



# Women's Livelihoods in the North of Bangladesh



## Gender and Climate Change UN Women Bangladesh

“Disaster risk reduction that delivers gender equality is a cost-effective win-win option for reducing and sustaining the livelihoods of whole communities” *Margreta Wahlstrom, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction.*

Rural women are the principal producers of basic food items and the agricultural sector is very exposed to risks of droughts and uncertain precipitation; climate endangers food security in addition to the wellbeing of families and their capacities to survive (FAO, 2007).

## The Gender Dimension of Climate Change

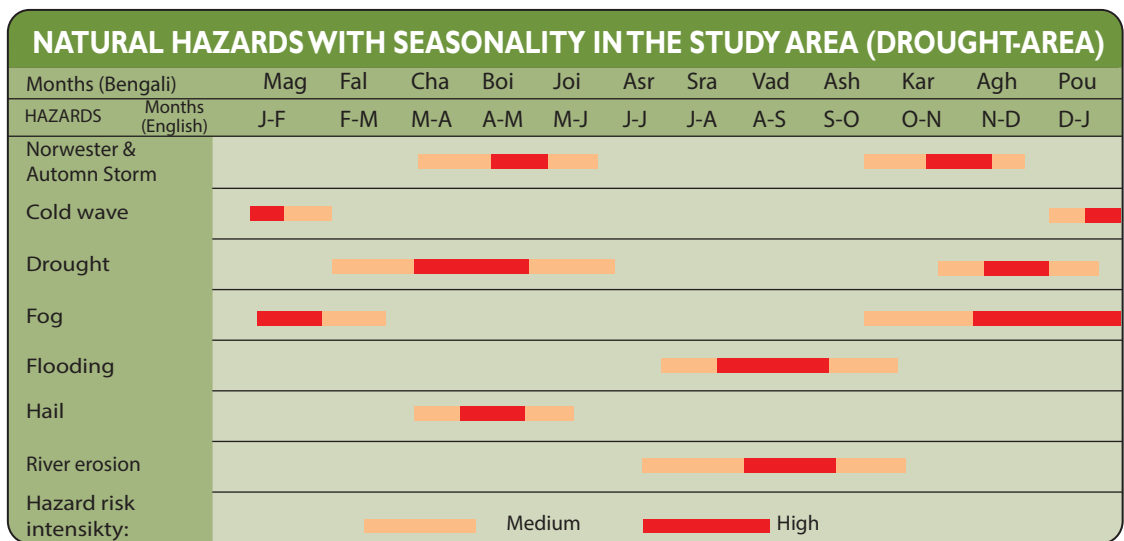
Bangladesh is widely recognized to be one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world (MoEF, 2009). Disasters impact men and women differently with women being more vulnerable than men, both to short-term recurring climatic events (major natural disasters) and long-term climate-induced changes (sea level rise, salinity intrusion in water and soil, land erosion, droughts) because they magnify existing social and gender inequalities. Women often hold essential knowledge to environmental sustainability through flexible farming and livelihood practices; however their voices and incomes are typically the lowest across communities.

Disaster risk management and climate change adaptation programmes are opportunities for women to become active participants in shaping the future of their communities. Through their participation, different experiences show that grassroots women have developed innovative solutions that address practical problems of shelter, credit, livelihoods and basic services, all of which lie at the intersection of resilience and development. Women are often at the front lines after a natural disaster, mobilizing the community in local relief efforts and playing a key role in protecting, managing, and recovering lost resources (Newman, 2008).

## Climate change factors

Droughts have become a recurrent natural phenomenon of northwestern Bangladesh in recent decades. Droughts in Bangladesh are seasonal and can devastate crops, causing great hardship to agricultural laborers. In recent decades, the hydro-climatic environment of north-western Bangladesh has been aggravated by environmental degradation.

This briefing sheet is based on information from recent research and a gender study of climate impacts on livelihoods in the flood areas of Natore and Singra which have been affected by droughts and river bank erosion as well as other climate change factors such as norwesters and autumn storms, hail storms and severe cold waves during winter; The seasonality of the natural hazards in these areas is mapped overleaf.

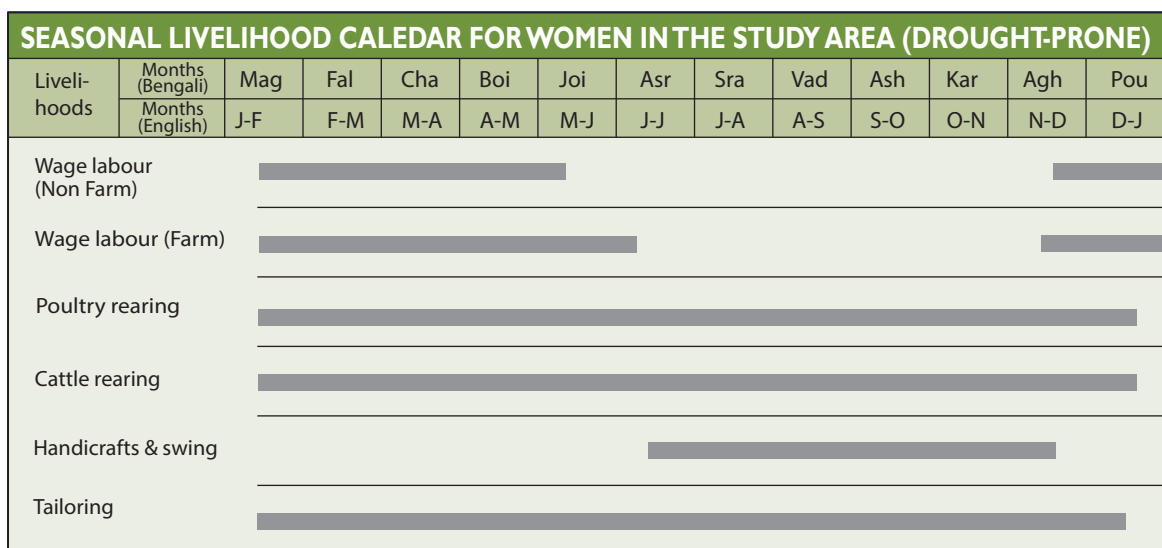


Natural hazards with seasonality in the drought prone study areas based on PRA sessions of the study area

## Climate change impacts on women and their livelihoods

The participatory rural appraisal process maps the seasonal livelihood calendar for women, illustrating the impacts of climate on women's daily productive activities. According to the study, the women in the drought prone areas are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Due to changing weather patterns and frequent disasters women are facing new challenges every day.

They suffer prolonged and recurrent droughts, sudden hail storms, norwesterlies, severe cold and fog during winter and floods and erosion due to erratic rainfall which aggravate shortage of fresh water, irrigation water, and shortage of fodder, diseases, pest attacks and most of all food insecurity.



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

## Current livelihood strategies practiced by women

In the drought prone areas, women are mostly engaged in poultry and cattle rearing handicraft, sewing and tailoring, in addition to taking full responsibility for household activities to run their families. Sometimes they also grow vegetables in their courtyards which are

somewhat drought tolerant. In Singra of Natore district, the women are involved in government funded activities as day labourers. The poorest women are preparing and maintaining roads by excavating canals.

## Barriers to current livelihood strategies

The major concerns of local women in the drought prone areas include livelihood destruction, food insecurity, problems in collecting safe drinking water, diseases, cattle and poultry dying, low water availability for homestead gardening and managing water and fodder and crop loss. Shortage of water is the main barrier for the current livelihood practices of the women; if water is available from natural or artificial sources women can complete their various tasks. Women have less accessibility to such irrigation options in general. Water borne diseases are common amongst women and they are forced to use contaminated and dirty water for household purposes. Due to water and food insecurity, women are often forced to sell their assets like poultry, cattle and jewelry to provide food for their families. In drought prone areas, some social constraints are also common for women. For instance, women are not

allowed in direct farm land activities in Nawabganj. This is not the case in Natore though, where women can engage fully in such activities. Some infrastructure related barriers are lack of water supply and sanitation facilities, disruption of roads and communication systems, lack of accessibility to healthcare and other social facilities and lack of market access. Other human barriers include lack of security, social harassment of women, increased family and household activities, religious beliefs, exclusion of women from socio-economic activities, deprivation of women's participation in different social, political and economic activities, and male dominance in households. Other important constraints for female livelihoods are a lack of other assets and resources, limited access to materials and financial resources and lack of relevant skills and knowledge.

### How the barriers can be removed

As the targeted community is very poor and vulnerable to different types of climatic hazards, it is essential to know what types of capital, resources and skill development training will be needed to practice viable livelihoods for women. It is also necessary to know the social acceptance and future risks of these livelihood options in the community. Valuable fertile lands are being affected by salinity, erosion and droughts. A long term coping mechanism should be considered as adaptation for the specific eco zones. The existing social barriers should be removed by consulting and including men, which is essential for increasing women's participation in decision making. Rights based approaches for women should be introduced for removing the existing barriers.

### How women can be engaged in viable livelihood options in drought prone areas

Though cattle rearing and poultry farming are the principal livelihoods in the drought affected areas, wage labour, homestead gardening, small businesses or shops and tailoring are also common livelihoods for some women. There is a need to focus more on climate resilient crops which need minimal irrigation or tailoring, sewing and micro enterprise training in areas which are not affected by climate. Modified and innovative livelihood options are essential to cope with the current situations. The keeping of swans, which require less water than ducks, has proven to be one effective adaptation to water limitations (see case study).

Hazards	Affected Livelihoods	Specific Impacts on Life and Livelihoods
Drought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Wage labour (Farm)</li> <li>● Wage labour (Non-farm)</li> <li>● Poultry rearing</li> <li>● Cattle rearing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Irrigation water is not available</li> <li>● Lack of food for livestock</li> <li>● Damage agricultural production</li> <li>● Lack of fresh water for domestic work</li> <li>● Wage labour is not available</li> </ul>

*Information from hazard mapping activity*

#### Recommendations for gender equity in droughts:

- Enable equal access for women and girls to food and nutrition
- Enable women's access to provision and training on deep tube wells
- Assistance from male members of the family with collection of fuel and water
- Ensure women are consulted at all stages of drought management on their needs and concerns

#### Recommendations for drought resilient sustainable livelihoods for women

- Increase access to training for economic activities which are drought resilient, e.g. swan production and indoor activities
- Increase training in financial skills to plan for drought seasons and maximize marketing of goods before drought season
- Minimise reliance on cattle and poultry due to their high risk for all climatic hazards
- 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 consuming activities women currently hold.

## Combating drought



“Day by day the temperature is increasing and we are feeling it. The drought is also prolonged. We are running short of water. Everywhere we see only barren lands”, said Mst. Kulsum, a 30 year old woman of Makrapur village of Nachole, Chapay Nawabganj. “Day by day we are losing our livelihood. Crops are not growing properly, the vegetable gardens are dying without water and fodder collection is almost impossible. Once we found out that swan rearing was suitable here, we have recovered from our financial stress. Although swans are species of ducks, they do not require much water to survive. So we started rearing swans in our homestead. Usually women in our area assist their husbands in post-harvest crop processing, but do not go to fields. Other than assisting their husbands, women usually rear cow and poultry in their houses; however swan farming on a commercial basis is very popular now. Many females are now engaged in this activity. Males usually collect the eggs for

hatching or buy the mother swan from markets, and females look after them and feed them on a regular basis” relayed Kulsum.

“Except swan or poultry rearing, the women in our area are also involved in tailoring, stitching, embroidery, handicrafts, laha production and in mango gardening, but swan rearing is easy and now, more than 80% households of our village have swans. Droughts are the main natural disaster in this area. In winter severe cold waves also cause a great problem, but the swans are strong enough to survive these conditions. During cold waves the swans need some extra care. They must be caged at night. Sometimes different wild animal such as foxes and wild cats attack the swans. Different training and medications and vaccinations are essential to develop swan rearing. Now we are happy and earn money by selling swans and eggs. By this way we are coping with prolonged droughts,” said Kulsum, with a smiling face.

### References

FAO. (2007). Gender and Food Security: Agriculture. <http://www.fao.org/Gender/en/agri-e.htm>

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