

# **FR2.3: What influences women's participation in water governance? Preliminary findings from Bangladesh**

**Niyati Singaraju,  
Associate Scientist, Gender Research,  
IRRI, New Delhi**

***co-authors:* Mou Rani Sarker, Mary Ann Batas, Rima Akther, Mahanam Dash,  
Manoranjan Mondal, Ranjitha Puskur, and Sudhir Yadav**



# Bangladesh Polders

---

- 1.2 million hectares of agricultural land
- 8 million people
- Women disproportionately vulnerable to climatic risks
- Women's participation in water governance - positive outcomes on agricultural productivity and livelihoods.



# Women in Water Governance

---

- Participatory water governance since the 1980s
- Water Management Groups (WMGs) with community members
- 30% membership of women mandatory

***Does representation result in effective participation?***





# Study focus

---

- extent and level of women's participation in water management groups (WMGs)
- socio-cultural, political, economic, and biophysical factors that influence women's participation

# Methodology

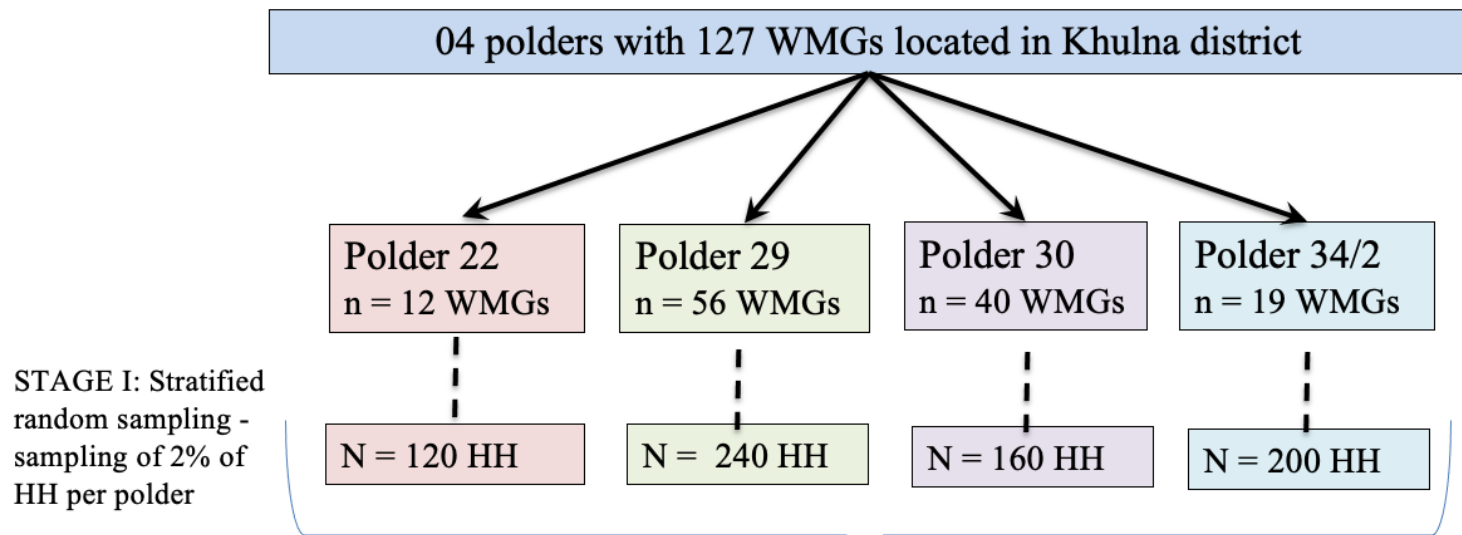
---



- Khulna district, Bangladesh
- Mixed methods
  - Structured questionnaire survey of 720 hhs
  - FGDs with men and women (two in each polder)



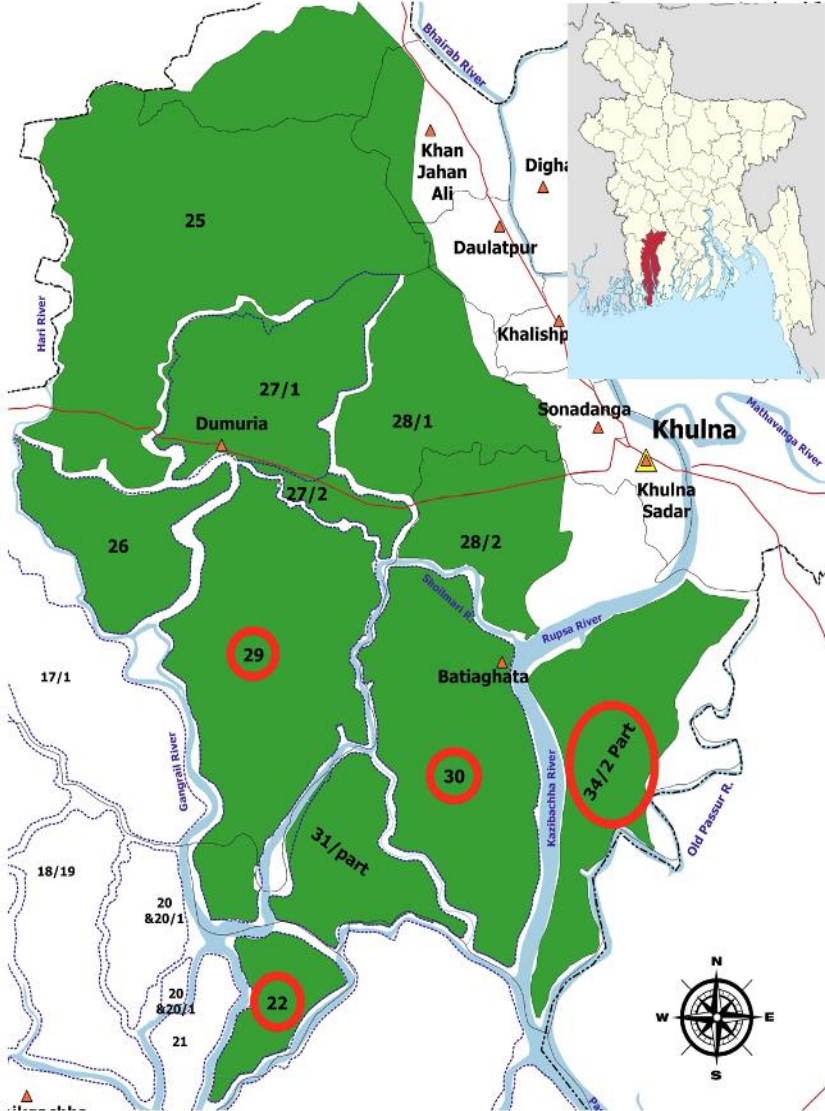
# Sampling Framework



STAGE 2: Sample HH per category

- i) Household with both male and female members in the WMG
- ii) Household with only male member in WMG
- iii) Household with only female member in WMG, and
- iv) Household with none part of WMG

# Study Area



# Gender roles in WMGs

---

- Men and women both participate in different activities of the WMGs.
- Men provide more input to the decisions around the release and distribution of water, maintenance and repair, and fee collection.
- Women participated and provided more input to decisions revolving around enlisting participants into training workshops and actions related to the misuse of funds.



# Three domains of participation

---

- Attendance in meetings
- Speaking/ involvement in WMG decision making
- Leadership roles

# Attendance in meetings

---

- 38% of the male members and 31% of the female members attended all WMG meetings in the last 12 months

*“Because we work in the fields and need to know about water, so we attend whenever they call a meeting”.*

*“I try to complete my household chores sooner so that I can join the meetings”.*

# Speaking in the meetings

---

- Women attend the meetings, but do not speak

*“I am not comfortable to talk in front men. Men are more knowledgeable about water issues, so they dominate the conversation. For example, for transportation water from the canal to our plots, my husband will speak with other farmers; it is pointless to inform me because I cannot assist him. Same in the meeting, men know more about water problems, thus they are the ones who typically talk during meetings”*

# Leadership Roles

---

- Less than 5% women in executive positions in WMGs
  - restrictive social norms, time constraints

*“He (husband) allows me to join the group, which is more than enough for me; if I mention about participating in committee, he will kill me.”*

- A woman WMG member

*“We want more women (in EC). Executive committee quotas for women are very difficult to fill. Women are reluctant to participate for a variety of reasons, including educational, familial, domestic work, and public speaking difficulties, as well as the belief that they do not know enough to contribute”* - Male Chairman of a WMG.



# Factors influencing women's participation in WMGs

---

<b>Significant Variables</b>	
Age Distance from Canal to main plot Time spent on unpaid activities	↓
<b>Education</b> <b>Land ownership</b> <b>Access to credit</b>	↑

# Perceived benefits of participation

---

- Access to technical innovations
- Improved crop productivity and incomes
- Social recognition

*“Becoming a widow at 26, I became helpless with my son. I started to cultivate crops on my husband's land without a single thought. Initially, people used to gossip. I worked tirelessly, participated in various trainings. Now, DAE officer often uses my field for demonstration. I also got medal at the union level.”*

# Challenges women face in participation

---

- Time constraints due to high levels of unpaid domestic work
- Restrictive social norms - participation seen as threat to existing family tradition and culture
- Need husband's permission

*“It becomes hard to join the meetings sometimes as who will take care of my children during that time. My husband cannot serve meal by himself, and if I get delayed, he becomes upset. My father-in-law thinks my participation in committee does not suit our family tradition”*

- A woman member

# Key takeaways

---

- Access to resources (land, credit, education) positively influences participation
- Participation has the potential to enhance economic and social benefits
- Participation does not necessarily mean women's voices are heard or they have a say in decision-making
- Tackling restrictive gender norms to redistribute the unpaid domestic work burden of women has the potential to enable their effective participation in water governance
  - engaging men and boys
  - behavioural and social change communication
- Investment in women's technical and leadership skills is important to build their confidence



# Thank you!

**This work has been supported by the CGIAR GENDER Platform Evidence Module Research Grants funding. We also appreciate support received from USAID Feed the Future Sustainable Intensification Innovation Lab (SIIL) project in Bangladesh.**