

# Making women in fishing visible

**A recent study reveals that women in Bangladesh's coastal fishing continue to remain largely unrecognized, and that urgent steps are needed to rectify this situation**

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**B**angladesh is one of the world's leading fish producing countries, with a total production of 42.77 lakh MT in the year 2017-18. Aquaculture contributes 56.24 per cent of the total fish production. The average growth in this sector has been 5.26 per cent for the last ten years. The rate of growth in fish production is in conformity with the government's targets of Vision-2021. According to the State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020, Bangladesh ranked third in inland open water capture production and fifth in world aquaculture production.

Around 10 to 12 per cent of those employed in fisheries in Bangladesh are women. Aquaculture alone employs more than 3 million fishers, 60 per cent of whom are women. In the

rural and coastal areas, 30 per cent of all women are directly or indirectly engaged in small-scale fisheries, primarily in aquaculture, shrimp culture, fish processing and net, gear and craft making. Women are not involved in active fishing from the sea, but accompany men in fish production from inland water bodies.

However, the work done by women and their contribution to the economy are largely unrecognized and women remain largely absent in decision making for the management and development of the sector. COAST Trust, a national NGO in Bangladesh, recently conducted a study covering three coastal districts, to explore the situation of the women members of the coastal areas of Bangladesh. The COAST study helps us understand the role of the

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Woman in a dry fish plant at Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Around 70 per cent of women fishers are involved in different support activities, including drying fish, and net making. The low involvement of women in income generation hinders their empowerment and financial self-reliance in Bangladesh society



A woman working with dry fish in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. However, the work done by women and their contribution to the economy is largely unrecognized and women remain largely absent in decision making for the management and development of the sector

women members of fisher families, including their participation in decision making both in the family and society level. It also includes case studies of working women members of the fishers' families.

While more than 97 per cent of fisher families depended on fishing as the main source of income, surprisingly only two per cent of the women members were found to be directly involved in income generation. Women played an important role in pre- and post-harvest activities. Around 70 per cent of the women fishers are involved in different support activities, including drying fish and net making. The low involvement of women in income generation hinders their empowerment and financial self reliance in Bangladesh society. The study therefore found a low participation of women in the decision making process at both family and society levels.

The study tried to identify the reason behind the low involvement of women in income generation activities that involved working

alongside men, outside their homes. Fifty-five per cent respondents reported that working with males was 'bad'; 15 per cent said they had experienced verbal harassment from men.

All the respondents said they faced discrimination regarding wages. Twenty-one per cent accepted lower wages as they were women; 40 per cent said employers claimed they paid women less as they worked less compared to men.

The study showed that women and girls in coastal fishing communities lagged behind in formal education. The attendance rate of girls in primary schools was 92 per cent in Bagerhat, 95 per cent in Bhola, and 93 per cent in Cox's Bazaar. However, only 60 per cent of women in these families had completed Class Five; only 26 per cent had moved on to Classes Six to Ten. Out of 1200, only ten said that they had finished schooling and were attending college. Girls in fishing communities also lagged behind in general education performance levels among all girls in the districts.

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Nearly a third of the respondents took no part in decisions with regard to the assets of the family, especially in buying or disposal. Only 40 per cent participated in decisions related to the marriage of anyone in the family. The study thus clearly brought out the hold of patriarchy in family affairs. It also revealed the low levels of participation of women in different social structures. Of the respondents, 82 per cent did not participate in local 'Salish' or village courts; none were members of local institutions like the market or schools. Only 2 per cent of respondents had communicated directly with the Union Parishad (Committee) chairman on matters related to local services.

While most women said they could go out of their homes at will, there were restrictions. Almost all could visit their neighbours at any time. Less than half could go to their relatives' houses as they willed, so long as the house was not too far away. A third of the responders even claimed they could not get medical treatment when they felt it was needed.

Over 60 per cent of the respondents had been victims of violence. Nearly three-fourths reported feeling insecure when the male head of the family was out at sea, with families with

girls reporting the greatest insecurity. While three-fourths of all respondents had lodged complaints of harassment against neighbours or community, only 13 per cent of the complaints had resulted in satisfactory solutions.

Most women covered in the study were completely unaware of the importance of networking. There were no women's associations or organizations available for them to join. Half the women were members of microfinance groups; this was the only institution they could call their own.

None of the respondents were aware of fisheries related laws and regulations. None had ever taken recourse to legal action on any issue.

The COAST study came out with the following recommendations:

- Special policies and actions to identify women's contributions
- The involvement of women in economic activities
- The inclusion of women's participation in various fisheries programmes
- The implementation of labour policies for fisherwomen
- The issuance of ID cards to all women fishers ❏