

Empowered Women in Agriculture Are Breaking Deep-Rooted Conventions in Bangladesh



Over the last decade, the participation rate of women in the agro-sector has increased remarkably in Chandina, Comilla.

BACKGROUND

Contrary to the popular belief that men are suited to the agricultural sector, the women of Bangladesh today are increasingly involved in farming. Despite challenging the traditional view, the women are subject to constant discrimination. The Department of Agricultural Extension's Progress Report 2015 mentions that women are engaged in 17 of the 21 steps involved in farming work. The steps range from pre-farming work to the work of cultivation, seed conservation, processing and marketing. However, there is no official recognition of women in institutional statistics. The work of women farmers is considered merely to be a part of their daily chores. The commonly held view is: why should they be paid for routine work? A staggering 45.6 percent of the work done by women in the agro-sector remains unpaid. Even though the wage gap between men and women labourers in the sector has decreased, there remains a gender bias.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)'s latest agricultural wage survey (2016), the number of people in the labour force employed in agriculture is 2 crores 56 lakh—of which nearly 1 crore are women. For context, the number of women engaged in agriculture a decade ago was 38 lakhs. In the last ten years, the increase in women's participation in agriculture has enjoyed a steady rate of 4 percent every year. On the contrary, the participation of men decreased by 3 percent. Because of men in rural areas going abroad as migrant labours or joining other sectors, agriculture is facing a labour force crisis. This gap is being filled by women agricultural labours.

WORKING AREA

Chandina upazila of Comilla district. Comilla has long been a district where commercial agricultural is practiced. For that reason, the entire process of production and sales was conducted by men. Women were involved in the agricultural which was primarily thought to be housework, therefore unpaid. However, in the last few years, landless women members have been working as agricultural labourers in the field. According to findings from focus group discussions with members of the

landless organisation in the Chandina, the average wage for women was BDT 200, while for men, it was BDT 300, at the start of the year. So, discussions regarding the issue of wage discrimination started last year and they had started mobilisations for demanding equal wages.

WAGE BARGAINING

For the last 2–3 years, the women landless members have been working in the field alongside men in Dumuria and Narsinghpur villages in Keronkhal union of Chandpur upazila. Although, their wages increased for a few days during the harvesting season every year, it soon went down again. In the previous year, the average wage for women was BDT 200 daily, and for men, it was BDT 300.

In April 2017, landless leaders conducted representative meetings covering different villages began discussions about wage discrimination in the two villages. As a result, besides the landless members, other women involved in agricultural work in the area came to the decision to collectively demand increase of wages. Landless members raised this demand in the Dumuria village committee meeting on May 1, 2017. A 10-member team was formed, and was made responsible for negotiating the wages with the land owners. The demand was raised that women's wages need to be increased and made equal to that of men. Unfortunately, the owners refused to agree to this demand.

After consultation with the leaders of Dumuria and Narsinghpur, it was decided on May 12, 2017 that if wages were not increased for both men and women and made equal, all labours would refuse to work and go on strike. After 4 days, the owners sat in discussion with the landless organisation. It was decided that for the three months of monsoon, the wages of all agricultural labours, both men and women, will be fixed at Taka 300. After the end of the season, only the wages of women will be increased from Taka 200 per day to Taka 250. As a result, it was possible to increase the wages for women by Taka 50 for the entire year, therefore cut the wage gap, albeit meagerly.

EXPERIENCE OF LANDLESS WOMEN MEMBERS

The religious and social constraints of women working in agricultural are very pervasive. Most women agricultural labours are Hindus, and Muslim women fear working in the fields due to religious reasons. But, during the 4-day protest, many Muslim women took part. Sakina Akhtar, Miriam begum of Dumuria village took part in the mobilisation. The whole process worked to distil the socio-religious fear for them. They said, "We used to look for work. But in fear of mosques-madrassa, what people would say, we did not work. But our husbands joined us in our mobilisation and protests. So we have courage to start working now. No one will feed me; I have to work for my own food." Through the mobilisation, 11 Muslim women have started working as agricultural labourers in the fields.

RESULTS

Overall, the analysis of results shows that in the working year, the wages of 759 agricultural labours increased. Among them, 534 were women labour and 225 were men.

In eight villages, the wage gap decreased by Taka 25. Thus, the wage gap could in fact be reduced, and as a by-product of that -women's economic empowerment has increased. This social recognition of women's role in agriculture will hopefully prove to be instrumental in eradicating gender discrimination for the foreseeable future.