

# Women's Leadership in Coastal Water Management

A community perspective from south west Bangladesh



## Background

Absence of clean water and safe sanitation facilities poses a serious threat to Bangladesh's future especially to women and children. Currently, 36%<sup>1</sup> of children under 5 years of age suffer from chronic malnutrition, which is partially caused by the lack of access to clean water and safe sanitation. In coastal areas of Bangladesh the situation is further exacerbated and more than 70 million people are affected by climate change<sup>2</sup>, only 35.2% of households are using recommended water treatment technologies and 34.5% households can obtain drinking water in less than 30 minutes<sup>3</sup>. This exacerbates risk for women and adolescent girls, who are typically tasked with fetching, carrying, storing and managing household water.

In Bangladesh, there is a gender gap with regard to women leadership in water management from national, municipal to local level governance. Women rarely make decisions for policies and strategies, water resource management, or tariff-setting and technology-choices. Women are absent in key areas of water-related decision making. To narrow the gender gap in leadership at all levels of the water sector, and to ensure water security for all, there needs to be more equity, and women need to have greater involvement in decision making<sup>4</sup>.

Since 2015, the Nobo Jatra project<sup>5</sup> has sought to improve the food security, nutrition and resilience of vulnerable communities, especially children under 5, in the Khulna and Satkhira districts of south west Bangladesh through a multi-sectoral set of interventions. This includes new investments in water and sanitation and efforts also ensure women's leadership in water management and governance.

The mobilization and strengthening of local WatSan committees, composed of government and community leaders, serves as a cornerstone of the project's WASH programming. Nobo Jatra project develops strong community WMCs with significant representation of women to ensure water facilities provide safe, sufficient, equitable and sustainable water service. The majority of Union and Ward WatSan committees in Nobo Jatra working areas were non-functional, so the project undertook intensive capacity building and mentoring, working with local leaders to recruit women and youth into the committees and provided them with leadership training to ensure their meaningful participation in local WASH sector improvement. Till now, Nobo Jatra has mobilized and strengthened 40 Union WatSan committees with 892 members (23% or 214 women) and 360 Ward WatSan committees with 5,599 members (32% or 1841 women).

Nobo Jatra also developed and reactivated 549 Water Management Committees (WMCs) with 6,102 members (48% or 2962 women) because study shows that, the high incidence of non-functioning water systems in project area is caused largely by lack of local ownership and insufficient capacity/lack of functionality of local water management committees (WMC) <sup>6</sup>. Significantly, within each WMC, at least one woman member holds a leadership role, typically that of treasurer – a critical role in terms of committee resource management and allocation within the community. According to monitoring data, 1,610 women are in leadership positions; among them 524 are treasurers, 61 presidents, 126 vice-presidents, 101 secretaries and 798 are caretakers. Empowerment of women with regard to 'water and sanitation' is the catalyst to serve in these committees as they are directly involved in the transport, storage and treatment of water and to take care of health, hygiene and sanitation at household level. Thus, Nobo Jatra project envisions women leadership to improve water and sanitation in the 40 Unions of Khulna and Satkhira districts of Bangladesh.

<sup>1</sup> See World Bank, Prevalence of stunting, height for age (% of children under 5), UNICEF, WHO, World Bank: Joint child malnutrition estimates (JME). available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.STNT.ZS?locations=BD>

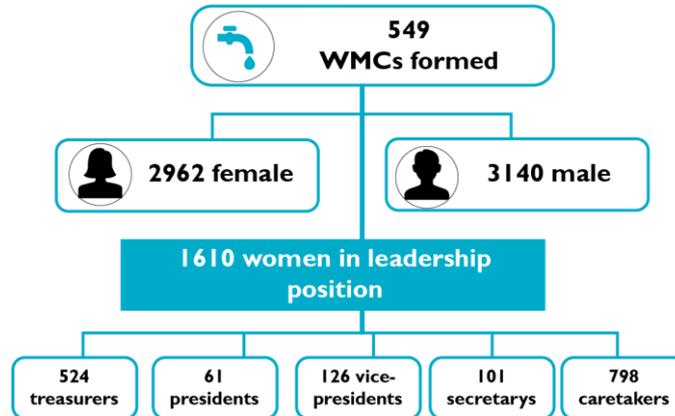
<sup>2</sup> World Bank, 2018. Bangladesh Disaster Risk and Climate Resilience Program. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/brief/bangladesh-disaster-risk-climate-change-program>.

<sup>3</sup> Nobo Jatra Baseline data. Available at <http://www.wvb-nobojatra.org/>

<sup>4</sup> From the Shallows to the Deep: Who is Taking the Lead? Women, Water and Leadership: A Workshop for Asia and the Pacific. ADB headquarters, Manila. 13–14 February 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Nobo Jatra is a USAID funded food security activity led by World Vision in consortium with Winrock International, and World Food Programme and implementing in coordination with MoDMR. For detail see, <https://www.wvb-nobojatra.org>

<sup>6</sup> Khulna Division WASH Assessment, World Vision, December 2014



In January 2018, the first phase of a longitudinal study to better understand the nature of women's leadership as a driver for water management, resource allocation and sustainability of the committees. A detailed literature review captured impact and good practices from different NGO projects in Bangladesh; in addition, field research was undertaken to accumulate and synthesize data and information about women's leadership in improving management of WASH resources.

Now in its fourth year, the second phase of the study was undertaken to capture impacts of women's leadership for improving management and sustainability of water points and WatSan committees. This is an in-depth investigation that captures the opportunity to understand the nature of women's involvement in water management committees and learn from best practices. This learning will be used to strengthen adaptive management principles within the project – and will also form the basis of facilitative and supportive activities in the final year of the project to ensure that key outcomes in women's leadership in water governance are sustained.

It is also imperative to know the extent in which different projects contributed to women's ability and leadership for maintenance and sustainability of community's water resources, particularly in south west Bangladesh.

### Objective of the study

The main objective of the study was to ascertain the extent of women's leadership in WASH committees has improved at community level.

The key research questions were,

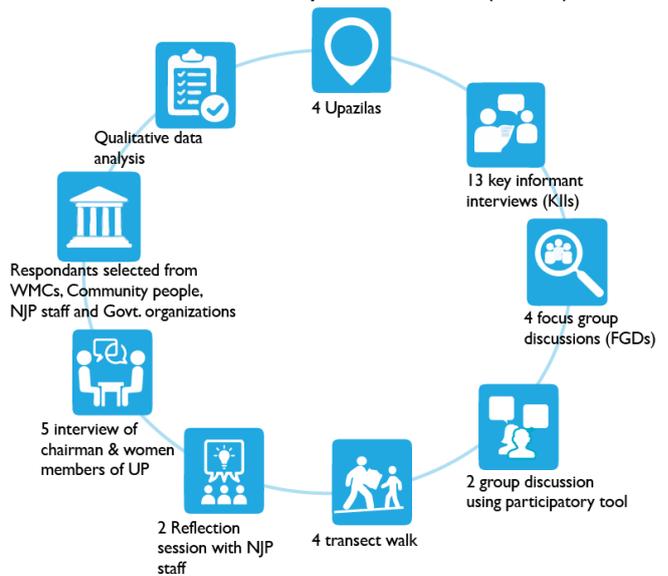
- To what extent women have been playing leadership role for the management and functionality of water points?
- How do women lead committees? Are committees'  proactive,  active and  not active?
- To what degree women have access to and control over resources? How do women decide at personal, private/family, and public/community level?
- To what level has gender equality been achieved? Provide empirical evidences?

### Method and tools for data collection

Data collection took place in 4 sub districts; Kaliganj, Shyamnagar, Dacope and Koyra. Respondents were mostly members of water management and WatSan committees, Nobo Jatra WASH component staff at sub district level, chairmen and members of Union Parishad and community people. Women leaders, maintaining community water points such as Pond Sand Filters (PSFs), tube wells and reverse osmosis<sup>7</sup>, have been given preferences as respondents of this research paper.

<sup>7</sup> A fee based climate smart and improved technology intensive saline water treatment plant.

A range of tools were applied for data collection. In addition to Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) there were in-depth discussions applying participatory tools, transect walk near water points, consultation, and review-reflection by the implementing staff of the program. There were four FGDs, thirteen KIIs, two group discussions using participatory tools, four transect walk, five interviews of chairmen and women members of Union Parishad, two consultations and two reflection sessions for this research endeavor.



Objective of the research was explained to respondents and consent was taken for interviews and discussions. Findings were noted and recoded where necessary. Brown papers and markers were used for participatory discussion and reflection sessions.

### Findings from the qualitative inquiries

#### Access to drinking water

Ponds and some nonfunctional Pond Sand Filters (PSFs) were found in some villages ; communities were not capable to excavate ponds or to repair PSFs. Nobo Jatra had formed water management committees, placed women in leadership positions, and capacitated women leaders through training; In addition, the project had channeled fund for the installation and repairing of PSFs, reverse osmosis and tube wells. As researchers observed, availability of a PSF or tube well and installation of RO in a village is an incredible asset for people living there. According to respondents, PSFs have increased access to safe drinking water for the community people, thus, they do not need to drink pond water anymore or to walk a long way for collecting water.



#### Women leaders are information rich and messenger for safe water, sanitation, health and hygiene



Women leaders in the WMCs received training on operation and maintenance, water safety plan, caretaker's role, tariff collection, management and leadership. Besides, attending a range of sessions on social and behavioral change communication, women leaders in the Nobo Jatra project area visit door to door and counsel households about safe water, sanitation and hygiene practices. Essentially, women leaders are WASH advocates on ground and have gained trust and respect of community people through such awareness raising initiatives.

Women leaders of WMCs and WatSan committees also play significant role in the campaign for Open Defecation Free (ODF) villages. As part of their role, women leaders arrange meeting, rally and discussion session at Union level on World Environment Day, World Health Day, World Water Day, World Toilet Day and Global Hand Washing Day observation.



Women leaders of WMCs and WatSan committees visit door to door and attend courtyard session to educate households about safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation. Hence, availability of hygiene products is important to meet project's goal, which is ensured by the women entrepreneurs. Therefore, program is not just limited within information dissemination on WASH, rather women entrepreneurs have been selling hygiene products at union and village level. Hygiene products include sanitary napkin, soap, plastic baby potty, tooth brush, pest, hand washing devices, bucket, toilet tissue and toilet cleaning materials; they run business from the profit they make.

They maintain book keeping to record income and expenditure; some entrepreneurs sell hygiene products door to door.

### Box I. Quotes from respondents

"It is not raining during monsoon, this is unusual. 30 to 40 years back ponds were filled with rain water. Nowadays, water layer in the pond is low and shortage of freshwater. We are facing this challenge to keep PSF functional. There are shrimp culture fields all around; this has caused saline water intrusion into the ponds. Our generation is experiencing severe lack of fresh water in the ponds"-Members of WMC, Ward-8, Dudli village, Munshiganj union, Shyamnagar

"Nobo Jatra installs water points closer to our households; now we can collect water from nearby water sources, which save our time and energy"-Hemlota Mondol, Vice President of Uttor Amtola Solar PSF WMC, Dacope.

"Women are more sincere and active to save the water points as they were the most sufferer earlier; and women are more available than men for taking care of the water points. That's why we voted them as our WMC leaders"-Taposh Mistri, President of Modhumoti RO plant and Union Parishad member, Dacope.

### Women leadership in the WMCs

In some cases, the number of women members are even higher than male members in WMCs. For example, there are six women members and four male members in the PSF at Amina village, Tarali union of Kaliganj sub district; 7 women and 5 male members in Solar PSF of Uttor Amtola village in Dacope sub-district; and 7 women members and 3 male members in the PSF-committee of Sundarban Secondary Girls High school in Munshiganj union of Kaliganj sub district. Women are holding the leadership positions of these WMCs such as president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and caretaker. It is quite evident that women are the majority and they are taking decisions for these committees. Committees led by women are active with regard to maintenance and management of the PSF. Women leaders usually convene every month for meetings and action points are taken as meeting resolution. When problem occurs, emergency meetings are called on short notice.

Women leaders also raise awareness among community people, so that, water in the pond is not contaminated by bathing, washing, and dumping of waste. Women leaders in the Amian village also moved a latrine through negotiation with the households adjacent to the pond, women leaders lead to clean the pond surface and excavate the pond in Uttor Amtola village. Women leaders visited Union Parishad and

talked to chairmen and members; none the less, they also visited government offices at Upazila level. This has significantly increased women's mobility outside their villages.

Members of WMC in Ward no-2 of Munshiganj union, Shyamnagar, said, during an in-depth discussion using participatory tools, *“before joining this project, we did not hold positions in any committee and join meetings in communities. We had to seek permission from husbands to go outside from home even. We did not have opportunities to spend money. We were afraid to talk in public. We have had lack of awareness and experience. Now family members and people in the community respect our opinions because we are members of WMC.”*

After being empowered in the committee, they can talk fearlessly and analyze problem. Hence, they have gained dignity in the society. WMC in Munshiganj union has savings account in Agrani bank and WMC in Tarai union has account in Krisi bank; these two state owned leading commercial bank of Bangladesh. Women leaders can spend money for water point maintenance by withdrawing money from banks.

### **Decision making ability of women members**

Chairperson/ Vice-chairperson: chairperson of WMC is an empowered person in the community context because she is leading a committee, calling meetings, taking actions, planning and budgeting for smooth operation of the water point. While having FGDs, it is found that chairperson of a PSF in Amian village in Kaliganj is also member of Village Development Committee as well as member of WatSan committee. She attends numerous meetings on different issues and provides her opinions and comments.

Secretary: Secretary calls monthly meetings, writes resolutions and follow-up action points. She has to communicate to Union Parishad and officers at sub district level when required.

Treasurer/ Cashier: The treasure has a critical position within committees as they have financial decision making authority – as signatory for the WMC bank account and also in tariff collection. Most of the banks are situated at sub district; thus, treasurer needs to visit bank every month and deposits money to the account. Sometimes treasurer has to withdraw money for repairing PSFs. This has increased women's long term financial resiliency, mobility and ability about financial management and accounting.

*“We opened bank account in Krishi bank on 2017 with a savings amount Tk. 5000. We collect tariff from villagers on monthly basis. I visit to Kaliganj town by rickshaw van for depositing and withdrawing money from the bank.” - Atifa, Treasurer, WMC, Tarali union, Kaliganj*

Caretakers: Selected caretakers monitor overall functionality of the water points, this includes cleaning of the pond and sand filters of PSFs, maintain water collection timing, testing of water quality and so on. She received advanced training and tools from Nobo Jatra project about repair and maintenance of water points. Women are empowered as caretakers because they have technical skills and people in the community admire them for such an important role to keep the water points functional.

### **Equality of men and women at community level**

WMC committees are not necessarily dominated by male; women and men have equal participation. Women have freedom of opinions in the meetings and discussions and male members accept and respect women's leadership. While discussed in the FGD in Amina and Uttor Amtola villages, male members acknowledged women's role in the committees and also in family affairs. Respondents noted that even at community level, nowadays, more and more women attend meetings and awareness sessions. There is significant change in social circumstances and communities are not that male dominated as it was in the past. There are examples where father and brother in laws, sons and husbands encourage women to attend meeting of WMCs.

Women, living in the closer proximity of the PSFs and RO, usually collect water from morning to before dusk. On the other hand, men from distant (2 to 5 kilometers) villages carry water by bicycle and rickshaw van. While having group discussion respondents mentioned that men are increasingly playing roles at household to collect water. Some men are helping women by taking care of children, cooking food and doing household chores. This could be a combined ripple effect of gender messaging in WASH SBC and through parallel activities such the Male Engagement for Gender Equality module that is also implemented as part of Nobo Jatra. Training through male engagement may have further sensitized Households on the importance of balancing household responsibilities and childcare.



During discussions with members of WMCs in four sub-districts, respondents noted that girls and women do not face sexual harassment during collecting water. Incidents of sexual harassment by men, in fact, are not being witnessed in the program areas.

**Strategies by program implementers to develop women leadership**

Motivating women to play the role of president/vice president, secretary, treasurers and caretakers has been useful to develop women leadership in the community. Leadership training was particularly effective to capacitate women to lead a committee with regard to water point management. In the leadership training women learnt how to analyze problems, take action points and make decisions. Women also came to know about roles, responsibilities and attitude of good leaders.



Program staff have been linking women leaders with local government institutions, which is enhancing communication ability of the leaders. Joint water point visit also develop insights of the women leaders about problems and prospects of water points. In the WASH fair, which happens four times annually, women leaders talk to representatives of DPHE about water issues thus, linkage is developed between women leaders and DPHE. Nonetheless, regular monthly meeting is a place where women leaders make decisions and follow-up action points. Women leaders also join courtyard sessions about

SBCC on WASH.

**Ward WatSan committee is a space where women leaders could raise voice and demands**

An enabling space is being created in the Ward WatSan committee where women leaders could raise needs related to sanitation. Before forming such committees women did not have any channel to raise such demands with regard to water and sanitation. Women members of unions, after being engaged by Nobo Jatra program, advocate in the union WatSan committees to allocate budget for sanitation.

Due to regular meetings in the WatSan committees at Ward and Union level, overall allocation on water and sanitation is being increased in the annual plans and budget of Union Parishads in these sub districts. And the Unions in the program area envisions for open defecation free territories.

There is absence of linkages between women leaders of Ward WastSan committee and the members of committees in Union and sub district level. Women leaders of Ward WatSan committee cannot reach or join meetings at union and sub district level.



### **Engagement of Chairmen and members of Unions in the WatSan committees**

Chairmen and members of Unions have attended range of awareness sessions on water and sanitation organized by Nobo Jatra project. Now they are informed about water and sanitation situation in the union. Hence, they have become advocates for WASH. Engagement of chairmen and member through Union WastSan committee appears a useful strategy. They now prepare annual plan for WatSan committee; nonetheless, they are reviewing that plan.

Previously union WatSan committees were inactive but now regular meetings are taking place. There is a prospect that even after project phase out, this Union WatSan committee will continue functioning.

While interviewed, chairman of Dholbari union in Kaliganj and Amtola Union of Dacope appreciated Nobo Jatra project and explained how water points and latrines installed by the project have been benefitting vulnerable households in the community. They also acknowledge the SBCC efforts of the project to raise community awareness. They want such cooperation to last longer time for betterment of the communities. Similarly, chairperson of Moutola union in Kaliganj noted that WatSan committees are active now because of the efforts of Nobo Jatra project. And the project not only installed water points and latrines but this has capacitated vulnerable people in the community through training and SBCC.

### **Ownership and achievements of women leaders**

During range of discussions and interviews with respondents and staff of the program, the following achievements were highlighted,

- Women members have gained knowledge and information about safe water, health, hygiene and technicalities of PSFs and RO.
- Women leaders of WMCs and WatSan committees raise voice in the open budget discussion of unions for adequate allocation. They have been communicating with NGOs, Banks, local elites and local government offices to leverage resources. Amtoli Union Parishad kept BDT 100000 (USD \$1182) in their annual budget for WASH sector improvement of the community. The Union WatSan committee of Amtoli also motivated Caritas and Rupantor- local NGOs and Ad-din – a private organization to provide water tanks and water treatment plant and repair PSF to the community; Ward WatSan committee of Amtoli motivated Bangladesh Association for Sustainable Development (BASD)-a local NGO to re-excavate pond of a PSF.
- Women leaders have gained skill on management, maintenance, banking and fund raising for sustaining water points. They have also gained dignity by playing important role in the community and by ensuring drinking water.
- Some WMC committees, after 6 to 9 months of operation of PSFs, cleaned ponds and filters and repair water taps by themselves without hiring labor and technicians. This is an example of self-reliance and leadership.
- A WMC has installed sign board about services of PSF besides displaying rate of monthly tariff for water collection.
- Another WMC has built fence around the pond, so that, animal cannot bath and people cannot wash dishes or clothes.
- WMC has installed net above pond, hence, leaves cannot fall from trees to the water, rot, and eventually pollute water. They also regularly clean the pond and its surrounding.

- In Ratanpur village, WMC had excavated ponds on a piece of land and installed PSF by taking support from Nobo Jatra and Union Parishad. The built fence around that pond too.
- Women members of WMCs call meeting according to needs; though there is provision for monthly meeting, they call meeting in the middle of the month when necessity arises.
- Women leaders in the WMCs understand well that Nobo Jatra project will phase out and they are committed to take care of the water points beyond the project life.

### **Challenges and difficulties experienced by women leaders**

Although the achievements and effects of having women in leadership positions are visible – there are still a number of climate and socio economic challenges that need to be addressed.

- Water layer in some ponds is low, as a result output/flow of drinking water is poor in the PSF.
- In some villages of Shyamnagar PSFs are surrounded by shrimp culture field; this has increased salinity intrusion into the adjacent pond water, thus, drinking water from PSF becomes salty.
- Tariff collection: many people, who just collect water from PSFs, are still reluctant to pay tariff. Treasurers collect tariff on monthly basis from villagers based on each person's ability. As most people are poor and vulnerable, thus, collected amount is not adequate.
- When water supply stops due to repair/ maintenance of PSFs, villagers struggle to collect water from distant water points.
- Usually everyone in the community pump up water from pond to concrete reservoir using hand pump voluntarily during water collection. Some people in the community silently draw water from PSFs and do not press hand pump; this is a trick to hide face and avoid monthly tariff.
- All members are not equally active in the committee. It is difficult to cancel membership of an irregular or absent member because he/she gets angry for such cancellation. Without canceling membership and recruitment of new active members, it is not possible to transform an inactive WMC into an active one.
- Union WatSan committees, led by chairmen, have decision making power to prioritize needs and demands related to sanitation. Thus, due to overwhelming needs from all Wards, Union WatSan committee accept few and ignore many demands that are being raised by ward WatSan committees. Members and chairmen sometime commit nepotism ignoring community demand for selecting vulnerable households to install latrines.
- Union Parishads always struggle to allocate adequate budget for water and sanitation in annual plans and budget. There is overwhelming demand and available fund in unions cannot met that. Sometimes, unions cannot even spend allocated budget and there is lack of monitoring as well as accountability in this regard.
- Male members in families have been allowing women to take leadership role at WMCs because there is interest for accessing drinking water. From a patriarchic view point it is safe to talk about drinking water but not about women's rights and freedom of movement. There is example where in a bigger meeting at community level, women did sit behind curtain, and did not give opinions because men were present in that meeting. Still patriarchal mindset and religious conservatism control society, which discourages women leadership and their freedom of expression.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings from the project area, greater attention of the concerned authorities is required in the following areas,

- Around 300 to 400 people collect water from a PSF per day. Sometime there are long queues for water collection. There should be 2 to 3 PSFs in a village because one PSF cannot meet the demands of hundreds of households.
- Many people still collect water with free of cost from PSFs; and they do not feel moral obligation to pay tariff and there is no legal obligation for tariff payment. Therefore, WMCs need to set some rules and minimum standard for tariff payment because sustainability of PSF heavily relies on fund raising.
- Coordination among different NGOs and mobilization of fund could potentially benefit women beneficiaries with regard to access to pure drinking water and distribution of latrines.
- Women leaders of WMC and WatSan committees could learn more about Union Parishad Act. 2009, planning and budgeting at unions, and government circulars. More knowledge and information on these could enable women leaders to communicate local governed institutions and claim services related to water and sanitation.
- Women leaders can also play important role for monitoring Union Parishad's budget spending on WASH and ensure accountability in the implementation process. They can also do advocacy to allocate minimum 20% of annual budget of the Union for drinking water and sanitation sector.

For citation and references

Rupa, M, Ahsan, R & Kabir, S 2019, 'Women Leadership in Coastal Water Management: 'A community perspective in the south west of Bangladesh', *paper presented in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coastal Water Convention, Khulna, 1-2 August.*