



# AMERICAN JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (AJIRI)

ISSN: 2833-2237 (ONLINE)

SPECIAL ISSUE (2<sup>nd</sup> EIC-2024)

PUBLISHED BY  
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

## Exploring Sustainable Initiatives for Rural Women: Analysis of Economic Transformation of Women and Community Empowerment

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### ABSTRACT

Bangladesh, a developing nation in South Asia, has been struggling with various challenges such as poverty, corruption, overpopulation, climate change, and violence against women ever since its independence. Half of Bangladesh's entire population consists of women, with a significant majority residing in rural areas and not participating in any economic activities. Excluding this portion of the population from participating in economic activity results in a fifty percent reduction in the development of the country. Several initiatives have been undertaken to enhance the economic well-being of women in these rural communities. This study investigates the actual circumstances of women, finds obstacles to their economic participation, and suggests measures that foster their involvement in income-generating activities. The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, directing the rural women of Lalmonirhat district through structured interviews and focus group discussions. Result shows that the rural women residing in this community possess inadequate levels of education and are subject to numerous prejudices. Consequently, they do not participate in any economic activities, and their fate remains unchanged by any sustainable development efforts. To improve their situation, the women in this area should increase their involvement in vocational education and gain access to information, communication, and technology. This will enable them to engage in income-generating activities and bring about sustainable improvements in their lives.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Economic Empowerment, Rural Women

### INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has been plagued with various problems since its independence and has been influenced by the development trend (Ullah *et al.*, 2022). Bangladesh's government has been facing various challenges in advancing the country. However, the government of Bangladesh has achieved various targets to continue the country's development, such as achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG), influencing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and the development of Bangladesh in the World Bank's economic development criteria is commendable (Alam, 2023). However, Bangladesh is facing various challenges such as poverty, corruption, climate change, overpopulation, and gender-based violence (Khan, 2022). All these challenges have not only hindered the achievement of Bangladesh's development goals, but these channels have also been a major obstacle to the overall development of a large section of the female population of Bangladesh. Currently, the ratio of women to men in Bangladesh is almost equal; more than half of Bangladesh's population lives in rural areas (Coleman *et al.*, 2023). The educational qualifications and technical capacity of the women living in these villages are very poor, which is why they cannot directly participate in any developmental and economic activities to change their destiny. Due to this backwardness, the poor women in the villages are stuck in the cycle of poverty and the overall economic development of Bangladesh stands as a hindrance (Murshid, 2022).

Due to the geographical location of Bangladesh, it is subject to various types of climate change impacts (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2022). Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh is a river-bed area where people are subjected to regular floods and waterlogging. Women in this area are far behind in terms of educational qualification and have no technical capacity, so they are deprived of various economic opportunities. Due to various social barriers, they are not able to bring about any change

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in their standard of living. This large number of women need proper education and technical capacity building for sustainable development so that they can connect themselves with economic activities through their own work and sustainably develop themselves and their families.

This study aims to examine the various obstacles that rural women in the Lalmonirhat district face, with a particular focus on the intricate relationship between socio-economic elements that contribute to their ongoing marginalization. By utilising an all-encompassing research framework incorporating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this study aims to offer a nuanced comprehension of the obstacles hindering women's economic participation and sustainable development in the area. Primary data will be gathered through structured interviews and focus group discussions with women residing in rural areas. These methods will facilitate an in-depth examination of the participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and ambitions.

This study sheds light on various dimensions of improving the quality of life of rural women, including economic, social, and technological aspects. By bridging the gap between policy aspirations and grassroots realities, this study endeavors to inform evidence-based strategies and interventions that resonate with the needs and aspirations of rural women in the Lalmonirhat district. Different types of NGOs are working to improve the livelihood of women (Shahin *et al.*, 2022). Analysis of the involvement of rural poor women and various aspects of their sustainable development are reviewed. The Government of Bangladesh is working to improve the quality of life of these backward rural women through various programs and is committed to their sustainable development (Dupuis, 2022).

### **Objective**

This research aims to address the multifaceted issues of rural women and the factors hindering their economic development. The main objective of the research is to study the complexities behind the growth of rural women in the Lalmonirhat district. This research examines the women's circumstances, identifies barriers to their economic participation and proposes strategies to foster their engagement in income-generating activities.

The objectives of the research studies are stated below:

1. To access the socio-economic status and challenges of rural women
2. To identify the barriers to economic participation and sustainable development
3. To develop sustainable strategies for economic development

By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to empower rural women in Lalmonirhat district, Bangladesh, fostering sustainable development and promoting inclusive growth that benefits the entire community.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The country of Bangladesh has been struggling with a significant unemployment rate for a considerable amount of time, and women, in particular, have been subjected to social exclusion from participating in rural economic activity (Kamal & Afrin, 2022). Over the course of several years, scholars have not paid a great deal of attention to the role that gender plays in socioeconomic development and activities that are economically significant in rural areas. Over the course of the past twenty years, an increasing number of studies have been carried out on this subject. According to the findings of these studies, it is likely that a certain group of social norms is to blame for the fact that men are able to exert their authority over women (Bose *et al.*, 2009). Approximately 49.3 percent of the population of Bangladesh is comprised of females, which translates to approximately 71 million out of a total population of 144 million people. On average, around 56 million women reside in rural areas (BBS, 2011).

### **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have emerged as a primary concern for the countries still growing their economies (Ordonez-Ponce & Weber, 2022). In light of the fact that Bangladesh has received a great deal of praise from the international community of development for its outstanding performance in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality, the nation is becoming an active participant in welcoming the sustainable development goals (Kumar & Suppiah, 2023). In spite of the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have seventeen global goals and 169 objectives for Bangladesh, this article makes an effort to concentrate on the fifth aim of the SDGs, which is to establish gender equality and empower women (Karlsson, 2022). More than half of our total

population is comprised of female. It is impossible to secure our overall development if we do not consider women's education and advancement (Rahman *et al.*, 2023).

### **Economic Empowerment**

Giving women more economic power is not only a way to boost economic growth, but also a way to protect women's human rights (Christopherson *et al.*, 2022). Many women make important contributions to society, but because of how it is set up, most are not seen, recognized, or paid for (Saleh & Sultana, 2016). Different countries have different problems when it comes to giving women more power. Sen and Batliwala (2000) say that empowering women rests on having enough control over their resources, abilities, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. They also say that traditional ideas need to be changed.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said in 2014 that "Bold and sustained action is needed to advance women's opportunities and rights and to make sure that women can participate and be heard." According to the UN Women (2014), "economic empowerment of women would lead to gender equality, the end of poverty, and economic growth that benefits everyone." Women make a huge difference in economies, whether they work in businesses or on farms, as entrepreneurs or workers, or by caring for others at home for free.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Method and data collection**

For the purpose of accomplishing its objectives, this study utilized a methodical methodology, which included both primary and secondary sources of data. The initial data was gathered through the utilization of a fundamental quantitative and qualitative methodology. For the purpose of gathering quantitative data, researchers utilized the interview method in conjunction with a more organized questionnaire. Through the use of the FGD method, researchers were able to collect qualitative data. The secondary data was obtained from a variety of trustworthy sources, including statistics reports and publications that are now within the realm of research. To be more specific, the Lalmonirhat district is the focus of this particular research endeavor. Our sample population consisted of four geographically rural areas, and we conducted interviews with them.

### **Sampling**

At the beginning of the primary data collection phase, a total of 100 respondents were chosen after careful consideration. Residents of the Lalmonirhat district are included in this category. In addition, four focus group discussions (FGD) were held with the respondents in order to acquire qualitative data. In each and every FGD, we had 10 responders, which included both male and female participants. We also included young people in the conversation in order to make the FGD more welcoming to a wider range of people. The views and thoughts of each and every respondent have been openly shared and voiced by all attendees. In addition to this, we incorporated the perspectives of the key informants and carried out ten key informant interviews with the representative of the local government, the chairman of the Union Parishad, officials from the development sector, and representatives from rural impoverished communities.

### **Data Collection**

Quantitative data (interviews and key informant interviews) and qualitative data (focus group discussions and observations) were collected through a variety of methods. In order to obtain information that was both broad and in-depth, we conducted personal interviews with each of the eighty heads of households. In the event that the head of the home was unavailable, we gathered our information from the next most significant member of the family system. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to collect community feedback and obtain a more comprehensive perspective. Forty individuals participated in the focus group discussions and articulated their ideas.

### **Findings**

In Bangladesh, in the male-dominated society, most women are stuck inside the "four walls" of their home, like a bird in a cage. Cultural and patriarchal restrictions, like purdah, make it hard for them to move around and take part in economic and social activities. Most of their jobs are inside the house, doing things like cooking, cleaning, giving birth and raising children, and so on (Sultana, 2009).

To conduct the survey, we focused on 100 female respondents and collected data related with their surroundings (Table 1).

**Table 1: Age of respondents**

| Age of respondents | Number of respondents | Percentages |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 14-17              | 19                    | 19%         |
| 18-24              | 23                    | 23%         |
| 25-35              | 29                    | 29%         |
| 36-45              | 13                    | 13%         |
| 46-60              | 10                    | 10%         |
| 60+                | 6                     | 6%          |
| Total              | 100                   | 100%        |

Source: Field Visit

**Table 2: Household member status**

|               | Age   | Number of HH member | Average | Percentage |
|---------------|-------|---------------------|---------|------------|
| Male          | 18+   | 115                 | 1.15    | 24%        |
| Female        | 18+   | 137                 | 1.37    | 29%        |
| Boys          | 14-17 | 83                  | 0.83    | 18%        |
| Girls         | 14-17 | 93                  | 0.93    | 20%        |
| Infants-Boys  | 0-13  | 19                  | 0.19    | 4%         |
| Infants-Girls | 0-13  | 23                  | 0.23    | 5%         |
| Total         |       | 470                 | 4.70    |            |

Source: Field Visit

**Table 3: Educational status of respondents**

| Education Status        | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Graduation completed    | 3                     | 3%         |
| HSC Completed           | 13                    | 13%        |
| SSC Completed           | 21                    | 21%        |
| SSC Appeared/not passed | 6                     | 6%         |
| Class 5- Class 8        | 15                    | 15%        |
| Below Primary Class 5   | 23                    | 23%        |
| Moktob (attended)       | 15                    | 15%        |
| Never attended any      | 4                     | 4%         |
| Total                   | 100                   |            |

Source: Field Visit

**Table 4: Technical skill of rural women**

| Technical skill           | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Computer and IT knowledge | 5                     | 5%         |
| Sewing and embroidery     | 23                    | 23%        |
| Block & Batik             | 6                     | 6%         |
| Handcrafting              | 9                     | 9%         |
| Agriculture               | 20                    | 20%        |
| Livestock                 | 31                    | 31%        |
| Others                    | 6                     | 6%         |
| Total                     | 100                   |            |

Source: Field Visit

Among our sample respondents, 29% are from the aged 25-35 range and 23% from the aged 18-24 range.

We asked about the educational background of the sample respondents. Among the sample respondents, 21% passed the SSC examination, and 23% attended below the primary class of 5 (Table 3).

Respondents stated that 31% of them know about livestock rearing, 23% of them know Sewing and embroidery and 5% only have computer & IT knowledge. Based on this data, women in our rural society have very little technological and technical knowledge. The knowledge they have is that animal husbandry is related to agriculture (Table 4).

47% of respondents replied that they depend on the income of their HH head, 25% rely on the income from livestock, and 15% are engaged with various small businesses (Table 5). Among the respondents, only 5% are engaged with formal employment,

**Table 5:** Source of income

| Source of income          | Number of respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Formal Job                | 5                     | 5%         |
| livestock income          | 25                    | 25%        |
| Handcrafting              | 8                     | 8%         |
| Depends on HH head income | 47                    | 47%        |
| Small business            | 15                    | 15%        |
| Total                     | 100                   |            |

Source: Field Visit

and 8% are engaged with various handcrafting.

Women in Lalmonirhat district are largely backward in terms of educational qualification and lack of much technical capacity. They are not able to involve themselves in income generating work and have less scope for decision making and voice in the family.

FGD respondents said that,

“Due to our educational qualification and lack of technical knowledge, we cannot involve ourselves in income-generating activities. We have to spend most of our day at home and manage other household functions.”

We found that the main source of income for these women is animal husbandry, and few rural women engage in sewing. Since they have no income of their own, they have to rely on their husbands or main breadwinners.

FGD Respondents stated that,

“There is no such thing as our own wealth, so we have to depend on our husband's income and buy our every need depending on his wishes. Sometimes we have arguments with our husbands about all these things and they do different kinds of violence with us.”

We also find that people in these areas do not make it possible for women to go elsewhere to work. Here women's own opinion is not given much importance, in this case the father or elder male member of the house takes all the decisions in the house and decides on the distribution of work and future of the women in the house.

FGD Respondents stated that,

“Our male members take the main decisions in our house and what we do next, where we work or who we get married to, they decide everything, and we have to accept it.”

We found that rural women are now engaging themselves in various income-generating activities with information communication and technologies (ICT) that help them in their economic empowerment.

We have seen rural women doing various types of handicrafts and block batiks, selling these products through social media, and earning income. One respondent argued that,

“I currently do block batik and sewing work and sell it through social media, through which I earn some money that helps me buy other necessities for my family.”

Currently, various non-governmental organizations are working in Lalmonirhat district and are working on various projects and their implementation to bring about structural change and increase women's involvement with technological systems. These NGOs provide various types of financial support to the rural backward women. With these financial supports, the rural women are employing their time and labor in various small businesses and trying to change their fortunes. The Bangladesh government and various NGOs are working to implement various programs in this area to change the quality of life for rural women. These

projects work tirelessly to empower women to take a leading role in decision-making in their personal and family lives and implement their own decisions to shape their future plans.

## CONCLUSION

In Bangladesh, most women are demotivated, apathetic, and inactive in activities that generate cash (Arora, 2022). This is mostly because their religious beliefs, patriarchy, insecurity, and social shame in society all contribute to this situation (Khan *et al.*, 2022). The foundations of women under development include things like domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, child marriage, and a lack of social safety nets that are adequately guaranteed for bereaved, divorced, or separated women. Additionally, the digital divide between women and unpaid domestic work are also contributing factors (Saha, 2022). Bangladesh is a growing country that is on track to meet its sustainable development goals by ending inequality between men and women and giving women more power (Saifuddin *et al.*, 2022). The country is getting better at giving women more power, but to make sure that the progress lasts, skills development, higher education, and building people's abilities should be given top importance. Bangladesh knows that tackling poverty and inequality, as well as all the other goals of sustainable development, is very important. They have also put gender equality and women's empowerment at the center of their plans for growth (Jahan *et al.*, 2023).

There is a pressing need for radical ideas to achieve gender equality and ensure a sustainable future. In order to speed up the process of achieving equality, the Bangladesh government needs to ensure that women have access to the essential skills, particularly in the domains of science and technology. Additionally, they should make it simpler to gain access to financial resources, work to narrow the gender gap in mobile phone ownership and provide assistance to individuals interested in advancing from lower-level positions to management ones to increase the level of empowerment. Support should be provided to low-income women working in the informal sector so that they can become self-employed and micro entrepreneurs. This would remove the most significant barriers to accessing financing and skills, and it would also correspond with many women's inclination to work for themselves. To move forward, it will be essential to implement new measures that address gender-specific barriers, such as providing inexpensive childcare for women who come from low-income homes. To guarantee that women's interests are adequately reflected, a greater number of women should participate in decision-making processes at both the local and national levels. The economic prospects available to everyone will be impacted by climate change. As a result, men and women need to play equal roles as agents of change to achieve a more robust and expedient recovery. By providing equal chances for individuals to become politically and socially active, it is possible to generate productivity gains that will ultimately result in a more inclusive and sustainable development for everyone.

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