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Women's Livelihoods in the Flood Plains of Bangladesh



Gender and Climate Change UN Women Bangladesh

“Women and girls are on the front lines of climate change. Around the world, day-by-day, women and girls are finding climate change and sustainable development solutions.” *UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.*

“Women’s disproportionate vulnerability to flood disasters, compared to men, indicates that they will also experience more flood-related health problems, such as diarrhoea, cholera and other water borne and water-related diseases or injuries, and mental health problems” (Urgwu and Urgwu, 2013: 1032)

Climate change factors

Bangladesh is widely recognized to be one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world (MoEF, 2009). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2007) predicts that Bangladesh will face higher monsoon rainfall resulting in higher levels of flow in the rivers and sea level rise which could increase coastal flooding and saline water intrusion into the aquifers and rivers.

Most of Bangladesh lies in the delta of three of the largest rivers in the world. These rivers have a combined peak discharge in the flood season of 180,000 m³/sec (the second highest in the world, after the Amazon) and carry approximately two billion tons of sediment each year. Floodplains occupy 80% of Bangladesh making it susceptible to river and rain water flooding and, in lower-lying coastal areas, to tidal flooding during storms (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.

This briefing sheet is based on information from recent research and a gender study of climate impacts on livelihoods in the flood areas of Shariatpur, Sunamganj and Sirajganj. The seasonality of natural hazards in these areas is mapped overleaf and illustrates that floods are accompanied by multiple other hazards such as Norwesters, drought and cold waves.

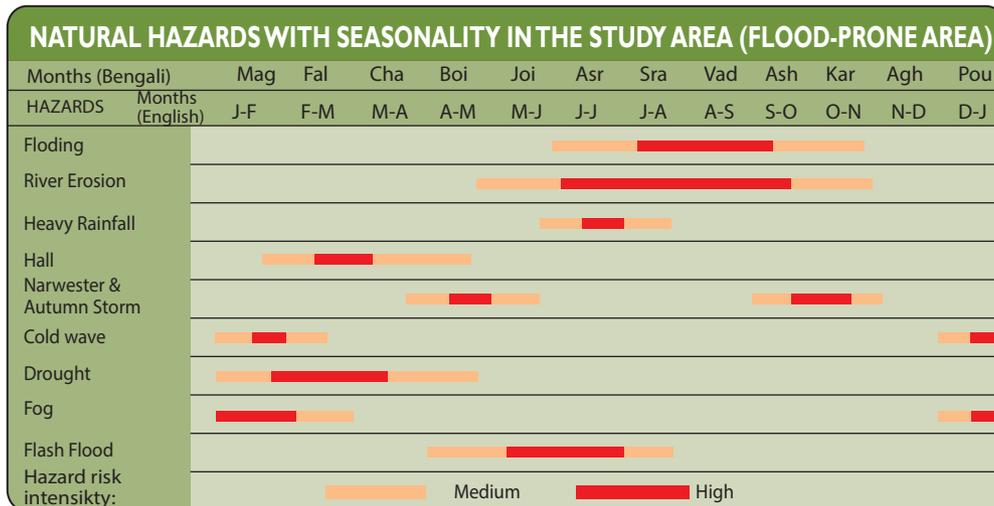


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Focus group discussion

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 the flood prone areas claim that they are now facing more and sometimes

earlier flooding, higher flood water levels, sudden floods and round the year river erosion. Some other climate factors such as erratic rainfall, hail storms, cold waves, fog and droughts in the summer are also prominent.

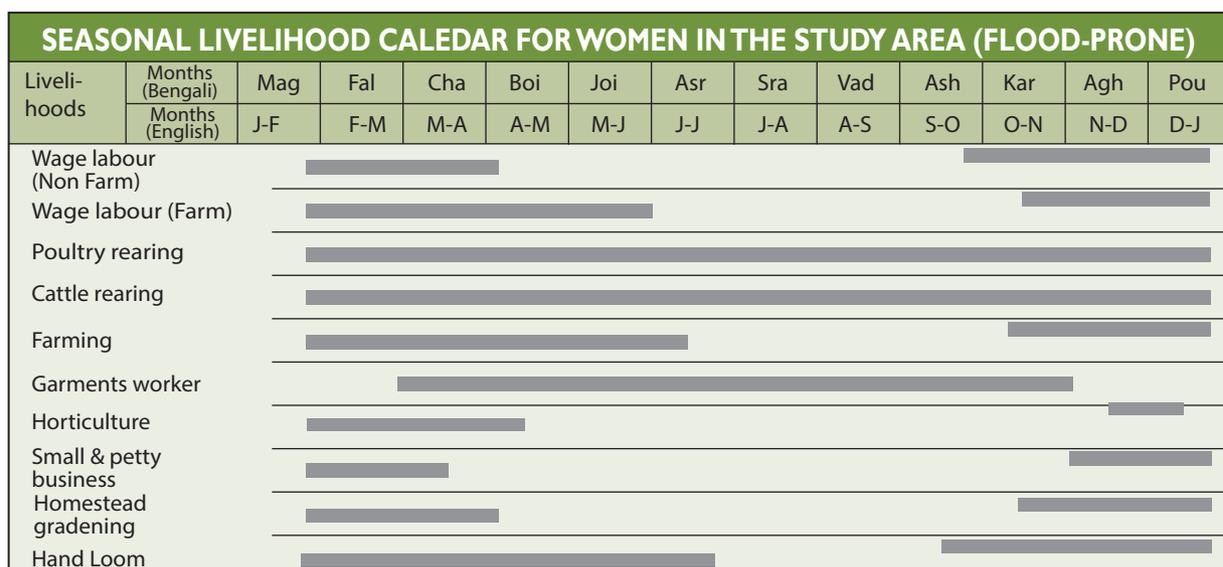


Natural hazards with seasonality in the flood prone study areas based on PRA sessions of the study area

Current livelihood strategies practiced by women

Homestead level livelihood options commonly practiced by women in flood prone areas include homestead gardening, cattle and poultry rearing, handloom, small handicraft and swing tailoring and small business professions. In all flood prone study areas, females are also found working as wage laborers in farm and nonfarm activities, but not in large numbers. Some other small scale livelihood activities are conducted such as

small businesses, hand looms (in Sirajgonj), horticulture and nursery (in Shariatpur). Women from the poorest households in the flood prone areas are engaged in the livelihood options already stated, but in addition they do earth work on roads (exchange of food by work) and different types of handicrafts like making fishing net, or fish cages.



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

Hazards	Affected Livelihoods	Specific Impacts on Life and Livelihoods
Flood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Farming ● Cattle rearing ● Poultry rearing ● Wage labour (Farm) ● Wage labour (Non-farm) ● Horticulture ● Handicrafts and swing ● Homestead gardening ● Handloom ● Tailoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Agricultural crops submerged under water ● Sand deposits on farmlands ● Food insecurity ● Submerged homestead area ● Damage household physical structures ● Submerged all tube-well and lack of safe drinking water ● Collapse sanitation systems ● Communication system disrupted ● Seasonal disease for cattle and poultry ● Damage livestock fodder ● Damage hand-loom and power-loom textiles ● Decrease mobility and low income

Information from hazard mapping activity

Increased flooding, and flash floods cause destruction of crops, homestead gardening, poultry and livestock, which are the major means of female livelihoods. Some infrastructure related barriers include lack of water supply and sanitation facilities, disruption of roads and communication systems, lack of accessibility to fuel, healthcare and other social facilities, and lack of market access. Other human barriers are lack of security, social harassment of females, increased family and household activities, social barriers such as 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. The incidences of waterborne diseases amongst women are also much higher than men throughout these natural calamities.

A study of the 1998 flood in Bangladesh indicated increased perineal rashes and urinary tract infections in adolescent girls as they were not able to adequately clean their menstrual rags. In the aftermath of the floods, women are also subjected to “eve-teasing, domestic and public sexual harassment and violence against women and girls”, which combined with the shame of being sexual wet and in public, discourages them from seeking help and safety in shelters (Rahman, 2013:78).

How the barriers can be removed

As the targeted communities are 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. A long term coping mechanism is required as an adaptation for the specific eco zones. The existing social barriers should be removed by consulting and

including males, which stands equally important to increasing women participation in decision making. If males are not included in the process of empowering women, the local levels of acceptance may go down and males may become even bigger barriers to it. Right based approaches for gender equity need be introduced for removing the existing barriers.

Recommendations for gender equity in floods

- 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)
- Assistance from male members of the family with collection of fuel and water
- Maintain girls as well as boys in school as a priority
- Ensure women's voices as well as men's voices are heard at all stages of flood management (from preparedness to recovery) on their specific gendered needs and concerns
- Ensure women and men are represented on all decision making and rescue/recovery committees

Recommendations for flood resilient sustainable livelihoods for women

- Increase access to training for economic activities which can be home or factory based (i.e. indoors and flood proof)
- Increase training in financial skills to plan for flood seasons and maximize marketing of goods before flood season
- Minimise reliance on cattle and poultry due to their high climate risk for all hazards in flood prone areas
- 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

Making deities



Pushpa Rani Mondol (45), from Jamalgonj Upazilla, has a family of 5 with 3 sons. “Today, I have been able to build a strong and secure life for me and my children, which even some years ago, was a dream that was fading very fast. Diety making has enabled me to single handedly rescue myself and my children out of a dark abyss, and I have shown that a woman can do anything if she puts her mind to it.”

Due to tradition, she was forced to get married at a very early age to a person who was an alcoholic. To support fund the consumption of his alcohol her husband would sell things from the house. “I was thus left with no choice but to take the financial responsibility of my family,” stated Pushpa. “I even had to travel outside my village to try to make a living, but I could not earn enough to sustain my family.”

“Eventually, one of my relatives gave me the idea to produce diety, which is a mandatory item that hindus use during their puja and other religious activities. I took the advice very seriously and started to make the diety”, explained Pushpa.

She received training from several expert diety makers from other villages and took a loan from a local NGO and bought the necessary raw materials. “I also started to train my son in this art and very soon he too became an expert.” Pushpa then explained with some pride that her son had been awarded the best diety maker of the area and this also increased their business tenfold. “Disasters like floods don’t impact the business at all since dieties can be made indoors.

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This policy brief is made possible by the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy and UN Women. The contents are based on research findings under the project titled “Reducing vulnerability of women affected by climate change through viable livelihood options”, prepared by the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), for UN Women Bangladesh. Further information on these issues can be obtained from the full report available from the UN Women office.



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