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REVIEW ARTICLE

A review on feminization of agriculture and women empowerment in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Concern to women empowerment in relation to their engagement in agriculture of Bangladesh is not new, but it has not always been acted upon accordingly. The study was intended to investigate the relationship between mounting participation of women in agriculture of Bangladesh and their empowerment attainments. As a probing instrument, this study brings into play the adoption-equity-power flow incorporating women's acceptance to agricultural work preference (adoption) to enhance their empowerment attainment (equity) which may also turn out to be ineffectual (power) due to lack of proper policy attention in time. The task of review was done by collecting various articles from Google Scholars and other possible web-links and then was analysed within a suitable theoretical and practical basis by the researcher. The paper argues that numerous factors like lack of access to land, lack of education, lack of employment opportunity, wage discrimination between men and women, psychological backwardness of women, lack of decision making power in the household affairs and so on, acted as stumbling blocks to the pathways of empowering women in rural Bangladesh. The paper suggested that women's greater extent of engagement in agriculture of Bangladesh largely enabled them in attaining higher empowerment which must be appreciated by the policy makers by formulating gender inclusive policies to assist these women in overcoming the gender based socio-cultural and economic barriers jamming their pathway towards uppermost empowerment attainment in context of rural Bangladesh.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a densely populated country where majority of its population depends highly on agriculture for life sustaining articles. The demographic structure of Bangladesh indicates that women comprise almost half of its total population (BBS 2015). In Bangladesh, empowering women is one of the most important and pronounced issues of recent time because it is not only a device for women development but also a prime step to pull off sustainable development (Haque et al. 2011). On the whole, women empowerment is about the extent to which women are able to control their own destinies, even when the people with whom they interact oppose their interests. Besides, women are not empowered or disempowered in a vacuum, rather, they are empowered or disempowered relative to other people or groups whose lives intersect with theirs and whose interests differ from theirs, at least in part. The journey to ensure women empowerment in Bangladesh began since the independence in 1971 by ensuring equal rights in the

constitution. In a continuance, Bangladesh Government has also adopted preemptive policies and national action plans to accelerate the process of achieving the goal of holistic women empowerment (CEDAW 1992). Despite these planned initiatives, still the goal of empowering women in Bangladesh has not yet been fruitfully achieved (Islam et al. 2014). Then again, in Bangladesh, agriculture and women have been correlated with each other since long time but their contribution to agriculture has not been aptly acknowledged as it should have been. Earlier on, women in Bangladesh were working in the agricultural fields first and foremost during post-harvest period. But, recently, due to agricultural transition and rapid urbanization and industrialization, things have altered a lot in the form of swift out-migration of men from rural in Bangladesh (Afsar 2003) in search of industrial wage employment who were working in the agricultural fields. Such swift outmigration of men have created impulsive labor

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scarcity in rural Bangladesh which in turn materialized and shifted the role of women in agriculture from unpaid family workers to farm managers, a recent phenomenon termed as “feminization of agriculture” (Jaim and Hossain 2011).

Considering the urge need of investigating the changed scenarios in relation to feminization of agriculture process and consequent empowerment attainment, this paper investigates the most imperative question; does women’s role as economically active participants in agriculture increase their empowerment attainment in Bangladesh? As a probing instrument, this study brings into play the adoption-equity-power flow which validated the empowerment assessment in relation to women’s economically active participation in agriculture of Bangladesh. To elaborate, in context of Bangladesh, women’s acceptance to preference regarding economically active participants in agriculture as replacement of men in the agricultural fields (adoption) broadens their capacity to earn more and make own life-choices which eventually reduces the gender gap and brings them under the category of empowered women (equity). However, some variation (power) emerges in relation to women’s adoption and resulting equity provision due to the implementation of development initiatives with limited focus on the emerging feminization of agriculture process and consequent changes in women empowerment attainment in Bangladesh.

The objective of the present study was to investigate the relationship between mounting participation of women as economically active participants in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh and their empowerment attainments. This investigation of this study was done based on the adoption-equity-power flow incorporating women’s acceptance to agricultural work preference to enhance their empowerment attainment which may also turn out to be ineffectual due to lack of proper policy attention in time. Moreover, this study would help the policy makers to formulate better policy options for women empowerment in context of the agriculture sector in Bangladesh.

Table 1. Participation and type of contract held in rural Bangladeshi

Year	Male (%)			Female (%)		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total
2000	85.1	15.1	24.2	69.1	30.9	3.1
2005	79.3	21.7	22.4	73.8	26.2	6.4
2010	73.2	27.8	19.8	75.4	24.6	9.7

Source: FAO 2010

Table 1 illustrates the gender differences in participation and in type of contract held like full-time and part-time rural wage employment in Bangladesh based on the data collected from the Rural Income Generating Activities (RIGA) database (FAO 2010). The total participation of male in rural wage labor markets decreased from 24.2% to 19.8% during the period 2000-2010 whereas in case of female, the rate of participation increased from 3.1% to 9.7% during the same period. The rate of full-time employment in rural Bangladesh increased gradually for female while decreased markedly for male.

On the other hand, the rate of part-time employment increased for male and decreased for women in rural Bangladesh. In addition to the differences in male and female labor participation rates noted earlier, there were also major gender differences in employment patterns within labor markets for several reasons which hold across regions. Most importantly, as a result of household and child-rearing, women are not only much less likely to participate in the labor force; those who do are also much more likely to engage in self-employment

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper was based on reviewing some articles related to women in agriculture and their empowerment attainment in context of Bangladesh. For preparing this paper, at the outset, the researchers selected one title on “Feminization of agriculture and women empowerment in Bangladesh” on which review has been conducted. After selecting title, the researchers searched some articles from the Google scholar related to the title and employed the adoption-equity-power flow in selected articles to generate suitable policy options for enhanced empowerment attainment by women in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women in Agriculture of Bangladesh (Adoption)

The demographic structure of Bangladesh specifies that women comprise almost half of its total population and significant gender differences exist in all spheres of rural Bangladesh. In Bangladesh about 83% of women live in rural areas (BBS, 2014) and its rural social structure is plagued with many problems such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, disempowerment and underdevelopment (Nazneen et al. 2011). Bangladesh, as a developing country, cannot afford to misplace half of its human resources by the discrimination on grounds of sex and a sustainable development in Bangladesh is impossible without the well-remunerated participation of women in agriculture. Women in Bangladesh play a key role in agriculture and if they are paid with deserved payment, they can enjoy more of the benefits of rural development and can also become empowered, both at household and community level. The trend regarding the participation in rural wage employment by gender and wage levels has been illustrated and discussed in tabular form as follows.

activities rather than higher-paying wage employment (Islam et al. 2014). Due to household responsibilities like child care, economically active women in Bangladesh often leave the wage labor market and thus accumulate less work experience. As a result of time constraints, women are also more likely to work in part time jobs and in informal arrangements that pay less and provide fewer benefits, but provide more flexibility (Jaim and Hossain 2011).

Additionally, in Bangladesh, a larger proportion of female than male employment was found in seasonal jobs rather than usually better paid year-round jobs which also tend to include additional non-salary benefits (Afsar 2003). Besides, there was a well-documented pay gap in both urban and rural labor markets likely to exist in that women are paid less even for equivalent jobs and comparable levels of education and experience (Hafiza et al. 2015). Wage level and gender based participation in agricultural and non-agricultural wage employment in Bangladesh are further discussed below.

Table 2. Participation by wage levels and gender in rural Bangladesh

Year	Participants in agricultural wage employment						Participants in non-agricultural wage employment					
	Males			Females			Males			Females		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
2000	56.0	32.7	11.3	91.5	7.4	1.1	20.6	25.8	53.6	73.8	7.5	18.7
2010	48.1	21.8	30.1	56.2	21.1	22.7	17.5	27.1	55.4	43.2	31.4	25.4

Source: FAO 2010

Table 2 illustrates participation differential by wage levels and gender in rural wage employment of Bangladesh and it is fair enough to state that during 2000-2010, number of females as medium and high agricultural wage participants swiftly increased whereas number of females as low agricultural wage participants significantly decreased. On the other hand, during the same period, numbers of males as medium and high non-agricultural wage participants increased promptly whereas decreased as low waged participants in non-agricultural wage employment. In rural Bangladesh, women are frequently confined to working in particular sectors and in certain jobs, often as a result of their disadvantaged position with respect to human capital and bargaining power (Thompson and Sanabria 2010).

Furthermore, other statistics shows that in Bangladesh from 2007 to 2012, the participation of male labor force in agricultural activities decreased by 15% due to numerous happenings like less profitability of farming, rapid urbanization and industrialization, swift out-migration of men (FAO 2013). On the contrary, the shortage of agricultural labor force created by the decreased participation of men in agriculture gradually started to be filled by rural women in Bangladesh which is evident from the statistics that participation of Bangladeshi female labor in agriculture increased by 12% during the same period (FAO, 2013). The contribution of women in employment of Bangladesh was encouraging as about 16.8 million of females were engaged in different economic sectors (BBS, 2014). The women share in full time worker in permanent economic establishment estimated about 48% while female workers are more than 40% of total person engaged in all permanent economic establishments (BBS 2014). The percentage of female in industry and agriculture sector was higher than male which also commendable (BBS 2014) was. For the last two decades, Bangladesh has experienced remarkable female contribution to the overall economy - particularly in agriculture - as a result of such high percentages of women employment in the agriculture sector, with estimates ranging between 55 to 60% (FAO 2013).

While the proportion of men labor force working in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh has been declining drastically, the proportion of women working in agriculture has increased rapidly. Besides, women's work in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh has become more visible over the last two decades (Nazneen et al. 2011). As a result, women comprise about 57% of the agricultural labor force in Bangladesh and this trend has been called as the 'feminization of agriculture' (Jaim and Hossain 2011) though this figure masks considerable variation across regions according to age and social class. Besides, women have broadened and deepened their involvement in agricultural production as they increasingly shoulder the responsibility for household survival and respond to economic opportunities in commercial agriculture. In addition, women in Bangladesh are over represented in unpaid, seasonal and part-time work, and are often paid less than men, for same work (Hafiza et al. 2015). Studies in rural Bangladesh observed that there is a significant difference between the wages paid to male and female workers in rural Bangladesh. The aggregate average wage rate was BDT 265/man-days for male workers whereas it was BDT 233/day for female. This wage gap varied depending

on the types of work and physical strength (Rahman et al. 2016).

Different facts were found by Hafiza et al. (2015) where the authors indicated that women in rural Bangladesh were generally less able than men to participate in economic opportunities because they (women) faced huge work burden in relation to household management, child-rearing activities and rearing of small livestock. This additional work burden is mostly unpaid and limits women's capacity to engage in income-earning activities, which often require a minimum fixed time before being profitable. Furthermore, the nature of tasks, such as caring for children and elderly household members, requires women to stay near the home, thus limiting options to work for a wage. Moreover, time scarcity forces many women to start-up cottage industries, such as handicrafts, which are often characterized by low returns and limited potential for expansion.

In Bangladesh, women's participation in economic activities, particularly in agriculture, was rapidly increasing and such progress was attributed to migration of male members from farm to non-farm occupation, poverty reduction and empowerment of women. Therefore, women participation, particularly in agriculture as entrepreneurs was increasing in rural Bangladesh. The authors also noted that in the absence of men in rural Bangladesh due to high out-migration, women's role is changing from unpaid family worker to farm managers, a phenomenon termed as "feminization of agriculture" (Jaim and Hossain 2011).

Women Empowerment: Bangladesh Remarks (Equity)

Women empowerment has been one of the top priorities of development agencies and governments around the world and it has been recognized that even in the developed countries women continue to experience various forms of discrimination in one way or the other (Thompson and Sanabria 2010). In developing countries like Bangladesh, gender disparity has been recognized as an absolute obstacle to equality, empowerment and development. Even after decades of research, women empowerment in context of rural Bangladesh remains a widely reported, but rather narrowly researched subject. There have been some significant studies too, but often entrepreneurship take precedence over empowerment or, in other words, economic aspects are more highlighted and evolve to be the core point of the empowerment research whereas subtle socio-politico-cultural issues remain wrapped and unnoticed (Islam et al. 2014).

It is difficult to say which factors are more important for empowering women. The differences in pace of empowerment in rural Bangladesh might be a result of various factors like household and village characteristics, cultural and religious norms within the society, behavioural differences between the respondents and their family members, the kind of training and awareness programs that the women have been exposed to. Hence, there is no single factor to be the source for empowering women. Instead, the total striking issues of their life are the sources of empowerment (Hafiza et al. 2015).

Bangladesh has ranked 100th out of 128 countries in the 2007 Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum 2015). The index

illustrated that labor force participation among women was 55% whereas that of male was 88%, and women earned less than half compared to the wage of their male counterparts. Furthermore, the index showed that Bangladesh is one of the worst performers in paternal versus maternal authority and polygamy was still practiced here. Besides, the report showed reduced gender gap to a certain extent but the sad part was polygamy was still practiced in here and rate of domestic violence was way high (World Economic Forum 2015).

In Bangladesh, religion plays vital role for higher education of women. In Bangladesh, women's education plays a major role in determining her social position and status in family. So it is a major criterion onto examining women's empowerment status. The literacy rate among women in Bangladesh is 31%, however, only 4% women join a tertiary education (World Economic Forum 2015). In Bangladesh, women, who didn't get the opportunity to be literate with higher education remain behind to all kinds of progress and this weakness turned their social and economic position in lower status. For many reasons, women in Bangladesh couldn't get the opportunity to complete their higher study and it created a subordinate position to keep them away from becoming empowered (Nazneen et al. 2011).

In Bangladesh, women have very limited power in their social and economic sphere of life. This limited power has impact on women's educational attainment and their lack of control over resources thus affects their decision making capacity, bargaining ability and employment opportunity. The women in Bangladesh had mostly seen as a burden for family and as a result they got lower value of life. Most women had to depend on their husband for having no income of their own and other household decisions were also taken by their husband as they (men) think that their wives have no rational knowledge on different financial matters. Such kind of discrimination makes women in rural Bangladesh weak in status and accelerates to less-empowerment. The situation can be improvised through women's economically active participation in agriculture as women's access in family income and household decisions is more important in determining their position in family (Basu and Basu 2001).

Women NGO members in rural Bangladesh, who were involved with credit activities, were generally more exposed to modern ideas and views; and hence, were more likely to be empowered. Women's earnings gave them a higher status in the family and the husband-wife interaction on decision-making increased significantly (Hossain 2012).

In rural Bangladesh, women faced considerable difficulties and hindrances in their access to employment and earning opportunities. Among numerous factors, six major underlying factors that have a significant impact on women's access to the labor market as well as occupational mobility in rural Bangladesh are (a) Purdah; (b) Less job mobility; (c) Lack of literacy, knowledge and information; (d) Child-bearing responsibilities; (e) Ideological and sociological shortcomings; and (f) Physical constraints. Because of the severe persistence of these factors, women in rural Bangladesh were restricted to particular types (lower) of employment which in turn resulted in their disempowered position there (Kabeer 2001).

In rural Bangladesh, men were paid with higher wages than women in most cases. Also, women's workload had not been acknowledged to the minimum extent rather their workload had been devaluated through avoidance and no power in decision making role. In general, the higher is the women's monetary income, the higher is the provision of being empowered. In gender socialization education, most families in rural Bangladesh were seen not only for developing women's life but also for the betterment of their family life in husband's home

(Jahan and Mahmud 2002). In Bangladesh, women who are engaged in well occupational activities were commonly more rewarded than who were not for their participation in family expenditure. Their less dependency made them less vulnerable in the family. Though women in Bangladesh earned for their family but not got any kind of importance as earning member of the family or couldn't take part in major decision making (Hossain and Jaim 2011). It represents that for social value, women in rural Bangladesh were not able to get equal opportunity for involvement in economic sector compared to their male counterparts. Even they (women) think that although having their qualifications, family should get the highest priority not the high paid works.

The challenge of poverty, inequality and disempowerment in Bangladesh is not only huge but also highly discriminatory against women. Poverty, inequality and disempowerment have been feminized in most parts of the world, but in Bangladesh it truly has a woman's face (Malik 2013).

Government Strategies to Empower Women in Agriculture (Power)

Historically Bangladesh has been putting all its exertions to reduce poverty and inequality, to empower women and to re-shape the structure of gender relation in accordance with the strategic national economic, social and political development—particularly in the rural areas. With the government aiming to achieve its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which includes better living facilities for its citizens by 2030, it is imminent that the country which still faces a grave challenge for the equitable rights of women, who still prefer to stick to their routine life of taking care of their households, needs measures to help uplift their status.

A silver lining to the cause in recent years has been the gradually transforming social mentality which has acknowledged the increasing awareness of women's productive roles in agriculture and their contribution to development (Rahman et al. 2016). With more and more women coming out of their 'Social Veils', one can see women in Bangladesh now actively participating in household decision-making and taking part in agriculture. As outcomes of numerous initiatives implemented by GOs and NGOs in rural Bangladesh, quite recently, rural women's increasing participation as labor force in agriculture has started a new wave of rural women empowerment in Bangladesh. Rural women who were home bound have now started coming together out of their homes to work in the agricultural fields. Their negotiation skills have developed, awareness in terms of health, hygiene and legal rights has increased and the quality of life has been positively impacted (Hossain 2012). Nonetheless, for always, women in Bangladesh are not equal to men and, in turn, are poorer and more vulnerable than men in the community. Though the GoB has done fabulous job in reducing poverty almost near to the target level, it needs to fine-tune the equalizing mechanism which is being used to attain the target of reducing inequality, of empowering women and of re-shaping the structure of gender relations among its population. Hence, the GoB must formulate gender inclusive policies to assist the economically active women in agriculture in overcoming the gender based socio-cultural and economic barriers blocking their pathway towards greater level empowerment attainment by these women in context of rural Bangladesh.

Adoption-Equity-Power Flow

In response to the high out-migration of men, women in rural Bangladesh have positively adapted to the role of economically active participation in the agriculture sector and the rate of adoption is escalating with time. Such adoption has enabled the rural women in Bangladesh to get employed as wage earners in

agriculture (feminization of agriculture) and to enjoy monetary earnings on a consistent basis. As a result, they have started to gain higher decision-making power by making monetary contribution to their household expenditures.

On the other hand, by receiving the prerequisite like higher decision-making ability (equity), rural women in Bangladesh have started to expand their life-choices based on their impulsive self-control and enthusiasm. By this, the gender gap has reduced to a certain extent which in turn resulted in higher empowerment attainment by women in rural Bangladesh. However, due to lack of resource ownership and social recognition, the pace of attaining greater empowerment by women in agriculture of Bangladesh is slowed down by a long way which needs to be fixed in the first place to righteously empower these women.

Moreover, due to limited focus by the policy makers on the changing agricultural employment pattern based on gender and existing socio-cultural barriers, there has been a considerable variation between expected and achieved empowerment attainment (power) by the women involved as economically active participants in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh. Therefore, before implementing any further women empowerment initiatives by the GOs and NGOs working in rural Bangladesh, the GoB must formulate strategic gender inclusive policies which may act like antidote against the viral socio-cultural contamination regarding men's attitude towards women and hence, bring the provision of highest empowerment attainment by women, working as economically active participants in agriculture.

CONCLUSIONS

Bangladesh is termed as a developing country with a high level of gender disparity which acts as an obstacle to its overall development process. Concern to women empowerment in relation to their engagement in agriculture of Bangladesh is not new, but it has not always been acted upon accordingly. The works done by numerous authors regarding the so called issues 'Feminization of Agriculture' and 'Women Empowerment' in context of Bangladesh has surely achieved significant height that it deserves as well as has implications to new researchers to gather knowledge about these phenomena. In a continuance, the women empowerment in relation to agriculture of Bangladesh was discussed and analyzed in the light of adoption-equity-power flow. The present study was an effort to investigate the relationship between women's extent of engagement in agriculture and their resulting empowerment attainment in rural Bangladesh based on adoption-equity-power flow. The findings indicated that women's economically active participation in agriculture as replacement of men (adoption) extended their capacity to earn more and to make own life-choices which eventually reduced the gender gap and brought them under the category of empowered women (equity). Nonetheless, some deviation (power) emerged in relation to women's adoption and resulting equity provision due to lack of proper policy formulation with augmented focus on the feminization of agriculture process and consequent changes in women empowerment attainment in Bangladesh.

Factors like lack of access to land, lack of education, lack of employment opportunity, wage discrimination between men and women, psychological backwardness of women, lack of decision making power in the household affairs etc. acted as stumbling blocks to the way of empowering women in rural Bangladesh. The interaction of some push and pull factors had accelerate the rate of rural-urban migration in Bangladesh which had caused the emergence of new phenomenon called 'Feminization of Agriculture'. However, the precise nature and extent of 'Feminization of Agriculture' in Bangladesh has been

left to be determined.

This study also correlated the findings of numerous authors and from this correlative analysis it has brought into being that in rural Bangladesh, women suffer from different types of powerlessness in social and economic sphere of life. The lack of power or disempowerment reflects in their less education level, less income, less control over their own income, less bargaining power in selling their own produce and labor, less participation in decision making body, less access to production inputs and resources and employment opportunity than men. However, there was an urge need to perform an analysis regarding the issue in order to appraise the psychological pattern of rural people to limit the rural-urban migration rate in favor of the national policy makers of Bangladesh.

To conclude, the study re-affirmed that women's greater extent of engagement in the agriculture sector of Bangladesh largely enabled them in attaining higher empowerment which must be appreciated by the policy makers by formulating gender inclusive policies to assist these women in overcoming the gender based socio-cultural and economic barriers jamming their pathway towards uppermost empowerment attainment in context of rural Bangladesh.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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