



Unseen Labor: The Struggle for Entitlement and Fair Wages

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Since achieving independence in 1971, women have played a significant role in agriculture, contributing to the foundational development of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. Though back then, agriculture was overwhelmingly perceived as a male domain. In 1974, women represented only 3.8% of the total agricultural workforce according to early national labor surveys [1]. Despite a gradual increase in women's participation, their privileges, including access to resources, credit, and control over resources and inputs, have not seen a corresponding rise in equality. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Labor Force Survey (LFS) 2022, women aged 15 and above in



agriculture now make up 26.2 % of the total workforce, while the rate for their male counterparts is 19.2 % [2]. This represents roughly 18.4 million women, surpassing the 13.55 million men currently working in the sector.



Female farmers of Bangladesh. Source: WAVE Foundation

Although women are engaged in agricultural work across all regions of Bangladesh, their roles vary by geography and production system, and their living and working conditions differ. Generally, female farmers in rural areas are left behind and are in a much more vulnerable position. In the Northern and Northwestern part of Bangladesh, women are primarily involved in rice cultivation, vegetable production, and post-harvest activities. FAO Bangladesh Country Gender Assessment (2024) reveals that over 60% of rural women are engaged in agricultural labor in many northern districts, such as Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Dinajpur. Women also contribute to aquaculture, including shrimp and crab farming, as well as homestead gardening, in the South-western and Coastal Areas of Bangladesh, such as Khulna, Bagerhat, Barishal, and Patuakhali. They mostly handle feeding, processing, and small-scale management. However, it is worth noting that ownership and control over aquaculture farms are dominated by men. In the Central Region, including Tangail, Mymensingh, and Gazipur, women's participation is mostly in poultry farming, small-scale dairying, and vegetable cultivation, often linked with homestead-based activities. [3]



From crop cultivation, livestock rearing, poultry farming, horticulture, home gardening, to overall farm work, female farmers are keeping agriculture alive. Their contribution, particularly in informal agricultural activities, is immense. Out of the 21 stages of crop production, women directly participate in 17 of them [4]. Despite their vast contributions to agriculture, female farmers do not receive proper recognition, which is a deliberate erasure of their class contribution. Much of their labor remains unpaid, and even when paid, it is far below market value.

The terminology ‘female farmers’ reflects the diversity among women, especially rural women’s engagement in agriculture. In Bangladesh, women’s engagement in agriculture spans a spectrum of social and economic positions, from landless wage laborers to smallholder farmers. The majority are landless or peasant women, working as unpaid family laborers or wage workers in rice fields, vegetable plots, or livestock rearing. A smaller segment consists of smallholder female farmers who cultivate small plots and combine crop production with poultry or dairy. Many of them engage with microfinance programs or NGO-led agricultural initiatives to sustain livelihoods. Only a small percentage of women agripreneurs—that is, women who own farms and enterprises involving agricultural products—manage commercial farms, fruit farms, and nurseries. Most of the farms and businesses are run by men. Due to the barriers of limited access to land ownership, credit, and mechanization, etc, it is rare to see women’s participation in large-scale agriculture. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) reports that women in rural Bangladesh are 20 % less likely to access formal credit than men, primarily due to their lack of land ownership and social exclusion from financial institutions [5]. Apart from this, one of the major issues is access to water and irrigation systems. Women generally can use water for crop or household purposes, but they do not have decision-making power over irrigation schedules or water resource management. The male farmer buys and operates the irrigation pump.



Agricultural Tools and Machinery of Bangladesh. Source: WAVE Foundation

On average, women earn nearly half the wages men receive for the same work. Unpaid labor in itself is a hidden surplus value that benefits landowners and capitalist systems. Not only are income inequalities, discrimination, and oppression against women farmers clearly evident in every aspect, such as access to resources, land ownership, entry into markets, price negotiations, integration into agricultural value chains, and extension services. Meanwhile, land, machinery, and credit are the ‘means of production’ from which they are systematically excluded. Female farmers remain systematically marginalized. And this is not the story of one country alone. The same scenario persists in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Indonesia, as well as many African countries; this is a global crisis.

In Asia, the condition of women farmers is quite mixed. On one hand, their participation in agriculture is increasing, contributing significantly to food sovereignty and national economies. On the other hand, much of their work remains unpaid, with limited social and economic recognition, leaving them in a vulnerable position. There is still no formal recognition of women agricultural laborers in many Asian countries, which prevents them from claiming their rights and social dignity.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women constitute over 50% of Bangladesh’s agricultural labor force [6]. Yet, they are not officially recognized as “farmers” by the Government or law. As a result, women are excluded from land



ownership, agricultural credit, and government facilities such as the ‘Farmer Card’. The Farmer Card is generally known as the ‘Krishi Card’ in Bangladesh. It is a government-issued card designed for farmers, which helps them collect agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides distributed by the Agricultural Ministry [7]. It also assists in crop production and marketing, and creates opportunities for financial inclusion. This card contains detailed information about the farmer, including their name, address, the size of their agricultural land, types of crops cultivated, and a list of government benefits received. In 2024, the Interim Government proposed to give a ‘Farmer Smart Card’ by 2030 [8]. This is more like the Farmer Card, but it will be a digital card. Although farmer cards were distributed by the previous government, there is no accurate data on how many women farmers have received or are using them. In reality, these cards are mostly issued in the names of male farmers. This reflects the systematic exploitation of women’s labor and wage discrimination in agriculture.

Women remain unseen workers in family farming. Without any financial compensation, they work regularly on family land. Some even spend long hours drying and preserving harvested crops to receive nothing more than three meals a day in return. Despite contributing enormous labor, they have no ownership over production. They cannot participate in decision-making regarding crop production, sales, or income. It is important to note that the family unit is not a neutral space, but a site of unpaid domestic and farm labor that reproduces the labor force at no cost to the system. Most women farmers do not own land. According to the World Bank, only around 13 percent of women have sole or joint ownership of agricultural land, compared to 70 percent of men. [5]. Without land titles, they are denied access to agricultural loans or any free inputs from the government.

Discrimination does not end here. In most cases, women do not get opportunities to attend agricultural training. Although a few women can join small local sessions near their homes, they are almost absent from residential training programs. They are also far behind in using agricultural technologies. Most farming machinery, including tractors, is not women-friendly, leaving them dependent on men. Internet services and agricultural apps are also less accessible to them. Our patriarchal social structure



prevents women from becoming empowered, placing restrictions on their use of modern technologies. Social norms, superstitions, and religious conservatism are among the major factors driving this exclusion.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 68.1% of Bangladeshi women are engaged in agriculture [9]. However, they lack access to and control over the benefits of their labor. They cannot sell their produce directly in markets and must depend on male family members for sales. Even when products are sold, women are rarely able to decide how the money will be spent. In many cases, they cannot claim the income at all, as it is not considered the earnings of their own. These structural barriers keep female farmers in Bangladesh struggling. This is how women farmers continue to suffer in silence. The fight for rights and fair wages among women in agriculture is not just about money; it is also about gender equality and human rights.

To sustain agriculture, women's contributions must be recognized and valued. Policies and actions must ensure fair wages, reduce the burden of unpaid labor. Women farmers must be formally recognized as 'Farmers'. Agricultural resources and capital must be in their hands. Land ownership is crucial, but even if it cannot be ensured right away, women must at least have access to agricultural credit. Women-friendly agricultural technologies must be ensured. Women farmers deserve equal access to all facilities, rights, and opportunities as well as men.

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