

EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN FOR FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

FERDOUSE ISLAM

Key words: empowerment, women, food security, nutrition.

Author's Background

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Summary

Empowering women has multiple benefits for women themselves and for their families and communities. In Bangladesh, rural women are involved in different income generating activities. As a result, their empowerments are increasing beside the food security and nutrition. The main focus of the study was to determine the women empowerment status through the participation in IGAs for food security and nutrition, and to examine the selected characteristics of the rural women. Data were collected January to March, 2012 through pre-tested interview schedule from randomly selected 105 respondent from three villages of Pabna Sadar Upazilla. The selected characteristics of the rural women were considered as the independent variable while their empowerment status through participation in IGAs was the dependent variable. Majority (67.62 percent) of the women were medium empowered while 12.38 and 20.00 percent were highly and lowly empowered respectively. Among the four indicators or aspects of empowerment the mean participation in decision making of the respondents was the highest (19.46) and access to service providers was the lowest (10.11). The findings also revealed that the mean of contribution to household economy was 18.25 and access to resources was 15.48. In the study area, majority of the respondent women were middle aged category, illiterate, medium family size, small farm size, medium family income, medium socio-economic status, medium attitude and very slight fatalistic category.

Background

Women in rural areas are particularly affected by poverty and they have the least power in the society. Traditionally women in Bangladeshi village have few rights, little choice about the courses of their lives and less opportunities to change their situation (Lovell, 1991). By social custom, Bangladesh women are dominated by men in almost all spheres of their lives. A Bangladeshi woman dependent on her family, on various neighborhood and patronage groups and on her family's fortunes. Socially a Bangladeshi woman's role is that of a house wife. From childhood, a girl is trained to be wife and mother (Amin and Pebley, 1994). UNICEP identifies five principal levels on which empowerment is achieved: welfare (meeting basic needs), access (to resources-land, credit, education), conscientisation (or awareness of inequalities and ability to change them), participation (in all arenas of socio-political action) and control (over one's own life) (UNICEP cited in Karl, 1995). Empowerment is a way of defining, challenging and overcoming barriers of one's life through which people increase their ability to shape their own lives and environment. Normally women involvement in household activities and child care, besides these women substantially participate in homestead agriculture, poultry, and animal husbandry and non-farm activities and play a crucial role in maintaining food security in the family. Most of the NGOs in Bangladesh are working to involve of rural women in IGAs by micro-credit with the formation of group consisting of such vulnerable segment of the population are supposed to get empowered in and outside their family. Keeping this view in mind, the present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

- a) to determine the women empowerment status regarding the following aspect due to participation of IGAs for food security,
 - Contribution to household economy
 - Access to resources
 - Participation in decision making
 - Access to service providers
- b) To determine the selected characteristics of rural women.

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Main chapter

Methodology

Study area, sampling and collection data

The study was conducted randomly selected villages namely Goyshpur, Puspopara and Char Vabanipur of Sadar Upazilla under Pabna district. The household women of these three villages were the population. A total of 105 respondents (35 from each village) were selected as sample. Interview schedule was used for collecting data from the sampled respondents during January to March, 2012.

Measurement of independent variable

The independent variables such as age, education, family size and farm size were measured by using the measuring units of year, year of schooling, number of members and hectare respectively. The annual income was measured on the basis of total earning annually by all the members of the family and expressed in Taka. The agricultural knowledge of the rural women was calculated by asking 22 questions on various aspects of homestead gardening, crops harvesting and storage, livestock, fisheries, family nutrition etc. Training experience was computed by the number of days of training that a farmer had received. For the measurement of the socio-economic status of the women in the present study, different score such as education, family education, farm size, annual income etc. The psychological variables attitude and fatalism were measured by the asking of her extent of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements against by strongly agrees, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. Scores assigned to these responses were 4, 3, 2, 1 and 0 respectively for positive statements and reverse scoring for the negative statement.

Measurement of dependent variable

The dependent variable of women empowerment status of rural women through participating in IGAs for food security and nutrition was measured by computing of four aspects like a) contribution to household economy, b) access to resources, c) participation in decision making and d) access to service providers.

a) Contribution to household economy

Contribution to the household economy of rural women was regarded in terms of frequency of involvement in productive activities. In this study, eight activities were selected to measure this indicator, these included: homestead vegetables cultivation, poultry rearing, cattle rearing, small business, seed collection and preservation, fuel collection for cooking, bargaining on fixing price, daily food preparation and selling of food item. It was measured on a 4-point rating scale with a score of 0 representing 'none', 1 for 'low', 2 for 'medium' and 3 for 'high'. A cumulative score was worked out from the scores of ten items.

b) Access to resources

Accesses to resources mean the opportunities or power to use selected resources. Women have had poor access to schooling and higher education, especially among the rural poor. However, eight resources were selected in this study. These were handling family finances, equal consumption of food, ownership of land, independent IGA operation, emergency funds collection through asset sale, participation in local government activities and rural micro-credit facilities. It was measured on a 4-point rating scale with a score of 0 representing 'none', 1 for 'low', 2 for 'medium' and 3 for 'high' extent of excess to resources.

c) Participation in decision making

Participation in decision making refers to the extent of women's ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions regarding domestic, financial, health, farming and socio-political matters in co-ordination with other members of the household (Parveen, 2004). Seven issues were used to measure this aspect. These were: children's education, marriage of children, medical treatment of family, daily family expenditure, buying household, entertaining guests, land purchase and family planning. A 4-point rating scale was used to measure women empowerment in participation in decision making where, 0 stood for 'nil', 1 for 'low', 2 for 'medium' and 3 for 'high' level participation in decision making in the family. Finally, a cumulative participation in decision making score was calculated for each respondent based on the scores of ten issues.

d) Access to service provider

Access to service providers refers to the ability to call on public officials, private employer to account and use of funds. In the study, six items were asked to the women to measure access to service providers, which included government hospital, private clinic, NGO office, bank, family planning office and local school authority. A 4-point rating scale was used to measure access to service providers of women where stood for 'none', 1 for 'low', 2 for 'medium' and 3 for 'high' level of access to service providers. Descriptive statistics such as number, percentage, distribution, mean standard deviation and coefficient of variation were used in describing variables of the study. Correlation was employed for exploring relationship between dependent and independent variables.

Core messages and conclusions

Aspect wise empowerment status of rural women

a) Contribution to household economy

The score of contribution household to house hold economy of the respondents ranged from 8 to 25 against the possible range 0 to 30 having an average 18.25 and coefficient of variation 13.37. Based on their observed score, the women were categorized into three categories: poor (up to 13), moderate (14-20) and high (above 20). Data furnished in the Table 1 indicate that most of the women (53.34 percent) contributed medium to their household economy, while 25.71 and 20.95 percent of them contributed poorly and highly to household economy respectively.

Table 1. Distribution of the women according to contribution to household economy

Categories of the char women	Respondents		Range	Mean	CV (%)
	Number	Percent			
Low (up to 13)	27	25.71	8-25	18.25	13.37
Medium (14-20)	56	53.34			
High (above 20)	22	20.95			
Total	105	100			

Women have always made a very significant contribution to the household economy. There is no doubt that women's contribution to the family and national economy is much more that their actual earning (Laxmi, 1998).

b) Access to resources

The resources have been considered in the study having a possible range of 0 to 30. The observed scores of access to resources ranged from 6 to 27. The average score was 15.48 and coefficient of variation 19.83. Data presented in Table 2 that the highest proportion (80 percent) had medium access to resources, while 6.67 percent had low and 14.34 percent had high access to resources.

Table 2. Distribution of the women according to access to resources

Categories of the char women	Respondents		Range	Mean	CV (%)
	Number	Percent			
Low (6-12)	7	6.67	6-27	15.48	19.83
Medium (13-20)	84	80.00			
High (21-28)	14	13.34			
Total	105	100			

Women have a greater role in purchasing daily food items and catering for children's needs. However, the fact is that women in rural households usually eat after the male members have eaten.

c) Participation in decision making

Participation of decision making of the women respondents ranged from 9 to 28 with the average being 19.46 and a coefficient of variation 17.54. The half proportion (50.47) of the respondents had medium control over participation in decision making, while 14.29 percent had low and 35.24 had high control over participation in decision making (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of the women according to participation in decision making

Categories of the char women	Respondents		Range	Mean	CV (%)
	Number	Percent			
Low (9-15)	15	14.29	9-28	19.46	17.54
Medium (16-22)	53	50.47			
High (above 22)	37	35.24			
Total	105	100			

Some of the items of participation in decision making got higher scores, daily family expenditure, medical treatment of the family and children's education etc.

d) Access to service providers

Access to service providers score could range from 0 to 30 and observed ranged from 3 to 21 (Table 4). The average score was 10.11 and coefficient of variation 23.44. Based on their possible scores the respondents were classified into three categories. Data presented in the Table 4 that the highest proportion (75.24 percent) of the respondents had low access to service providers, while percent medium and percent had high access to service providers.

Table 4. Distribution of the women according to access to service providers

Categories of the char women	Respondents		Range	Mean	CV (%)
	Number	Percent			
Low (3-8)	79	75.24	3-21	10.11	23.44
Medium (9-15)	22	20.95			
High (above 15)	4	3.81			
Total	105	100			

Access to service providers was an important indicator to measure women empowerment and it is their right. Their access to NGO office, NGO doctor was higher than other items of service providers. On the contrary, access to bank and

other financial institute was the lowest because institutions do not provide credit or loan without mortgage, which NGOs do.

Overall Empowerment status

Empowerment status of the rural women was the dependent variable of the present study. It was measured with the six indicators. Table 5 reveals that the score of overall empowerment status of the respondents ranged from 45 to 142 against the possible range 0 to 180 having an average empowerment status 99.13 and coefficient of variation 13.82.

Table 5. Distribution of the women according to empowerment status

Categories of the char women	Respondents		Range	Mean	CV (%)
	Number	Percent			
Not empowered (0)	0	0	45-142	99.13	13.82
Low (1-60)	21	20.00			
Medium (61-120)	71	67.62			
High (above 120)	13	12.38			
Total	105	100			

Based on the observed scores, the subjects were categorized into four categories such as not empowered (0), low (1-60), medium (61-120) and high (above 120) as shown in the Table 13. Data furnished in the Table 5 indicate that most of the respondents (67.62 percent) were in medium empowerment category, while 20 and 12.38 percent of them were in low and high empowerment categories respectively.

Among the four indicators or aspects of empowerment the mean participation in decision making of the respondents was the highest (19.46) and access to service providers was the lowest (10.11). The findings also revealed that the mean of contribution to household economy was 18.25 and access to resources was 15.48. It indicates that the women empowerment was achieved to the highest extent regarding participation in decision making. The second highest empowerment of the women was contribution to household economy.

Characteristics of rural women

The respondent women's age varied from 21 to 55 years with a mean 32.60 years and coefficient of variation 20.21. The highest proportion (57.14 percent) of the respondent was middle aged while 34.86 and 8 percent were young and old aged category respectively. The level of education of women respondents were 0 to 10 having a mean 1.67 and coefficient of variation 120.38. Data reveals that more than half proportion (50.48 percent) of respondent was illiterate but their few could sign their name. The lowest proportion (3.81 percent) was secondary level and 45.71 percent had education at primary level. The numbers of the family member of the respondents from 2 to 11 with an average 5.14 and coefficient of variation 32.34. On the basis of family size scores the family were divided into three groups such as small (up to 4), medium (5 to 6) and large (above 6). The highest proportion (45.71 percent) of women medium family size, 30.47 percent had small family size and the rest 23.82 percent had large family size. The minimum farm size of the women respondent found in the study area was 0.2 ha and the maximum was 2.22 ha with a mean of 0.47 and coefficient of variation 80.71. The majority proportion (57.14 percent) of the respondents belonged to the small farm size group, 19.05 percent had medium farm size, same proportion was marginal and only 4.76 percent had large farm size. The family income of the respondents ranged from 29 to 151 thousand Taka with an average of 63.44 thousand Taka and coefficient of variation 28.32. The highest proportion (66.67 percent) had medium family income, while 28.57 percent low income and rest of them (4.76 percent) had high income. The findings indicate that the majority (95.24 percent) of the respondents had low to medium income category. Data also indicated that the highest proportion (60.95 percent) of the respondent women had medium agricultural knowledge while 24.76 percent had high and the rest of them (14.29 percent) had low agricultural knowledge. The majority of the respondents (74.29 percent) had short training experience while 25.71 percent had no training experience. The highest proportion (55.24 percent) of the women had medium socio-economic status as compared to 36.19 percent low status and 8.57 percent high status. Data indicated that highest proportion (62.86 percent) of the respondent women had moderately favorable attitude towards IGAs, while 30.47 percent had slightly favorable attitude and 6.67 percent had highly favorable attitude towards IGAs. The highest proportion (45.71 percent) of the respondents had very slight fatalistic, while 42.87 percent had medium slight and 11.42 percent had slight fatalistic character.

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