

# Understanding Women's Empowerment Challenges in Flood-Prone Rural Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract** - Women's empowerment has consistently been a subject of debate within the intricate socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. The occurrence of flood disasters presents increased difficulties within rural communities. The objective of this research is to gain an understanding of the obstacles encountered by women residing in rural flood-prone regions as they strive to enhance their empowerment. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing Focus Group Discussions with six distinct groups and conducting In-depth interviews with a total of thirty participants. The data demonstrates that rural communities and flood events exacerbate women's empowerment issues because the patriarchal culture embedded in rural Bangladesh makes it difficult to modify women's positions. Therefore, this paper advocates for the government's firm dedication to empowering women and harnessing their full potential to integrate them into the mainstream of society, thus fostering constructive societal development.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Flood, Rural Region, Bangladesh

## I. INTRODUCTION

The eradication of discrimination against women and girls is a prominent objective within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it continues to persist as a significant issue across various regions globally. Gender equality and the empowerment of women, which is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving sustainable development that benefits all individuals [42]. Due to the pervasiveness of gender inequity across all cultures, the topic of women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of political and social agendas everywhere. Though, compared to industrialized nations, gender imbalance is far more prevalent in underdeveloped nations [3]. The idea of power is at the heart of the empowerment concept and is a multifaceted societal process that gives individuals more agency in their daily lives. It's a way of encouraging individuals to take charge of their lives, their communities, and their society by acting on problems they see as crucial [33]. The concept of women's empowerment entails the expansion of women's options and the augmentation of their capacity to exercise agency in making independent choices regarding their lifestyles, particularly in the face of societal

obstacles. To enable individuals to make policy decisions that impact their lives and communities, it is necessary to furnish them with both autonomy and the necessary resources [24], [37], [7].

The involvement of women in policy and planning is crucial in fostering communal development. Women are significant figures in addressing various pressing issues that affect their communities and the environment, and they serve as key actors in promoting sustainability and development. Therefore, promoting the empowerment of women has a significant and far-reaching effect on society. The advancement towards a more favourable global condition necessitates the inclusion of women in decision-making processes. The establishment of a prosperous society is contingent upon the active engagement of both genders. A just society and progressive change are impossible without achieving gender equality and empowering women [37]. Before gender equality can be achieved and maintained, women must be empowered to reduce the gender gap. According to the United Nations, gender inequality costs the economy approximately 15% of its gross domestic product (GDP). The OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) GDP could increase by more than \$6 trillion if female employment rates rose to match those of Sweden [19]. The World Bank has prioritized women's empowerment to reduce poverty and increase economic growth [36].

The prevailing perception that women are treated as subordinate to men worldwide is widely acknowledged [19]. Approximately 70 percent of the global impoverished population consists of women, while women also account for 65 percent of the global illiterate population [21]. Access to land, particularly among impoverished women, carries several repercussions in their lives [2]. The global distribution of land ownership exhibits a significant gender disparity, with women holding fewer than 20% of the total land. Over 400 million individuals are engaged in agricultural activities, thereby contributing significantly to the global food production. According to a report by the World Economic Forum [44], it has been observed that in over 90 countries, female farmers face a significant

disparity in their rights to land ownership. Over the years, the movement for women's rights and gender equality has grown into a potent global force that is still having an impact on new frontiers. Education is the key indicator for women's empowerment, and humans have a fundamental entitlement to education. In addition, according to ABC News, a female with an additional year of education can earn 20% more as an adult. There is a clear indication that women globally engage in a substantial amount of unpaid and unacknowledged labour. By encompassing all these engagements within a unified framework, the GDP of Bangladesh, as well as that of any other nation, will experience a substantial increase [19]. Women's empowerment is hindered by both individual women and members of the community within society. Women often experience significant pressure to conform to society's expectations regarding their roles and responsibilities. In a professional context, individuals exhibit a lack of ability to make decisions or embrace opportunities. Certain women may opt to make compromises regarding their genuine aspirations, prioritizing social acceptability and minimizing potential discrimination and other biases linked to prevailing gender norms in society.

Women's empowerment has far-reaching effects on society, families, and individuals, particularly in the areas of health, nutrition, education, and economic growth. The reduction of household vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity is a primary focus of rural development, and women's empowerment is often touted to this end [1]. The government of Bangladesh has been working hard to alleviate poverty and better the lives of its poor inhabitants [43] though women make up a larger percentage of the poor than men everywhere in the world, not only in Bangladesh. For women's empowerment economic solvency is the capacity builder for women. Even though women make up about half of the population in Bangladesh, their social position is still quite low, particularly in rural regions. Rural women are among the most marginalized members of society, experiencing social injustice and economic inequity. Most of them are also poor, therefore empowering them is essential to making a positive difference in their lives [34].

Despite many government and non-government efforts, empowering women in rural Bangladesh is still difficult where frequent natural disasters, such as floods, increase the difficulty of these plans. Because along with other socio-cultural barriers, regions with frequent natural disaster like flood put additional restriction and complications on the path of women empowerment by limiting opportunities. Thus, the main objective of this study is to explore the challenges to women's empowerment in rural flood-stricken areas of Bangladesh.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empowering women globally is a gradual process, challenging conditions in low-income and developed nations, and women consistently face disparities in position

and status across various societies [10]. Consequently, it becomes imperative to enhance their agency by ensuring equitable access to opportunities. The concept of women's empowerment, which refers to the enhancement of women's capacity to make deliberate life decisions within a framework of historical gender disparities [23] is a key topic of concern within the realm of the economic, socio-cultural, familial, or interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological domains [9]. The empowerment of women is not only important but also crucial for the comprehensive development of society and the nation. The topic of "women empowerment" has gained significant prominence in the agendas and initiatives of the United Nations as well as several governmental and non-governmental organizations [28].

The advancement of women's empowerment is impeded in societies everywhere, albeit with variations depending on factors such as the societal context, urban or rural setting, cultural milieu, and natural environment. Rural women exhibit a relative lag in terms of empowerment, although it is important to note that this observation cannot be universally applied, as women residing in metropolitan or urban areas also encounter challenges in attaining empowered statuses.

In a study conducted by Hussain and Jullandhry [20], it was demonstrated that women residing in Lahore, a prominent urban centre in Pakistan, faced significant limitations in terms of their control over family savings, ownership rights about immovable assets, authority over property transactions, mobility restrictions, and involvement in household decision-making processes.

In the urban regions of India, according to the study conducted by Menon *et al.*, [30] the advancement of women's empowerment is significantly impacted by their educational attainment and access to professional prospects. The extent to which this objective is accomplished is primarily contingent upon society's perceptions and beliefs around gender parity. Nevertheless, rural women in India face a plethora of obstacles, encompassing but not extending to poverty, the detrimental effects of climate change, limited access to public facilities, occurrences of gender-based violence, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Therefore, these conditions have a significant impact on the limited economic independence and restricted opportunities for women, despite their innate potential for empowerment [39].

In another study Nosheen *et al.*, [32] shows that women's economic empowerment in Pakistan is hindered by the gender-specific vulnerability to climate change-induced disasters. The indices of women empowerment encompass various dimensions such as mobility, economic security, purchasing power, household decision-making, political awareness, and participation in political campaigns. Additionally, it encompasses factors such as self-esteem, the ability to exercise control over resources, financial

autonomy, access to education, and overall health [9], [17], [30], [38].

In the South Asian region, the presence of disparities stemming from factors such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and geographical location is exacerbated by the presence of significant gender-based discrimination [40]. Education is an important predictor of women's empowerment. In India in terms of employment rural women are more employed than urban women because variation in the educational requirements for entry into jobs is one of the factors [8], [15], [30]. In rural Bangladesh, a significant proportion of households, namely 21%, experience a lack of access to education and attendance, which has notable implications for women's perspectives on gender equality. Moreover, this situation has an influence on per capita income and the decrease in poverty levels [43].

The significance of education for females is frequently dismissed, leading them to internalize the notion of being deprived in comparison to their male counterparts from a young age [17]. At the secondary level of education, there exists a gender disparity that is perpetuated by the patriarchal structure, resulting in a significant number of girls discontinuing their education [18].

The province of Baluchistan exhibits a significant disparity in terms of female enrolment and involvement in educational institutions, primarily due to the imposition of mobility restrictions on women. It is observed that merely 20% of the female population in Baluchistan possesses literacy skills [35]. Rural women in Pakistan encounter restricted career prospects because of gaps in education, which serve as a socio cultural obstacle impeding their educational access [9] the second-worst country for gender inequality in 2017 according to the Global Gender Gap Report [40]. For women empowerment education is the crucial component.

The involvement of women in the decision-making process is a prevalent aspect of women's empowerment, as highlighted by Choudhry *et al.*, [9]. In Pakistan, over two-thirds of women residing in metropolitan areas experience a lack of empowerment, with limited participation in decision-making processes being identified as a significant contributing factor [20]. In the context of family dynamics, it has been shown that women within nuclear families tend to possess a greater degree of decision-making authority compared to women within extended families [38].

Research in South Asia shows women hold decision-making authority in family matters like food, household items, and children's health, while men make more significant decisions in education, marriage, and market transactions [23]. The decision-making authority of women in India is contingent upon their level of education, which is often limited due to restricted access to educational opportunities [30].

In Bangladesh, the interplay of patrilineal descent systems and patrilocal residency practices like purdah, mobility restriction, and constraints in outdoor work, leads to the social and economic subordination of women, perpetuating their social and economic dependency on men [17]. Thus, Azad and Pritchard [6] advocates the necessity for a more official and public recognition of women's contribution to disaster policy. According to International Labor Office data, Asian and Pacific women spend 4.1 times more time on unpaid care than males.

Despite working greater hours than males, women still do 60% of unpaid work [22] which broadens the economic dependency. Women empowerment is a challenge worldwide, not just in low-income nations, but the context and perspective differ. In Europe, 23% of company boards are female [10] and women have a lower labour force participation rate than men of prime working age. According to Masud *et al.*, [29] the presence of floods in rural areas of Bangladesh poses significant challenges to women's empowerment, hence exacerbating their vulnerability and this situation further complicates the attainment of women's empowerment goals.

Ashra fuzzaman *et al.*, [4] demonstrated in their research that women's empowerment can decrease women's susceptibility and enhance their potential where Kreutzer and Timbs [27] shown in their research, which analyzed 180 nations and territories affected by catastrophes from 1981 to 2019, that disasters reduce women's economic empowerment. Asthana [5] proposes tailored techniques for women empowerment to address the varying challenges across different places.

### III. METHODOLOGY

To pursue research tasks and gain a deeper, better understanding of the social processes of flood-prone rural areas, a qualitative technique was used. Qualitative researchers seek practical solutions to real-world challenges. The qualitative method analyzes the various meanings of personally formed social phenomena and offers a fuller knowledge of the social phenomenon. When employing simply quantitative data, qualitative research can provide an understanding that is challenging to comprehend [25].

Empowerment scenario in a flood-prone rural area for women can only be understood through qualitative research. The research utilized a qualitative approach, collecting data through narratives and textual information. In certain cases, qualitative approaches are used to address questions about experience, significance, and insight from the potential informant's perspective [16]. Eco-feminism is used as a theoretical lens to guide the study.

#### A. Data Collection

Sariakandi Upazilla was chosen as the study area of this research. Sariakandi is one of the most flood-prone areas of

Northern Bangladesh. Apart from the coastal region, Sariakandi was the most flood and river-erosion-affected area in North Bangladesh which was often avoided in research work. There were 12 Union in Sariakandi Upazilla named Bhelabari, Bohail, Chaluabari, Chandanbaisha, Fulbari, Hat Sherpur, Kamalpur, Karnibari, Kazla, Kutubpur, Narchi, and Sariakandi. To fulfill the research's goal, Narchi, Kutubpur, and Chondonbaisha were chosen as the best data sources. Data collection units were chosen purposively. There were two data collection tools, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions used for gathering qualitative data from the study area. Thirty flood-induced women from three Unions were chosen purposively for in-depth interviews.

The informants for an in-depth interview were selected based on the following criteria.

1. Female,
2. Aged between 15 to 50 years old, and
3. Affected by the flood incidences.

Informants were not empowered in society, all were housewives. The main data was collected through in-depth interviews guided by an open-ended interview schedule. A total of six FGDs were conducted in this study. Selection criteria were like in-depth interviews except both genders were included in the study. The two FGDs in each Union comprised one female and one male group only. Each FGD comprises a minimum of six to eight members.

For both in-depth interview and FGD informants were chosen through purposive sampling method. Since most of the interviewees were expected to be either illiterate or merely able to write their names, the interview schedule was delivered via in-depth interviews. Even though in-depth interviews are a costly and time-consuming way of data collecting, they assist the researcher in effectively extracting the pertinent information. Additionally, it enabled the interviewer to make sure the interviewee understood the study questions completely and provided more insightful answers.

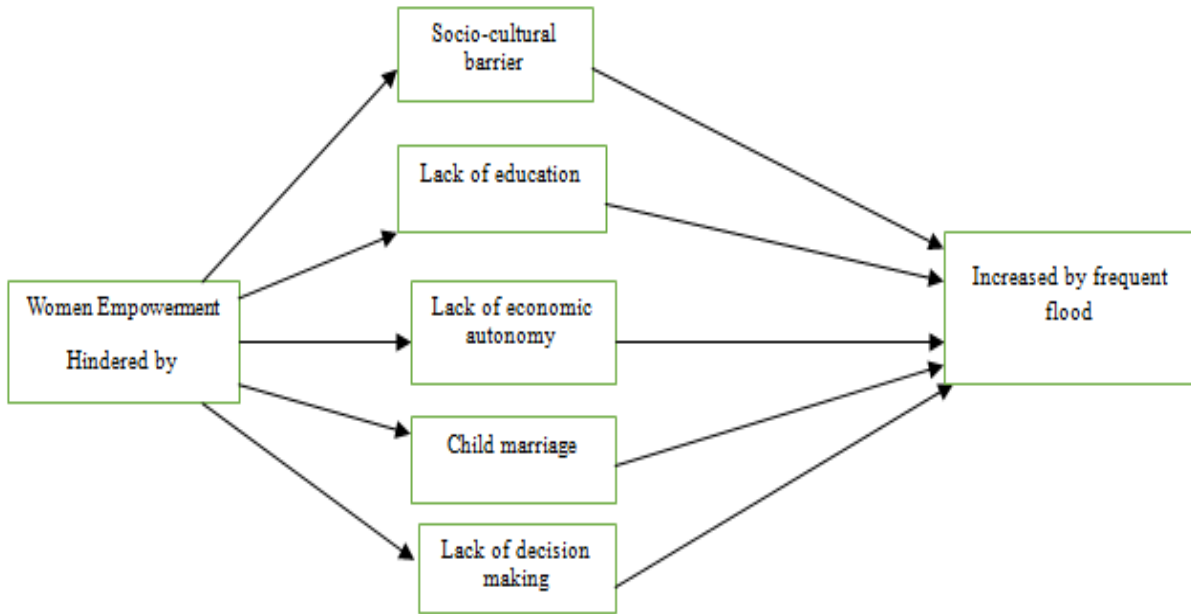
Besides that, Focus Group discussions (FGD) were conducted with the flood-affected women and with their counterparts. Because patriarchy is a significant factor in hindering women's empowerment and is connected to social and cultural notions of a society, it was crucial to conduct these focus group discussions to have the opinion of the males regarding the issue and to understand their attitude toward women. Focus groups were used to gather knowledge concerning shared opinions, and the meanings that underpin certain views and are also effective in developing a deep understanding of participants' experiences and values [31].

## *B. Data Analysis*

The data was analyzed using a thematic method. The data analysis spiral developed by Creswell was utilized as an outline. After a methodical data-gathering procedure, the collected field data was painstakingly arranged and afterward translated with the help of a skilled translator, starting with the careful compilation of pertinent documents and field notes. Field notes were supplemented by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. To gain a thorough understanding of women's experiences and how they navigate obstacles on the way to empowerment, transcribed data were read and re-read. Next, the interview transcripts were processed for checking, rechecking, and editing, and tried to get a sense of what they contained. The process of analysing data in qualitative research entails the systematic organization and arrangement of various forms of data, including transcripts and photographs, for analysis. This involves refining the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, followed by the representation of the data in figures, tables, or a discussion [12]. Using in vivo codes, following the research question, manual coding of the unprocessed data was performed. These types of codes correspond directly to the terms used by participants and help researchers avoid situations in which they might otherwise impose their preconceived frameworks and opinions on the data. The codes were organized, classified, and then themes were generated. Data were presented through these generated themes.

## **IV. RESULTS**

Women's empowerment and representation at all levels of leadership and in all spheres of society is not a choice, but a requirement. In the context of Bangladesh, women throughout various strata of society encounter obstacles in their pursuit of empowerment. When comparing urban and rural areas, it is evident that rural women encounter a greater number of hurdles. These challenges are further exacerbated when faced with a calamity such as a flood, as they are forced to confront additional obstacles in choosing viable livelihood options. Women and nature are believed to undergo similar forms of oppression. This is attributed to the dominance of men and the existence of a patriarchal culture, which is held accountable for both environmental disaster and the subordination of women within society. So, it is important to ensure the active involvement of women in the preservation and protection of the natural environment, emphasizing the inherent connection and relationship between women and nature. The necessity of women's empowerment is evident. Women are disproportionately affected by environmental extremes such as floods. Each participant was queried about the specific problems they encountered when striving for empowerment in a region susceptible to flooding. From the gathered data following themes were generated showing in the figure below.



Source: Field data

Fig. 1 Factors Affecting Women Empowerment

*A. Economic Empowerment: An Agenda for Fiscal Autonomy*

In the context of this prevalent topic, female participants who engaged in-depth interviews expressed diverse perspectives on the matter. None of them possessed economic autonomy or financial stability, and even if they possessed some monetary resources, they were not entitled to exercise control over those funds. The male participants expressed strong opposition to women’s economic authority. The individuals involved in this study were representative of socioeconomically disadvantaged and deprived populations. Most of these individuals possessed limited literacy skills, faced limitations in their mobility, encountered cultural obstacles to engaging in employment outside the home, were subject to social stigmas, and relied on their spouses for financial support. These factors collectively hindered their ability to achieve economic empowerment. Moreover, the issue faced by the respondent was further worse by the repeated occurrence of flooding.

Without man, we are nothing *Apa* (Sister). We don’t have economic power like men, also not allowed to work outside for money, so we cannot make any decisions of our own. We earn some money by doing some work performed inside the house like cow rearing but due to flood, we cannot constructively use that, as during flood we must spend all the savings for managing our daily necessities. We have no authority to spend it. Our husbands make all the decisions about everything in our lives (In-depth interviewee).

In the region of Sariakandi, the economic authority is predominantly controlled by male individuals. The participant expressed that they generate income throughout

the year through activities such as stitching *katha*, (a cotton fabric blanket produced by rural women), and cow rearing. However, they faced challenges in utilizing this income for their development due to the occurrence of floods. During periods of flooding, the male population faced a lack of employment opportunities and alternate means of livelihood. The individuals relocated to a different location in pursuit of alternative means of subsistence, leaving women confined to domestic roles and burdened with sole responsibility. Vulnerable and uneducated women allocate their accumulated funds towards providing sustenance for their families, and may even resort to selling their livestock, which formerly served as a means of income generation, or potentially as a pathway to economic empowerment.

In the region of Sariakandi, which was impacted by flooding, those belonging to lower socioeconomic backgrounds faced significant challenges in securing their means of sustenance. The inhabitants exhibited a significant degree of superstition, while the prevailing culture maintained a pronounced patriarchal structure. The individuals in question demonstrate a willingness to perceive their spouse as subordinate, while simultaneously expressing a desire to maintain their power in all matters as a male. Another problem was that the males in this region believed they had sole power over family finances, whether they came from their wives’ income or their own.

Since we don’t want to lose our wives, they are unable to work. Women are permitted to work in urban civilization because it has a culture that disregards norms and values. If I let my wife work, she won’t respect or follow me. She will be more powerful than I am. She might decide against coming with me. In addition, I’ll damage my standing as a

guy in the neighborhood. Everyone in society will think I'm incompetent if I can't control my wife. Since my father and grandfather never let my mother or grandmother work outside, why am I breaking the law? (FGD participant).

In addition to other challenges, the occurrence of floods imposes vulnerability on women, hindering their aspirations for economic empowerment. Because flood occurrences diminish the access of women to potential factors of economic empowerment.

### *B. Challenging Educational Right*

Education is the main component of ensuring women's empowerment. In rural areas, women often face significant barriers to accessing education and establishing foundational reading skills, which is in stark contrast to their urban counterparts. The impoverished individuals and those from marginalized communities hold the belief that women are not suited for education, but rather should be limited to domestic duties such as housework, cooking, and child-rearing. Consequently, restrictions on education serve as an obstacle to women's empowerment.

The Government of Bangladesh has implemented various initiatives aimed at providing universal education, resulting in significant advancements in the educational landscape, particularly for females. Women residing in flood-prone regions, such as Sariakandi, were unable to avail themselves of the advantages provided by governmental or non-governmental initiatives. This unfortunate circumstance could be attributed to the persistent occurrence of floods and the prevailing social and cultural milieu. In the research area, there were three to five months every year when floodwaters persisted, and during those months, most of the educational institutions served as shelter centres. When schools were open during a flood, parents kept their female children at home to help with domestic tasks and watch over younger siblings because there was water everywhere and the youngest children needed special protection. According to prevalent beliefs, men in Bangladesh were responsible for safeguarding and transmitting their ancestral heritage.

In every way, for the family and society, it is a good idea to marry girls when they are young. What are the advantages of educating girls? She only needs to be able to write her name. It would be better if she received reproductive responsibility training. Even if we lack the resources to properly educate my girl, if we help her learn and become independent, she will do better for her future husband and not for us, as my boy will be the one to take care of us. An educated girl does not heed their parents and becomes imperious (FGD participant).

Conversely, the notion of providing education to males in all situations was perceived by them as a strategic investment for forthcoming endeavours.

"My father was a poor man and could not educate me. He educated my brother instead of us when we were five since he was my brother. Spending money for my education seemed a waste of money to my father as I must go to the in-laws (In-depth interviewee)".

The educational attainment and level of awareness among parents show a direct correlation with the educational outcomes of females. Traditional beliefs often serve as barriers to women's education. The individuals exhibited a lack of receptiveness toward efforts aimed at empowering women. Living in poverty, the flood has posed survival issues for them, making education a low priority, especially for females.

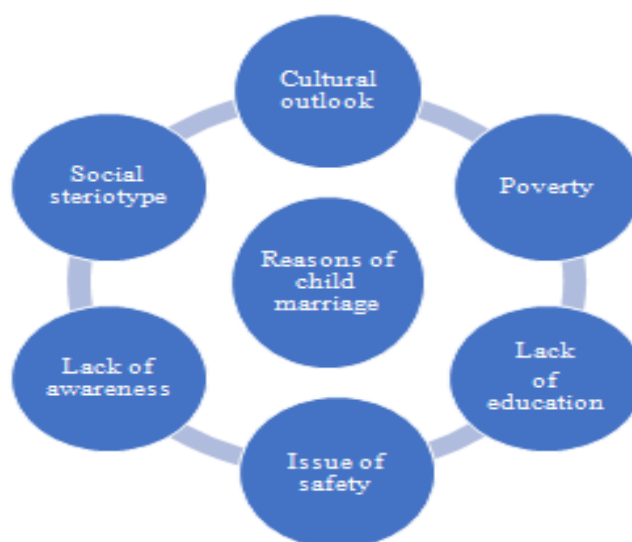
### *C. Child Marriage Has Become a Culture*

Child brides are more likely to reside in rural areas and come from lower-income households. Additionally, they are less likely to have an education beyond the secondary level. According to a report by UNICEF in 2020, just less than 50% of child brides experienced childbirth before reaching the age of 18, with virtually all of them giving birth before the age of 20. The phenomenon of early marriage significantly contributes to the economic dependence of women. Bangladesh is currently home to an approximate population of 38 million child brides [41].

Child marriage is a prevalent phenomenon observed in rural areas, whereby the incidence of such marriages is further exacerbated by natural disasters such as floods. The study area encompassed a rural region that is prone to flooding, where the occurrence of child marriage is a common phenomenon. The prevalence of recurring floods in this area increases the existing challenges of poverty and illiteracy. The occurrence of floods necessitates increased attention towards the well-being of female children, mostly due to concerns regarding their safety.

The parents exhibited a reluctance to jeopardize the safety and well-being of their female offspring, leading them to opt for early marriage as a precautionary measure. Another issue emerged from the field data: when individuals relocated to the shelter centre during floods, it was observed that the safety of females was compromised. Parents who had to leave their daughters in shelters were unable to make ends meet, therefore they sought to marry them off as soon as possible to solve this problem. Child marriage became a coping strategy of Sariakandi.

Factors contributing to the rise in child marriage are exacerbated by floods and ultimately impede women's empowerment. The following figure showing the reasons of child marriage.



Source: Field data

Fig. 2 Reasons of child marriage

Understanding the role and way of life of women in their setting and culture is one of the first stages toward enacting women's empowerment. No action should be undertaken without a comprehensive comprehension of various factors, including the individual's role, self-perception, aspirations, frustrations, and particularly the dynamics of gender relationships and their impact on the community. The prevalence of early marriage in Sariakandi Upazila was deeply rooted in its cultural practices, and community members were actively engaged in upholding this tradition. Consequently, the promotion of women's empowerment faced significant obstacles within this community. This tradition made it difficult for the government's efforts to end child marriage and empower women to succeed.

The researcher discovered a significant prevalence of early marriage among brides inside the study area, as well as throughout the entire Upazilla region. These young brides experienced early motherhood, resulting in compromised health. Additionally, they faced educational discontinuity and a loss of economic potential. Child marriage was shown to be more prevalent in locations characterized by a higher susceptibility to natural catastrophes and a generally poorer socio-economic status. Sariakandi emerged as an Upazila where the issue of child marriage had a notably high prevalence.

Respondents were asked why they support child marriage. "At the age of 13, my daughter was married to secure a suitable partner for her. There is insufficient justification for prolonging the education of girls, as it is seen as futile due to their perceived societal role in domestic responsibilities. It is incumbent upon us to conduct ourselves following the norms and values established by our society. The prevailing belief among individuals is that physical appearance tends to decline as one ages. What actions should be taken in the event of the loss of our physical appearance? Our female

offspring are not commodities intended for commercial transactions (In-depth interviewee)".

During a focus group discussion (FGD) held in Chondonbaisha with male respondents, a few facts concerning child marriage were revealed. Residing within a poor community, individuals adhered to customary practices that dictated differential treatment between genders, as it was customary to assign greater significance to boys due to their perceived role in perpetuating the family lineage. Conversely, this area had a pronounced susceptibility to flooding. Annually, the individuals were compelled to take shelter within the dam, presenting a predicament in terms of safeguarding the well-being of the adolescent females. Furthermore, a multitude of incidents transpired within both the dam and the shelter centre.

Due to their current financial circumstances, it is plausible that they may encounter challenges in securing a good marital prospect for their daughter in the forthcoming years. Hence, it was deemed advantageous to arrange marriages for female children at the earliest opportunity, as societal expectations placed an overwhelming burden on parents who delayed the marriage of their daughters. The field data collected by the researcher revealed that poverty, insecurity, societal stereotypes, cultural perspectives, limited knowledge, and inadequate education were identified as the primary factors contributing to child marriage. Thus, child marriage stands as a barrier to empowerment, and child marriage increases by flood occurrence. The early marriage of a girl restricts her access to educational institutions, limits her mobility, confines her to domestic duties, and ultimately hinders the progress of women's empowerment.

#### D. Socio-Cultural Barrier

The research area was characterized by a society that adhered to a patriarchal culture. The entirety of societal



control was vested in men, resulting in women's complete dependence on them. The lives of women are predominantly influenced and regulated by their male counterparts. Society was characterized by the prevalence of taboos and superstitions. The majority of those residing in that region exhibited a lack of awareness. Every year, the local population was compelled to endure and overcome the challenges posed by recurring floods and river erosion. They were classified as living below the poverty level. Their geographical location impeded their awareness. They are disconnected from contemporary civilization. The status of females was significantly worse than that of males due to the prevailing male-dominated society and the patriarchal culture that rendered women dependent on men. The women residing in this region were unable to envision themselves attaining empowerment due to the constraints imposed by societal standards and cultural expectations.

"In every facet of our existence, we must adhere to the societal norms and regulations that are imposed upon us due to our gender identity as females. We are unable to engage in employment, travel freely, obtain land ownership, exercise decision-making autonomy, or dress according to personal preference. Attempting to assert independence in direct opposition to the desires of our spouse might be regarded as a transgression (In-depth interviewee)".

Women of study frequently encounter societal pressure from men to terminate their education prematurely, enter marriage, and assume the role of a homemaker, primarily responsible for initiating or tending to familial obligations. In this context, a significant proportion of women are restricted from property ownership and face limitations on their ability to engage in employment beyond the confines of their households. If the husband provided financial resources, sustenance would be procured. Conversely, in the absence of such provision, the family's intake would be limited to a single meal each day. All members of the household would be reliant on a single individual, namely the male head of the household.

According to cultural norms, it was considered the responsibility of women to adhere to their husbands' authority in all aspects of life; deviating from this expectation was regarded as a transgression. The dominant position held by men has resulted in various adverse consequences for the status of women across multiple domains and restrained women's empowerment.

Cultural practices such as mobility restrictions, the belief that girls do not require education or training, the enforcement of *purdah*, the limited opportunities for women to work outside the home, the lack of reproductive health rights, and the inability to maintain social relationships all contribute to the exaggerated vulnerability of women in the community. Furthermore, the occurrence of floods exacerbates this already dire situation. As a result, women cannot take initiative to empower in the society.

### *E. Women are Not for Decision-Making*

As a unit of consumption, the family or household operates similarly to other groups, facing various challenges and making decisions. Within this context, each family member assumes a distinct role, with varying levels of engagement. When considering decisions to be completed within a home where both the husband and wife have equally significant roles, several factors come into play. The prevailing sentiment among the respondents indicates that the decision-making authority predominantly rests with the husband.

Like other rural regions in Bangladesh, there has been a discernible prevalence of gender imbalance in the areas under investigation. The individuals residing in these regions, with a special emphasis on women, experience a lack of access to prevalent social and economic advantages. Hence, it is unsurprising that the region is characterized by prevalent social dogmatism, exemplified by practices such as early weddings, divorces, and dowry systems. Women lack access to and control over productive resources such as land, credit, and market opportunities. Furthermore, their authority in the decision-making process is either restricted or non-existent. Decision-making authority not only increases women's ability but also enables them to meet their needs appropriately.

This capability is typically dependent on knowledge, training, resources, socio economic status in the family, society, and awareness on the part of the individual. Where women were denied the right to receive an education or training, it is impossible to fathom how they might ever hold positions of authority. In addition, the people of the research area were extremely poor, and patriarchy was a significant hurdle. The men in this region believed that women should defer to men when making decisions regarding who should provide financial support for the family. The society in question was likewise supportive of this. Because of this, the women who live in this region were unable to make any decisions that would assist them in lessening their susceptibility and increasing their ability to adapt to their environment. In any circumstance, they were required to await their husband's decision before acting. They were left without a voice.

"We do not have the power to make decisions since society does not permit us to make decisions on either family matters or other things. When we try to share our views, they reprimand us and tell us that *mohila manus* (female) cannot make their decision since they do not have enough brains to make any decision at all (In-depth interviewee)". They fear that if they listen to what females decide, it will lower their self-esteem. It was not in the household, the situation in society was the same.

To promote women's empowerment, it is imperative to gain a comprehensive understanding of the unique roles and experiences of women within their respective contexts and



cultural settings. No action should be undertaken without a comprehensive comprehension of various factors, including the individual's role, self-perception, aspirations, frustrations, and particularly the dynamics of gender relationships and their influence within the community. On this aspect, women were a helpless portion of the society.

In actuality, the concept of women's empowerment primarily revolves around women taking the initiative to empower themselves. The female participants residing in the study area exhibited a lack of assertiveness regarding their potential for empowerment or their desire to attain empowerment. The women of Sariakandi encountered a hindrance in their endeavour to empower themselves, as the occurrence of a flood disrupted their aspirations, compelling them to focus on the restoration of their regular routines. An observation made in the field revealed that women residing in this region exhibit a lack of confidence in making independent decisions. They tend to rely on societal approval and perceive themselves as lacking the necessary information and capability to make informed choices.

## V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed that recurrent flood situations harmed women's empowerment of Sariakandi. In general, climate change has significant consequences, such as floods, droughts, extreme weather events, and the exacerbation of food and water insecurity. These impacts tend to disproportionately affect the global population of 1.3 billion individuals living in poverty, with a particular emphasis on women who constitute the majority within this group. A significant proportion of mortalities resulting from the 2004 Asian tsunami and the 2014 Solomon Island floods were seen to be comprised of women and children, accounting for around 70% and 96% respectively [26]. Women often take on the role of primary responders in community efforts to address natural disasters. However, it is important to acknowledge that these disasters might impede progress in women's empowerment. Therefore, it is crucial to undertake more measures to successfully empower women in rural areas. Throughout history, there has been a parallel between the dominant status of women and nature. This can be attributed to the cultural origins of a patriarchal framework, which perpetuates both the dominion of the natural world and the subjugation of genders. As per the theory if the oppression of women or nature can be minimised or stopped then women can be the active agents of environmental protection as well as empower themselves.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the obstacles to women's empowerment that are exacerbated by the occurrence of floods. The presence of patriarchal culture further exacerbates the obstacles to women's empowerment, particularly in the context of flood disasters.

This study identified five themes that elucidate the findings about the obstacles faced in the empowerment of women residing in rural flood-prone areas of Bangladesh. The first

was about economic empowerment. Economic empowerment refers to the acquisition of skills and resources by women, enabling them to enhance their economic standing and transcend the constraints of poverty. Furthermore, this implies that women and girls possess the agency to determine the allocation of their financial resources and other assets, either independently or through collaborative decision-making processes [26]. Women in the study region were unable to become economically independent due to socio-cultural barriers such as mobility restrictions, *purdah* (a veil), early marriage, and bans on working outside of the home, but the flood scenario made these barriers much more severe in the pretext of protecting women. Additionally, women who saved money to act for their solvency had to use that money during a flood to cover everyday expenses.

Secondly, educational obstacles. Educational qualification is the principal type of individual resource and the main factor for women's empowerment. Girls and women who are well-educated are less likely to be dependent on men for survival and have more authority and control over their lives in Nigeria [13]. The government of Bangladesh has implemented a variety of programs aimed at promoting equal participation in education. However, women continue to face significant disparities, particularly in rural areas. Natural disasters, such as floods, have a detrimental effect on the educational opportunities available to women. Like other rural areas prone to disasters, the dropout rate of females in Sariakandi is higher than that of boys. This can be attributed to the fact that during floods, parents tend to prioritize keeping their daughters at home to assist with household chores. The occurrence of a flood disaster has resulted in a precarious situation for women, leading to the necessity of withdrawing young girls from educational institutions. One additional factor to consider is the influence of parental educational status on girls' education. Individuals with a moderate level of literacy expressed a desire to provide education for their female children. Promoting the education of women may serve to facilitate the active involvement of women in the realm of environmental conservation.

Thirdly, child marriage is a strong obstacle to women's empowerment. Early marriage is a strong factor in women's economic vulnerability. An estimated 38 million child brides are living in Bangladesh. 13 million of these couples married before the age of 15 In Bangladesh, 51% of young women were married before the age of 18, the legal age of marriage in that country [41]. The local government has implemented programs aimed at curbing child marriage, but there exists a prevailing preference among the local populace for early marriage. In the event of a flood, individuals are compelled to seek refuge in the dam, an establishment that may not provide enough safety measures for females. Parents have the goal to arrange a marriage for their daughter before the occurrence of a flood to ensure safety. Child marriage raises the dropout rate for girls, causes early pregnancies, reduces women's chances of

being independent, increases their physical vulnerability, and on top of all that, blocks the path to women's empowerment, forcing them to remain dependent on their counterpart.

Fourthly, the cultural phenomenon of interdependence among women in Bangladesh has been deeply ingrained and perpetuated across successive generations. Access to education, training, and economic stability has a crucial role in mitigating the prevalence of detrimental cultural practices. However, it is important to note that in flood-prone regions, women often face significant barriers to obtaining such access. The occurrence of floods poses a hindrance to accessing existing services due to the increased workload imposed by the flood. The cultural environment shapes the lives of women following the expectations of a patriarchal society, making it difficult for women to readily break free from this cultural influence. The responsibility for changing this culture lies with the individuals who hold power and influence in society.

Finally, in general, socially excluded groups such as women, who have limited participation and influence over resource allocation, were more exposed to the effects of climate change. Increasing the standing of women in the decision-making process for disaster reduction contributes to the reduction of women's catastrophe vulnerabilities. This is because it will help to identify women's special needs and concerns in a more efficient manner [14]. The capacity for decision-making expands the range of options available across several domains, hence facilitating the empowerment of women. Due to flooding, women in the study area are still illiterate, unskilled, ignorant, and dependent on men. As a result, they cannot make decisions.

The study's overarching findings suggest that floods harm women's empowerment within the designated research region. The issue of women's empowerment poses significant challenges in the flood-prone region of Sariakandi. The achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment is not solely a goal, but also a vital determinant for the maintenance of economic growth, social development, and environmental sustainability. To achieve a sustainable trajectory of development, it is imperative to ensure equitable allocation of resources that considers the interests of both women and men. This can be accomplished by offering equal opportunities to women and men, including their inclusion in decision-making processes across various domains of activity.

To promote women's empowerment, it is imperative to raise awareness among women and motivate them to transition from a state of passivity to one of active engagement. There is a pressing need to enhance school enrolment rates, put an end to child marriage practices, foster the development of decision-making skills, and address cultural constraints to promote women's empowerment. Throughout the entire process, men can play a significant part. For the actualization of women's empowerment, a significant

transformation in attitudes, gender stereotypes, and the distribution of power between genders is imperative.

Available data indicates that the women residing in Sariakandi are not fully inclined to embrace any transformative changes. This reluctance can be attributed to their long-standing subordination across generations and the limited exposure to contemporary knowledge resulting from the impact of floods in this rural region. To effectively address oppression and domination, it is imperative to not only focus on their removal but also to prioritize the awareness and empowerment of women regarding their societal roles. By first educating women about the need for change and encouraging them to actively participate in reshaping their place within society, the prospects for successfully eliminating oppression and domination can be significantly enhanced.

One limitation of the study is that while in-depth interviews provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of women encountering challenges in empowerment, the inclusion of quantitative data could enhance the overall richness and use of the findings. Another aspect to consider is the geographical scope of the study conducted in Sariakandi. While this area is prone to flooding, it is important to gather information from other flood-prone regions in Bangladesh to validate the findings and ensure their applicability to a broader context. Additional investigation has the potential to be undertaken considering the concerns.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The topic of women's empowerment holds significant importance in terms of human rights, as it directly affects the overall welfare of women, their families, and society. Moreover, it has substantial implications for socio-economic development and the alleviation of poverty, particularly in developing nations such as Bangladesh. The world community has taken note of and acknowledged Bangladesh's progress in empowering women. However, the road for Bangladeshi women has not been without its bumps. They have had to overcome several challenges, from social taboos to traditional beliefs, to get where they are now. The process of women's empowerment is not characterized by simplicity and expediency, but rather by complexity and long-term duration. The reorientation towards women and the improvement of women's empowerment, particularly in Bangladesh's rural flood-prone areas, are matters that require time. The objective of this study was to gain an understanding of the obstacles faced in promoting women's empowerment in these areas. It is noteworthy to observe that despite an era characterized by advanced technological advancements, the prevalence of patriarchal cultural norms in the realm of academic pursuits significantly impacts the lives of women, exacerbating during flood situations. Women, adhering to societal constraints, exhibit hesitancy towards embracing any alterations and refrain from contemplating their

empowerment under a patriarchal social structure that prohibits such endeavors. It might be argued that the success of women's empowerment and capacity development initiatives, whether led by government or non-government entities, hinges on addressing the fundamental challenge of motivating women to actively embrace the necessity of empowerment.

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