



**IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND  
GENDER ANALYSIS, CfL 2009**

**Bangladesh,  
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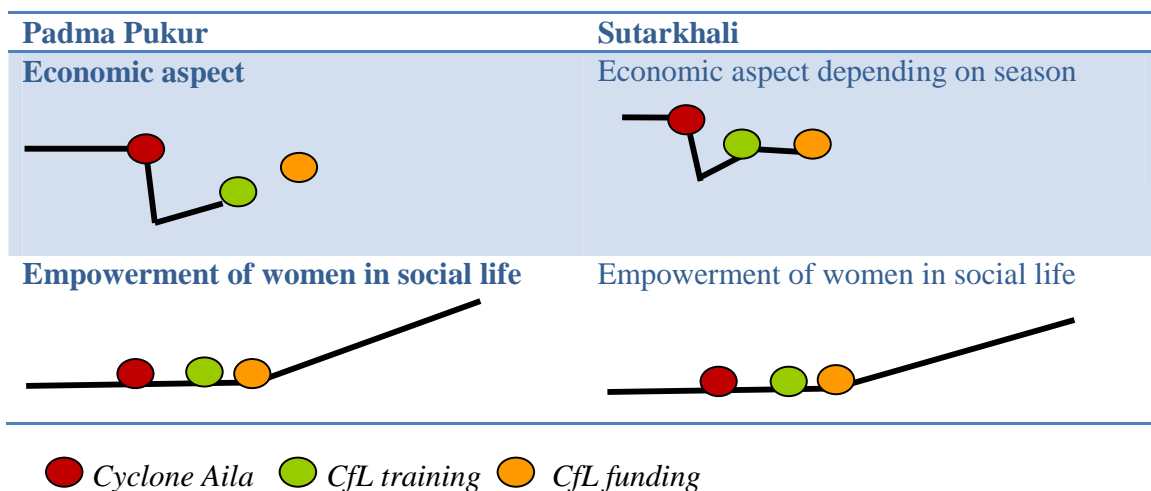
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

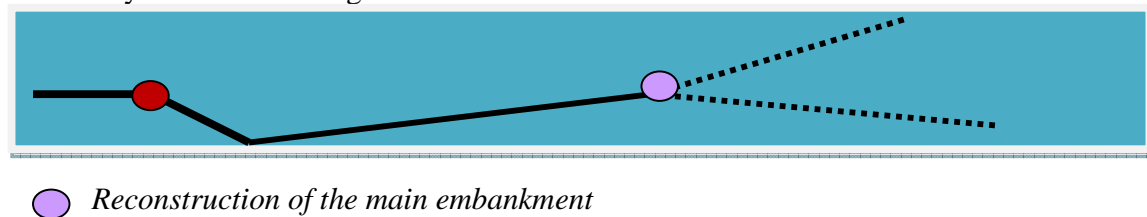
Since cyclone Aila, the empowerment of women has considerably improved. In Padma Pukur and Sutarkhali, thanks to support from Cash for Livelihood (CfL), women feel more self-confident about their livelihood strategies. This is especially noticeable in Padma Pukur, where women can earn more money than before because they have taken up small-scale shrimp farming. In all 6 focus group discussions (involving 110 women) the fact was strongly emphasised that economic factors have the greatest influence on people's lives. The women are aware of, and accept, the negative environmental consequences of these economic activities (intensive exploitation of the Sundarbans forest region, and shrimp farming).

For the Padma Pukur and Sutarkhali Unions, the assessment results in the following findings regarding economic and environmental aspects:



In this context it appears to be useful to focus on the concept of resilience. Resilience is the capacity of communities to withstand loss or damage, or to recover from the impacts of an emergency or disaster. How can one speak of resilience in the Padma Pukur and Sutarkhali Unions when considerations of environmental factors are not yet part of a global strategy to reduce risks? Part of the responsibility for this has to be borne by the political system. The communities are ready to become active in the area of environmental protection, but they need external support.

In both Unions, the future of women's livelihoods will primarily depend on the reconstruction of the main road and the protection of the Sundarbans forest region, which is the only natural barrier against disasters.



## INTRODUCTION

In general, women are more vulnerable to disasters due to their social and economic status. This assessment was carried out within the scope of the SDC's 2009 Cash for Livelihood project (CfL 2009). It aims to obtain a clearer view of the current situation of women and the factors influencing their vulnerability. Six focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were carried out. All the participating women were affected by cyclone Aila. All of them had also benefited from the additional CfL action to support livelihood selection and implementation for women, and received the cash grant of 15,000 Bangladeshi taka (BDT). Depending on the sector in which they invested this money, they participated in practical training courses organised by CfL and received advice on developing a livelihood strategy.



*Padma Pukur, ward number 7*

For humanitarian agencies, natural disasters are becoming increasingly complex. Only one thing is for certain, namely that more people are being affected than ever before. In the Sundarbans region, natural disasters occur due to environmental degradation, which is coupled with cyclones, erosion, increasing salinity of groundwater and flooding. But the people here, and especially the women, are not merely helpless victims – they have ideas, capacities and coping mechanisms that form the basis for outside support. This kind of support can increase the resilience of vulnerable people and form a link between emergency, early recovery and development activity.

This assessment focuses on households headed by women, and provides qualitative information on their current vulnerability. It evaluates the views of women concerning the impacts of the support provided by the SDC on their general situation, and focuses on environmental, economic and social aspects. In this way it leads to a better understanding of the collected quantitative data. It also sets out to determine how women have invested the cash grants provided by the SDC in terms of their own strategies, whether their investment has changed their life, whether their livelihoods are sustainable, and whether they feel more resilient in the face of current and future threats.

## 1. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

### Resilience of women's livelihoods

In Padma Pukur and Sutarkhali Unions, women invested the cash grants provided by SDC (BDT 15,000) in different economic sectors depending on their location, property, personal history, opportunities and strategies. In **Padma Pukur**, the women reported that their economic situation is now better than before. Here we noted a certain shift towards shrimp farming and small businesses. But for many, repairing their home remains a problem. In ward number 7, eighty percent of the thirty-five women who attended the focus group discussion still live in huts on government land because their own land is still under water. In **Sutarkhali**, the situation is different and the resilience of livelihoods is poorer. Generally speaking, the women here

#### Most successful areas of investment

- Fishing (*fishing net, BDT 5,000, boat approximately BDT 10,000*)
- Shrimp farming (*rental or purchase of pond, approximately BDT 3,000, plus purchase of larvae*)
- Tailoring (*purchase of sewing machine and material*)
- Operation of small shop

#### Problematic area of investment

- Chicken farming (*high mortality rate in some villages due to high salinity of water*)

invested in the same sectors in which they were active before cyclone Aila. But life has become harder because of the downturn in the economy (everyone now has less purchasing power) and seasonal factors (during half the year the level of salinity in the water is high, and the only feasible activity is fishing). Other factors include environmental degradation (fish are less abundant than before, though the women did not give us an explanation for this) and damage to public infrastructure (roads, pontoons, embankments).

In all villages, most women earn an income as labourers: road reconstruction, mud cutting (which is paid by the government or NGOs), or working in the fields of wealthier individuals. But land access is becoming increasingly difficult due to erosion and high water levels, and this is impacting on resilience livelihood.

### Disaster risk reduction

In **Padma Pukur**, the women feel that their investment protects them more effectively against natural disasters because they feel less poor than they were before cyclone Aila. They can now save some money for future crises or emergencies, and some also have taken out life insurance, which they were unable to afford before. Some of them continue to sell their products on local markets as they did before cyclone Aila, but now they are able to keep all their profits since they are their own boss, and this significantly reduces their economic vulnerability. In **Sutarkhali**, the situation is very different. Here, women do not have any real plans for the future because they only earn just enough money to

survive (less than they did before cyclone Aila). They feel helplessly exposed to future disasters and crises. Public infrastructure is also a problem. In ward number 5, a cyclone shelter was destroyed by Sidr. No women in this village have life insurance or similar protection. In ward number 1 the only existing cyclone shelter (which has been damaged) is inaccessible because the road leading up to it was washed away. In this village, before cyclone Aila, Grameen Bank encouraged people to save money for the future. But now, those women who have any assets prefer to save their money with DSK (a non-governmental organisation specialising in this field) because Grameen Bank obliges its customers to save a certain amount each month, and this is not possible for the women in this area. As far as micro credits are concerned, the women find the interest rates far too high and prefer to borrow from rich men in the village.

In both Unions, women feel more empowered than they were before cyclone Aila, both within their family and to some extent in their communities. But as before, vulnerability to future natural disasters depends on the area, and in particular on the available infrastructure. A large number of people still rely on income earned from working on embankments and roads financed by NGOs and the government.

### **Capacity building**

The training courses organised by CfL project helped women set up their own business so that they can earn an income and sustain their families. They feel that they have acquired additional skills (e.g. how to cash fish, how to make clothes). **In Padma Pukur**, women invest in their children's education and have ambitions to develop their business further. Those who work in shrimp farming or run small shops feel that the market is growing, and they want to profit from this opportunity. Since cyclone Aila, women have better access to employment and can become their own boss. But the situation remains precarious, and many are still only able to meet their daily needs. **In Sutarkhali**, the CfL training courses are regarded as useful, (this is particularly true for fishing) however, the short fishing season represents a problem. Yields are low from July to December. The other 6 months are suitable for rice growing, but access to paddy fields is primarily reserved for wealthier men.

All the women who attended the focus group discussions want to stay in their village and develop their community, because they feel they would be more vulnerable in cities. Some women would even work voluntarily if the government should decide not to proceed with the reconstruction of embankments, roads and schools (especially in Sutarkhali). However, the situation concerning embankments is something that cannot be resolved at the community level. All the women here are aware that reconstruction will not be possible without government support. They are hoping that pressure exerted by the communities themselves, as well as by their representatives (Union chairman), NGOs and local government, will help. They feel more involved in this issue than they did prior to cyclone Aila, and in all villages, solidarity and mutual support are now stronger.

### **Addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability**

The situation is not the same as it was before cyclone Aila. At the family level, men now realise that it is beneficial if their wives work. But at the community level, the situation is sometimes problematic, for example there is a certain amount of rivalry and jealousy between women. In **Padma Pukur**, women are able to handle tension without aggression. But in **Sutarkhali**, especially in communities where there is a majority of Muslims, handling tension can be more difficult. In ward number 9, for example, women returning from fishing (5 hours a day) fear that men will take the fish away from them. In ward number 1, which is a Hindu community, there is less rivalry and jealousy than there was before cyclone Aila.

## 2. ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS

### Exploitation and degradation of the environment

In Sutarkhali in particular, women feel that the exploitation and degradation of the Sundarbans region has increased sharply since the area was hit by a cyclone on 29 November 1988. At that time, the region's natural resources were exploited for the purpose of reconstructing houses, embankments, etc., but the situation has continued to deteriorate due to population pressure, erosion, water salinity and increasing poverty. The forest has become an indispensable source of income for all communities in the region, and the women report that degradation of the Sundarbans increased further after cyclones Sidr and Aila.

#### Coping strategy in ward number 1, Sutarkhali

In ward number 1, which is a Hindu community, no one goes to the Sundarbans. The inhabitants here focused on fishing, mud cutting, small businesses, farming, etc., for their livelihood, but after cyclone Aila the situation grew more difficult because saline water prevented agricultural production. As a result, around half the men now migrate for weeks or months at a time to cities in order to find work.

In other parts of the low-lying areas, saline water reaches higher levels and it is no longer possible to pursue the same activities as before. In **Padma Pukur**, women report that 20 years ago there were paddy fields everywhere, but in the meantime many of these have been converted for shrimp farming. The women are unhappy about this, but have no idea how the situation can be reversed again. They are aware that shrimp farming is problematic for the environment and thus makes them more vulnerable (the environmental risks of shrimp farming are greater than those of paddy fields).

*Shrimp farming, Padma Pukur region*



## Limitations of protection

### Sundarbans forest region

Women are aware of the environmental risks. They know that degradation of forests is detrimental to their own livelihood and safety. But in some villages they feel they are unable to become involved in this issue, because they themselves do not exploit the Sundarbans. It is only men who exploit the forests (collecting honey, cutting down trees, harvesting golpata, etc.). In Sutarkhali, the women in ward number 9 even feel that men need to change their livelihood strategies and, for example, open a shop, collect honey, harvest crabs or turn to fishing. But as before, the main problem is how to find the necessary funding or earn enough money.

#### Padma Pukur

In *ward number 4*, women would like to earn enough money so that they can build houses with bricks and thus reduce demand for timber.

In *ward number 7*, women would like to be involved in planting trees because they know that the Sundarbans are their only protection. But as one woman pointed out, “Before we can do this, we first need to eat every day.”

The women are of the opinion that government strategies also limit their involvement in the protection of the Sundarbans. In ward number 1 in Sutarkhali, until 2 to 3 years ago wood cutting was restricted and there was a requirement in place to replant trees. But the government has discontinued this policy, and the women cannot understand why. Even very poor women are willing to work hard in order to restore the Sundarbans. Women feel that it is necessary to exert pressure on local government, because without its support the communities will not be able to change the situation.

### How to empower women?

The majority of women have no suggestions for protecting the Sundarbans because they are also afraid to oppose the government’s strategies. They feel that what happens in the Sundarbans is legal (perhaps they want to protect their men by stating this). But they also think the government should change its strategy in order to more effectively protect the Sundarbans. In general, the women in the region do not feel empowered to change the situation, but in some villages there appears to be a readiness to protest. We can sense that in Padma Pukur and Sutarkhali there is a willingness to take action to protect the Sundarbans, for example by creating a committee to draw attention to the issue.

### **3. EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

#### **Disaster risk reduction and new challenges**

Both before and after a cyclone, men and women have always worked together to minimise risks, e.g. by constructing embankments and repairing roads. But during a natural disaster like a cyclone, the situation for women is more difficult to handle, and they continue to feel more vulnerable than men. If a cyclone hits during the day (as was the case with Aila), it is the women who have to take measures to protect their family and property, because most of the men are at work. If a cyclone hits during the night, the men will initially help the women, but when things become critical they are more concerned about their own survival and many even make their way to a cyclone shelter without their family.

In all villages, however, women now feel more resilient in the face of future natural disasters because they are mentally stronger and better prepared. After cyclone Aila, a variety of preparedness and prevention measures were introduced by NGOs and the government (e.g. early warnings issued via radio and TV), and women now feel better prepared for future disasters. But the lack of cyclone shelters, especially in the Sutarkhali region, remains a serious problem, and the women in these villages still have nowhere to go if there is another cyclone.

However, the women are well aware of the importance of embankments, which are essential for protecting their families and livelihoods. In ward number 5 in the **Sutarkhali** region, the main road and embankment are washed away each year due to flooding, and this is where the most vulnerable women live. It is not unusual for them to have to repair their homes as many as 3 times a year.

**All women who attended the focus group discussions feel they are more vulnerable than people in other villages because:**

- They live next to a river
- Embankments are frequently washed away
- They are afraid of flooding caused by the river
- The population is constantly growing

#### **Social empowerment, resilience and limits**

All women feel more empowered today, including those who do not earn more money now than they did before cyclone Aila. Their social status improved after the disaster thanks to their participation in training courses and their newly acquired capacity to show men that it could be beneficial to give them more autonomy for creating and developing business activities. They can now manage their assets and investments themselves. In one

village the women reported that they all earn less than their husbands. In general, women feel more self-confident and better educated, as well as more recognised as developers of business activities. They want to achieve a better standing in this male-dominated society. Women do not have the same rights as men, nor do they have equal access to resources. But this inequality is part of the culture here and to some extent is regarded as normal (for example a dowry of between BDT 20,000 and 30,000 is still common in Bangladesh).

It is also important to emphasise the fact that in ward number 1 in Sutarkhali, Hindu women do not feel discriminated against by Muslims. This community is characterised by mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. It is interesting to note that the government recently introduced a regulation which stipulates that in all communities at least one woman must be elected and represent the ward at same level as the chairman. In Sutarkhali, in all the visited communities it was apparent that women feel better recognised because their problems are now taken into consideration to a greater extent, mainly thanks to the efforts of NGOs.

NGOs were present in most villages even before cyclone Aila, but now most of them implement emergency and development programmes. Government support has also increased, for example in connection with the repair of embankments.

Local institutions have come to realise that women are not just vulnerable members of the community, but also offer capacities and strategies for coping with risks and are able to develop their own livelihoods.

In Padma Pukur, the women would like to have the opportunity to further develop their business activities. And in Sutarkhali, especially in ward number 1, they would like to receive more intensive education in the field of disaster risk reduction so that they are better equipped to save lives, minimise risks and reduce damage.

### **Women and political empowerment**

Shortly after cyclone Aila, some families decided to migrate, but the people living in the villages in the region do not want to leave their homeland. Local and national policies and institutions play a critical role in supporting people's capacity to adapt to climate change and reduce their vulnerability to natural disasters, but there is still insufficient involvement of women.

In Sutarkhali, in the wake of cyclone Aila the government offered all families a one-time contribution of BDT 3,000 and 20 kilograms of rice per month. But this support is due to be discontinued in December 2010, and women are worried about how they can feed their children next year.

Many women are prepared to more actively campaign for the local government to reconstruct the main embankments and take measures to protect the Sundarbans. Even though they do not have a plan or a political organisation, they are aware that the various problems cannot be resolved solely at the community level. They feel that governmental organisations at the local and national levels need to become more actively involved in protecting and developing their livelihood through environmental protection and economic growth.



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**Venn diagram  
Sutarkhali, ward number 9**



**Economic powers**

- Since cyclone Aila, it is NGOs and the government which have the greatest economic and social impacts on the community.
- For women, the main options are fishing, followed by rice growing and shrimp farming.
- All paddy fields in this community are owned by wealthy men.
- Since cyclone Aila, fishing has become more difficult because the majority of traders come from outside the community and the local infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed.

**Social and political powers**

- Inside communities, the head of the school and the Imam have a great deal of power.
  - In this village there are 2 chairpersons (one man and one woman) who have equal powers for governing community life. Thanks to the existence of a chairwoman, women here feel better represented and empowered.
  - Women feel the impact of local government in their daily life (economic and food support), but are now concerned because the provision of 20 kilograms of rice per month is to be discontinued.
  - Women feel the tensions between two opposition parties in the political sphere.
-