

Access of Rural Women to Productive Resources in Bangladesh: A Pillar for Promoting their Empowerment

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Abstract

The study examines the extent of accessibility of rural women to seven productive resources. Data were collected from 159 farmers' wives through interviews using a pre-designed schedule from three villages of Mymensingh District in Bangladesh. The Likert Scale was utilised to measure the extent of women's access to productive resources based on their subjective judgements. Descriptive statistics were used in interpreting the data. The findings show that the women had better opportunities for rearing livestock and capital availability. However, their access to extension services, training, technologies, institutions, land and production inputs were limited. Lack of technical knowledge and land ownership, heavy household chores and some socio-cultural constraints like restricted mobility and male resistance hindered women's access to productive resources. The study ends with a series of suggestions for rural women's empowerment. Special emphasis was given to forming social capital among rural women by various development actors which could increase productive resources under women's control.

INTRODUCTION

Resources are the key considerations for rural livelihoods. Rural households negotiate their livelihoods by obtaining access to land, labour, capital, knowledge and market, which leads to enhanced family well-being and sustainable use of resources (Valdivia and Gilles, 2001). In most developing countries, there is a patriarchal

system of social setting. In this tradition, men hold the sovereign power to control households and society as a whole while women are ascribed to a lower hierarchy compared to men (Balk, 1997). The historical

deprivation of women socially, legally, politically and technologically aggravates their positions and they are subordinated as a production unit for bearing and rearing children (Ahmad, 2001). Women's access to productive resources (e.g. land) tends to be related with men, either by kinship or through marriage. Furthermore, economic, extension and other public institutions are gender-biased and often ignore the needs of women. Baden (1997) identified some gender-based differentiations within the household including access to productive resources, control over family labour, rigidities in division of labour, inequality in consumption and responsibility for domestic expenditure. Tamale (2004) argues that the non-recognition of women's labour for domestic chores is reinforced by the unequal allocation of resources. Thus, the lack of access to and control over productive resources is the main factor limiting women's equal participation in economic activities, thereby hampering the human development process (Acharya, 2003).

Out of a total population of 149.7 million in Bangladesh, women constitute 74.4 million (PRB, 2005). The majority, who are mostly poor, vulnerable and marginalised, live in rural areas. They play an important role in seed production, animal husbandry, fisheries, post-harvest management, conservation of biological diversity, management of energy and family

(Anon., 1995). Despite their tremendous contribution to food production and well-being for the household, rural women are underestimated and overlooked in development strategies. Various socio-cultural and structural barriers affect their access to formal and non-formal institutions and extension services (Murshid and Yasmeen, 2004).

It is praiseworthy that the government of Bangladesh has adopted a national policy for the advancement of women since 1997. For improving the socio-economic condition of women, the efforts of different NGOs are also very significant. Various development agencies have undertaken some initiatives and programmes focusing on education and skill development, credit, health and nutrition, political empowerment, gender awareness, human rights and oppression. Some innovative steps like free education for girls with special stipends, reservation of seats for women in local government, special quota in services and amendment of laws have been promoting women's empowerment as well as reducing the gender disparity. However, women's property rights are highly constrained in Bangladesh, as it is governed by religious laws. Under the Muslim Law, a daughter inherits one-half the share of her brother, a wife receives only one-eighth of the deceased husband's property while a mother gets one-sixth (ADB, 2001; Ramachandran, 2006). Due to lack of land ownership, women are getting inadequate attention by many development agencies. For example, the agricultural extension delivery services in Bangladesh are still concentrated on male farmers and consequently, fail to reach the majority of rural women with modern information and technologies.

Access to resources is one of the elements of women's empowerment and a base for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Many international conferences have been held to improve rural women's equitable access to and control of land and property in recent years. The United Nations has outlined seven interdependent strategic priorities with regard to MDG-3 in altering discrimination against women. Two strategies are to ensure

women's property and inheritance rights and to eliminate gender inequality in economic sectors (World Bank, 2007). The 4th World Congress of Rural Women, held in South Africa in 2007, reiterated the need to provide full and equal access for rural women to productive resources, including the right to inheritance and ownership of land and other property, credit/capital, appropriate technologies, markets and information. Considering this complex situation, the researcher attempted to examine some of the productive resources accessible to rural women and explore enabling and limiting factors, with the intention of making them powerful agents for change over time.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

Access is the right or opportunity to use, manage or control a particular resource (Nichols *et al.*, 1999). Resources may be economic (e.g. land and credit), political (e.g. participation in local government and community decision-making) and social (e.g. education and training). In general, women and men require different levels of access to resources based on their productive, reproductive and community managing roles (Moser, 1993). When disadvantaged women have the ability to control their own environment by gaining greater access to material and intellectual resources, Musokotwane *et al.* (2001) have called this process 'empowerment'.

Many studies have already found that access to productive resources for women enhances knowledge on farm management and income generation, develops bargaining and decision-making power, improves children's schooling and health, increases self-confidence and social networks and provides security in old age (IFPRI, 2000; Grace, 2005; Pitt *et al.*, 2006). Poverty alleviation in rural areas is significantly related to women's increased access to productive resources (Adereti, 2005). Thus, efforts to build social capital among rural women are necessary for sustainable production and household food security through provision of facilitating resources (Meludu *et al.*, 1999; Flora, 2001). All actors in development must provide them with support in this regard. At the same

time, raising social awareness of people about the symptoms, causes and consequences of oppressive economic, cultural, familial, religious and legal practices is necessary for changing traditional gender roles and mindsets (Acharya, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Location of the study

The study was conducted in three villages of Mymensingh District in Bangladesh. The villages, namely, Boyra, Sutiakhali and Daribhabakhali were selected purposely considering the location of Bangladesh Agricultural University, Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture and Bangladesh Fisheries Research Institute, good access to government and non-government services and communication facilities. It was assumed that rural women had better access to various resources because of the level of modernisation in these villages.

Sampling design

The population for the study consisted of the married women in farm households in these three villages. A representative sample of 159 was drawn (53 from each village) based on arbitrary allocation (Cochran, 1977). The respondents were selected from different farm households by random sampling.

Data collection and analysis

The primary data were collected between January and March 2007. In order to collect qualitative data, three group discussion sessions were arranged separately in three villages; each group contained 10 participants. During these group sessions, several open-ended questions were asked of the respondents in order to collect deeper information about their accessibility to resources along with many hidden facts and factors. Based on this information, the research instrument was prepared and a pre-test was conducted with 18 respondents for its necessary modification. Finally, interviews were made with 159 rural women in a face-to-face setting using the pre-designed schedule. The respondents were requested to provide information about

their socio-economic condition, accessibility of resources and constraints to these resources. Four key informants (one male and one female community leader, one extension and one NGO personnel) were also interviewed to give their expert views in order to formulate strategies for rural women's empowerment.

Books, journals, reports and internet documents were used as secondary sources of data supporting or supplementing the empirical findings of the study. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) and some descriptive statistics, such as percentage, mean, standard deviation (SD), coefficient of variation (CV) and rank were used to interpret the data.

Measuring access to productive resources

In this study, access means the ability of a rural woman to get seven socio-economic resources and accrue benefits from them. The full meaning of these resources is illustrated below.

§ *Access to land:* power to use family farmland, ownership of land and control over it.

1. *Access to capital:* opportunity to get loans, micro-credit and banking services from any formal or informal institution.

2. *Access to extension services and training:* Opportunities to develop technical skills for production through training and obtain information about development aspects from any extension agency.

§ *Access to technologies:* availability of cost-effective and appropriate technologies for production, post-harvest and household tasks. These technologies included improved varieties/breeds, artificial insemination, vaccines, weeders, threshers, sewing machines and improved stoves.

1. *Access to production inputs:* Availability of technological inputs such as quality seeds, saplings, fertilizers, pesticides and water supply.
 2. *Access to livestock rearing:* opportunities to rear chickens, ducks, pigeons, cattle and goats for income generation.
- § *Access to rural institutions:* Any co-operatives or associations within the locality providing production inputs, financial supports, saving facilities and other opportunities through women's active participation.

Access of a rural woman to productive resources was measured using the Likert Scale with a weight of 0 representing 'no access', 1 for 'low access', 2 for 'medium access' and 3 for 'high access'. Finally, a rank order was developed among the seven resources based on mean score obtained for each item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of rural women

Analysis of the socio-economic condition of the respondents found that their mean age was 34

years and the length of marriage was 18 years on average. A poor level of formal schooling (mean: 3.0 years) was found among sampled respondents, which is one of the major causes of their inferior status. The women had given birth to four children on average, perhaps in expectation of boys for enjoying a better social status and respect. Most women lived in households consisting of six persons. The average area of family farm was 0.70 ha. The members of the farm household performed both farm and non-farm activities and earned an average of 65000.00 Taka (approximately 954.00 US\$) annually, which is not enough to meet their basic needs.

Extent of rural women's access to resources

Data contained in Table 1 show that the respondents had better access to livestock rearing (mean: 1.92) and capital availability (mean: 1.42). However, their access to extension services and training, technologies, formal or informal institutions, land and inputs for production was limited. In support of the qualitative data obtained through group discussions, the extent of women's access to seven productive resources and underlying facts are described here on the basis of rank order.

Table 1: Extent of rural women's accessibility to productive resources (n = 159)

Resources	Extent of access (%)				Mean ^a (CV)	Rank order
	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Not at all		
Livestock rearing	24	45	28	3	1.92 (41)	1
Capital	6	42	39	13	1.42 (56)	2
Extension services and training	15	19	22	44	1.04 (105)	3
Rural institutions	6	18	44	32	0.99 (38)	4
Technologies	11	18	25	46	0.93 (110)	5
Land	8	11	33	48	0.79 (116)	6
Production inputs	5	18	10	67	0.62 (156)	7

^a Mean values of items ranging from 0 to 3, where 0 indicates no access and 3 indicates high access of resources.

Figures in the parentheses indicate CV = (SD / Mean) × 100.

i) Access to livestock rearing: almost all the respondents (97%) had the opportunity to rear domestic birds and animals. Feeding animals and poultry birds, cleaning their sheds, health care and other related activities were performed by women. They also had a major role in decision making for rearing and marketing of birds, animals and their products. Since women had no access to market, selling and purchasing activities remained under men's control and hence, women were deprived of getting real benefits from livestock. The respondents, however, felt that rearing cattle, goats and birds increased household income and their consumption of nutritious food and

ii) Access to capital: The respondents (87%) received a limited amount of credit from NGOs (mainly from BRAC, Grameen Bank and ASA), co-operatives, money lenders and relatives, with a high rate of interest. The women were almost always excluded from loans from commercial banks because of lack of land ownership. The respondents reported that their access to institutional loans was further restricted by their lack of education, confinement to household activities, lack of familiarity with loan providers and restrictions on their mobility. Interestingly, a high proportion of women's loans was controlled by male members of the household (Goetz and Gupta, 1996). In some cases, women were not even allowed to invest the loan in income generating activities (Husain and Mallik, 1998).

iii) Access to extension services and training: almost half respondents (44%) had no opportunity to receive services from different extension agencies like the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) and the Department of Livestock Services (DLS). They reported that having access to such services for women largely depended on their husbands, since extension services are mostly

directed towards male farmers and female extension agents are very limited in numbers. As a result, they lack modern avenues of knowledge and information, new technologies and opportunities for training to increase their farm productivity and income.

iv) Access to rural institutions: 68% of respondents were involved in co-operatives or informal associations, which created opportunities for savings, taking loans, discussions and participation of women in social events like agricultural fairs.

v) Access to technologies: Table 1 shows that nearly half respondents (46%) had no access to modern technologies. They used traditional tools and practices for production and household purposes. Due to lack of capital, it was difficult for women to hire or buy or adopt technologies like threshers, sewing machines and artificial insemination. Moreover, they limited their labour time in economic activities due to heavy commitment to domestic chores. They stated that technologies had not yet been designed for women's tasks and had little impact on the welfare of rural women.

vi) Access to land: about half of the women (48%) were deprived of access to land, which led to serious constraints on getting credit and increasing their productive capacity. The respondents could only use land in and around their homesteads for gardening. Lack of education and training, fewer opportunities for employment, cultural taboos, male resistance and financial constraints were the obstacles stopping the respondents from inheriting, using and securing land. Moreover, they were not well equipped to deal with tenants, sale of produce or reach the land located at a distant place.

vii) Access to production inputs: unexpectedly, only 33% of respondents had little access to important inputs (e.g. seed and saplings) for

production purposes. Since they had no land, it was not easy to gain access to inputs like fertilizers and pesticides.

Views of key informants

The key informants selected for the study provided a wealth of information about their roles and limitations, current socio-economic atmosphere, social stigmatization and services available to women's welfare in the locality. They made the following suggestions for improving women's access to productive resources as well as their status in the rural community:

- § Enhancing rural women's income generating activities by providing literacy, technical information and skills, inputs and credit (in kind or cash) for agricultural and non-agricultural production.
- § Transferring cost-effective and suitable technologies for women through extension agencies.
- § Establishing formal and non-formal institutions for technical assistance and capacity building for women.
- § Ensuring women's participation in rural development schemes and community decision-making.
- § Ensuring women's rights to land and property by the government including local authorities.
- § Implementing awareness raising programmes on different aspects of gender at the village level.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, discussions and suggestions mentioned earlier, it is crucial for development actors to address the issue of rural women in a comprehensive and holistic manner. In particular, allocation of resources related to the practical and strategic interests of rural women should be integrated into rural development policies and programmes. Education, training and capacity building are

necessary pre-requisites for empowering rural women in the study area. Donors, NGOs and women's organizations, in addition to government organisations, should come forward to take this initiative for sustained rural development.

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