforms at sea, and in the processing industries. Children also work in severe environmental conditions where they may be exposed to extreme temperatures, sounds, or vibrations that are harmful to their health (BILS, 2015).

Working conditions

Small-scale fishers often live and work in dangerous conditions. They are poor and constantly face different hardships that are beyond their control. Inshore fishers go out to sea daily or on a 2–3 day trips. Most often labourers (fishing

crew) and skippers work together so they face common constraints. Those in better financial situations, are more likely to evaluate skipper's character before agreeing to work for them. As a result, they can find boat owners they are comfortable with, especially if they are not happy with their current boat owner. Offshore fishery workers usually sail for longer trip so they cannot leave their boats until they reach their targeted catch. The majority of fisheries workers usually do not get notified if they are terminated or laid off. The rest of the workers are aware of the termination notice, although they rarely receive it due to labour shortages. Concepts such as appointment letters and attendance registers are practically unheard of. The majority of the labourers (76.4 percent) are unaware of their fundamental labour rights. Skippers or *mohajon* control workers through their channels, but they do not provide identification cards.

While at sea, the crew members receive four meals per day. Labourers are generally unable to take the vacation time during the fishing season unless they become ill. If any crew members are on leave, boat owners or *mohajon* are under strain to manage fishing due to workforce shortages. During the hilsa fishing season, the boat owner undertakes all liabilities for injured labourers until they heal. Even during a cyclone or storm season, most fishers violate weather forecast warnings and resume fishing in hopes of better catch, which sometimes leads to fatal accidents. The lack of or poor radio network can makes it difficult for fishers to return to shore. Workers rarely use safety gear due to costs and contempt for safety equipment, while only a basic first aid kit is readily available. Approximately 80 percent of fish workers believe they have insufficient safety equipment on board, and 97 percent of fishers believe harbour facilities in Bangladesh's coastal area are not good (The Daily Star, 2021). Additionally, they may face criminal gangs on the sea, Piracy is a real threat to fishers, especially during the hilsa fishing season. Fishers are abducted and held hostage for ransom. They are constantly terrified of being attacked and hijacked of their boats or nets. Surprisingly, the pirated stuff is subsequently sold back to the fishers via brokers or direct contact with the robbers. Fishing in the Sundarbans is equally dangerous since tiger-human confrontations may lead to fishers losing their lives. In addition, they are

often forced to pay bribes or rent to officials, which hampers their income.

Furthermore, women and children working in the fish drying yards face a different set of issues. Female workers and adolescent girls receive poor wages compared to men. Sanitation conditions at the workplace are deplorable, with open-pit toilets shared by most workers. They are exposed to weather conditions for a prolonged periods of time and come in constant contact with pesticides. One-fourth of workers drink contaminated water in the workplace. As a result, many serious health problems commonly occur, such as diarrhea, backache, headache, and skin disorders. Labourers who solely process fish receive BDT 20,000–30,000 for a five-month long season. Usually, they spend an average of 10 hours per day in fish drying or processing enclosures. Male labours work more (16.8 hours) than females (8.2 hours).

Coercion and the lack of freedom

Many small-scale fishers are landless and reside on government property (*khas* land). Those who own their house have hardly any additional land. The few who own a property, own a tiny amount that is sufficient for family settlement but insufficient for generating additional revenue. Access to growth and development efforts is hampered by a lack of infrastructure, distance, and inadequate transportation. Families headed by women that lose an earning family member due to a calamity, illness, or tiger attack are particularly vulnerable to poverty. In the absence of males in the fishing families, females lead the families. Our study found that the families led by females lead are more likely to experience food insecurity. Their livelihoods and coping abilities are hampered by low education, inadequate skills, and low earning potential, forcing them to seek income outside the home. The lack of collateral assets, such as lands, severely limits fishers' access to formal credit systems (i.e., banks). In the absence of formal credit support, small-scale fishers become trapped in informal credit systems by the money lenders.

It is hard for small-scale fishers to return the debt on time due to their low income and high family expenses. Conflicts with the money lenders are thus very common when it comes to returning their debt back. A similar situation

is also observed for those who work in boats owned by others boats and have taken advance money. Boat owners are also willing to pay advance in order to ensure enough labour for the season. This prevents workers from absconding and leads to de facto incarceration for the duration of the fishing season. These workers are only allowed to leave once the advance is paid off. However, this is impractical since recruiters may trick them into gambling, drinking, and other vices that thrust them deeper into a debt cycle and forces them back to fishing. Further, migrant workers in the dry fish sector also face discrimination in respect to wages, food, workload, and workplace conditions. In many cases, child labourers get trapped in a job if their parents have taken advances from the company, making it difficult for them to leave that job despite facing numerous difficulties.

Conclusion

Small-scale fishers in Bangladesh are exposed to immense vulnerabilities because of the nature of their work and geographical position. Among them, fishing labourers are likely the most vulnerable due to the disadvantaged labour arrangement in the fishery sector. The awareness of labour rights among fish labourers was found to be extremely low. As the fishing labours constitute the largest portion of the workforce employed in small-scale fisheries of Bangladesh, the well-being of the fishing labour should be a priority of the fisheries governance. The study recommended the following suggestions. First, steps should be taken to increase awareness among fishing labourers and their employers about occupational health. Second, the government should establish a wage board that implements the minimum wage for fishers and thus promote equal rights and pays for male and female worker. Third, there should be effective monitoring to register the sea-going boats and establish checkpoints to ensure that the boats are well equipped. Fourth, there should be a provision introducing life insurance and fishers' database providing ID cards for all sea-going fishers. Fifth, the government should revise the list of hazardous work to exclude children from hazardous fishing activities. Finally, overall technical education should be emphasized

to enhance the employability of people.

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