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# Women's Livelihoods in the Coastal belt of Bangladesh



## Gender and Climate Change UN Women Bangladesh

"In climate change, we are facing the biggest challenge to human rights of the 21st century; this warrants an urgent transformation in leadership that is supported by all peoples in all nations. But we must ensure that when we design climate change policies they are fair and therefore consider the needs of the most vulnerable people." *Mary Robinson, founder of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice*

During the cyclone of 1991 in Bangladesh, of the 140,000 people who died, 90% were women (Ikeda, 1995)

### The Gender Dimension of Climate Change

Bangladesh is widely recognized to be one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world (MoEF, 2009). Disasters impact men and woman differently with women being more vulnerable than men, both to short-term recurring climatic events (major natural disasters) and long-term climate-induced changes (sea level rise, salinity intrusion in water and soil, land erosion, droughts) because they magnify existing social and gender inequalities. Gender-based shifts in economic opportunities, women's mobility outside the home, and income are slowly changing family and social norms; however, unequal intra-household power relations and gender-based socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional constraints remain (Sultana, 2011). So, for adaptation to climate change impacts, understanding gender dimensions and taking gender responsive steps will be vital for Bangladesh.

### Climate change factors

The coastal belt of Bangladesh is highly exposed to various climatic factors including variations in temperature, erratic behavior of rainfall, cyclonic events, droughts and salinity intrusion (Rabbani et al., 2013). These climatic factors are what make the lives of the coastal people vulnerable to climate change. This briefing sheet is based on information from recent research and a gender study of climate impacts on livelihoods in the coastal areas of Satkhira, Khulna and Bagerhat district on the south-west coast Patuakhali district on the south-center coast and Cox's Bazar district on the southeast coast of Bangladesh. The seasonality of the natural hazards in these areas is mapped below and women from these coastal areas state that they are regularly suffering from more frequent cyclones, salinity intrusions, higher tidal surges, coastal flooding, extreme temperatures, lack of rainfall, or droughts, coastal erosion and water logging.

NATURAL HAZARDS WITH SEASONALITY IN THE STUDY AREA (COASTAL AREA)													
Months (Bengali)	Mag	Fal	Cha	Boi	Joi	Asr	Sra	Vad	Ash	Kar	Agh	Pou	
HAZARDS Months (English)	J-F	F-M	M-A	A-M	M-J	J-J	J-A	A-S	S-O	O-N	N-D	D-J	
Tropical Cyclone			Medium	High	High	Medium							
Tidal surge			Medium	High	High	High	High	High	High	High			
Norwester & Autumn Storm			Medium	High	High	High				High	High	High	
Cold wave	High	Medium										High	
Drought		Medium	High	High	Medium								
Salinity intrusion	Medium	High	High	High	High	High						High	
Tornadoes			Medium	High	High								
Fooding						High	High	High	High	High			
Water logging								High	High	High	High	High	
River erosion							High	High	High				
Hazard risk intensity:			Medium			High							

Natural hazards with seasonality in the coastal study areas based on PRA sessions of the study area

## Current livelihood strategies practiced by women

Current livelihood options being practiced by women in the coastal areas include cattle and poultry rearing, homestead gardening, crab and prawn collecting, small handicrafts, sewing and tailoring activities. In some coastal areas such as Unions of Khulna and Patuakhali districts, women are also found to be in wage labour activities. Some other micro scale livelihood practices such as small businesses, betel leaf and nut production (in Cox's bazaar) and hawkers of different household materials can

also be found in coastal areas. Women from the poorest households also work in Government development projects such as KABIKHA (exchange of food by work) and engage in different types of handicrafts like making fishing nets, fish cages, bamboo-made goods and snail-made toys. The participatory rural appraisal process maps these seasonal livelihoods in the calendar below.

SEASONAL LIVELIHOOD CALENDAR FOR WOMEN IN THE STUDY AREA (COASTAL)													
Livelihoods	Months (Bengali)	Mag	Fal	Cha	Boi	Joi	Asr	Sra	Vad	Ash	Kar	Agh	Pou
	Months (English)	J-F	F-M	M-A	A-M	M-J	J-J	J-A	A-S	S-O	O-N	N-D	D-J
Wage labour (Farm)													
Wage labour (Non Farm)													
Poultry rearing													
Cattle rearing													
Crab collection													
Fishing													
Prawn collection													
Handicrafts & swing													
Tailoring													
Homestead gardening													

Seasonal livelihoods calendar from coastal study areas based on information from the PRA exercises

## Climate change impacts on women and their livelihoods

Due to climatic hazards women's livelihoods are affected by the destruction of crops and livestock, which are the major means of female livelihoods at the household level in the coastal area. Salinity intrusion reduces the options for fresh water supply, causing women to travel long distances to collect drinking water. Extreme temperatures, lack of rainfall and drought like conditions destroy homestead gardens and any vegetable

production. Coastal erosion and water logging force coastal people to migrate. The migration of male members of a family makes the entire family socially and economically vulnerable, especially women who then need to take on additional tasks and find more money for the household. The other associated impacts of climate hazards include children dropping out of school due to financial or social reasons.

Adverse impacts on life and livelihoods during hazards (Coastal)		
Types of Hazards	Affected Livelihoods	Specific Impacts on Life and Livelihoods
<b>Tidal surge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wage labor (Farm)</li> <li>● Cattle rearing</li> <li>● Poultry rearing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Damage household physical structures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cattle and poultry damage</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fish pond damage</li> </ul>
<b>Flood</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wage labour (Farm)</li> <li>● Cattle rearing</li> <li>● Poultry rearing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural crops submerged under water</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sand deposits on farmlands</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Food insecurity</li> </ul>
<b>Water Logging &amp; river bank erosion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wage labour (Farm)</li> <li>● Cattle rearing</li> <li>● Poultry rearing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> People can't go out for work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Damage household physical structures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Livestock died</li> </ul>

Information from hazard mapping activity

## Other barriers to the current livelihood strategies

The social barriers to livelihood options include religious beliefs, exclusion of women in socio-economic activities, deprivation of women's participation in different social, political and economic activities and male dominance at the household level. As an example, in the Cox's Bazar area, women are less involved in income generating activities due to social and religious constraints by society. In coastal areas of Khulna and Patuakhali, the collection of safe drinking water is a tough task performed by women where they have to walk long distances and spend huge amounts of time to collect it thus not permitting them to engage in any income generating activities. Other important constraints are the lack of other assets and resources, limited access to materials and financial resources, lack of relevant skills and knowledge. The existing social barriers should be removed and involve men in the process to enable gender equality so that the

social and religious restrictions can be decreased. Rights based approaches need to be central to adaptation activities if they are to be sustainable in the long term, rather than adding short term and time consuming activities into women's already busy days. As women's traditional roles in water and fuel collection are already increased during natural disasters during coastal areas, they have less time in the day for any additional activities unless men take on some of these roles. Women's workload must be addressed directly in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction interventions for development work to be effective. Sex disaggregated data and a clear gender analysis in the household and community are essential components of project planning with a need to address a change in male behavior, productive and reproductive roles and decision making.

## How women can be more engaged in viable livelihood options

As many of the current livelihoods women depend upon are prone to climate hazards, modified and innovative versions of present livelihoods need to be adapted. For example, using the rafters of houses to breed poultry during times of floods or creating netted ponds for crab rearing. Provision of needs-based skill development training in different sectors like shrimp and crab production, cutting & sewing, horticulture and micro enterprise training for the climate vulnerable coastal women is essential. Some green jobs such as production of agricultural by products and green manure production are activities which can be done at household levels, making this easier for women's traditional roles, they also

require limited investment. However to move women into more roles of economic empowerment, they need to access different types of resource and capital like seed money, product selling outlets, marketing linkages and training to enable them to practice more long term livelihood options that are not so climate prone. Bangladesh houses the largest continuous mangrove forest in the world and organisations must prioritise the development and training of viable sustainable livelihoods for women in addressing specific saline resistant aquaculture and sustainable industries to support the mangrove ecosystems.

### **Recommendations for gender equity in coastal zones:**

- *Prioritise and ensure women's safety in shelters, latrines and public spaces*
- *Enable equal access for women and girls to food and nutrition*
- *Ensure access to women's specific and gender sensitive accessible medical care (female doctors, private spaces, reproductive health)*
- *Increase gender awareness of migration push and pull factors and the social and economic impacts on the household*
- *Assistance from male members of the family with collection of fuel and water*
- *Maintaining girls as well as boys in school as a priority*
- *Ensure women are represented in all decision making on coastal management*

### **Recommendations for coastal zone sustainable livelihoods for women:**

- *Increase access to training for sustainable crab and shrimp production and other salinity resilient farming*
- *Increase training in financial skills to plan for new resilient coastal livelihoods including agricultural by products*
- *Maximize the diversification of livelihoods to increase economic security*
- *New livelihoods for women cannot involve a huge increase in time unless other household members take on other time burden activities women currently hold.*

Location: Vill: Kachharibari  
Union: North Bedkashi  
Upazila: Koyra  
District: Khulna



“Handicraft, woodcraft and embroidery – all these three activities have changed my way of life”, said 38 year old Shafia Begum. “We lost our livelihood means after Aila. But now we are very happy, we have found a different livelihood practice that can be done in bad weather conditions too”.

“Our lives almost stopped after the cyclone,” reflected Shafia. “The demand of tailoring was almost nothing, and my husband lost his job due to most of the land being destroyed by saline water. We were at a complete loss.” Shafia told of intense hardship as she had to find manual labour digging land and selling fish just to meet ends. Her daughter’s education almost stopped due to their economic crisis. After starting her handloom business though, Shafia states that her entire life changed for the

better. “I am now not only earning sufficiently right from my home, but my daughter is able to continue her studies properly, which I think is one of my best achievements.” “The best part of it though,” continued Shafia, “is that the structure used in the process is light weight and can be dismantled for transport, which can sometimes become a necessity in times of disaster. And since it is an inside task, it is not impacted by disasters like cyclones or tidal surges and income is not affected in times of disaster.” Shafia says that she formed a committee with other women of the area and was elected to be president of this committee. After learning that a local NGO was conducting handloom training, she arranged for 24 women from her committee to be trained at this NGO. All of them are now working in the handloom business.

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