



SOCIAL FORESTRY FOR WOMEN LIVELIHOOD IN THE RURAL SOCIETY OF JESSORE, BANGLADESH

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Abstract: Women's rights and privileges are now global issues. Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh has reviewed all its policies and programmes to remove gender discrimination and to bring women in the mainstream of development arenas to warrant their roles are significant. In the very recent past women participation was emphasized in forestry activities in Bangladesh. Social forestry programme is such an important sector where rural poor and destitute women have actively been participating during the last decade. Data were collected from 100 randomly selected women who have been working in the social forestry programme of the Forest Extension Division and two national NGOs namely Jagoroni Chakra and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) supported by the Social Forestry Extension Circle, Jessore, Bangladesh. This study demonstrated that the social forestry programme contributed for the livelihood improvement of the rural women through their active participation in the programme. Social awareness, health consciousness, family decision making power, and income generation capability built by the social forestry programme for the rural women in Bangladesh. Sustainability of the livelihood for women from social forestry programme would be an issue, need to be addressed in future studies.

Key words: Livelihood, rural development, social forestry, women participation

Introduction

Development activities were localized while women have been deprived from such activities. Women, particularly in rural Bangladesh have been facing different types of social, cultural and economic exploitation and are deprived from basic education, primary health care, proper sanitation and optimum nutrition (Khandakar, 1991). Women's contribution to the family remains invisible and usually not regarded as significant in family income generation endeavor (Salahuddin, 1992). In Bangladesh women have been suffering from an inferior status and occupy a subordinate position in the society due to traditional bound structured and subsistence oriented socio-economic structure (Yasmin, 1994). Meanwhile, women's contribution in the national economy as well as development processes have been realizing out from different corners of the society. Therefore, very recently women are being given due importance in the various sectors of development activities undertaken by the several Government and Non-government Organizations through social forestry programme to hold up their standard of living.

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Social Forestry, as a subsystem of forestry, has been practiced experimentally in some denuded forestland by the Bangladesh Forest Department during the last decade. Recently some private organizations also have been taking part in the social forestry programmes directly involving the women from the grass-root level for roadside, railway, canal or riverside, large scale timber and homestead plantation; and nursery development programmes. (Khandakar, 1994). It is estimated that in Bangladesh about 1.5 million ha of land are available for social forestry out of which over one million ha are under joint control by the Bangladesh Forest Department, the Ministry of Land, and District administrations (who administers *Khas* and Unclassed State Forest Land). In reality most of the lands have undergone encroachment by the local landless and rural elites (Ahmed, 1994). It was also experienced that the participation of women in the development process, especially in social forestry programme, could contribute significantly in the socio-economic growth and development of the country. In this way social forestry can play a strategic role to minimize the scarcity of forest resources as well as to establish the women's right (Kabir, 1993). Hence, the present study intended to investigate the impacts of social forestry for enhancing woman livelihood in the rural society of Jessore district in Bangladesh.

Materials and Methods

One hundred (married, unmarried, divorced and widowed) women of various ages (15 – 50 years) were selected randomly who have been working in the social forestry programme of Forest Extension Division, and two national NGOs namely Jagoroni Chakra and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) of Jessore Forest Extension Circle, Bangladesh. Semi structured interview was conducted in 2002 among the samples separately, using a questionnaire. Data were analyzed according to different variables. The changes of life standard of rural women before and after being involved in the social forestry programme with respect to different criteria like income, household decision making, sanitation and drinking water facilities, educational status and social position were compared and presented in graphs and tables.

Results

Approximately 84% of the targeted women had no income and the rest 16% had a maximum income of Tk. 600 month⁻¹ before being involved in the social forestry programmes. Whereas after being involved in the programme, around 5% of the total women have increased their average family income by up to Tk. 300, 5% by Tk. 300-600, 22% by Tk. 600-900, 25% by Tk. 900-1200, 16% by Tk. 1200-1500, 14% by Tk. 1500-1800, and 13% by more than Tk. 1800 month⁻¹ (Fig. 1).

Our findings reveal that some older women earn more than Tk. 1500 plus month⁻¹ than that of youth (Tk. 600-1500 month⁻¹) but their participation were lesser (about 27%) than that of young women (about 65%) from the rural

Table 1. Age structure of participating women by income level in social forestry programme.

Age group (yrs)	Monthly Income (Tk.)							Per cent (%)
	Up to 300	301-600	601-900	901-1200	1201-1500	1501-1800	1801+	
15-20	-	7	4	5	-	-	-	13.33
21-25	-	3	6	4	4	3	-	16.66
26-30	-	-	7	5	6	2	5	20.83
31-35	-	-	-	6	4	7	6	19.16
36-40	-	-	2	3	2	3	5	12.50
41-45	-	-	3	4	4	2	-	10.83
46-50	-	-	3	5	-	-	-	06.66
(%)	0	8.33	20.83	26.66	16.66	14.16	13.33	100

society (Table 1). About 69% women belonging to age group of 21-40 years were involved in social forestry programme and their income ranged from Tk. 301-1800+.

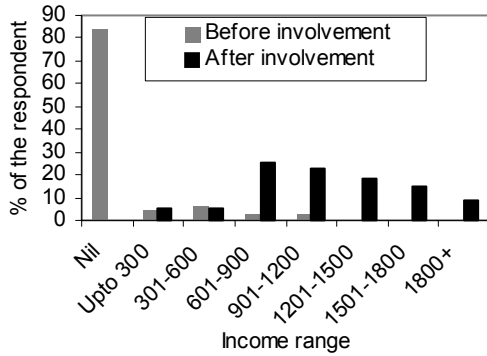


Fig. 1. Women's contribution to the family income before and after involving the social forestry programme.

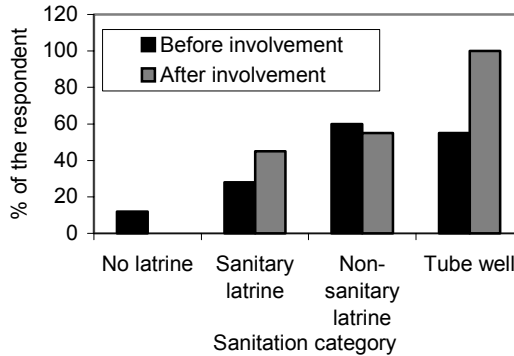


Fig. 2. Health and sanitation scenario of the participants before and after involving in the social forestry programme.

We found approximately 12% families were not using latrines before being involved the social forestry programme. However, about 44% of the respondents increased using sanitary latrines (about 28% before and 45% after involving the social forestry programme) while using non-sanitary latrines (about 60% before and 55% after involving the social forestry programme) among them decreased after involving the social forestry programme. About 98% of the working women were using tube well for their drinking water and other household water uses after involving the social forestry programme while it was about 55% before involving the programme (Fig. 2). About 79% of the targeted women were possessing positive approach while 21% of them had no comments on the question of participating in the social forestry programme. No women possessed negative approach in participating in the programme. Meanwhile, about 65% of the family members, particularly their husbands, were also possessing positive mentality in favor of participating their wives participation in the social forestry programme. While 10% of the family members opined their negative attitude in participating in the social forestry programme. On the other hand about 25% of the of the family members had no particular stand in this endeavor (Fig. 3). This is because of the prevailing poverty among the mass people when people cannot even think of religion or culture.

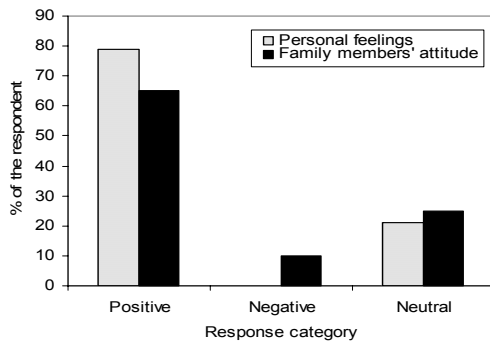


Fig. 3. Personal feelings of respondent and attitude of their family members towards woman participation in the social forestry programme.

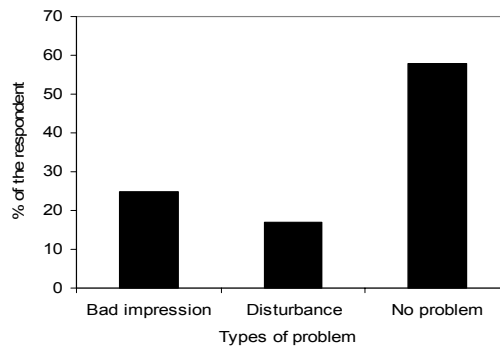


Fig. 4. Social position of women working in the social forestry programme.

Decisions on house construction (0% by respondent, 88% by householders, and 12% jointly), children education (17% by respondent, 69% house holders, and 14% jointly), health (28% by respondent, 55% by house holders, and 17% jointly), family purchasing (9% by respondent, 76% house holders, and 15% jointly) and dietary selection (0% by respondent, 74% by house holders, and 26% jointly) were mainly taken by the male counter part of the family before involving the women in the social forestry programme. On the average majority of the family decision making before involving the women in the social forestry programme was made by the house holders (73%), 17% joint decision (husband and wife), and only 11% by the respondents (wife) themselves (Table 2).

Table 2. Participation of women in household decision making before and after involvement in social forestry programme.

Field of Decisions	Before Involvement (%)			After Involvement (%)		
	Respondent	*House holders	Jointly	Respondent	*House holders	Jointly
House construction	0.00	88.33	11.67	11.66	33.33	55.00
Children education	16.66	69.16	14.18	20.00	27.50	52.50
Health	28.33	55.00	16.67	23.83	22.16	53.33
Family purchasing	9.17	75.83	15.00	20.16	33.33	45.83
Dietary selection	0.00	74.17	25.83	22.50	30.83	46.67
Average (%)	10.83	72.5	16.67	19.63	29.5	50.87

* father, husband or seniors of the respondent.

Decisions on house construction (12% by respondent, 33% householders, and 55% jointly), children education (20% by respondent, 28% house holders, and 52% jointly), health (24% by respondent, 22% house holders, and 54% jointly), family purchasing (20% by respondent, 34% house holders, and 46% jointly) and dietary selection (23% by respondent, 31% house holders, and 46% jointly) were mainly taken by the joint (husband and wife) and respondents (wife) themselves after involving the women in the social forestry programme (Table 2). On an average majority of the family decision making after involving the women in the social forestry programme was made by the joint decision (51%), 30% house holders, and 19% by the respondents (wife) themselves (Table 2).

Family decision making power of the women increased by 9% (11% before to 20% after) after involvement the social forestry programme). But what is the good news is that the majority decision making power by the house holders (73%) shifted to the husband and wife (respondent) joint (51%) decision after the women started participating the social forestry programme. House holders decision making power has reduced from 73% to 51% due to participating the women in the social forestry programme is another good way of enhancing family livelihood (Table 2).

We found an amazing situation of 58% respondents encountered no such social and religious problems in participation with the programme. About 25% of the respondents quoted that they faced some bad impression from their neighbors and family members against the participation in the programme (Fig. 4). They were very kin on not to allow female members to go out of the house and work with others. However, the most disgusting situation for the participated women were the tease from the outsiders during work with the programme. About 17% respondents noticed such situation in an irregular fashion but was so disgusting for them to walk around and work in the field (Fig. 4).

In majority occasion, women are restricted to outside work in rural Bangladesh due to the problems of household works particularly assigned to them. We found about 65% of

the participated women having no problem for them to go with both household works and social forestry activities (Fig. 5). Another 25% participants reported few problems like mismanagement of the household works (15% of the respondents), child care (10% of the respondents), and bad relations with family members (10% of the respondents) might come occasionally but it would be manageable as of economic earning from the programme.

Approximately 48% of the participated women were quite ignorant; it was a great barrier to development activities. About 34% were only completing their primary education while remaining 18% were getting chance to move to secondary and higher secondary level (Fig. 6). It was also observed that they express their positive perseverance towards education after involving the social forestry programme.

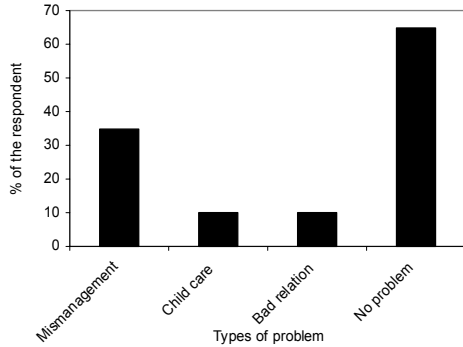


Fig. 5. Family problems of the women working in social forestry programme.

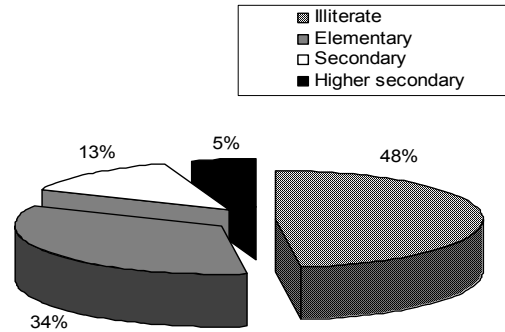


Fig. 6. Educational qualification of the women involving in social forestry programme.

Discussion

Income is a function of the age of the person earning. Young women have been participating more than that of youth and old women in social forestry activities. This may be due to possessing better physical and mental health required to work and earn. Women of Bangladesh remain active physically and mentally at the average age of 20 to 40 years (Ahmed, 1986). Thus, this study recommended the young women to participate in the social forestry programme and contribute to the family welfare. Child labor is a common picture in many development sectors in Bangladesh. Poverty is the root cause in this endeavor. The present study revealed no child are participating in the social forestry programme. Family income has increased substantially due to the women participation in the social forestry activities which would motivate the rural and destitute women to participate actively in such activities to help increase total family income.

The consciousness about health and sanitation was not well enough in the rural society of Bangladesh. Providing basic knowledge about health and sanitation is utmost important in Bangladesh in general and in rural society in particular. Various government and non-government organizations have already launched several programmes countrywide to motivate people in this regard. Social forestry programme is one of such various programmes doing well in alleviating health and sanitation related problems at the household level.

Using sanitary latrines and safe drinking water can reduce disease infestation in human body. Most of the respondents of this study expressed that they spend much less for medical treatment and medication for their family from the very beginning of using sanitary latrines and safe drinking water. This way their average monthly family income increased substantially which has been using for the other family welfare. Thus, the life

standard of the families participating in the social forestry programme is enhancing significantly over time. Personal feelings of the women and the attitude of the family members towards them were the factors to work with a social forestry programme. This is due to the religious and cultural barriers on women not to go out of home and work. Typical Muslim family believes that going out of home and work by a woman is an unforgivable sin. However, social forestry programme empowered the rural poor women over time in major family decision making process. Social acceptability of working women was a question whether she would do work with social forestry programme or not. In a muslim country like Bangladesh would not be an easy place to motivate people to accept the proposal of women's participation in social forestry programme. Going with the duties and responsibilities, women require literacy to go rightly with in the programme. It was observed that child education among the families participating social forestry programme was much higher than that of the families not participating the programme. We did not investigate this aspect quantitatively due to some research limitation. However, it would be a research agenda for further investigation.

Conclusion

Development activities can not be fully achieved without the active participation of both men and women. This situation is mainly experienced in third world countries like Bangladesh. Now it has come into realization that women participation and their social acceptability is inevitable in any development initiatives. That's why many initiatives have been undertaken by the several government and non-government organizations ensuring women's active participation to uplift their standard of living, social consciousness, physical and mental health, and overall social status. It is very clear from this study that the financial solvency changes the sociocultural behaviors of a family. When a woman becomes an earning member, she eventually becomes a helping hand for her family. In this regard social forestry practice would be a vital tool for the women to work with which will ultimately help improving the rural socioeconomic condition and standard of living.

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