



CASE STUDY 5

GENDER AND CLIMATE CHANGE RESEARCH IN BANGLADESH

Country: Bangladesh

Focus: Gender mainstreaming

Donor(s): Oxfam

Organisation(s): Monash University /
Oxfam

Timeframe: 2011-2013

FEBRUARY 2018

KEY POINTS

- Thinking *systematically* about gendered implications is an important part of gender awareness
- Working at multiple levels is crucial to analyse problems and form sustainable solutions
- A gender lens constitutes an extra level of analysis when combined with a politically informed approach

OVERVIEW

This case study focuses on lessons from research by the Oxfam-Monash partnership into the gendered impacts of climate change in Bangladesh. Led by Professor Margaret Alston and working with researchers from the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) research unit at Monash University, the team collected qualitative and quantitative data from three regions of Bangladesh between 2011 and 2013. Logistical support was provided by local partner organisations. Key findings emerging from the research include, firstly, that the effects of climate change result in significant gendered differences relating to food and water security, livelihood strategies, education access, health, child marriage and violence.¹ For example, violence against women has increased as a direct result of climate disasters. Violence occurs in shelters, on the way to shelters, during and after a climate event and in the reconstruction phase.²

GENDER AWARE WAYS OF WORKING

The approach to gender within the research emphasises both the necessity of sex disaggregated data and attention to context: “The primary aim was to report on women and girls, so we approached it squarely from that position. However, you can’t study women in isolation. Gender is always negotiated via relationships, and you have to understand how those relationships are formed if you are going to look at the impact of anything on women.”³ The key lesson learned from this approach has been the importance of considering gender explicitly and systematically in every context when programming. For example, in the case of disaster response, “if you are working to alleviate death and drowning from floods, you also need to ensure that women have safe shelters, and protect them from sexual violence in that context”.⁴

POLITICALLY INFORMED

Being politically informed is a way of working that recognises that development outcomes are determined by the dynamics of power and politics. It is not about formal governance reforms, such as elections or civil service reforms. It involves analysing stakeholder interests and incentives to understand what is politically feasible.

POLITICALLY INFORMED WAYS OF WORKING

The research highlights the value of several aspects of a politically informed way of working, namely working with local partners, careful framing of recommendations, and strategies that address issues at multiple societal levels simultaneously.

Working with local Oxfam partner organisations to conduct the research was crucial to avoid “coming across as thinking that we are the international experts, telling people what to do”.⁵ This also provided access to a range of perspectives, including those of “usually male leaders in all of the villages.”⁶ This bottom-up approach and attention to local context has then in turn informed strategic framing of recommendations emerging from the research. For example: “It meets with resistance if recommendations are specifically gendered, like keeping girls in school.”⁷

A key insight to have emerged from the research findings is that the complex and connected nature of developmental challenges requires simultaneous interventions at multiple levels. For example, a combination of social norms and lack of resources together result in girls’ early marriage and, as a result, lack of education. Thus, in order to improve girls’ education, “you can’t just build a school, and when you do, you have to ensure that the education it provides isn’t controlled by a patriarchal system”.⁸

GENDER AWARE

Being gender aware is a way of working that analyses how women and men, girls and boys, experience an issue differently and/or unequally, and the power relations that sustain these inequalities. A robust analysis also looks at how gender intersects with other forms of diversity, such as race, religion, ethnicity, class and disability, and non-binary gender identities or diverse sexual preferences.

Similarly, the findings highlight the importance of policy at local, regional and national levels: “When national programs are introduced, gender equality features in all of their plans. Yet when that translates down to village level there is no oversight, and women at village level are not aware that policies exist at the national level, so it doesn’t get translated.”⁹ For example: “If there is a national policy that women have access to reproductive healthcare, but without health officials visiting door to door, women may not access that.”¹⁰

“Policy translation from national to local level is absolutely critical.”¹¹

CONVERGENCE OR TENSION?

The approach and findings from this research demonstrate how the addition of a gender lens to politically informed programming can constitute an additional level of analysis, improve understanding of informal power, and contribute to programs’ overall effectiveness.

Regarding a gender lens as a level of analysis, researchers found, for example: “In family negotiations when food was short, it was mainly

“Gender and TWP [thinking and working politically] can’t be divorced, because you can’t do development in isolation from what is going on in broader society.”¹²

women who were doing the adjusting by eating less. [...] But, when the government distributes food, that doesn’t necessarily address the within-family negotiations that go on. Therefore, a gender lens shows that we have to work at the household level as well at the national level.”¹³ Without this level of analysis, food security policy is less effective.

A gender lens also contributes to understanding of informal power because “otherwise what tends to happen is a focus on the male-dominated bodies which constitute formalised lines of authority. That means you don’t get a balanced view, and this eventually affects the distribution of resources, such as in the case of food security”.¹⁴

Improved program effectiveness – beyond results specific to women and girls or focused on gender equality – resulting from gender aware approaches is demonstrated by the emerging impact of recommendations made by this research: “Within partner organisations, the statistics about deaths from floods and cyclones in Bangladesh have improved dramatically.”¹⁵

EFFECTIVENESS: CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

The factor identified as most crucial to the success of programming drawing on this research is the ability to work at multiple societal levels simultaneously: “Just working at one level isn’t going to make any real change. If you empower women at the ground level when there is nowhere for them to go from there, then you are limiting the change that you can make.”¹⁶

1. Alston 2014
2. Alston 2014
3. Key informant, 09.03.2017
4. Key informant, 22.03.2017
5. Key informant, 22.03.2017
6. Key informant, 09.03.2017
7. Key informant, 22.03.2017
8. Key informant, 22.03.2017
9. Key informant, 09.03.2017
10. Key informant, 09.03.2017
11. Key informant, 09.03.2017
12. Key informant, 22.03.2017
13. Key informant, 09.03.2017
14. Key informant, 09.03.2017
15. Key informant, 22.03.2017
16. Key informant, 22.03.2017

METHODS

A rapid review of select documentation, combined with confidential interviews with at least two key informants per case. These include project staff, independent reviewers, donors and other stakeholders. Identifying and listening to local and/or female informants has been prioritised. Interviews for this case took place on 09.03.2017 and 22.03.2017.

SELECTED RESOURCES:

Alston, M. (2014). *Gender and Climate change in Bangladesh: a short report*. Melbourne: Monash University.

Alston, M., Whittenbury, K. and Haynes, A. (2014). *Gender and Climate Change in Bangladesh. A Report to Monash-Oxfam*. Melbourne: Monash University

Alston, M. (2015). *Women and climate change in Bangladesh*. Women in Asia series. Routledge.

Alston, M. and Akhter, B. (2106). "Gender and Food Security in Bangladesh". *Gender, Place and Culture*, 23:10, pp. 1450-1464.

Alston, M., Whittenbury, K., Haynes, A. and Godden, N. (2015). *Are climate challenges reinforcing child and forced marriage and dowry as adaptation strategies in the context of Bangladesh?* Women's Studies International Forum.

This case study was written by **Orlanda Siow** of UCL as part of the Gender and Politics in Practice (GAPP) research project. It is one of 14 short case studies focusing on development programs that aim to be both politically informed and gender aware. See *From Silos to Synergy* for a synthesis of the lessons that emerge. Explore all GAPP publications at dlprog.org/gapp.

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