

Vital work, invisible lives

The impact of growing climate change is deepening the marginalization of women in Bangladesh's small-scale fisheries

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In Bangladesh, women contribute significantly to fishing-related work, despite their efforts often being overlooked. While men carry out most direct fishing activities in rivers, oceans, and coastal areas, women are essential in the later phases of the fishing process. Their main post-harvest tasks include cleaning, sorting, drying, preserving fish, and preparing them for the market. Many women also sell fresh or processed fish, either at local markets or through home-based businesses.

By managing post-harvest processes like fish drying a popular preservation method in the region women help sustain local fisheries. In small-scale fishing cooperatives and local organizations, women often collaborate with

men to improve livelihoods and fisheries management, making them key contributors to community-based fisheries resource management.

However, gender disparities persist in official fishing registrations, with women making up only 4 percent of cardholders compared to 96 percent men. This gap highlights not only gender bias in recognizing fishing activities but also deeper sociocultural norms limiting women's opportunities in the sector. Despite limited recognition, women in coastal Bangladesh continue to overcome obstacles and find ways to engage with and support the fishing industry. To better recognize women's achievements, it is crucial

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Women fisherfolk returning to home, Mongla, Bangladesh. Social safety nets like insurance and pensions, often available to male fishers, are frequently inaccessible to widowed and single women

to empower them through gender-sensitive legislation, financial support, and improved access to resources and training.

Badabon Sangho has played a vital role in addressing these gender gaps and empowering women fisherfolk. Through its dedicated programs, the organization supports women by providing capacity-building training on fish processing, drying, preservation, and marketing—enhancing their economic independence and livelihoods. Badabon Sangho also strongly advocates for gender-sensitive policies that promote equal access to fishing permits, financial resources, and legal protections—critical steps toward the formal recognition of women’s vital contributions.

Women fisherfolk in Mongla, Bangladesh, face numerous health and social challenges that often go unnoticed. Rising salinity and a lack of gender-sensitive policies worsen these issues, affecting their financial stability and well-being. Tasks such as fish sorting, cleaning, and drying are physically and mentally demanding. Prolonged bending, lifting, and working in unhygienic conditions put women at risk of musculoskeletal disorders, including joint and back pain.

Handling fish and related products without proper safety equipment exposes women to chemicals, cuts, and skin infections. Prolonged contact with saltwater and sharp fish spines can lead to skin irritation, wounds, infections, and rashes. In addition, women are exposed to bacteria and parasites during fish handling and drying, which may trigger allergic reactions or lead to more serious conditions such as dermatitis and fungal infections.

Mongla, located in Bangladesh’s coastal region, is experiencing increased salinity due to climate change and saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources. This environmental shift severely affects women’s health and livelihoods. Salinity worsens health issues and harms local fish populations. It also contaminates drinking water, raising the risk of dehydration and waterborne diseases that disproportionately affect women and children, who bear greater responsibility for water collection. The salinity crisis has reduced agricultural output, especially rice cultivation, impacting women involved in domestic farming. Consequently, women face dual burdens from agricultural and fishing challenges, limiting income sources, food security, and worsening nutritional deficits.

Widows and single women in Mongla often rely solely on fish processing or selling, which may be insufficient to support their families without male family support. Social safety nets like insurance and pensions, often available to male fishers, are frequently inaccessible to

widowed and single women. These women struggle to balance caregiving and work, resulting in unstable living conditions. They often lack affordable healthcare and face greater health risks due to social isolation and workplace conditions.

Urgent policy reforms are needed to address the socioeconomic and gender inequalities faced by women fisherfolk. Key areas for reform include:

- Ensuring women have equal access to fishing permits and legal protections as recognized participants in the fishing industry. Currently, women face limited access to financial resources, government support, and legal rights due to male-biased rules and exclusion from official registrations.
- Providing comprehensive healthcare services for women in fishing-related jobs. This includes affordable healthcare, occupational health training, and safe handling practices to reduce health risks. Public health initiatives should prioritize respiratory, skin, and waterborne diseases.
- Implementing policies to tackle the growing salinity crisis, such as conserving freshwater resources, improving water management, and offering alternative income sources for women reliant on agriculture and fishing. Possible solutions include improved water filtration systems and salt-resistant crops.
- Creating inclusive social safety nets for widowed and unemployed women in the fishing industry. Access to social security programs, microfinance, and other supports can improve the economic security of women-headed households. Policies encouraging women to own fishing assets like boats and gear can help break the poverty cycle.
- Investing in gender-sensitive infrastructure, including accessible healthcare, safe drinking water, and public restrooms near fishing markets and hubs. Encouraging women’s participation in community and policy decision-making will promote more sustainable and inclusive fishing practices.

Despite their vital role, women fisherfolk in Bangladesh face multiple health and socioeconomic challenges exacerbated by environmental stresses such as salinity. Without comprehensive policy interventions, especially for widowed and single women, these issues will deepen, causing further marginalization. A holistic approach is essential, addressing social protection, healthcare access, environmental resilience, and recognizing women’s contributions to ensure fair opportunities for all fisherfolk, regardless of gender. ■

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