

## A study on rural women's empowerment through participation in aquaculture

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### Abstract

The study was undertaken to understand the rural women's (i) extent of participation in some selected aquaculture practices and (ii) extent of empowerment through participation in aquaculture program. Data were collected from 200 selected rural women of two districts - Sherpur and Kishoreganj. Each of the families where the selected rural women who were involved in aquaculture under the supervision of two partner NGOs of DSAP, namely - Foundation for Human Development (FHD) and Center for Rural and Environmental Development (CRED). Both conventional and participatory methods of data collection were employed where structured questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were used as the tools. The data collection procedure took five-months spanning from September 2004 to January 2005. Appropriate scales were developed and used in order to determine the focus variables of the study, while most analyses regarding women empowerment were done using 'before' and 'after' method. Empowerment of women was measured by five dimensions such as decision making ability, spending ability, social participation, cosmopolitaness, access to assets and resources. The ten selected aquaculture practices were: fish feeding, eradication of aquatic vegetation from fish pond, disease detection, application of fertilizer, liming, harvesting of fry and fish, fish stock management, pond excavation, use of insecticides, and sale of fry and fish. The study also aimed at determining some selected characteristics of rural women and determining relationship between their extent of empowerment and the selected characteristics. The characteristics of rural women included: age, personal education, average family education, family size, family farm size, area under aquaculture, extension media exposure, training exposure, knowledge in aquaculture, and family income. The findings revealed an overall low level of participation by rural women in aquaculture activities. However, significant level of improvement was identified regarding overall status of empowerment during the course of participation in aquaculture program under DSAP.

**Key words:** Rural women, Aquaculture, Participation, Empowerment

## Research findings

- Majority (72.5%) of the rural women had 'very low' level of participation followed by 13% and 2% having, respectively, 'low' and 'medium' participation in ten selected aquaculture practices. No woman was found having 'high' participation. On the other hand, 12.5% were found having 'no' participation, at all.
- Relatively significant level of participation by women was found in the activities like 'feeding of fishes' and 'clearing of aquatic vegetation from fish pond,' while low level of participation were identified in 'application of fertilizers,' 'liming in ponds,' and 'managing fish stock.' Very low level women participation was identified in 'fish fry catching,' 'excavating pond,' 'using insecticides,' and selling fish.'
- Majority (59.5%) of the rural women had 'low' empowerment before participating in aquaculture program followed by 31%, 6% and 3.5% having 'medium,' 'medium-high' and 'very low' level of empowerment, respectively. However, an improvement of the scenario was identified after three seasons of involvement in the aquaculture programs under the supervision of concerned partner NGOs of DSAP. Majority (46.5%) of the respondent rural women perceived that they had 'medium' level of empowerment after the involvement, which was followed by 41%, 9.5% and 3% having 'low,' 'medium-high,' and 'low' level of empowerment, respectively. No respondent was found having 'high' level of empowerment. The average empowerment score of the women 'before' and 'after' involvement in the aquaculture program showed a significant improvement.
- Rural women achieved significant extent of empowerment in all of its five dimensions during participation in aquaculture activities. Among the five dimensions they achieved substantial level of empowerment in aspects of 'family decision-making' and 'ability to spending money.' Although the changes were positive, the progress was slow in the aspects of 'social participation,' 'access to assets and resources,' and 'cosmopolitaness.'
- Majority (85.5%) of the women were found young to middle-aged, while 83% of them belonged to medium to large families having at least five members in each household. A substantial percentage (33.5%) of the women were found illiterate or could sign only, while 66.5% had different level of literacy spanning from primary school to university level. More than half (51%) of the rural women possessed medium to large family farm (more than 1 ha), while 67% had up to 0.20 ha family pond under aquaculture. An overwhelming majority (96.5%) of the respondent women had 'very low' to 'low' exposure to extension media, while 87.5% did not get any training program for acquiring knowledge and skill in aquaculture. However, 65.5% women were found having 'good' to 'very good' knowledge on day to day aquaculture practices. More than two-third women (69.5%) belonged to 'medium' to 'high' family income group, while the rest (29.5%) fell in to 'low' income group having annual family income up to only Taka 50,000.
- Rural women's extent of empowerment was positively and significantly correlated with their personal and family education, extension media contact, training

exposure, and family annual income. The other selected characteristics of rural women such as age, family size, family farm size, area under aquaculture, knowledge on aquaculture and extent of participation in aquaculture did not show any significant relationship with their extent of empowerment through participation in aquaculture.

- Although women members of the DSAP demonstration farmers' families under the concerned NGOs were supposed to increase their involvement in aquaculture activities through the 'whole family' approach, it did not occur at the desired level. Women members were little interested in participating group meeting and training programs.

### Policy implications

- The study revealed a very low level of women participation in aquaculture, which is not encouraging. Thus, proper strategies should be formulated in order to increase participation of womenfolk in different aquaculture practices. All GOs and NGOs involving in fisheries sector in Bangladesh, particularly the DoF, should focus on gender sensitive dimensions in their aquaculture programs.
- During development of aquaculture program, it must be ensured that women are given equal rights and opportunities to actively participate in it
- As the study reveals the fact that women can achieve significant level of empowerment through involving in income generating activity like aquaculture, relevant GOs and NGOs should ensure women participation in their programs as a way of achieving empowerment.
- Participation of women should be facilitated and ensured in all phases of an aquaculture program. Such step will help in keeping a program gender sensitive in true sense.
- Educated women are found having low participation in aquaculture, although this group is considered very important in any development program. Thus, proper extension strategy should be undertaken to motivate this particular women group for ensuring their participation in aquaculture programs.

### Livelihood implications

Apart from carrying out day to day household activities, women of our country are gradually increasing their involvement in aquaculture in order to secure sustainable livelihoods of their families. The pace is, however, very slow. There exist huge potentials in increasing women participation in the aquaculture sector of Bangladesh. Through increasing participation in aquaculture, women can enrich their financial and human

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capitals and increase their access to social and institutional structures and processes, which would in turn pave the way of achieving their desired empowerment and improvement of their livelihood status in the long run.