

VEILED HUNGER

How mothers remain victims to gender-driven nutrient shortages in Bangladesh

Who is responsible for Bangladesh's maternal malnutrition crisis? Is it just a crisis of food availability, or is it our negligence of its gendered origins? The country produces enough food to feed its population, but patriarchal household dynamics ensure that mothers absorb the deficit in times of crisis.

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This was the first time I was visiting Lalmonirhat, excited to see how the urban/peri-urban living structure differed from what I was used to seeing in Dhaka city, with a goal of examining whether the children in the region are eating well. The first two years of a child's life, along with the time spent in the womb, constitute the critical first 1000 days of a child's life, as they determine the foundation for the child's cognitive growth into adulthood. The nutritional status during this period is assessed using Infant and Young Child Feeding practice indicators globally, looking at exclusive breastfeeding (only for 0-6 month old children), minimum acceptable diet, and overall dietary diversity for children aged 0-23 months. While there are a total of 17 recommended indicators according to WHO/UNICEF recommendations, these do not include Minimum Dietary Diversity for Women (MDD-W).

Despite its ability to positively impact childhood malnutrition indicators, societal and scientific priorities have sidelined MDD-W as a complementary indicator. When you ask the average Bangladeshi mother if she is aware of what she needs to feed her children, she often demonstrates awareness of the child's protein and vitamin needs from various sources, underscoring the importance of calorie-rich foods for development as well. She might also be aware of the types of foods she needs to eat during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, but the chances are that her knowledge does not directly translate into practice.

During the fieldwork, we visited many homes, particularly during lunch times. We saw plates of food assembled for a child placed in front of the mother, while her own sat beside it, almost neglected as she fed her child. Whether it was a breastfeeding mother or one introducing new foods to her



PHOTOS: FABI HUDA

6-8 month-old child, the women often neglected their own sustenance for their child. A common sight, even in households in urban Lalmonirhat, was heaped plates of rice, accompanied by a small green chilli and some salt. You see the same in the slums of Dhaka city: mothers who return after hours of domestic work end their days with a plate of white rice and maybe some daal, considering it sufficient sustenance for themselves.

"Why are you only eating rice?" I've asked many women, and received a similar answer from most: "Eta'i baki chilo... Ki aar korbo." (This is all that was left... What more can be done?) Always coupled with a dejected laugh, as if this were the norm—as a mother and the wife of the household. And while the children in these households were eating well, with plates decorated with eggs and a side of vegetables, it was striking to see the mothers resign themselves to a simple plate of

carbohydrates.

Bangladesh's nutrition policies have reduced child stunting impressively but have largely failed to confront the gender dynamics that keep mothers malnourished. Nearly three-quarters of Bangladeshi women of reproductive age are deficient in more than one essential micronutrient, even as the country celebrates dramatic reductions in visible underweight. While caloric hunger is no longer a concern, deficiency in essential micronutrients is the main culprit behind detrimental health outcomes for women and the children they bear. This deficiency, or "hidden hunger", persists because its root causes are deeply gendered: women eat last, eat least, and eat the poorest-quality food in their own households, because patriarchal norms present maternal self-sacrifice as a virtue.

Moreover, food taboos strip protein from pregnant women's plates during pregnancy. As studies note, many

women report at least one food restricted by family elders during pregnancy, with nearly half being forced to adhere to these taboos. White carp is avoided because it supposedly causes convulsions in the baby. Trout is believed to cause speech disorders. Duck meat will give the baby a "harsh voice". Eggs will make the baby too large, necessitating a caesarean section the family cannot afford. Mrigal fish is believed to cause epilepsy. Even traditional beliefs mirroring those of other cultures, such as the Chinese medicine hot/cold classification system, persist. Pregnancy is considered a "hot" condition requiring avoidance of "hot" foods, which can raise the body's temperature. This leads to families avoiding protein-rich items, including fish, fowl, and lentils. In fact, amongst certain indigenous communities in Khagrachari, studies have identified 64 distinct food items classified as taboo during pregnancy.

in childhood and leads to women's lifelong poor nutritional status." One of the factors that forces the persistence of this gender order is the economic depravity faced by many families, which leads to unequal distribution of food. Food inflation reached 12.56% in October 2023, driven by the aftershocks of the Russia-Ukraine war, currency depreciation, and supply disruptions. WFP monitoring found that 30% of low-income households were food insecure in late 2023, with more than six in ten households adopting harmful coping strategies. In fact, during food crises, mothers absorbed the shock: they reduced both the quantity of their food intake and the quality and diversity of what they consumed in order to feed their children and husbands.

So, the question arises: who is responsible for Bangladesh's maternal malnutrition crisis? Is it just a crisis of food availability, or is it our negligence of its gendered origins? The country produces enough food to feed its population, but patriarchal household dynamics ensure that mothers absorb the deficit in times of crisis. Unless Bangladesh confronts the gendered power structures within its own households, its impressive nutrition gains will continue to leave mothers behind. There needs to be a stronger push from technical experts as well as policymakers to dismantle these beliefs systematically. Incorporating the expectation of gender equity within family dynamics into our education system and the daily lives of our youth will encourage children to look after their mothers, and to learn to respect family members who have generationally sacrificed their own well being.



Children playing nearby while Mother is engaged in drying wheat after harvest.

The gender order, as Levay et al. write, "disadvantages women through gendered food allocation that often privileges males, which results in an inequitable distribution that can begin

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Living on the edge

How monsoon turns coastal life into survival

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Before the start of the disaster season, there is a rush of house changes along the coast. People on the banks of the Meghna River are busy repairing their houses. Many people strengthen their houses to make them storm-resistant. People in vulnerable areas take many more steps to avoid the risks of the monsoon and to protect themselves from river erosion. Still, they face suffering. Their time of vulnerability passes through various crises.

"This is our fight for survival. The monsoon brings great hardship to us. We prepare every year in anticipation of the disaster season. Our ancestors also fought to survive like this; we are doing the same. Our next generation may also survive like this." Selim Mollah (50) a resident of Kalkini village in Kamalnagar upazila of Lakshimpur district, was explaining his crisis.

This is not just Selim Mollah's problem. Millions of people living along the 710-kilometre coastline of Bangladesh face the same problem. The monsoon brings a different kind of crisis for them. They know that during this time, storms will hit, houses will be swept away by tidal waves, and the damage will increase. They have lost a lot of wealth in this way for ages. Unless a cyclone hits, government or NGO assistance does not come. But small disasters cause a lot of damage to these marginalised people.

Jahangir Hossain (55) a resident of Dhalchar Island in Bhola district, spent one lakh taka to fix his house before the monsoon arrived this year. Ibrahim Mia (58) of Dhalchar, spent the same amount of money to fix his house. But both of them had to move their houses at the beginning of the storm season.

Statistics show that the scale of this disaster has increased more than before due to climate change. Despite various initiatives, it is not possible to reduce the damage or alleviate the fear. Just as the people of the coast were in fear ten to twenty years ago, they still have the same fear. They are not able to live safely and peacefully on the margins. Every year, huge amounts of coastal resources are damaged due to tidal waves.

Uncertain Life

Before the start of the disaster season, the sound of crying was coming from a house on the banks of the Meghna River. The surrounding air became heavy with the cries of men and women. Before the monsoon, a member of the family was saying goodbye to his family for what could be the last time. This was their cry of separation. The village's almost 50-year-old house had to be moved from the banks of the Meghna before the storm season. Some of the seven families in the house have already moved elsewhere. The families are getting separated; the long-standing bonds of



1. A family faces a precarious future after losing their home to relentless river erosion. The search for a new place to settle remains a constant worry for those displaced. Photo from Ludhua village in Kamalnagar, Lakshimpur. 2. During the monsoon, the intensity of river erosion escalates, causing entire villages to disappear into the water. This recurring cycle of destruction continues to reshape the coastline. Photo taken from Dhalchar Dwip in Charfason upazila of Bhola. 3. For the inhabitants of this island, the arrival of the monsoon signals a period of heightened anxiety. As the weather worsens, resource crises and living challenges multiply. Photo taken from Dhalchar Dwip in Charfason upazila of Bhola.

PHOTOS: RAFIQUK ISLAM MONTU

these traditional families are breaking.

This scene was in Charjagabandhu village of Kamalnagar, an upazila adjacent to the Meghna in Lakshimpur district. The existence of this traditional village is now almost extinct. Many people have been forced to leave the village and move elsewhere.

Such heartbreaking incidents during the danger period are not limited to this one house. This scene is common in the villages on the banks of the Meghna, and even across the entire coast. Visiting the villages of Char Falkon, Ludhua Bazar, Char Jagabandhu, Kalkini Motirhat and other areas on the banks of the Meghna in Kamalnagar upazila, one can see that many people are changing their homes ahead of the monsoon and storm season. Some are moving their roofs and fences to other places. Some are cutting down old trees and selling them at throwaway prices. The house plots, ponds, relatives' graveyards, gardens — everything is falling into the grip of erosion. Farmers lose their agricultural land. Rich families become poor. Many people are forced to change their profession. A silent crisis engulfs the people on this margin.

"Our fear increases during the danger period. The Meghna swallows up village after village. I have lost everything in my life to the Meghna. The Meghna has made me homeless. Finally, I started life from scratch. Life is going

on in uncertainty," said Kamrul Hasan Mir, 40, a resident of Ludhua village.

Increasing misery

According to the calendar, the storm season begins on March 15 and ends on October 15. During these seven months, people on the coast face various types of disasters. The islands on the coast are mostly submerged in water. Houses are swept away by sudden waves. Many people become homeless and take shelter near embankments. Many people are devastated by storms. Yet, homeless people dream of living again and building houses. Now, coastal people are in such a period of fear. This period is called the 'danger period'. This period comes repeatedly, making many people cry. There are fears that this crisis will increase in the future due to the impact of climate change.

The World Bank's report titled 'Bangladesh: Enhancing Coastal Resilience in a Changing Climate' has highlighted various risks of climate change on the coast. It says that 27 percent of people in the coastal areas of Bangladesh are currently at risk of flooding. This risk of coastal flooding may increase to 35 percent in the current century. Currently, coastal areas suffer losses of about 3,000 crore taka annually due to floods. Cyclones cause losses of about 10,000 crore taka. Due to rising sea levels, the number of losses

in Bangladesh may double in the current century.

Disasters not only destroy homes or land, but also cause extensive damage to natural resources. These natural resources are also the main means of livelihood for many people. During this danger period on the coast, various types of disasters, including cyclones, tidal waves, waterlogging, and erosion, occur.

Preparation is weak

According to field sources, many people in remote villages along the 710-kilometre coastline still live in fear of natural disasters. Fear increases when tidal waves rise, when tidal waves occur, and when cyclone signals are issued. From Shahparir Island in Teknaf on the east coast to Kalinchi village in Shyamnagar on the west coast, many places are in a precarious situation. In a very short period of time, Cyclone Amphan took a terrifying form, increasing the fear of the people of the marginal villages on the coast. Five coastal island upazilas and 18 island unions are at risk.

Mehedi Hasan Liton, Union Parishad Member of Kalkini Union, Kamalnagar, Lakshimpur, said, "The coast is not able to prepare for this time of risk. The old houses built over the years have to be moved from one place to another due to natural disasters. The government is as active in broadcasting

cyclone signals as it is across the country, but there is no such government initiative to reduce the damage caused by river erosion and tidal waves."

Sharif Hossain, a businessman from Dhalchar, said, 'Dhalchar Island Union is almost lost due to erosion little by little every year. This island no longer has the capacity to withstand the impact of the monsoon. Every year, many people are forced to move from here to other places. But there is no government initiative to rehabilitate the displaced people.'

Residents of Jagabandhu village said that at one time, the distance from their village to the Meghna River was about ten kilometres. They earned their living by farming their own land. They never thought that they would have to leave their homes. But fate forced them to change their homes. However, no proper initiatives have been taken to prevent river erosion or to rehabilitate the people.

Stronger protection needed

Mohammad Shahjahan, climate expert and director of YPSA, said, 'Due to the impact of monsoon winds and climate change, cyclones, tidal surges, salinity, and coastal erosion are increasing in this region. This is displacing a large number of people every year, especially due to the lack of proper preparation to deal with natural disasters like cyclones.'

He said, 'A concerted effort is needed now to address the coastal crisis and prevent displacement, such as strengthening early warning systems, building sustainable infrastructure, and ensuring safe shelter and livelihood security for vulnerable populations.'

'The 'National Strategy on Internal Displacement Management 2021', adopted by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MODMR) of Bangladesh, is a comprehensive and rights-based framework for addressing displacement caused by climate-related disasters. According to the strategy, it is necessary to reduce disaster risk, strengthen early warning systems and sustainable infrastructure, ensure rapid relief for protection, safe shelter, and special assistance to vulnerable people, including women and children, and ensure safe rehabilitation, livelihood reconstruction, and inclusion in social protection systems for durable solutions,' he added.

'This river has taken all our property. We don't want to lose it anymore. We want protection for a normal life,' Selim Molla said, raising his index finger as he walked along the banks of the Meghna River.

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