

Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Bangladesh

A Gender and Climate Justice Perspective

Unequal Gains: Food Security, Gender, and Structural Inequalities in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has made significant progress in agricultural production over the past decade. National food production, particularly rice, has quadrupled from 9.7 million to 41 million tons since 1971.¹ Despite these achievements, a large segment of the poor and landless families, particularly female-headed households, continue to experience food insecurity.² According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, approximately 21.91 per cent of households experience moderate food insecurity and 0.83 per cent face severe food insecurity.³ With a population of 160 million, projected to reach 186 million by 2030, the country faces daunting challenges to ensure food and nutrition security.⁴ These challenges are compounded by climate-induced disruption to agricultural productivity, gender inequality, discriminatory land policies, and wage discrimination.

Women constitute nearly half of Bangladesh's population and play a crucial role in food production and household nutrition. They actively participate in agricultural work, including crop cultivation, seed preservation, harvesting, and post-harvesting activities (processing, packaging, and marketing). By managing diverse agricultural activities, they contribute to the availability of nutritious food, improving the health and well-being of their families, and promoting economic stability. However, their contribution remains systematically undervalued, and they face deep structural inequities in land ownership and decision-making due to entrenched social norms and gender biases.

The "feminisation of agriculture" is a growing phenomenon, and increasing numbers of women are involved in agriculture. Women constitute 63% of the agricultural workforce in rural Bangladesh,⁵ yet only 10% of them own agricultural land.⁶ This lack of recognition limits their access to land, financial services, training, and modern technology. These restrict their capacity to improve productivity and incomes, reinforcing cycles of poverty and food insecurity.

While Bangladesh has committed to achieving food and nutrition security under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and constitutional provisions (Articles 15, 18, and 11)⁷ provide a normative basis for the right to food, these commitments remain largely non-justiciable. Despite constitutional guarantees (Articles 27 and 28), religion-based inheritance laws and discriminatory land policies deprive women of equal rights. This gap underscores the need to enact legislation to guarantee equal inheritance rights for women across all religions and ethnic groups.

Against this backdrop, this thematic brief aims to examine the state of women's land rights, food security, food sovereignty, and climate justice in Bangladesh. It highlights how these challenges restrict women's agency in agricultural decision-making and resource allocation. It also provides evidence and policy analysis to support civil society organizations in advocating for the strengthening of women's land rights, the realization of the right to food, and the promotion of food sovereignty.

Food Security and Women's Land Rights

Land is an important natural capital for people in Bangladesh who depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and nutrition. Secure access to land can serve as a basis for food production, income generation, and improved nutrition and food security.⁸ Land ownership is a major determinant of agricultural production, yet women in Bangladesh face significant barriers to owning or inheriting land. According to the World Bank report, only 10% of women have sole or joint ownership of agricultural land, compared with 70% of men in the same households.⁹

Women face substantial challenges to agricultural land ownership due to discriminatory laws and cultural norms. Cultural norms often prioritise male inheritance, and property laws frequently favour men, leaving women with little legal control over the land they work. As a result, women are unable to make independent decisions about farming practices, investments, business opportunities, or participate in agricultural markets. They are also less likely to receive financial support from banks, which require land as collateral for loans, reinforcing economic dependency.⁹

Women in Bangladesh are also lagging in financial credit. Less than 60 per cent of women in Bangladesh have access to credit, primarily due to institutional and sociocultural barriers.¹⁰ Similarly, according to a report from the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB), less than 30 per cent of rural women have received agricultural training, compared to over 70 per cent of men.¹¹ This constrains women's ability to adopt sustainable, climate-resilient agricultural practices, thereby increasing their vulnerability to environmental shocks.

These dynamics reveal a deeper structural issue: food insecurity in Bangladesh is not only about availability but also about who controls productive resources. This brings into focus the concept of food sovereignty, which emphasizes the right of individuals and communities to control land, seeds, water, and markets. Increasing dependence on commercial seeds, agrochemicals, and global food markets has reduced farmers' autonomy and marginalized traditional knowledge systems, particularly those maintained by women. The majority of farms in Bangladesh are very small, and many rural producers are net buyers rather than sellers of food, making them highly vulnerable to market fluctuations and rising food prices. For women, who already face structural barriers to land and resources, these vulnerabilities are even more pronounced.

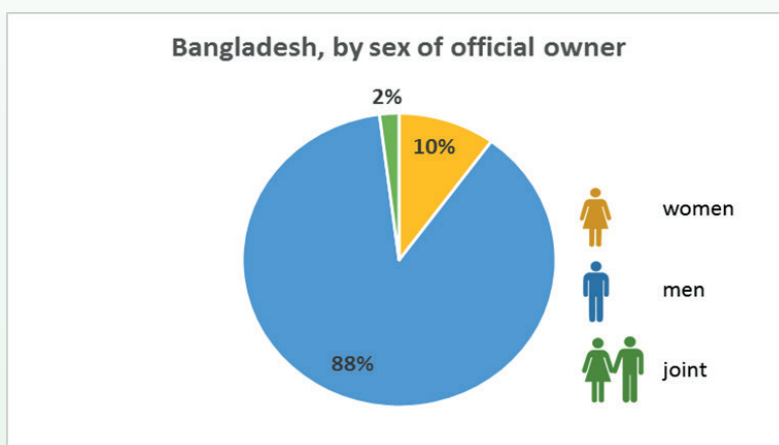


Fig 1: Distribution of Land in Bangladesh (Source: Kieran & Doss, 2014)

Policy and Legal Context

The Government of Bangladesh has formulated several policies and strategies to address food security and nutrition challenges, including the National Food Policy (2006), the National Nutrition Policy (2015), the National Agricultural Policy (2018), and the National Social Security Strategy (2015). Similarly, the Constitution (Article 19(3), 28(2), 27, 28, 42(1)1972) notes the equality of women and men within the public domain and recognizes that "every citizen can acquire, hold, transfer, or dispose of the property". The National Women Development Policy (2011) further stresses that women and men have equal rights to make contracts in their names, such as those related to credit, real estate, and other commercial transactions, to level existing inequalities (Art. 16, 25).¹²

While these policies acknowledge the importance of gender equality, gaps remain between policy commitments and practical implementation. In Bangladesh, customs greatly shape women's land ownership, and "personal laws" (codified religious text) formally regulate inheritance. The Constitution officially recognizes personal laws (Article 152) to regulate people's lives concerning inheritance, marriage, and divorce based on religion and custom. However, policies such as the National Agriculture Policy 2018 and the National Women Development Policy (NWDP) 2011 classify women as agricultural labourers rather than farmers.

Programs such as the distribution of khas land to landless households have provided opportunities for some rural families; eligibility criteria and implementation practices often favor male household heads, limiting women's direct access and participation. These religious laws are usually complemented by decisions conferred by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and the High Court Division of Bangladesh.¹³ In this way, personal laws can mitigate some of the direct benefits of national laws, and women face barriers in accessing legal services, land registration systems, and dispute resolution mechanisms, further constraining their ability to claim land rights.

Under customary laws, women's land ownership is usually determined by whether they come from matrilineal or patrilineal communities. While patrilineal practices, in which inheritance and land transfer follow the male lineage, dominate,¹⁴ there are also matrilineal communities. Women inherit property in the matrilineal communities of the Garo, Khasi, and Marma; however, male family members control it.¹⁵

Institutional neglect and sociocultural barriers limit women's ability to invest in agriculture, adopt improved technologies, enhance productivity, and claim rights. Limited access to legal services, complex land registration processes, and weak grievance mechanisms discourage women from asserting ownership or resolving disputes. These gaps become even more critical in the context of climate change, which further intensifies existing vulnerabilities.



Fig 2: Barriers to the recognition of women's land rights in Bangladesh (Source: Enokwenw, et al., 2024)

Gender, Food Security, and Climate Justice Nexus

Bangladesh is widely recognised as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. It ranks ninth on the 2024 World Risk Index for exposure and vulnerability to extreme weather and other climate impacts.¹⁶ Climate change poses a significant threat to food security, disrupting agricultural productivity, livelihoods, and access to food. Frequent extreme climatic events, such as cyclones, floods, and droughts, directly disrupt crop production, reduce food availability, and increase food prices.

A one-meter rise in sea level could inundate approximately 17% of cultivated land, forest, and aquatic resources, affecting the livelihoods of at least 17 million people in coastal regions.¹⁷ Even a 32 cm rise in sea level could reduce rice production by 25–28%, threatening national food security.¹⁸ Climate change reinforces, perpetuates, and exacerbates pre-existing gender-based inequalities, particularly through restricted access to natural resources (especially land and water), credit and markets, and knowledge and information.¹⁹ In Bangladesh, women have less access to climate and disaster-related information than men, including early warning systems, training programs, and institutional support services. Their access to financial resources, land ownership, and decision-making processes, both within households and in public spaces, remains constrained by gendered expectations, compounding the stress caused by shifting climatic conditions.

As a result, women's adaptive capacities are systematically limited. Gendered social norms and expectations restrict their mobility, participation, and control over resources, making it more difficult to respond to climate-related shocks. Institutional challenges, including the inefficiency

and inaccessibility of government support services, further hinder localized adaptation efforts.²⁰ In climate-affected areas, women also experience increased time poverty due to water scarcity, heightened care responsibilities, and reproductive health burdens, all of which reduce their capacity to engage in livelihood activities.

The intersection of gender inequality, food insecurity, and climate vulnerability creates a reinforcing cycle of disadvantage. Limited control over productive resources reduces their adaptive capacity, while climate shocks deepen food insecurity and livelihood instability. These challenges are further shaped by broader structural dynamics. Global trade systems and increasing dependence on external agricultural inputs reduce local resilience, expose smallholder farmers to market volatility, threaten food sovereignty, and lead to food insecurity.

Bangladesh's LDC Graduation (2026) – Implications for Food Security and Gender Justice

As Bangladesh prepares to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026, this milestone represents significant economic progress but also introduces structural vulnerabilities with direct implications for food security, rural livelihoods, and gender equity. The transition is likely to expose existing fiscal and financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, and continued dependence on preferential trade arrangements. These structural shifts risk placing additional pressure on already fragile food systems and marginalized populations, particularly smallholder farmers and landless communities.

A key challenge is the potential loss of duty-free and quota-free market access, which could disrupt agricultural value chains, increase market uncertainty, and reduce income stability for rural producers. At the same time, declining concessional financing and international support may constrain investments in social protection, food security, and climate-resilient agriculture, sectors critical for equitable and sustainable development.

These risks highlight the need for sustained, predictable, and well-coordinated international support beyond graduation. Continued investment in inclusive, climate-resilient food systems, alongside strengthened trade partnerships and domestic capacity building, will be essential to safeguard development gains. A managed, equity-focused transition, aligned with national priorities, is crucial to prevent setbacks in food security and ensure that the benefits of graduation are inclusive and sustainable.

Call to Action

Bangladesh's progress in food production has not translated into equitable food security outcomes. Structural inequalities in land ownership, gender relations, and access to resources continue to marginalize women and smallholder farmers, undermining both food security and system resilience. A shift toward a rights-based and justice-oriented approach is essential. Strengthening women's land rights, addressing institutional barriers, and promoting food sovereignty are critical to building inclusive, resilient, and sustainable food systems.

1. Institutionalize the Right to Food and Livelihoods

- National law should recognize the right to food in line with the constitutional guideline and ratified human rights charters/covenants
- National agriculture policy should be formulated to ensure that agriculture is seen as an integral part of the right to food rather than the right to trade.
- The national tariff and subsidy policy should be formulated to ensure food sovereignty and the livelihood security of the peasantry, rather than being treated merely as instruments of trade.

2. Strengthen Women's Land Rights and Resource Control

- Reform land governance systems to guarantee equal ownership, inheritance, and control of land for women, including joint land titling and direct allocation of khas land.
- Revise the 1997 Khas Land Management Policy to remove provisions that prioritise widowed and women abandoned by husband having abled bodied son for applying for the khas land
- Remove institutional barriers that restrict women's access to credit, extension services, and agricultural inputs, particularly those linked to land ownership requirements.
- Expand legal awareness, legal aid, and grievance mechanisms to enable women, especially

in rural and marginalized communities, to claim and defend their land rights.

- Formally recognize women as farmers, producers, and entrepreneurs within agricultural policies, ensuring access to markets and value chains
- Ensure equal pay for male and female farmers and fishers by eliminating wage disparity.
- Improve access to modern agricultural inputs and women-friendly technologies, addressing the current gender gap in training (where less than 30% of women receive agricultural training compared to over 70% of men).

3. Promote Food Sovereignty and People-Centered Agricultural Reform

- Implement comprehensive agrarian reform to ensure equitable access to land, seeds, water, and genetic resources, particularly for smallholder farmers, landless populations, women, and indigenous communities.
- Promote agroecological practices, ensuring long-term sustainability and resilience of food systems.
- Protect and strengthen indigenous knowledge systems, biodiversity, and traditional seed practices as central components of food sovereignty.
- Ensure access to natural resources, including open water bodies for traditional fishing communities, and strengthen community-based resource governance.
- Support decentralized rural credit systems and solidarity-based local economies that prioritize food production for domestic consumption rather than export-oriented growth.

4. Advance Gender-Responsive Climate Justice and Adaptation

- Design and implement gender-responsive climate adaptation strategies that prioritize marginalized groups, including women, small farmers, and indigenous communities.
- Ensure that climate adaptation programs enhance rather than restrict farmers' decision-making autonomy, recognizing that control over production choices is central to food sovereignty.
- Strengthen the capacity of farmers' organizations to monitor climate impacts and influence adaptation policies, ensuring accountability and responsiveness.
- Integrate indigenous knowledge and nature-based solutions into national climate policies and institutional frameworks.
- Advocate for climate justice at national, regional, and global levels, emphasizing the disproportionate burden borne by vulnerable populations.

5. Reform Trade and Global Economic Policies

- Safeguard Bangladesh's policy space to design independent agricultural subsidy and tariff policies that prioritize domestic food security and peasant livelihoods.
- Regulate the influence of transnational corporations in seeds, fertilizers, and agro-input markets to prevent monopolization and protect farmer autonomy.
- Ensure that trade agreements do not erode local food systems, biodiversity, and indigenous knowledge bases.
- Advocate for reforms in global trade governance, including within the World Trade Organization, to ensure that rules support food security, human rights, and development priorities of Least Developed Countries (LDCs).
- Elevate food security, environmental sustainability, and cultural rights as central concerns in global trade negotiations, moving beyond purely economic considerations.
- Strengthen the participation of smallholder farmers and peasant organizations in national and global trade policy forums.

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