



## Assessing Empowerment of Farm Women: The Case of Barisal Sadar Upazila

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### Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Author IJ designed the study, wrote the protocol, carried out all field work and performed the statistical analysis. Authors ATMSH and MGRA supervised the work and managed the literature searches and edited the manuscript. Author MKH managed the analyses of the study and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to determine the extent of empowerment of the trained farm women and also to explore the influential factors of their empowerment status. The study was conducted at 5 villages of Kashipur union in Barisal Sadar upazila in Bangladesh. Data was collected from randomly selected 114 women from these villages using a pre-tested interview schedule during 2 February to 10 March 2016. The overall empowerment status scores of the farm women ranged from 28 to 83 against a possible range of 0 to 126. The sampled women had a low-medium level of empowerment ( $M = 48.23$ ). Among the five dimensions of empowerment, psychological and economic empowerment dominated over the other dimensions. Coefficient of correlation showed that out of 10 selected characteristics of the farm women, education, family education, annual family income, savings, training experience and communication exposure had positive significant relationships with their empowerment status.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women constitute roughly half of the humanity. “Women perform 66% of the world’s work, produce 50% of the food, but earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the property” [1]. This shows that the economic status of women is in pathetic condition and this is more so in a country like Bangladesh [2]. Rural society is still male dominated and the women face considerable extent of constraints both inside and outside the four walls of the house due to the existing structure in the household and society [3]. In fact, they are treated as weak and dependent on men. Therefore, Bangladeshi women enjoy an unfavorable status in the society.

The position of women in any society is an index of its civilization [4]. No country can achieve its potential without adequately investing in and developing the capabilities of women. The very concept of empowerment of women which is based on equality between sources is a long drawn conscious continuous process comprising enhancement in decision making. Empowerment is an active multidimensional process which should enable women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life [5]. Gainful empowerment has been viewed as a critical entry points for women’s participation in income generating activities which enhance their status and decision making power.

Women empowerment is a widely investigated issue, nonetheless, the topic still remains in multifaceted forms. There is no universal definition of women empowerment. Few examples could be important here. World Bank mentioned empowerment broadly as an expansion of freedom of choice and action that needs an expansion of asset and capabilities [6]. UNICEF emphasizes inequality in defining women empowerment [7]. It states women empowerment as the women’s access, awareness, capacity, control and actions over minimizing inequality. UNDP also focuses on inequalities in economic and political participation and decision-making power and power over economic resources to measure women empowerment [8]. Empowerment can also be seen at different levels: personal (self-confidence); relational (ability to negotiate); and collective (ability to influence policy) [9].

Following these literatures, in this study, empowerment has been measured with economic (asset endowment and decision over asset utilization), psychological (self-confidence), social (relational), cultural and political context [10].

Training has been considered as a prerequisite to asset endowment through taking part in income generating activities. Training greatly helps rural women to understand their rights and freedom of expression. It is evident that training enhances women’s confidence and self-esteem, occupational business and entrepreneurial skills, generation of income to build a better life of Syrian refugees in Jordan [11]. This confidence building improves their personality and respect in the society etc. Women’s trainings through various organizations, both government and non-government, are playing very important role in increasing visible bargaining power of women to strengthen their voices in development. Trainings play a very vital role in empowerment of women psychologically, culturally, socially, economically and politically i.e. in all spheres of life. Keeping in view the empowerment status of women trained through various organizations, the present study was undertaken with the objective to study the extent of empowerment of the farm women.

Organizations dealing with women empowerment claim that they are successful in improving women empowerment status through involving a large number of women in their development programs. But few organizations investigate and report the extent of empowerment of their beneficiaries. For an expected level of farm women development, organizations have to find out the empowerment level of farm women and initiate special programs for long lasting women empowerment. To formulate regional development strategies, it is necessary to assess the women empowerment at regional level as in this case the Barisal Sadar upazila in Bangladesh has been selected. In this regard, the study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the empowerment status of the farm women who received training on different income generating activities?
2. What are the characteristics of farm women that influence their empowerment status?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, it was hypothesized that the farm women of Barisal Sadar upazila (sub-district) had been empowered after being participated in different training programs related to crops, vegetables, livestock, handicrafts etc. as their income generating activities. The second hypothesis was that there were certain socio-economic characteristics of the women that were associated with their empowerment status. Primary data from face to face interview through household survey were collected to test the hypotheses. The data sources were the farm women, who received training on different income earning activities in Barisal Sadar upazila of Barisal district of southern Bangladesh. From Kashipur union of Sadar upazila, 5 villages viz. Isakathi, Chohudpur, Gonpara, Koladanga, Diyapara were selected randomly. All the women (1140 in number) as housewives of the farm households except landless farm households of these villages trained from different GOs and NGOs constituted the sampling frame of the study. A total of 114 were selected randomly from the sampling frame.

Ten selected characteristics of the women were considered as the independent variables that could be associated with their empowerment status. The characteristics were: age, education, family size, farm size, family education, annual family income, own savings, training experience, communication exposure and fatalism. Their measurement techniques have been summarized in Table 1.

The dependent variable was the empowerment status of rural farm women. It was measured with five dimensions namely, economic empowerment (9 statements), political empowerment (5 statements), psychological empowerment (6 statements), social empowerment (14 statements) and cultural empowerment (8 statements) [10]. These components have been selected from a long list of components of women empowerment considering the applicability in the selected study areas [12]. Thus, a total of 42 statements for five dimensions were used to measure the empowerment status with a 4-point rating scale (0 for not at all, 1 for low, 2 for medium and 3 for high). In this way, the total scores for 42 statements could vary from 0 to 126. Economic empowerment indicates the access and control over productive resources by

the women to ensure economic autonomy. Political component states the women's ability to organize social change. Psychological empowerment measures the extent to which the women believe that they can act to uplift their social status [13]. Social and cultural dimensions measure the relational and collective aspects of empowerment with women's freedom of movement, visibility in social spaces, participation in social network, positive media images and access to education [12].

Descriptive statistical measures, such as frequency, range, mean, standard deviation and rank order were used to describe and interpret the data. For exploring the association between empowerment status of the women and their characteristics Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was computed using their total score of empowerment status.

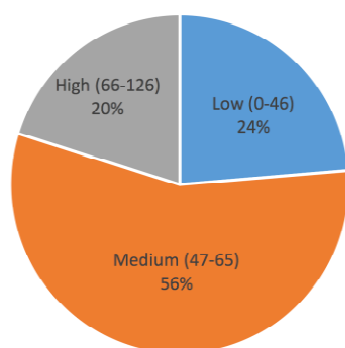
## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Women Empowerment Status

The sampled women had relatively lower empowerment status ( $M = 48.23$ ,  $SD = 21.23$  against a highest possible score of 126). Similar findings have been mentioned by another study [14]. This indicates that though the farm women received training on different crops and vegetables, hygiene and nutrition, their power position in the households remains in lower status. Many of them know their rights, but they are not yet ready to exercise their rights in the households. This might be due to their mental construct that has been built based on the existing social constellation where they have been experiencing the male dominance [15]. Their voice in the family may sometimes be the reasons for unhappy consequences. For example, in extreme cases, breaking up relation with husband is very precarious for the women. The men can easily start family life through second marriage but this is very difficult for the women. However, the divorced women become the burden of their parents in their older age. In addition, the society cannot provide them security to live alone. All these experiences pull them backward state of less empowered even after having participated in different training programs. However, there are 20% women in the sample who had high empowerment status (Fig. 1). So, the society is changing. In the coming days, their empowerment status could be in increasing trend.

**Table 1. Measurement techniques of independent variables**

Independent variables	Measurement techniques
1. Age	Actual age in years from birth to the day of interview.
2. Education	Years of schooling or highest class of school attained by the respondent women.
3. Family education	Total years of schooling completed by all the family members.
4. Family size	Total number of members living and sharing foods together in the same house.
5. Farm size	Measured in hectare in terms of full benefit to the family; sharecropped or leased land areas were divided by two and the results were added to homestead and own land under own cultivation to obtain the farm size.
6. Annual family income	Total monetary value of the outputs from both agricultural and non-agricultural sources of income and expressed in thousand BDT (Bangladeshi currency).
7. Own savings	Total amount in BDT saved in home or financial institutions.
8. Training experience	Measured in terms of total number of days of training received on different income generating activities.
9. Communication exposure	A total of 21 information sources were included in the interview schedule to know their frequency of contact with the respective sources per unit of time. Thereafter, a subjective score (0 to 4) was given to each of the sources based on the frequency of contact. Total score of all the sources was the observed value for this variable.
10. Fatalism	It reveals the extent of dependency of the respondent women on luck or own effort to uplift their livelihood standard. It was measured with 5-point Likert type scale (1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for undecided, 4 for agree and 5 for strongly agree) with 8 statements. Reverse scoring was done for negative statements. Total score represents the value of this variable. Higher score represents more dependency on luck i.e. more fatalistic attitude.



**Fig. 1. Women empowerment status**  
(Figures in the parentheses show score range)

Further segregation of the empowerment status through ranking of the dimensions of empowerment has been presented in Table 2. This ranking was done using the weighted average scores (observed total score divided by possible total score) of each of the dimensions, because the different dimensions do not have an equal number of statements. It was found that the farm women had the highest empowerment regarding psychological and

economic dimensions that had observed scores about half of the respective possible scores. The women having training can participate in income generating activities. They have a scope to spend their earned money for what they wish to spend. Their enhanced economic solvency contributes to make them psychologically strong. Thanks to government and non-government initiatives that provides training and legal supports to protect women's right. These initiatives are playing important role in women empowerment regarding psychological and economic dimensions.

**Table 2. Rank order of different dimensions of empowerment**

Rank	Dimensions	Weighted average
1	Psychological	0.53
2	Economic	0.46
3	Political	0.37
4	Cultural	0.35
5	Social	0.34

The constitutional right of the women has been tried to ensure through increasing women's

participation in political activities from local government to ministry level. However, the case of the farm women is different. The rural women's voice is timid in political sphere. They cannot exert pressure in rural arbitration and business negotiation to a substantial extent. Therefore, their political empowerment is relatively lower than psychological and economic dimensions. However, the cultural and social empowerment were in the lowest rank. Culture is a slowly changing social attributes. Rural infrastructure, women education and their income can be improved more easily than improving the cultural component in favor of women empowerment. This culture is closely linked to the societal behavior of the people. Even at present, the women cannot freely run their business as comfortably as men. Where the men can work outside till night, the women's security is extremely limited. Therefore, the blame is pointed towards the social insecurity of the women. They do not feel safe to struggle for their rights within their households because the society is not yet congenial to ensure the women's right. Thus, the cultural and social empowerment status of the farm women ranked in the lowest position.

### 3.2 Salient Features of Sampled Women

Summary of the salient features of the selected women has been presented in Table 3. The sampled women were mostly in the middle-aged category ( $M = 45.60$  years). The farm women were selected from those who had training experience. The younger women who started their family life after marriage had more restrictions to go outside of their houses to

receive training. On the other hand, the older women had less motivation to be trained on farm activities. Consequently, middle-aged women dominated the sample. The literacy rate among the women was 72%. The trained farm women had on an average a primary level of education. A minimum level of education is needed for a successful training program. At the same time, the illiterate women also need training. So, opportunity is given for all women irrespective of their educational attainment. It would be easier to achieve empowerment through training together with education because education enhances awareness of rights and responsibilities. However, their family education average was slightly higher than their individual education level.

Family size of the respondent women was of larger size. A unit family concept having two children and parents i.e. 4-member ideal family is still rare in the rural areas. Either the number of children might be more than two or their parents/siblings might stay together that increase their average family size ( $M = 6.14$ ). However, their household farm size was higher than the national average landholdings per household, because the landless women are technically excluded from the farm related training as they do not have the opportunity to apply their skill. Average annual household income was about BDT 87 thousand which becomes BDT 39 per capita per day. It is even difficult for them to afford three meals a day with this income let alone the other non-food expenses. It is a good sign that even with this misery situation they have a little savings that act as a security against their more hardship situation.

**Table 3. Summary of women's characteristics**

Characteristics	Possible range with units	Mean	SD
1. Age	- years	45.60	10.44
2. Education	- years of schooling	5.42	4.53
3. Family education	- years of schooling	7.5	2.73
4. Family size	- number	6.14	2.43
5. Farm size	- hectare	1.43	1.68
6. Annual family income	- thousand BDT	87.04	42.11
7. Own savings	- thousand BDT	13.56	1.03
8. Training received	- days	9.18	3.65
9. Communication exposure	0 - 84 score	31.83	7.55
10. Fatalism	8 - 40 score	23.23	8.76

<sup>†</sup> indicates unknown figures

The respondent women had on an average 9.18 days of training experience. Rural households in Bangladesh operate mixed type of farm activities. In order to acquire skill for farm activities, they need longer duration of training exposure. Communication is vital to be aware of rights and duties. In general, the male partners of the household maintain communication with the information sources for their farm related information. Thus, the women had apparently lower communication exposure. Finally, the women had less fatalistic attitude i.e. they believe that their own effort is more important than only being dependent on luck for their betterment. This is an optimistic situation that they are now aware that fortune would not come without hard work.

### 3.3 Influencing Factors of Women Empowerment

In order to discover the influencing factors of women empowerment, correlation coefficient (r) of the selected characteristics of the women with their total empowerment status was computed and presented in Table 4. Findings demonstrate that women empowerment has significant positive correlation with education, family education, annual family income, savings, training experience and communication exposure. On the other hand, women empowerment was not associated with age, family size, farm size and fatalistic attitude of the women. These findings are consistent with other studies [14,16,17].

Education is an important factor that influences women empowerment. It increases the awareness of the women and strengthen their voice in the household, community and state level. The educated women know their legal rights. Thus, education and family education positively influence women empowerment. Women's own education is not enough to improve women empowerment because empowerment does not work in isolation. Empowerment is like a power balancing process. In case of women empowerment, women will have more power and men will compromise their own control to ensure women's right. If only women know their rights through proper education but the men are not aware of women's right, women empowerment will not be enhanced. All the family members necessarily need to be aware of women empowerment. Therefore, overall family education positively influences women empowerment.

**Table 4. Factors influencing women empowerment**

Characteristics	'r' values with empowerment	p-values
Age	-0.092	0.330
Education	0.285**	0.002
Family education	0.298**	0.001
Family size	0.121	0.120
Farm size	0.103	0.275
Annual family income	0.378**	0.000
Own savings	0.529**	0.000
Training experience	0.227*	0.015
Communication exposure	0.205*	0.029
Fatalism	0.180	0.055

\* and \*\* indicate significant at 5 and 1% level of probability

Empowerment in the sense of ability to control over life events necessarily depends on the property possession. As a thumb rule, the more property/ income endowment, the more will be the empowerment. Thus, women from the richer households (higher annual income) tend to enjoy higher empowerment. Richer household in terms of annual income is not an exogenous variable rather depends on several factors such as education, occupation, asset holding etc. The women from these households enjoy greater economic and decision making freedom within the household. They can also participate in various social and economic activities like festivals, training, negotiations with small business partners etc. that enhance their control over their course of life events. They feel less pressure from other household members in case of spending money for child education, household food, clothing and so on. In this way, families with higher annual income tend to have more empowerment. Similar to the annual income, own savings of the women is positively correlated with their empowerment status. Thus, the women having more own savings had relatively higher empowerment status. Higher savings reflect in higher economic solvency of the women. Though the sources of these savings might include the part of their own income or income from their husbands, still they can utilize the saved money in case of need. Saved money can also be transformed into household assets owned by the women. So, their control over resources increases and thereby empowerment status is improved.

Training and communication exposure introduce the women with outer world of their confined territory inside the household. Though all the women respondents were trained in different income generating activities, there was considerable extent of variation among the women regarding training experience. The trained women can apply their skill to increase their income through diversified income generating activities. As explained before, increased income contributes to more economic and decision making freedom. In this way, training exposure of the women is positively associated with their empowerment status. Finally, communication exposure of the women increases their social network. The more cosmopolitan women can contact with different information sources and their knowledge horizon becomes widened. Thus, women empowerment increases with the increase of communication exposure.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that the sampled women had a low medium level of empowerment status. The women have achieved a considerable level of empowerment after being participated in different training programs related to homestead farming, food and nutrition, and different income generating activities. The psychological and economic empowerment dominated over other dimensions of women empowerment. Social security is inadequate to ensure desired level of women empowerment. The very low level of social empowerment is represented through their political and cultural empowerment that are also in misery condition. Education, family education, annual family income, savings, training experience and communication exposure of the women positively influence their empowerment status. In order to uplift their empowerment status, social security programs of the government should be monitored properly to ensure their enforcement in favor of the farm women. Besides, women's involvement in income generating activities with the provision of training needs to be continued in a sustainable way. Education is important for empowerment. Women's literacy rate is increasing due to government's policy of free primary and secondary education for the women. It is surprising that improvement of women empowerment is not consistent with the increase of their educational attainment. This is a small extent study concerning women empowerment through training, which is a limitation to

generalize the findings for a wider context. Nevertheless, the urgency of further research concerning social empowerment of the farm women cannot not be ignored.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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