

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF RURAL WOMEN

Rural women are the frontline warriors against climate change



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The first International Day of Rural Women was observed on October 15, 2008, by the United Nations in recognition of women's contribution to promoting rural development, maintaining food security, and addressing poverty within society and families. In recent years the contribution of rural women in addressing climate change impacts is being increasingly recognised. Today, rural women, including Indigenous women, are standing as a shield against the impacts of climate change through finding local solutions to minimise the devastation being caused by climate change.

The theme of this year's International Day of Rural Women is "Rural Women Sustaining Nature for Our Collective Future: Building climate resilience, conserving biodiversity, and caring for land towards gender equality and empowerment of women and girls." The theme reflects the growing recognition of rural women's role in achieving the sustainable development goals for a just, gender-equal, and climate-resilient world. As per a UN report, women are responsible for half of the world's food production while working as "environmental and biodiversity stewards." As farmers, women have learned how to cope with and adapt to climate change, for example, by practising sustainable agriculture in harmony with nature, switching to drought-resistant seeds, employing low-impact or



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gender equality. Structural barriers and discriminatory social norms continue to constrain women's decision-making power and political participation in rural households and communities. Women and girls in rural areas lack equal access to productive resources and assets, public services, such as education, health care, and infrastructure, including water and sanitation. Globally, with few exceptions, every gender and development indicator

indoor pollution is a severe problem for women and girls in Bangladesh. In addition, women and girls spend considerable time gathering fuel, cooking, and performing other household chores, resulting in time poverty, which is another dimension of gender inequality.

However, in spite of the many challenges women face, they are increasingly playing a crucial role as agents of change in the fight against climate change impacts. The UN slogan

learned how to cultivate vegetables in a *gher* (bank of ponds where aquaculture is practised) with the help of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE). Tahmina proudly shared, "I used to grow vegetables before, but I never earned such a good profit." Since starting with the new methods, she has earned Tk 11,000 from selling vegetables, after meeting her family's needs.

There are hundreds of such stories where women play pivotal roles in the protection and well-being of their families. During natural disasters such as floods and cyclones, it is women who store essential items such as fuels, matches and dry food, for example, rice, peas, puffed rice, flattened rice and molasses. They also prepare portable mud stoves for future use and often collect and store firewood in dry places for later use. They also store fodder for domestic animals, seeds, food, harvest, blankets and valuables on *machas* (high wood or bamboo structures for storage), which are also used to protect goats and poultry from floodwater. There are often images of families floating on a plank during floods where women are seen cooking on mud stoves.

According to the findings of the report "State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Bangladesh," commissioned by the Swedish Government, Bangladesh has made efforts to mainstream gender equality into climate actions through different policies and action plans. While these are positive steps, there remains a gap with regards to the interlinking of gender equality and climate change and also the coordination between government and NGO intervention. Some of the significant challenges include: limited capacity to mainstream gender into national and local policies, programmes and actions; lack of investment in gender-responsive actions; limited access of women's organisations; and low numbers of women in decision-making. Measures do not accord adequate recognition or acknowledgement to gender equality. Moreover, the lack of gender-responsive monitoring mechanisms or the lack of evaluation frameworks and indicators hinders the assessment of gender-related outcomes.

With the promise of a discrimination-free society, now is the time to take concrete actions to remove all discrimination against women and treat them as equal partners in the fight against climate change. The impacts of climate change are in no way "gender neutral." Several research and surveys conducted in recent times reveal the importance of taking steps to recognise the role of women as important agents of change.

This recognition has to be translated into policy actions such as including women in decision-making roles from the local to the national level in climate adaptation policies of the government and investments in women's education, skills, knowledge, and modern technologies to empower them to play a more significant role to address climate-related disasters.

Niva Rani Talukder, a climate warrior from Kalaya village under Sunamganj district, has changed cultivation patterns to offset the impact of inundation during severe monsoons. She learned about floating gardening and built three floating platforms with water hyacinths adjacent to her house. She now protects her crop which used to be destroyed three times a year due to flash floods.

organic soil management techniques, or leading community-based reforestation and restoration efforts. There is little doubt that women are on the frontlines of the climate crisis and uniquely situated to be agents of change to help find ways to mitigate the causes of global warming and adapt to its impacts on the ground.

Bangladesh is ranked the seventh most climate vulnerable country in the world. Floods, cyclones, and droughts have increased in severity and frequency. River erosion, salinity, and rising sea levels render thousands homeless every year, forcing them to migrate to cities in search of food and livelihood options. Several studies show that women are disproportionately affected by these calamities and are vulnerable to extreme poverty, health challenges, and multiple forms of violence. These are barriers towards women attaining gender equality and access to resources.

However, it is not only climate change impacts that prevent women from achieving

reveals that rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women and disproportionately experience poverty, exclusion, and the effects of climate change.

Rural women have less access to a range of resources, from land rights and credit to education and technology. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, farm yields could increase by 20 to 30 percent, feeding an additional 100 to 150 million people globally, according to UN data.

In Bangladesh, women are involved in 48 percent of agriculture-related employment such as milk production, agriculture, fish cultivation, etc. Their labour in seed preservation, poultry raising, vegetable gardening, and care work remains unrecognised and is not counted in the GDP. Despite their critical role in providing food security and nutrition for their families, they remain undervalued. Rural women are also disproportionately exposed to energy poverty and energy-related challenges. For example,

terms them as "environmental and biodiversity stewards." Rural women in Bangladesh are standing up to find local solutions to feed and protect their families in times of crisis. The fame Bangladesh has achieved globally for adaptation can be credited to women's role in the fight against climate change along with their male counterparts.

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Tahmina, an inhabitant from Andharia village under Bagerhat district, where salinity is a major barrier to vegetable cultivation,

Time to put the RTI Act on the right track

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SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

The country's fledgling Right to Information (RTI) regime has not escaped the popular demand for sweeping governance reform since the interim government assumed power. This was inevitable as the entire tenure of the RTI Act 2009 in Bangladesh coincided with the 15-year rule of the ousted government. Like many other laws of the land, it too suffered the debilitating consequences of an autocratic rule affecting all democratic institutions of the country. However, the inherent potential of the law to establish people's oversight of government activities remains intact. A new government with a mandate to restore peoples' sovereignty has ignited new hope for it.

Since its inception, the primary objective of this column has been to enhance the effective use of the RTI Act by citizens to promote good governance. The relatively scarce use of the law over the years has yielded some positive outcomes in a limited field of government activities, but no significant gains were made on larger issues of national importance. This is because civil society, a crucial stakeholder, largely remained aloof, primarily due to a lack of trust in the government's commitment to it. The unfriendly and often uncooperative behaviour of many government officials towards information-seekers, and the absence of a people-friendly mechanism to remove impediments and resolve disputes they faced with recalcitrant public officials were additional factors. More importantly, citizens feared that by seeking information of a sensitive nature relating to many shady government activities, they might face the

wrath of the officials concerned. With the drastic change of circumstances after the fall of the previous regime in the country, it is heartening to see civil society's growing interest in the act.

Increased attention to the RTI Act was manifested at two important gatherings last month in Dhaka. Participating RTI activists and civil society leaders engaged in a more frank and focused discussion on the importance of the law for democratic rule. They highlighted the difficulties faced by the law users, the need for further improvements to its provisions, the removal of many impediments citizens faced in its application, and the steps needed for their removal, thus providing a roadmap for future action.

At the more inclusive meeting on September 29, held to commemorate the International Right to Information Day, participants underlined the crucial importance of transparency and accountability of public officials to the people under democratic rule. Several recommendations were made, which should be of particular importance to one or more reform commissions set up by the interim government recently to improve overall governance in the country.

The foremost requirement for the success of the RTI Act, everyone agreed, would be the government's loud and clear commitment to its far-ranging objectives and readiness to promote its implementation unstintingly. The perceptible lack of such commitment in the past was recognised as a key factor for why many citizens shied away from using the law. They must feel that the government welcomes their participation in governance matters.

Together with its stated commitment, the government must demonstrate it in practice through measures such as proper training of government officials,

including an oath to respect the law's provisions. The training must include appropriate information and records management to ensure easy access when requested by information-seekers. In this context, the code of practice of the United Kingdom is pertinent: "The Right to Information legislation will only be as good as the quality of the records, which are subject to its provisions. Statutory right of access such as this is of little use

will also help decrease the burden on public officials from providing them reactively through citizens' requests. This also applies to NGOs which fall within the purview of the law.

Provisions of Section 7 of the RTI Act, containing a list of items exempt from mandatory disclosure, deserve particular attention. Some are too broad and open to misuse for withholding information. Terms like "national security" or "public interest"



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

if reliable records and information are not created in the first place, if they cannot be found when needed... Good records management practice is therefore essential in implementing the RTI Act."

An equally important measure would be inserting more decisive items in the Proactive Disclosure provision of the law than the current mundane list. The government's proactive inclusion of more meaningful information would not only enhance its credentials for more open and accountable pro-people governance, but

are susceptible to loose interpretation, allowing authorities to deny legitimate information requests. This prevents public scrutiny and allows cover-up of corruption or inefficiency. It also limits the scope of investigative journalism by denying journalists access to information of public interest.

However, the topic that concerned most RTI enthusiasts and observers is the role of the Information Commission in steering the law and facilitating its proper implementation. The selection

and appointment of the commissioners was of utmost importance. The lack of a transparent mechanism for their choice was loudly lamented. There is general agreement that all future commissioners should be selected with utmost objectivity, as prescribed under the law, with attention not only to their honesty and impartiality, but also to their capacity and expertise in the field. The importance of sanctions provided under the law to penalise recalcitrant public officials was also underlined, and so was the need for a more people-friendly Information Commission, since the law was enacted primarily to empower citizens to monitor government activities.

Equally important is to recognise that proper implementation of the RTI Act requires a fundamental transformation of the mindset of all its stakeholders. This is because the law seeks to change an age-old culture of governance based on a colonial concept of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. Such a change is impossible under any autocratic regime where the idea of people as the reservoir of all state power receives scant acceptance. Under the country's new dispensation, achieved through a popular people's movement, it is time to put a mechanism in place to change that mindset.

The success of the RTI Act anywhere in the world largely depends on the determination and commitment of the citizens to put it to practical use. The people of Bangladesh now have an opportunity to assume that responsibility more confidently. Their role in this regard is as essential for democracy as is their responsibility to participate in the elections and choose their government. Let us remember that while RTI activists in our region resist attempts by their governments to limit the scope of the RTI Act, we in Bangladesh are faced with a golden opportunity to enhance it. Let us not miss it.