

## **WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR OF BANGLADESH: UNVEILING THE REALITY**

**<sup>1</sup>Mahbuba Ferdous, <sup>2</sup>Md. Baktiar Uddin and <sup>3</sup>Humayun Kabir\***

<sup>1</sup>Upazila Agriculture Officer, Department of Agricultural Extension, Ministry of Agriculture,  
Bangladesh & Masters Student, School of Environmental and Rural Science,

University of New England, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Commissioner of Taxes, National Board of Revenue, Internal Resources Division,  
Ministry of Finance, Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, & Ph.D  
Student, School of Health, University of New England, Australia

E-mails: mferdous@myune.edu.au, baktier\_12@yahoo.com,  
humayun\_sociology03@du.ac.bd (\*Corresponding Author)

**Abstract:** The economy of Bangladesh predominantly depends on agriculture. Both men and women participate in agriculture related activities of this country. However, women's involvement in the agriculture sector has all through been ignored historically. Therefore, this study aims to focus on understanding women's contribution in this sector. Data were collected through using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Total 117 women who had the active involvement with agriculture activities were selected purposively for face to face interview and in-depth inquiry. Results show that 63% of the respondents remained unpaid labour although 78% of them work about 8-10 hours per day. Moreover, 89% among the paid female labour stated that they do not get same wages like the male labour in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh. In addition, 79% of the study population opined that their labour in agriculture remain unrecognized by their husbands or other family members. Bivariate analysis shows a significant correlation between women's contributions to the agriculture sector and the recognition of their work.

**Keywords:** Agriculture, Women, Bangladesh, Labour.

### **1. Background of the Study**

Women constitute-

Half of the world's population,

Perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours,

Receive one-tenth of the world's income and

Own less than one-hundredth of the world's property

(UN report, 1980)

Women are more or less misrepresented, disvalued, and engaged in double work in all over the world. Likewise, their contributions specifically in the agriculture field of developing countries remained greatly unrecognized. Albeit, according to the projection of FAO, the

percentage of economically active women working in agriculture sector in the Least Development Countries (LDCs) remained 70% by 2010 (Jaim and Hossain, 2011). Bangladesh, which is prominent among the developing countries of the world, is not an exception to disvaluing women's contributions in the agriculture sector (Sraboni et al., 2014). Women have the active participation in agriculture sector of this country since its independence in 1971. In addition, the economy of this country solely depends on agriculture where women constitute more than 50 percent of the total workforce (Doss, 2011). However, their labour as well as contributions in agriculture are greatly disregarded by the family members, society and the state as well. The reason behind this ignorance based primarily on the patriarchal nature of this country, unequal payment of labour, absence of ownership of land, and so forth.

Rural women in Bangladesh are not allowed to go to outside of their houses without the permission of the male family members. They usually have to take male family members in case of going to anywhere outside their home. Given this context, women are not expected to work in the job market. Albeit, RMG (readymade garment) sector of this country has opened the door of wage market vastly for the women. However, majority of the rural women prefer to work side by side their husbands in the crop fields. Because female workers of RMG sector very often stigmatized as bad girls (*kharap meya*) (Amin et al., 1998). Besides, rural women do not have more job options as they are mostly uneducated, unskilled, and choose not to move from one place to another. Consequently, working in the agriculture field is widely accepted in this country. Furthermore, some of the rural women also work as the wage labour in the land of rich farmers to run the family in absence of male bread earners. In this case, women can enjoy some sort of freedom to spend the money that they earn.

By this way, they also become the decision maker of the family and they can be considered, arguably, empowered. Because empowerment in the agriculture initiates women's active participation especially in five domains such as (a) decision making procedure regarding agricultural production; (b) decision making power and access to productive resources; (c) control over income; (d) leading the community; and (e) time distribution (Alkire et al., 2013). However, women in Bangladesh get little chances to be empowered through agriculture even though they are found to be involved in all kinds of activities in this sector such as post-harvest management of crops, seed production and preservation, tending animals, homestead gardening, intercultural operations, and so on (Rahman, 2000). In addition, their contributions are not calculated in the GDP (gross domestic production).

Another ground of unrecognition of women's contributions in the agriculture sector lies on the ownership of land. In Bangladesh women, in general, do not have the ownership especially on the cultivable land (Zaman, 2002). Although the existing land laws advocate for women's ownership in land, these are not practiced in our society. Those who demand for the right on their hereditary land are misbehaved or divorced from the family relationships. In addition to working in the agriculture field, women perform double day by working inside the household. Men after working in the field for whole day get leisure time to have a chat with friends in the local bazar or in the tea stall. On the other hand, women cook, take care of the children as well as feed the domestic animals and also do other types of work within the household sphere. Consequently, they have less time to take rest even to sleep because they have to wake up earlier in the next morning to prepare food for bringing to the field. These multifarious works make them vulnerable to mental stress and other diseases. In this regard, Paul-Mjumder (1996) who is a protuberant researcher on women's health and work related issues in Bangladesh stated that 'the most important reason for the differential health impact of work on male and female workers may be the fact that female workers had significantly less time for sleeping and rest and recreation than their male counterparts' (Paul-Mjumder, 1996:74). It is also to mention that female farmers who work in the land of rich farmers on daily basis are victimized in terms of payment and stigmatized as physically weaker and less productive compared to male farmer (Rahman, 2010). These kinds of victimizations as well as women's contributions in agriculture of Bangladesh were not explored before through in-depth inquiry. Therefore, this explorative study aims to understand women's contributions in agriculture of Bangladesh through using mixed approaches.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

Women who were involved in cultivating soil for crops production (such as rice), managing land for ploughing, harvesting, and growing vegetables and fruits were considered for this study. Consequently, those who were involved in poultry, fishing, farming, and rearing animals were excluded from this study. Data were collected in two phases using both quantitative and qualitative methods. During the first, quantitative phase, a total number of 117 women who had the active participation in agricultural activities were selected purposively from twelve villages of Durgapur Thana under the district of Rajshahi. The respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured, pre-designed and pre-tested questionnaire. Verbal permission from the respondents was taken before starting the interview procedure. The second, qualitative, phase considered five female farmers for in-

depth interview using a check-list. The interview was recorded and later translated into English. The study was conducted from November to December 2016.

### 3. Results and Discussion

**Table 1:** Socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the respondents

Characteristics	Number	Percent
<b>Age</b>		
15-24	57	49
25-34	26	22
35-44	20	17
Above 44 years	14	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education Status</b>		
Illiterate	65	55
Can read and write only	29	25
Primary level (class 1-5)	16	14
Secondary level (class 6-10)	7	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Payment Status</b>		
Paid labour	43	37
Unpaid labour	74	63
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Wage (Per Day)</b>		
BDT 100-200	26	71
BDT 201-300	8	20
Above BDT 300	3	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>37*</b>	<b>100</b>

\*as the total number of paid female farmer is 37.

Respondents' socio-demographic and economic profile reveals that more than half of the respondents (49%) fall into the 15-24 age group category. About 22 percent were found who belongs to 25-34 years age group and only 12 percent were reported as above 44 years old. Education profile shows that around 55 percent of the study population are illiterate and only 6 percent of them have reached up to secondary level of education. In the case of payment

status, overwhelming majority of the respondents (63%) are remained unpaid. In terms of daily wage, 71% of the respondents get only BDT 100-200 and very minimum number of them (9%) get more than BDT 300(See table 1).

**Table 2:** Women's contribution in the agriculture sector

<b>Working hours in the agriculture field (per day)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
5-7 hours	16	14
8-10 hours	92	78
More than 10 hours	9	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Participation in every process of cultivation</b>		
Yes	99	85
No	18	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Experience of working in replace of animals (such as cow)</b>		
Yes	32	27
No	71	61
Sometimes	14	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Taking day off in a week</b>		
Yes	34	29
No	67	57
Sometimes	16	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>

The table 2 shows that the great majority of the respondents (78%) work for 8-10 hours per day in the agriculture field. Moreover, 85% of them have the active participation in every sector of cultivation activities and 57% of the respondents do not take any day off in a week. The table also shows that 27% of the study population work in the replacement of animals such as cow. Women, very often, are commonly found to be used in the crops field replacing the animals. Farmers who do not have the capacity to buy cow for ploughing the lands use their wives in the position of the animals.

Amena Khatun (age: 29), who works in the crop field with her husband, stated that ‘my husband could not afford a cow for cultivating our lands, so both I and my husband perform the work by turn of what a cow does in the agricultural land. It is very tough job to do but we do not have other options to survive’.

**Table 3:** Recognition of women’s contribution in the agriculture sector

<b>Receiving wage same as the male farmers</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	4	11
No	33	89
<b>Total</b>	<b>37*</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Recognition of labour invested in agriculture by husband or other family members</b>		
Yes	25	21
No	92	79
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Treating female as weaker (physically) and less productive than male farmers</b>		
Yes	95	81
No	22	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>

\*as the total number of paid female farmer is 37.

The table 3 represents that 89% of the respondents do not get same wage like the male farmers. More even, 79% of them do not get any recognition from their husbands or other family members. Besides, they (81%) are treated as physically weaker compared to men.

One respondent was interviewed to know about the reason of receiving low wages compared to male farmers. Rahima Begum (age: 39), who invests her labour in the crops field of other rich farmers said that ‘I work more than male farmer but paid less. Male farmers take several breaks for smoking or for drinking tea. But, we the female farmers do not need to take break for these reasons. Therefore, we work more hours than the male workers. The owners of land do not believe this and always pay us less saying that we are not physically fit like men. For this excuses, they do not even want to employ us and prefer to hire male farmers. We cannot bargain about our wages as we do not have available job options. This is really frustrating for us’. In reality, female farmers always work more with great sincerity compared to male but victimized and exploited in several ways. Moreover, our society do not approve their identity as female farmers. ‘We work as the day labour in other’s land. The owner of land do not treat us as farmer rather they behave in such way as if they are showing mercy on us’ (Minari

Begum, age: 33). This is really unfortunate for women not be counted as farmer. The patriarchal nature of the society creates the gendered division of labour. That is why, women are expected to work inside the household. If they work, they will not be given actual wages as well as recognition by the male land owners and male dominated society.

**Table 4:** Empowerment of female farmers through agriculture sector

<b>Courage to participate as a candidate in the local election</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Yes	7	6
No	110	94
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Participation in the household decision making procedures</b>		
Yes	34	29
No	83	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Involvement in the decision making processes regarding agricultural products</b>		
Yes	15	13
No	102	87
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Full rights to spend the earned money</b>		
Yes	15	23
No	22	77
<b>Total</b>	<b>37*</b>	<b>100</b>

\*as the total number of paid female farmer is 37.

It is evident from the table 4 that only 6% of the study population have the courage to participate in the local election as candidates. Women's participation in decision making procedures in terms of household activities and agricultural products are 29%, 13% respectively. Furthermore, only 23% of the respondents enjoy the rights of spending the money which they earn by working in the agricultural field. Jomina Khatun (age: 40), a female farmer, was asked to know whether she can spend the money earned by herself. She replied 'I earn 175tk per day by working in the cultivable lands of big farmers of our village. After returning from the work, my husband takes the money from me because he buys the necessary foods from the market. Being women, I am not allowed to go to market. If I need money then I have to request him to give me small amount from my earrings'.

#### 4. Bi-variate analysis

All the quantitative findings are presented using bivariate technique. In the case of bivariate analysis, cross tables are formed using SPSS (version 21) and the statistical relations between variables are tested by using a number of appropriate measures of association. In this regard nature of the variables (e.g. level of measurement), size of the cross-table (e.g. number of rows and columns) and the distribution of cell frequency determine the choice of appropriate test statistic. Chi-square test is applied for nominal level variables. When variables are nominal in nature and the table is larger than 2x2 format with having any cell frequency less than 5 then V is applied (for details about the criteria on applying measures of association, please see Bryman, 2006).

**Table 5:** Summery table of Chi-square and Cramer's V on female farmer's contribution in the agriculture sector by the items of recognizing their labour in this sector

Women's contribution in agriculture	Recognition of women's labour in agriculture		
	Rights to spend earned money	Acknowledgement of women's labour in the agriculture sector	Receiving wages same as the male farmers
Payment status	$\chi^2=27.77^{***}$ df=2	V=.23**	V=.27**
Working hour (per day)	V=0.45**	$\chi^2=48.20^{**}$ df=2	$\chi^2=31.243^{**}$ , df=2
Participation in every process of cultivation	$\chi^2=9.15^{**}$ df=1	V=0.24***	V=0.37***
Experience of working in replace of animals	V=.45**	V=.43*	V=.28**
Taking day off (per week)	$\chi^2 = 54.01^{***}$ df=4	V=.48**	V=.62***

\*\*\* p= 0.001 \*\* p=0.01 \* p=0.05

Most of the variables of 'women's contribution in agriculture' are found to be significantly associated with the items of recognizing women's labour in the agriculture of Bangladesh. Payment status (paid/unpaid labour), per day working hour, participation in every process of agriculture, working in the replacement of animals, taking day off (per week) are found significantly associated with all the items of recognizing women's labour invested in the agriculture field.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that women's labour are greatly unrecognized, although 78% of them work for 8-10 hours per day and 57% of the respondents continue working without taking any break in a week, in agriculture of Bangladesh. Overwhelming majority (71%) of the study population receive only BDT 100-200 per day which is very minimal in the present income-expenditure structure of Bangladesh and 89% of them think that they are victimized in terms of wages. Because they do not get same wages like male farmers. In addition, though they perform double duty (as they perform household activity and also work in the agriculture field), 79% of them opined that their work are not recognized by their husbands or other family members. The above mentioned unrecognized of women's contribution in the agricultural sector lies on the policy of Bangladesh. Because the overwhelming majority of the policy makers are male and the policy board as well as think-tank is surrounded by the masculine ideologies. The representation of women in higher position of administration is not significant since limited number of women join in civil service. Therefore, no one raises the issue of the recognition of women farmer's contributions in the agriculture sector. However, the remarkable matter is that women who are involved in agricultural activities sometimes are not conscious about their contributions in this sector. For example, Tahera Khatun (age: 47) specified this matter clearly by stating that 'my husband has little cultivable land. I work there with him during the cultivation season. He sells the crops that we grow up. He is the head of the family and also the responsible person to feed me and our four children. I want nothing more. It is my duty to support him in the agriculture field'. Therefore, it is puzzling to say that the society itself responsible for not recognizing women's contributions in agriculture. Women such as Tahera are also responsible for not having deserved reward for their participation in the agriculture sector. This kind of unconscious attitude regarding their contributions in agriculture might lie on their educational status. The study shows that maximum (55%) of the respondents are illiterate. Therefore, they are not aware about their rights. However, things are seemed to be changing now. As the Prime Minister (PM) as well as the opposition leader of Bangladesh are females, women's contributions in the agriculture sector are coming into the scene like other sectors. If the state converts women's labour invested in agriculture into wage and includes it in the GDP then their position from family to national level would be changed. They will have more voice everywhere. They will also be able to participate in the decision making procedure. Because economic empowerment brings other advantages for the women. Thus, gender equality through recognition of their

contributions to the national economy will be established in each sector. The day is not far away when agriculture sector would be feminized (Jaim and Hossain, 2011), and contributions of women would be recognized from society as well as state level. However, there are some recommendations that can help to improve women's position in the agriculture sector.

### 5.1 Recommendations

- ✓ Women's contributions in agriculture sector should be acknowledged by their husbands, other family members and by the state as well.
- ✓ The state can play an important role by acknowledging women's contributions in the agriculture sector by converting their value in money and adding to the GDP and GNP.
- ✓ Women farmer's burden of double work in the agriculture field as well as household activities should be considered seriously by the other family members. Their work should be distributed equally among all the family members.
- ✓ Discrimination between the male and female farmers in terms of payment should be eliminated. The local government can play an active role in this regard.
- ✓ Representation of female farmers should be confirmed in the agriculture related national policy making committees so that they can raise their voice.
- ✓ Ownership of agricultural and cultivable lands of the female farmers should be ensured.

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