

POLICY BRIEF

April 2022

Hasina checking her vermicompost. Hasina had not undertaken any farming previously, but since joining the IFM-FFS she is cultivating vegetables and producing vermicompost. Photo: Practical Action

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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND AGRICULTURE IN COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH

SUMMARY

In 2021, Practical Action and UNDP assessed the contribution to women's empowerment made by a project supporting Integrated Farm Management – Farmer Field Schools among smallholder farmers in host communities in Cox's Bazar. Notable improvements were found across multiple dimensions of empowerment: agricultural production, household income and assets, leadership and opinion sharing, and attitudes towards domestic violence.

Key findings:

- Women's decision-making ability and confidence on agricultural production improved by 56% and 111%, respectively.
- Women's control over the use of income from farming and non-farming activities increased by 86%.
- Women's ownership and access to productive assets improved by 46%, and decision-making over these increased by 100%.
- Women's membership of groups and their confidence to share opinions in community forums increased by 143%.
- The attitude of women farmers towards wife beating being unacceptable, a proxy for perception of status within the family, improved by 31%.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government and its development partners must consider women's empowerment in the design, delivery, and evaluation of agriculture programmes. Programmes should seek to address structural barriers that currently prevent women, the majority of the country's agricultural workforce, from fulfilling their potential contribution to rural development and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Agriculture programmes should include specific objectives or outcomes on women's empowerment, and use multi-dimensional models and robust methodologies to track changes over the programme lifetime and beyond.
- Gender inequalities are unlikely to be addressed by any single branch of government in isolation. Agriculture programmes can contribute to women's empowerment, but greater coordination and cross-departmental collaboration is required to effectively address the multiple dimensions of empowerment.
- Further research is required to understand men's attitudes and assumptions regarding the role of women in agriculture and how their views change as women are empowered. Strategies need to be identified that support men to act as allies of women within households and communities.

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CONTEXT AND PROJECT

Women's contribution to agriculture is significant, though overlooked. Women make up approximately two-thirds of the agricultural workforce in Bangladesh. However, women have less access to productive resources than men, and their decision-making power is limited within families and communities. Studies using the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) found women farmers in Bangladesh to be almost twice as disempowered as men.¹ Practical Action



Anjuman on her farm. A single mother, Anjuman joined a IFM-FFS and now cultivates around 20 different types of vegetable and rears poultry and goats on a small plot of land.
Photo: Practical Action

is implementing the SHARIP project with host communities in Cox's Bazar, supported by UNDP with funds from Danida.² The project aims to improve livelihoods of poor farmers through Integrated Farm Management – Farmer Field Schools as a means to build resilience to the pressures of hosting large numbers of refugees from Myanmar. A total of 10,195 women smallholder farmers from Ramu, Ukhiya, and Teknaf Upazilas (sub-districts) participated in SHARIP.

Study methodology: The study was designed to assess the SHARIP project's contribution to women's empowerment. Its methodology was inspired by the WEAI. Four of the five domains covered by the study overlap with those used in the WEAI (production, resources, income, leadership). An additional domain of personal freedom and wellbeing was added, and the WEAI's fifth domain of time-use was not covered. A random sample of 372 women farmers participating in SHARIP from across the three target Upazilas were selected for the study. Respondents were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. A retrospective study design was used where respondents were asked about six months earlier. Answers were converted into numeric values on 3 or 5-point Likert scales.³ Scores from

individual questions within each domain were aggregated to generate average domain scores with values ranging between 0 and 1. Five 'Empowerment Status' categories were generated, inspired by the structure used in the Human Development Index. Qualitative information was used to validate quantitative scores and to understand women farmers' own perceptions of factors contributing to changes. One focus group discussion was conducted with participating women farmers in each Upazila. These were complemented by in-depth interviews with women farmers trained as farmer facilitators for the Integrated Farm Management – Farmer Field Schools, as well as with representatives from the government's Department of Agriculture Extension.

Study limitations: It is openly acknowledged here that the recall method has its limitations. Future studies on this topic will compare the data collected at the start (baseline) and end of the project. However, we are confident that the method used here is sufficiently rigorous to provide evidence of overall trends. Future studies will also engage with male farmers to understand perspectives. The missing male perspective is acknowledged as a limitation of this study.

KEY FINDINGS

Decision-making related to agricultural production: We found considerable positive shifts in women's sole decision-making around *all* surveyed aspects of agricultural production. Overall scores improved from 0.39 before joining SHARIP to 0.61 after – an improvement of 111 per cent on the index from 0 to 1. In relation to the specific agriculture issues on which women were surveyed, the largest improvement was found in sole decision-making on farming techniques (8 per cent before; 33 per cent after). Also notable is the shift in sole decision-making on livestock and poultry (22 per cent before; 58 per cent after).

Women were asked about changes in their levels of confidence regarding agricultural decision-making. Large positive shifts were found under all surveyed aspects, with an overall improvement of 111 per cent (0.28 before; 0.59 after). However, the lowest growth in confidence was in

relation to engaging with service providers, with only 43 per cent of women reporting medium or high levels of confidence in this area after joining, compared with 9 per cent before. This still represents a large positive shift, but not as large as in other aspects of agricultural decision-making such as input purchases, application of farming techniques, and crop selection. This is identified as an area in need of further attention in future programming.

'Our husbands are happy as we can suggest to them which agriculture technologies to use. Following the process, our production has increased.'
– Farmer, Ramu

Control over use of household income: We found participating women farmers have control over an increasing proportion of household income, with an overall shift in domain score of 86 per cent (0.14 before; 0.26 after). However, while the change in score is large, the overall domain score remains low. Not surprisingly, women have the largest say when it comes to

income generated from their own labour, ranging from control over 49 per cent of income from livestock and poultry (up from 28 per cent) and 41 per cent of income from agriculture products (up from 22 per cent). However, notable increases in women's control over money from off-farm income generating activities were also found (16 per cent before; 29 per cent after). Qualitative discussions indicate that in most cases this would be income earned by other household members as few, if any, participating women had other sources of income. Furthermore, in focus group discussions and interviews, women explained how being able to earn an income and decide how the money is used instils confidence and decreases dependency on others. The women conveyed a sense of pride in being able to contribute in a new way to family wellbeing and to household savings. Around 49 per cent of women reported reinvesting some of their income in agriculture inputs and equipment (increased from 25 per cent before) –

an important consideration for future agriculture programmes. Forty per cent are now contributing to household savings (up from 20 per cent before).

'[Previously] our husbands didn't want to give us money, even sometimes they had denied to pay the tuition fee for their children.' – Farmer, Ukhiya

Access to and control over productive resources: Again, we found large positive shifts in this domain. Ownership and access to productive assets improved by 46 per cent (0.37 before; 0.54 after), and decision-making power about assets has improved by 100 per cent (0.28 before; 0.56 after). Eighty per cent of participating women farmers now own poultry, compared to 49 per cent before. And 48 per cent now own farm equipment (for example tools), compared to 17 per cent before. Much smaller increases are found in relation to large livestock like cattle and buffaloes (14 per cent before; 24 per cent after) and land (17 per cent before; 25 per cent after). However, these increases are still notable; SHARIP's short duration may be part of the explanation for lower ownership levels of larger assets.

Household and community leadership: Within this domain the study explored group membership, confidence to speak in public and share opinions, and respect for women's decisions on family and health matters. All participants are part of farmer groups instituted by SHARIP. While there is some reported increase in membership of other groups, the overall level remains low: 73 per cent of women are not part of other agriculture groups, 65 per cent are not part of credit or microfinance groups, 71 per cent are not part of religious groups, and 70 per cent are not part of groups associated with government schemes. With social capital generated by group membership found to be an important contributor to empowerment, this is a concern. However, we also found that the percentage of women who report that they are not confident to share their thoughts and opinions in community meetings has fallen from 45 per cent to 8 per cent. When it comes to decision-making on family

'My husband was selected for a position in our mosque committee. They offered him a minor position but he has far more capacity. He discussed with me and I tried to convince him that he should raise his voice against it. Then finally, my husband listened to me and raised his voice' – Farmer, Ukhiya

matters, we found small increases related to children (0.65 before; 0.73 after) and health (0.64 before; 0.75 after).

Personal freedom and wellbeing: Cox's Bazar is a conservative context, with strict socio-cultural norms restricting women's movements and interactions with men outside their household. However, we found improvements in the percentage of women able to visit selected locations without permission from husbands or other household members: community events (17 per cent before; 43 per cent after), health centres (63 per cent before; 88 per cent after), markets (31 per cent before; 67 per cent after). Events outside the community remain widely restricted, with only 22 per cent of women able to join these, although this is an increase from 8 per cent before. Domestic violence remains widespread, but decreasing: experienced by 67 per cent of women before; 58 per cent after. Husbands are the perpetrators in the vast majority of cases. However, the proportion of women considering domestic abuse to be unacceptable, has improved by 31 per cent (0.55 before; 0.72 after). Clearly, there is a lot of urgent work to do to challenge and address the prevalence of domestic violence; collaboration with specialist agencies is likely to be essential.

Domains of empowerment	Key constituent dimensions	% Change	Mean score on a scale of 0 – 1 (\pm SD)*		Empowerment status**	
			Before	After	Before	After
Decision-making related to agricultural production	Agricultural production decision-making	56%	0.39 (\pm 0.18)	0.61 (\pm 0.19)	Very low	Moderate
	Confidence on agricultural production decision-making	111%	0.28 (\pm 0.22)	0.59 (\pm 0.21)	Very low	Moderate
Control over household income	Control over household income	86%	0.14 (\pm 0.14)	0.26 (\pm 0.17)	Very low	Very low
Access to and control over productive resources	Having own productive assets	46%	0.37 (\pm 0.22)	0.54 (\pm 0.21)	Very low	Low
	Decision-making about assets (buy/sell/transfer)	100%	0.28 (\pm 0.24)	0.56 (\pm 0.25)	Very low	Moderate
Household and community leadership	Group membership and confidence to share opinions	143%	0.14 (\pm 0.15)	0.34 (\pm 0.18)	Very low	Very low
	Decision-making about children	12%	0.65 (\pm 0.21)	0.73 (\pm 0.22)	Moderate	High
	Decision-making about healthcare	17%	0.64 (\pm 0.19)	0.75 (\pm 0.16)	Moderate	High
Personal freedom and wellbeing¹	Attitude towards domestic violence	31%	0.55 (\pm 0.37)	0.72 (\pm 0.36)	Moderate	High

Figure 1: Women's empowerment domains, constituent dimensions, and before and after scores.

*Standard Deviation

**In the above table, to support accessibility, mean scores are converted into brackets (Empowerment Status) as per the structure and cut-off points used in the Human Development Index (<0.4 = very low; 0.4 – 0.54 = low; 0.55 – 0.69 = moderate; 0.7 – 0.79 = high; \geq 0.8 = very high).

An Integrated Farm Management – Farmer Field School formation meeting in Ukhiya.

Photo: Practical Action



CONCLUSION

SHARIP was developed to improve production by smallholder farmers in Cox's Bazar through Integrated Farm Management – Farmer Field Schools. During implementation, encouraging signs of women's empowerment were noted, and this study was commissioned to explore this observation more fully. The multi-dimensional model and methodology developed and utilised was specifically inspired by the WEAI. The study found notable improvements

across all five domains of empowerment studied: production; resources; income; leadership; and personal freedom and wellbeing. For an analysis of how the SHARIP project contributed to generating these empowerment outcomes please refer to the full report available at UNDP's website. Within these domains, findings related to specific constituent dimensions can be further explored to refine the design of follow-on programmes. The broader findings substantiate the call to recognize the potential of agriculture programmes to contribute to women's empowerment and to adopt measures

that reinforce this potential. In this way, programmes can further support the central yet overlooked role of women farmers in contributing to the country's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Further coordination and cross-departmental collaboration within government and with development partners is required to adequately address the multi-dimensional nature of women's empowerment and to address structural barriers. Future research is needed around the attitudes of men towards women's empowerment and recommendations on how to support men as allies in this endeavour.

Notes

1. Sraboni E, Malapit HJ, Quisumbing AR, Ahmed AUJWD. Women's Empowerment in Agriculture: What Role for Food Security in Bangladesh? In World Development, 2014; Vol 61. Pg.11–52. Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X14000989>.
2. Support to Host Communities Affected by the Rohingya Influx Project (SHARIP). 1st phase: Nov 2019 to Jul 2021; 2nd phase: Aug 2021 – continuing.
3. Bryman A. Social Research Methods. 4th ed. OUP: 2012.
4. Unfortunately, results around freedom of movement could not be included here due to the different type of response categories associated with these questions.



About Practical Action

We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone.

We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty.

Big change starts small.