

# THE BUSINESS STANDARD

## Empowering coastal women for a sustainable tomorrow

With little access to resources and assets, limited mobility, food insecurity, inadequacy or absence of relevant skill development opportunities, ultra-poor coastal women are left extremely vulnerable to climate change



Due to climate change, more men are forced to migrate to cities while the women left behind struggle to run their families. Photo: Tarek Mahmud.

According to Germanwatch's 2021 Global Climate Risk Index, Bangladesh is seventh on the list of countries most vulnerable to climate devastation. The report estimated that the country lost 11,450 people, suffered economic losses worth \$3.72 billion, and witnessed 185 extreme weather events from 2000 to 2019 due to climate change.

The southwestern part of Bangladesh is very prone to natural disasters induced by climate change, which causes more frequent and intensive storms, floods, and cyclones in the region.

These events have already left a destructive mark on the poorest people in the coastal regions, especially women. These extreme poor women suffer from limited access to resources and assets, limited mobility, food insecurity, inadequacy or absence of relevant skill development opportunities, low-level of awareness, and weak social networks.

With recurring issues like increased salinity, drought, and prolonged waterlogging, the sufferings of coastal women are getting worse every year.

As livelihoods become uncertain due to climate change, more and more men are migrating to cities for work, leaving behind the women in the villages with little or no money to run the family.

In many families, women are not allowed to work due to their household responsibilities or conservative social norms. Women's lower bargaining power in the household keeps them from utilising and accessing household resources and making important decisions.

Ultra-poor women in coastal regions who must work have to compete with the men remaining in the villages for the limited jobs that are available. Not only that, but they also receive lower wages than men. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly reduced their already meagre income.

What's more? Often climate change most seriously affects the sectors that women in Bangladesh are most involved with. One of such sectors is aquaculture. According to the World Bank, 1.4 million women in Bangladesh are engaged in aquaculture. The work can be a source of empowerment and it is often the first means of livelihood for rural women.

Over the past few decades, increasing salinity has been a problem in the region, forcing farmers to choose fish farming in 'gher' or 'fishpond'. For coastal women, particularly those who are poor, fish farming became a major source of employment.

However, this business is becoming highly uncertain because of flooding in the monsoon season and even during the off-season. This has seriously affected the livelihoods of ultra-poor women living in the coastal regions.

The pre-existing vulnerabilities of these women, as mentioned above, are interacting with the climate impacts and making their lives even more vulnerable.

A sustainable path to overcome poverty can be achieved by increasing the resilience of ultra-poor women against disasters and climate crises. In other words, sustainability in the coastal belt can only be achieved if the ultra-poor women are empowered to survive the hazards of natural disasters. And it means helping them to access skills, resources,

and knowledge, and information. It means empowering them to make important decisions for themselves and their families.

NGOs like Brac are working with many of these vulnerable women to help them become resilient against climate change. Among them, Brac's ultra-poor graduation (UPG) programme is a noteworthy initiative. Through this programme, Brac reaches the most vulnerable women in the coastal region and provides them with productive assets, training, and knowledge about climate-adaptive practices.

The programme puts emphasis on increasing awareness about women empowerment along with other concerning issues so that women have a greater social presence. UPG-like holistic approaches, designed with the specific vulnerabilities of the ultra-poor coastal women in mind, would be instrumental in making sure that this marginal group do not suffer disproportionately due to climate change.

Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University, is working closely with Brac to find out the most effective approaches to ensuring the livelihoods of the poor people, particularly women, who are affected by climate change.

The true perils of ultra-poor women living in coastal Bangladesh receive little attention in national or international dialogue on climate change adaptation. But precisely the groups like this should be at the centre in our effort to become a climate resilient nation.

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