Women’s Participation in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Programme of BRAC at Community Level

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ABSTRACT

This study describes women’s participation in the decision-making process during participatory rural appraisal (PRA), Village WASH Committee (VWC) and cluster meetings of the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programme of BRAC. This study aimed to determine the challenges, if any, faced by female members in participating in and influencing the decision-making process, and to determine BRAC’s role in dealing with any problems faced by women. Seven villages were selected for this study from Balaganj, Srimongal, Gajipur and Feni districts. Data were collected through participant observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of community people, VWC members, programme assistants, programme organizers and upazila managers. Findings reveal that almost in all cases attendance of female members in the meetings was equal or higher than men. Most of the females did not voluntarily express their opinions, especially the ultra poor and adolescent girls. As a result, they failed to influence in decision-making. Male members always spoke on many issues, about their problems though they did not have much influence on decisions, except in a few cases. Decisions were mostly made by BRAC representatives. However, male members were seen to express their voice voluntarily in most of the time in the meeting. Women’s participation in these meetings can be ensured by sensitizing community people, VWC members and WASH field staff about the benefits of equal participation of both sexes in development activities. An enabling environment should be created where all members of the community, especially adolescent girls and hardcore poor, can express their opinions in meeting. Participation of adolescent girls can be increased by decreasing the number of target households for cluster meetings, as we found that attendance of adolescent girls was much lower. Presently in formation of cluster larger geographical coverage is considered to include 50 households often from the distant places of the village. In cluster with scattered households most parents do not allow their adolescent daughters to attend meetings. Finally, holding of meetings at convenient time for women may also ensure their higher participation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

BRAC has been working in partnership with the government of Bangladesh (GoB) and other stakeholders to facilitate the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) related to water, sanitation and hygiene for all, especially for underprivileged groups, in rural Bangladesh. Through these efforts, it is hoped to improve the health situation of the poor and enhance equitable development through its Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programme\(^1\). There are six key themes against which the success of the programme is being judged. These include hygiene and behavioral change, integration of hygiene, sanitation and water, effectiveness of technology, reaching the poor and the ultra-poor, gender sensitivity and sustainability\(^2\). BRAC recognizes the participation of people from all levels as crucial for achieving the targets of WASH.\(^3\) In this context, it places special emphasis on ultra-poor and female populations, especially ultra-poor women.

Women usually gain substantial benefits from an effective and integrated water, hygiene and sanitation project. Availability of latrines helps them tremendously, in terms of health, safety, privacy, dignity and convenience. Well-located water points reduce their burden. Hygiene promotion and education not only improve the health of women, but also as gate-keepers of the lives of their families, promotion/education for women improves the health of their children and husband\(^3\).

The programme also focuses on the empowerment of women. Therefore, the organization has designed the programme in such a way that women are seen not only as the beneficiaries or recipients but also as the active participants in all the stages of the process, from policy making to implementation.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

General objective of the study is to determine women’s participation in WASH activities at community level.

Specific objectives

Specific objectives of the study were

- To see women’s participation at community level in the process of decision-making in participatory rural appraisal (PRA), Village WASH Committee (VWC) and Cluster meetings in WASH activities;

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\(^1\) BRAC WASH Proposal

\(^2\) Programme Data

\(^3\) BRAC arrange meetings with small group of villagers to share and discuss different issues regarding WASH. Each of these groups is called a cluster. WASH conducts two types of cluster meetings with community members. One is held right before PRA to introduce people to the WASH program with its 5 messages about hand washing as well as to invite people to engage in social mapping and committee formation. Another type of cluster meeting takes place at the second stage of the programme, where another 9 WASH messages on sanitation are given to villagers. This study observed 6 cluster meetings of the latter type.
To know the barriers or challenges, if any, faced by female members in participating and influencing decision; and
To determine BRAC’s role in dealing with the problems, if any, faced by female members.

**Operational definition of ‘participation’**

For the study purpose, the following phenomena were explored to determine participation:

- Voluntary effort/active participation/expression of voice – that is, whether women speak up willingly or not as well as their articulation of their needs and concerns compared to that of men. It does not imply that women have influence, i.e. that their voices are heard or taken into account by others.
- Women’s influence on decision-making - whether their opinion is valued during decision-making
- Involvement, that is whether they are performing any tasks during the meetings
- Attendance at VWC and Cluster meetings

**Rationale**

In a patriarchal system, participation of women in the public sphere is not as prominent as men. But what does the participation mean? The term ‘participation’ has been defined in various ways, such as involvement, influence, initiative, voluntary effort, etc (Singla 2004). Attendance in meetings is one of the most commonly used variables for studying participation in majority of the studies (Singla 2004). Participation, in the present context, has been studied on the basis of following specific determinants, namely:

- Attendance of women members at the meetings;
- Nature of the issues handled and discussed;
- Members’ performance in the meetings; and
- Gains from participation indicates whether female members able to influence the decision.

In patriarchal culture, women face various barriers when participating or expressing their voices in the public sphere due to the way they are brought up. The structures of domination have prevented women from actively participating in and contributing to the enrichment of public discourses. According to Millet (1970) patriarchal ideology is that of male supremacy which conditions women to exhibit male-serving behavior and to accept male-serving roles (Hadjipavlou 2003).

All genders are culturally constructed categories, associated with culturally defined expected patterns of thought and behaviour that are subjected to hierarchical distinctions, advantages and disabilities (Bhasin 2004).

Study shows that women have a secondary importance in public affairs and community decision-making (Bhasin 2004). Lots of myths like their childbearing state, emotions, lack of self-confidence, paucity of imagination and real creativity are
used to validate women’s subordination in the society. Here religion, which legitimizes gender hierarchy, also plays a very crucial role in hindering women to be active in public place. The subordination of women in religious activities and their denial of access to positions of religious leadership has been a powerful tool in most world religions in supporting the patriarchal order and the exclusion of women, from the public arena (Ortner 1974; Sered 1994, 1998; Wallace 1997; Franzmen 2000).

Women are generally bypassed and marginalized either they lack the requisite skills or because of their heavy and unending domestic responsibilities. That makes difficult for them in attending meetings and participating in decision-making. A study on status of tribal women in India shows that although women’s status is high in their community when they contribute substantially to primary subsistence activities, women supremacy is restricted within the family domain and does not extend to social or political spheres (Bhasin 2004). It is also shown that although by convention every village Panchayat4 has a female member, she rarely others to attend the meeting or to take any active interest in the proceedings of Panchayat. The study also shows that when women occupy public spaces, men usually do not join them. Here the interaction between individual men and women varies according to kinship relation and relative age. This interaction ranges from relaxed informality to extreme avoidance, marked by women covering their head and men averting their glances. Men who are not relatives, especially elders, do not come close to an area where a group of women is sitting (Bhasin 2004).

Several studies document women's lack of effective participation at council meetings (Sooryamoorthy 2000). Since they are not used to dealing with men outside their home, it is difficult for them to speak up at meetings. Even when women had something to say at the meetings, they would hesitate because of the presence of males in the room (Thomas 2004). Often, the husbands led the discussion on behalf of their wives. In other instances, women were seen preparing tea for the male members of the council, and remained in the background (Thomas 2004).

In a patriarchal system several social and psychological obstacles hinder women’s participation in highly professional positions, in politics and at decision-making levels. Society’s attitude that “a woman’s place is in the home”, inadequate education, few positions allocated for women, the lack of support from other women and fear in handling power, were considered as some of the main obstacles (Hadjipavlou 2009).

Keeping the above mentioned reality in mind, it becomes necessary to see whether women are able to place their needs and raise their voice as well as to influence the decision-making at community level as though they are given the most priority during the planning and designing of the structure and activities of WASH programme. Therefore, to ensure women’s active participation in implementing programme activities, we studied whether women are able to perform their duties and responsibilities as well as to raise their voice in favor of women’s interest and needs. If they are not able to do this, we intended to explore the barriers they faced.

The study will be of use to programme for identifying areas most in need for creating an enabling environment where women can equally participate at the community level during PRA, VWC and cluster meetings.

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4 Village council in India or southern Pakistan.
METHODS AND MATERIALS

STUDY AREA

This study was done in four districts i.e. Balaganj, Srimongal, Gajipur and Feni. From each selected district two villages were chosen while one village was from Gazipur district.

DATA COLLECTION

Observation

Three PRA meetings were observed. Two were observed in Balaganj (village Shonatita and Bororchar) and another one in Gajipur (village Rayerdia). Four VWC meetings were observed. Of these, two from Feni (1st phase) and another two from Srimongal (2nd phase). Three cluster meetings (one with a female group, one with adolescent girls and one with male group) were observed at both Feni and Srimongal, for a total of six.

In-depth interview

Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted. Four female members were taken as key informants from each of the two VWC in Feni and Srimongal. The respondents were Member Secretary, BRAC’s VO (village organization) members, ultra-poor members and adolescent members. Six WASH field level staff were taken as respondents from Feni and Srimongal. Three (one Programme Assistant or PA, one Programme Organizer or PO and one Upazila Manager or UM) were taken as the key informants from each place.

Focus Group Discussion

Six focus group discussions were conducted. Two were conducted with male and two with female after a PRA session while another two were conducted with male members of VWC (one in Islampur, Feni and another in Vurvuria, Srimongal). Topics included the barriers to women’s participation in the above mentioned meetings and decision-making.
FINDINGS

PARTICIPATION IN PRA MEETING

Observation

1. Balaganj, Sylhet (village-Shonatita, Union-Osmanpur, *Upazila*-Balaganj, Number of households-68, Number of facilitators- 1 PO (male) and 2 PAs (female) Date-16 July 2008-17 July 2008, Time: 9.00 am)

2. Balaganj, Sylhet (Village-Borochar, Union: Eliaspur, *Upazila*-Balaganj, Number of households-127, Number of facilitators: 1 PO (male) and 2 PAs (female)) Date-24 July 2008- 25 July 2008 Time: 9.30 am)

3. Gajipur (Village-Rayerdia, Union: Nagori, *Upazila*-Kaliganj, Number of households-159, Number of facilitators: 3 Pos (1 female and 2 male) and 2 PAs, Date- 2 August 2008 - 3 August 2008, Time: 9.30 am)

Social mapping

Male villagers and BRAC representatives played the main part in social mapping. In this regard, there were real differences between Balaganj and Gajipur.

In one case at Balaganj, in Shonatita, women totally avoided the social mapping meeting due to the very conservative nature of the area. Although women came to the house selected by BRAC staff as meeting place in a festive mood, none of them came to the room where the social mapping was going on. Here male villagers as well as facilitators were indifferent about the matter.

In another place in Balaganj, Borochar, the totally opposite picture was observed. Only women were present there. No male attended the meeting, except the head of the house where the meeting was being taken place. He refused to sit with women in the meeting, so he was in the next room. A 17 years old son of the house was seen to serve water and refreshments to the participants. In Rayerdia, Gajipur, although women were present in the meeting with male, their participation was almost negligible.

Seating arrangement and distance from facilitators

In all cases, participants sat in a U-shaped arrangement. During the social mapping, women were totally absent in Shonatita and Borochar, but in Rayerdia, female participants sat on one side and male participants sat on the other. Between the two groups, three POs and two PAs were sitting. Although they kept equal distance from the men and the women at the beginning, the main male facilitator shifted closer to the male group when the social mapping started. The drawing of the map mainly...
involved the five male members and he communicated mainly with the male members. By the end, male members were sitting beside the main facilitator, while distance between women and the main facilitators became almost seven feet.

In Borochar, three out of seven participants (all were women) were sitting with the facilitators and looking at the map while the other four were standing almost three feet away, such that they could not see the map.

In Shonatita, five men sat with one PO and two PAs in U-shaped. Three men were participating in drawing with facilitators while other two were sitting keeping almost two feet distance from the facilitators.

**Participation in terms of number**

At the beginning, in Gajipur, 31 villagers from 27 households were present in the meeting (male-08, female-11, adolescent boys-04, adolescent girls-03, children-06). The number of participants decreased as the time passed.

Despite the many factors that had been taken into consideration while selecting the meeting place so that all villagers could come, only villagers who lived close to the meeting site came to the meeting.

At the start of the meeting, around 9.30 am, the number of women was higher than the number of men, but by 12.00 pm women started to leave due to their household responsibilities (cooking).

In the case of Borochar, Balaganj, there were seven female participants (2: aged above 60 years, 3: 40-50 years, 2: 30-40 years). No adolescent, no male participants except the house owner and his son were present. In Shonatita, five young and middle aged men were present. Three of them stayed in the meeting until the end.

**Involvement in social mapping**

*Involvement in drawing*

In all meetings, no woman was involved in drawing map. Interestingly, even if there were no man present in the meeting, women did not participate in drawing.

In Gajipur, no woman was seen to be involved in drawing the map despite her physical presence. Women even did not take part in social mapping even though no men were present in the meeting in Borochar, another observed meeting. In that case, i) women were seen to be refused to take part in drawing giving the excuse of their inability and ignorance about the matter, and ii) they were asking for financial support from the programme. Here facilitators asked the household head to draw the map. Then he did it sitting in a separate room from the main meeting. Then after few minutes, it was seen that facilitators also moved to the household head to join the social mapping leaving the women. Then after a few minutes, all the women left the place.
Providing information

Among the eleven women present in Gazipur, four of them gave their opinion, in only four times in identifying households, giving location of kacha/pacca sanitary latrines and about the location of tube-wells in the village. It was noticed that –

(i) They gave their opinion only about their nearest neighbourhood
(ii) They expressed their opinion with less command and confidence

Identification of households, wealth ranking, identification of tube-wells, identification of latrines and their condition, identification of needy area were mainly done by BRAC representatives with 5 male members present there (1- farmer, 2- educated unemployed, 1-student and 1-businessman, all between 18 to 50 years). Here all male members were participating in the same way without any class differentiation. All women were seen to refrain from giving any comments or information about social mapping; sometimes they talked among themselves.

Exclusive role played by women

In all cases, women were seen to play a common role irrespective of area observed. They were seen to be involved in preparing the place before the meeting as well as in arranging tea and refreshment for the participants.

Formation of village WASH committee

Seating arrangement and distance from facilitators

In observed meetings, the participants were sitting on the floor in two groups, separated by gender. Women were sitting on one side and the men were at the other side. The facilitators sat between them. The distance between facilitators and male villagers was only 2.5-3 feet, while their distance from female was double that.

Participation in selecting chairperson

On the day of social mapping, BRAC representatives unofficially selected particular persons as chairpersons of VWCs who had social acceptability among most of the villagers. Sometimes the selection was done during cluster meetings that took place before the day of social mapping. On the day of Committee formation, BRAC representatives proposed their name to the villagers present in the meeting as the chairperson of the committee. In these three cases, nobody raised any objections. Some of the participants were seen to utter “no objection” during the time. Then BRAC staff declared them as the heads of the committee. It was noticeable that many of the participants (both male and female) remained silent at the time.

Participation in selecting other members of VWC

According to the criteria of each members set by the WASH programme, mainly the selected chairperson and BRAC people selected other members of the committee among the participants. Here in all of the cases, female members did not play any role in the selection process, while some of the male members raised their voice in favor of some particular persons.
PARTICIPATION IN VWC MEETING

OBSERVATION

1. Srimongal (1.Village: Vurvuria, Union: Rajghat, Upazila: Srimongal, No. of household: 331, Date: 03/08/08, Duration: 11.00 am to 11.45 am 2.Village: Shindurkhan, Union: Rajghat, Upazila: Srimongal, No. of household: 237, Date: 08/08/08, Duration: 3.30 pm to 4.30 pm)

2. Feni (1.Village: Islampur, Union: Anandapur, Upazila: Phulgazi, No. of household: 135, Date: 18/08/08, Duration: 10.25 am to 11.15 am, 2.Village: Dakkhin Khazuria, Union: Amjadhat, Upazila: Phulgazi, No. of Households: 200, Date: 19/08/08, Duration: 4.40 pm to 5.30 pm)

Seating arrangement and distance from facilitators

Srimongal

In Vurvuria, males and females sat in separate groups. There were 2 facilitators, one male PO & one female PA. The male PO sat with the male group while the female PA sat with the female group. Here, the PO played the role of the main facilitator. He mainly was communicating with male members. The distance between him and female members was almost 6 feet, while the distance between him and the men was almost half.

In Shindurkhan, attendees did not separate into same-sex groups. Members sat on the floor in a nearly U-shaped pattern in a long room. Here, participants seemed to be less conservative in seating positions; men and women were interspersed in the U. Here one of the male POs worked as the main facilitators.

Feni

In both the meetings in Feni (Islampur and Dakkhin Khazuria), males and females sat in separate groups in the meeting. In both cases, the distance between female members and main facilitators was greater than that of male members.

In case of Islampur, the distance between female groups and the main facilitators were seemed to be 6 feet while it was 3.5 feet in case of male members. Here both facilitators, one PO and another PA, were women.

In the case of Dakkhin Khazuria, where one female PA and one male PO were facilitators, the distance between the female group and the main facilitator (male PO) was almost 5 feet while he sat very near to the male members.

Number of participants

Women’s participation was higher in terms of number than that of men in the observed VWC meetings. Among six female members at least five members were
present, while among male members, at least four out of were present in two observed meetings.

**Table 1. Attendance of VWC members in four observed meetings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Male Attendance</th>
<th>Female Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimongal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vurvuria</td>
<td>03/08/08</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shindurkhan</td>
<td>08/08/08</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feni</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islampur</td>
<td>18/08/08</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakkhin Khajuria</td>
<td>19/08/08</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* As per proposal, VWC consists of 6 female (youth woman as member secretary, village defense party representative, adolescent girl, community health volunteer, woman selected from hardcore poor group, according to category set by BRAC and Palli Samaj/BRAC-VO representative as members) and 5 male (1- local elites/local leader as chairperson, religious leader, representative of school/madrasa teacher, village doctor/small business/community leader and local NGO/club/association representative) members. In addition, women union parishad (ward level) member, other ward member and one selected community leader acted as advisors to the committee.

**Issues handled and discussed**

The following issues were handled and discussed in the observed VWC meetings:

- Evaluation of activities in the last two months
- Making action plan for the next two months

**Participation**

*Expression of voice*

Numbers of women taking part in the discussion. In all cases, most of the women remained silent in the meeting. A very few women participated in the discussion.

It was observed that, in Vurvuria, two (member secretary and village defense party representative) out of five female members took part in the discussion while the other three (BRAC VO member, Shasthya Shebika member and adolescent member) remained silent all the time. As mentioned earlier the ultra-poor female member was absent in the meeting.

In Shindurkhan, all members more or less took part in the discussion except for the adolescent members.

In Islampur, three female members (member secretary, BRAC VO member and village defence party representative), out of six, participated in the discussion while three remained totally silent. These members included adolescent member, hard-core poor and Shasthya Shebika.

In Dakkhin Khazuria, only two of the five females present in the meeting took part in the discussion, while all three male members present in the meeting shared
their views and problems, especially with the BRAC representatives. The two women who took part in the discussion were the village defense party representative and *Shasthya Shebika* while the other three who remained silent were the adolescent member, BRAC VO member and hardcore poor member.

In all cases, although all female members remained silent most of the times, the categories of females who were the most marginalized were:

i) **Hardcore Poor Member**: In two out of four VWC meeting observed, members from the hardcore poor group were silent, in one, hardcore poor member was absent. Later she said that she was not informed about the meeting because the other member, especially the chairperson and the one of the advisor of this VWC didn’t like her to join the meeting.

ii) **Adolescent Member**: In all cases, adolescent members didn’t take part in any discussion during the meeting. In explanation, one adolescent member in Shindurkhan, Srimongal, when she was asked to talk by the facilitator explained, “Everybody is talking; it doesn’t matter if I alone remain silent.”

Issues in which women gave their opinion. It was observed in all meetings in Srimongal that female members took part in the discussion of issues like achieving targets of household for awareness raising on WASH concerns as well as villager’s inability to set up latrines due to their poverty.

Issues in which they were not participating. They kept themselves away from discussing matters like deciding the number of targets of households, which would be the area of their activities, like awareness raising on WASH issues, supervising the condition of latrines at that households, assisting in fund raising for sanitary latrines for the next 2 months for each of the members. They also did not take part in the discussion about the number of tube-wells, the number of water seals to be set up, the number of new siphons to be fixed up, or setting up a deep tube-well. In this case male members took part in the discussion with facilitators, though the facilitators made the final decision.

**Barriers from other members**

Interruption and shouting- no matter whether the opinion was different from men’s.

“Shut up! You know too much about everything!” (A male member to a female member of VWC in Islampur, Feni)

It was seen in all observed VWC meetings that whenever any issue was raised, the tendency of talking over the female members was seen among male members, no matter whether the opinion of female members went against their views or not. For example, when the PO raised the point of setting up sanitary latrines in Vurvaria, all the members identified poverty as the most difficult barrier in this case, but in reply, the PO said that they all would be able to set up latrines if they could manage to stop being drunk on the way back home from their work. Then all the members seemed to be feeling offended and tried to oppose the words of the PO. In this case, when female members (the member secretary and village defense party representative) tried to say
something to the PO in favor of their position, male members shouted at them to stop by saying “You stop! We will explain.”

When the issue of setting up a tube-well came into the discussion in Shindurkhan, all the members tried to explain their poor economic condition. At that time it was observed that male members shouted at female members to stop and then started to say something about their poverty, the same topic about which female members were trying to express themselves.

It was noticed that at one time, during the meeting in Shidurkhan, a woman who was a village defense party representative, took part in the discussion about setting up sanitary latrines in each households. As she was saying, “if we give real importance to the issue, then we will be able to set up such latrines without having financial support from anybody...” but she was interrupted by a remarks of one of the advisors saying “Shut up! What do you know about the matter? If we ourselves do everything, then what will they (BRAC) do for us? Let me understand the whole thing first.” Then all the women participants became silent and the men spoke.

During one point in the discussion in Islampur meeting it was observed that when a female member, who was also village defense party representative, tried to give her opinion regarding the location of a deep tube-well, she was badly interrupted by the acting chairperson who shouted at her, “Shut up! You know too much about everything!”

**Domination**

It was also seen that men participants and facilitators decided the next action plan and men were seen to have tendency to impose as much responsibility as they wished on women participants. For example, in Shindurkhan, when the number of target household for awareness raising had been decided, women said that they were given a lot of responsibilities without letting them state the problems they face with meeting their target. One of the men participants said “You will have to do it, that’s all,” and that was the end of the discussion of the matter.

**Influence**

The decision regarding the following facts were taken in the observed meetings:

- Number of assigned households for each member to disseminate WASH messages
- The number of latrines to be set up
- The number of water seals and siphon to be fixed
- Setting up deep tube-well

Facilitators made most of the above decisions. During this time they were seen to consult with men of the committee while the women were totally ignored. While deciding the target numbers of siphons and water seals to be fixed up by each member, it was seen that the men, especially the chairperson, were imposing as many as they wanted on women participants without asking their opinion.
PARTICIPATION IN CLUSTER MEETING

OBSERVATION


Number of participants: Women’s participation in numbers was seen to be much higher than that of men and adolescent girls in observed cluster meetings. In the case of the men and adolescents, it was observed that their presence in the meeting was less than 50% in number while in one observed meeting with female group, it was seen that their number exceeded the target.

Table 2. Attendance of villagers in cluster meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Cluster Meeting</th>
<th>No. of target participants</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
<th>% Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khaichara (Srimongal)</td>
<td>Adolescent girls</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakkhin Khazuria (Feni)</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaichara (Srimongal)</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakkhin Khazuria (Feni)</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>130%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khaichara (Srimongal)</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakkhin Khazuria (Feni)</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time

In case of Feni, it was found that villagers didn’t like the meeting held in the morning. It was revealed that due to their household and other outside activities both male and female participants were not happy with the time.

In case of Srimongal, it was also found that when the meeting was held in the morning time, the participants were in a rush for their daily activities, but they were not when it took place after 5.00 pm.

In the case of adolescent girls, they were seen to be in a hurry for school during the meeting held in the morning in Feni. The meeting could not start on time in
Srimongal as the organizers did not consider the school time while selecting the meeting time.

**Different role of facilitator**

The role of the facilitators was seen to be different in when facilitating the meetings with female, adolescent and male group members.

In the case of meetings with adolescent and female groups, after delivering messages, facilitators asked some relevant questions to each participant to judge the effectiveness of their speech. All the participants tried to give the correct answers, and except for some minor mistakes, they all gave the right answers. An exception was seen in the meeting with the adolescent group in Feni. Participants hesitated to respond due to shyness. After much effort by the BRAC representative, three of them gave incomplete answers.

But the facilitators in both the observed area excluded the above-mentioned part when they sat for the meeting with the male group.

**Participation of adolescent girls**

It was found from the observed meetings that attendance of adolescent members is lower compared to the target number. It is known from the participants that many of them did not come due to the distance (Srimongal and Feni) and meeting time (Feni). The other reasons behind their lower participation revealed from interviews with PA, PO and UM, were lack of interest of their parents in the issue, worries on the part of their parents to let their daughters go to the distant area, self-esteem problems, school, exams etc.

It was also seen that in Feni that the adolescent member of VWC did not participate in the meeting at all. She did not even sit for the meeting with most of the participants, but instead stood some distance from the main gathering. Facilitators tried to make the girl sit and participate but she refused to take a seat with most of the participants out of her hesitation and shyness.

On the other hand, an adolescent girl of the VWC was seen to participate more actively in the meeting observed in Srimongal. She listened attentively to the messages delivered by BRAC representatives. She was on very good terms with other participants since she was seen to have good discussion on various matters, especially WASH messages, at different points in the meeting.

**Women’s participation in the meetings at a glance**

Therefore, from the observation of three different meetings- PRA, VWC and Cluster Meetings a few observations could be made.

During social mapping, there was no involvement of women in three observed meetings. Only in one case (Rayerdia, Gajipur) a few women provided information to the participants involved in drawing. Male participants were seen to give their
volunteer efforts/expression of voice in providing information about their village, no matter whether they were able to influence or not.

In the case of committee formation, male participants, especially chairpersons, were seen to be participating in terms of involvement, volunteer efforts/expression of voice and influence. But in terms of attendance, the number of women was seen to be higher than that of men during social mapping. An exception was seen in one place, Shonatitia, Balaganj. In all cases, during committee formation, the attendances of women were higher than men.

In VWC meetings, attendance of female members was also equal or higher than that of men. There, like at the PRA meetings, most members did not voluntarily express their voice, it was especially true in the case of hardcore poor and adolescent members in all observed meetings. As a result, they failed to influence decision-making. In case of male members, it was seen that in all cases, they expressed their voices on many issues, their problems, etc. though they did not have much influence on the decision except in a few cases, as the final decision was made by a BRAC representative. But they were seen to express their voice voluntarily in most of the time of the meeting.

In cluster meetings, no voluntary efforts have been found by any of the participants of either sex to join the meeting. But the attendance of women was higher than that of men.

BARRIERS IN PARTICIPATION

Barriers faced by male participants

Social values: Sometimes younger generations were hesitant to express their opinion during selection of VWC members or deciding the time and place of the meeting of the PRA, male members reported during FGD in Balaganj and Gajipur after PRA.

Little awareness about issues dealt by the programme

It was revealed from the observation that little awareness about the issues of the programme was a major barrier to villagers’ participation. People who already have sanitary latrines sometimes did not feel it necessary to join this type of activities. Lack of knowledge and awareness about the importance of the area of intervention prevents men from joining the activities voluntarily at the initial period of the programme.

Tendency of giving priority of other activities

Observations of VWC meetings in Srimongal and Feni and PRA in Sylhet and Gajipur revealed that BRAC representatives had to remind VWC members and villagers again and again to attend the meeting at the scheduled time. Therefore, all members were informed about the meeting but many of them showed reluctance to join because of their other work, including going to the field, market or other outside activities.
Barriers faced by female participants

**Psychological barrier**

“I will never let my unmarried daughter come in front of other men in the village.”  
(Mother of an adolescent girl from Balaganj)

“If we go there, then elderly brothers will say, “What are you doing here? Go inside.””  
(An adolescent girl from Balaganj)

“Sometimes we knew that a man was giving wrong information during social mapping, but we didn’t say anything out of the fear that he or other men may get angry and shout or tease.”  
(19 years old adolescent girl who have been selected as an adolescent member of VWC in the village of Rayerdia, Gajipur).

From observations and separate FGDs with men and women in observed areas, it has emerged that various psychological factors such as feeling shame in front of men, lack of practice at being vocal and responsive and lack of confidence prevent women from participating in the meetings. The other psychological barriers that came exclusively from the discussion with women were male chauvinism and feelings of insecurity on the part of parents about letting their adolescent and unmarried daughters come in front of village men.

Another barrier that emerged during in-depth interviews with female members of VWC was that they did not say anything in the meeting out of fear of being humiliated and embarrassed by their male counterparts.

“I always try not to make such comments that people can make fun with”  
(BRAC VO members of VWC of Islampur, Feni)

**Social values**

“It is our education that we do not sit on the same level with men on any occasion. If they sit in the chair or bed then we have to sit on the floor, even if there is a vacant chair or place to sit on.”  
(A woman from Balaganj)

“If BRAC is to work with full participation of both male and female, then they have to arrange their activities separately for both sexes; otherwise women will not participate in equal way as men. It is a matter of values and education they [women] got from the family and religion. It is not considered as appropriate for them to speak against what men say.”  
(FGD with men after PRA)

Based on FGD and in-depth interviews with both female members of VWC, PAs, POs and UMs that social values like not saying anything that conflicts with the opinion of men or elderly people is one of the many factors responsible for women’s less participation in event of social mapping, committee formation and VWC meeting.

**Religious factor**

Religious factors, like the value of purdah, were seen to be one of the most important factors affecting women’s participation in meetings. This factor has been identified as a barrier to women’s participation in FGD with both sexes as well as in observation.
During in-depth interviews it was revealed from the respondents from Islampur, Feni that all the participants (both male and female) do not feel comfort when women sit during meetings in public places, like school. In the case of this VWC, the meeting was shifted from school to the house of the chairperson. One of female members, BRAC VO, reported that she does not like to go to someone’s house and therefore did not like to attend the meeting, but at the same time she was aware that it is not appropriate to sit for the meeting in the schools where many people can see them.

**The nature of support WASH provides**

Another barrier women faced was the type of support WASH provided. According to them, their husband or elder brothers encourage them to join such NGO programmes or activities when they see any hope of getting financial support directly. So when they think there is not any hope of financial support from the programme, they themselves do not feel motivated to come and are reluctant to let their female family members to participate. Women also commented that they themselves sometimes did not feel encouraged to join meetings when they found no hope of any financial support or direct equipments or materials from the programme.

**Class factor**

During in-depth interviews with hardcore poor VWC member from both Srimongal and Feni, it was seen that both members felt neglected by other members due to their socio-economic status in the village. They thought it was useless to place their opinion during meeting as other members do not value or care about their opinion.

**Time**

FGDs with male members of VWC and in-depth interviews with female members of VWC revealed that women were busy with their work when the meeting was arranged, usually around 10.00 or 11.00 am. The same was true for men. Therefore, the second half of the day (after 4.00 pm) was the most desired time for all members, both male and female, because in the morning, women were occupied with the thought of their household activities while men with their outside activities.

**Ideas about the gendered division of labour**

“In the hadith it is said that Allah himself has given women lesser brains or intelligence than men for the benefits of society” (Business man, Gajipur in FGD after PRA)

“Today if it was not a rainy day all of us [women] in the village would have gone in groups to a wedding party we were invited to, that no men would find it bad, but men dislike women’s participation in a meeting like this, they thought it was showing ‘disrespect’ to the elderly brothers and uncles in the village” (a woman from Balaganj)

From FGDs with both men and women as well as in-depth interviews with female members of VWC, it has been found that rigid and stereotypical gender roles prevail in the minds of both sexes. This is one of the most powerful factors that prevent
women from participating in decision-making. Several aspects of these stereotypes can be highlighted:

Not such ‘hard work’. According to FGDs with males after PRAs in Balaganj and Gajipur and also with male members of VWC in Feni and Srimongal, men believe that women cannot do everything men can do. It was also revealed that in the case of the WASH programme, men thought that there was not any “hard” work that women were unable to do. They thought the main task of VWC members was to create awareness of WASH-related issues among neighbours. So, according to all respondents, women can do it very easily with their nearest neighbours.

Less responsibility for men and more responsibility for women. According to men WASH deals with issues which are mostly women’s household matters. Women can manage the cleanliness or maintain other hygiene issues at their family or household level. They even do well in awareness raising activities among their neighbours from their immediate surroundings. But they can not raise awareness among larger number of village people due to their limited mobility. As women are not used to speaking in public meetings, they can not participate in the meeting (FGDs with male members of VWC in Srimongal and Feni). So, women can have a very good performance in the area of creating awareness about WASH related issues in venues close to their home. Therefore, the desired role of female members of VWC would be as follows, according to men (FGD with male members of VWC in Srimongal and Feni):

- The most important role of women is to prepare food for family members. So female members of the committee should make village women realize the importance of serving clean and hygienic food and water
- To make people understand about the necessity of setting up sanitary latrines
- To wash hands with soap and clean water in preparing and serving food, before eating as well as after defecation
- To look after their children’s cleanliness
- To be aware of cleanliness of their kitchen

Therefore, according to the view of male members (FGDs with male members of VWC in Srimongal) the female members who both had the ability to convince village women about WASH-related issues and state their opinion regarding these awareness activities in front of other committee members and BRAC representatives were the successful members of the committee. In Srimongal, male members mentioned the name of two members (Lakhxmi- Defence Party Representative and Monita -Member Secretary) as successful members because they thought they were good at awareness-raising and were convincing speakers.

Women in awareness and men in decision-making. In case of decision-making, men can decide, according to male respondents, about the number of tube-wells to be set up, the location of water source or latrine, purchasing materials for sanitary latrine, selecting committee members, etc far better than women do. Men attributed this to women having less intelligence than men by nature.

Therefore, according to men’s views, women can implement the messages of WASH at the household level far better than men, while men’s performance is far
better outside their home. According to them, men can make the final decision on any matter that women can not do.

**Restricted mobility**

During FGDs with women and men in Gajipur and Balaganj after PRAs, it was revealed that women lacked confidence in their knowledge of the number of tube-wells and sanitary latrines existing in the village, their location and condition, the socio-economic status of each household, etc. due to their limited mobility. They felt men have better knowledge on the locality because of their greater mobility and interaction with people.

It is also revealed from FGDs with male members of VWC that although women can do awareness raising to their immediate neighbours, they can’t disseminate the message to larger areas due to their restricted mobility.

**Tendency to ignore women’s potential**

Women from Gajipur also said in FGD that due to their limited mobility they may know less than men about the issues, but in meetings organized about local interests women’s voices are not valued by men, and sometimes not even by NGO representatives. They said that sometimes women know more about important topics than men do, due to their greater interaction with the females in their neighborhoods.

**Marginalized due to age**

Many young female members in the committee, especially adolescent members, remained voiceless since they felt hesitation to speak in front of elderly members.

“What should I say when I am the youngest of all?” (Adolescent member in Islampur, Feni, during in-depth interview)

**Lack of social acceptability of house owner**

It was observed in case of the PRA meeting in Borochar that the meeting was arranged at a house whose household head did was not social acceptable due to his political biases. This caused many of the villagers, both male and female, to not join the meeting.

**Role of Facilitator**

Observations indicated that women felt discouraged to join due to some of the facilitators’ behavior.

**Gave equal importance to number, not opinion**

During PRA (social mapping and VWC formation) facilitators worked hard in the heavy rain to encourage villagers to join the meeting. Although the time and date of the meeting were pre-set the villagers were not prepared for the meeting. Then POs and PAs went to each nearby house to invite them to ensure their participation. Here they gave equal importance to both sexes.
Although facilitators gave equal attention to the attendance of both sexes, they were seen to be indifferent about women’s opinion during social mapping. Women participants did not share their knowledge about social mapping voluntarily most of the time and facilitators also did not make any effort to make them speak. Even when women tried to be a part of the job, they were shouted or discouraged by negative words by male participants. It seemed that this incident not only inhibited women from participating in the next time, it discouraged other women from participation. In these cases, facilitators didn’t play any role in making the situation easy for this woman and the other female participants also.

**Encouraging words**

From the observation of 2 VWCs in Islampur and Dakhzin Khazuria (Feni), facilitators did not make any special effort to ensure women’s participation in the meeting. They didn’t utter any word to encourage female members’ participation in the meeting. An exception was seen in the case of 2 VWC meetings in Srimongal (Shindurkhahan and Vurvuria) where the POs acting as a facilitator insisted that the adolescent female members participate in the meeting by saying some encouraging words. But when they refused to participate, the facilitators did not encourage them again.

During social mapping in Rayerdia, Gajipur and Balaganj and Borocrh, Sylhet, facilitators didn’t utter any words to encourage women’s participation.

**Eye-contact**

Most of the times, during social mapping, committee formation and also during VWC meeting, facilitators were seen to have eye contact with male members but were indifferent about the presence of women. They were also seen to communicate information to the male participants rather than female participants.

**Prevent male domination**

It was observed in all the 4 VWC meetings and PRA meetings that male members always interrupted female members when they were talking. But the facilitator did not take any step to create a more favourable situation for women to talk or to prevent male members from interrupting their female counterparts.

**Giving priority to male members**

The PO who played the role of main facilitator, in Gajipur, was drawing the social map with 5 male villagers. Here no female villagers were called to take part in mapping. Other male villagers were assisting them (PO and other 5 male villagers) in drawing maps by giving information about their village. In case of Borochar, although only women sat for the meeting, male members (household head) was seen to be given priority over female participants in drawing maps by facilitators ignoring the presence and knowledge of female participants. The same was true in case of other observation of committee formation as well as VWC meeting.
Lack of attention to ensure participation of all members

Member secretary (female members) of one of the observed VWC meetings in Feni reported that sometimes they all could not attend meeting due to their other responsibilities, WASH people came to get their signature later, so that they could show them as participants on paper.

Here, the president of the same VWC informed the observer that he did not know about any decisions made during the previous meeting and also didn’t know whether there was any written copy of the decisions or not. It was also known from the president that the facilitators play the main role during all the meetings and other members of committee do need to do anything.

Strength and weakness of wash regarding women’s participation

i. Men consider WASH as a type of NGO interventions which is not “misleading” women by encouraging family planning or other messages. The household heads, predominantly male, think most of the NGOs cause disruption to their family life through their messages and activities. Therefore, the characteristics and type of issues dealt with by the programme make it more welcome than other programmes or interventions focused on family planning or micro-credit.

“I would not let my lady come in front of NGO people if they had come to say about how many children I should have.” (Male participants of Balaganj during FGDs)

ii. All males think that the messages given by WASH are basically in the women’s domain because the issue of using and drinking clean water, washing hands after defecation, and the cleanliness of family and household is a chore always performed by women.

“I always encourage my wife and daughter to come to this type of gathering, because it is good for all of the family members. It is a women’s issue.” (One of the male participants of Balaganj during FGDs).

This side can be regarded both as strength and weakness of the programme as women do not face barriers in joining the programme activities for this aspect, at the same time it is also true that regarding WASH activities as only women’s matters increases women’s workload and encourages the idea of traditional gender roles. Therefore, in order to ensure participation of both sexes, the programme will have to deal with the matter tactfully.

Positive impact of wash on women

Increased social interaction

In-depth interviews revealed that social interaction with each of the female members in the VWC study area has increased. After joining the committee, their interaction increased from 2 to 18 households. The exception was seen in the case of adolescent in Srimongal and hardcore poor member of Feni who reported that the number of household remained the same.
Growing philanthropic attitude in women

During in-depth interviews and FGDs, female members showed their interest in contributing to the field of water, sanitation and hygiene in their locality. This reflects a growing philanthropic attitude. They expressed their desire to helping their poor neighbors and also expressed their satisfaction with the programme for providing them with opportunities to be part of the development process. This attitude indicates a success of the programme in involving women into the public domain from the domestic spheres.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be drawn. These may enhance women’s participation in WASH activities at community level:

Sensitization

i. To community: The community should be made more gender sensitive to ensure women’s participation in WASH activities. In this regard, some messages relevant to gender equality as well as benefits of equal participation in the development process can be incorporated in the existing WASH messages. It is also necessary to present the goals and objectives of the programme to the community in a way that they participate in the programme without having any expectation of any materials or financial aid.

ii. To VWC members: Special steps should be taken to sensitize VWC members, both male and female, about the benefit of equal participation in the activities of the committee.

iii. To staff at field level: BRAC representatives who are working in the community level (PAs and POs) should be made more aware and gender sensitive to ensure maximum participation of women in PRA, VWC and Cluster Meetings.

iv. Creating enabling environment: In general, women remain in a marginalized position, adolescent girls and women from hardcore poor group are even more so, due to their age and socio-economic status. Therefore, special attention should be given to creating an environment for adolescent girls and hardcore poor women that enables them to express their voices, needs and suggestions during the meetings.

v. Ensuring convenient meeting time: Both men and women are busy in the morning with their various responsibilities. Therefore, they do not feel comfortable to join the meetings in the morning. Even if they attend, they are hurried and cannot give their full concentration. Therefore, holding the meetings in the second half of the day may ensure higher participants of both men and women.

vi. Decreasing number of households for cluster meeting with adolescent girls: It is found that attendance of adolescent girls is much lower in the cluster meetings.
It is known from the participants that many of them did not come due to the distance and lack of permission from their parents. Therefore, participation of adolescent girls can be made higher by decreasing number of target households in each of the cluster. Presently fifty households consist of each cluster which often requires selection of households from very far off places of the village.
References


