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The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

Integrating Gender and Nutrition into Agricultural Extension Systems

Research into Men's Perceptions of their Roles and Involvement in Household Decisions around Food in Rural Bangladesh

Report on Field Work Conducted October 2-16, 2015

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Published March 2016



USAID
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INGENAES
Integrating Gender and Nutrition
within Agricultural Extension Services



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Technical editing and production by Andrea Bohn.

Cover photo by Suzanna Smith,
taken with Nijera Gori project participants in Dinajpur in October 2015.

This report was produced as part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and US Government Feed the Future project "Integrating Gender and Nutrition within Extension and Advisory Services" (INGENAES) under the Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-LA-14-00008. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the prime awardee, and partners with the University of California-Davis, the University of Florida, and Cultural Practice, LLC. www.ingenaes.illinois.edu

The research and this report were made possible by the generous support of the American people through USAID. The contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States government.

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Introduction

Like other INGENAES activities, this research activity aims toward the larger goal of building gender-responsive agricultural extension and advisory services and as a result, improving women farmers' agricultural productivity and household nutrition. This particular project expanded the overall INGENAES focus by bringing men into the picture, specifically, looking at men's perspective on their roles in meeting household nutritional needs and their preferences for nutrition-sensitive extension approaches. In addition, this project sought out information from men and women about gender roles and particularly transformations in gender roles taking place in rural villages that might affect nutritional outcomes.

This activity also expanded the INGENAES focus by including the older generation of women, who traditionally have overseen their daughter-in-law's food preparation and distribution, and thus have a tremendous influence on family members' nutrition. Common wisdom is that older women enforce traditional gender-based practices such as distributing more food to men while limiting women's share, even when they are pregnant and breastfeeding.

Objective

The objective of this trip was to conduct interviews to gather information about men's and women's perceptions of men's roles and involvement in household decisions around food. The project is directed at the following end goal question: *How can men be most effectively enabled to support the nutritional needs of their families and what is the role of Extension in this?*

This was a small-scale activity carried out with INGENAES partners Caritas and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in two areas where Caritas has agricultural outreach projects supported by CRS. This report presents background on men's and older women's expected roles in decision making, general study results, and recommendations for follow up work.

Background

This project takes a systems approach to household interactions and attempts to capture the contributions of two sometimes overlooked but influential positions, the husband/father and the mother/mother-in-law. Men take charge of decisions about many issues, including ones that affect women's and children's health, such as whether and when women should seek medical treatment and care. Men do much of the food shopping and sales, including of women's own products, because of their easier access to the market.

In addition, the household system is composed of older generations that may have different beliefs and attitudes about acceptable roles and behaviors for women and men. Mothers-in-law have a reputation for strongly influencing younger women in their decisions and actions, including food that will be prepared

and the quantity of food each family member will receive, as well as the daughter-in-law's health care, prenatally and postnatally, and food consumption during these critical periods of high nutritional demands and needs. However, livelihood options have increased and so has a need for employment that will bring in cash earnings. This has resulted in lesser dependence on land for production, land most probably owned by the older generation, specifically the father/father-in-law. Probably this has also contributed to a reduced influence of elderly women on household decision-making in general.

Of course, even in rural areas, agricultural households are impacted by broader social changes that may influence men's and women's roles, such as urbanization and migration to cities and increased education of both boys and girls. Gender role transformations may be reflected in how decisions are made at the household level. For instance, do men value women's contributions to decisions? Do they differ from their parents in their views about how decisions should be made? How are nutrition decisions made by gender and generation?

In summary, rather than being linear or one-dimensional, household decision making is expected to involve a number of decision-makers of different genders and generations. Knowledge about the beliefs and perceptions of various decision makers about their roles in food preparation and marketing is valuable. Agricultural extension programs can use this information to tailor and target food and nutrition messages, making these relevant and useful to the decision-maker. Also, extension programs can be delivered in ways farmers consider most desirable and respectful of their needs and activities.

Field Work

Purpose

The first purpose of this research activity was to describe rural men's perceptions of their involvement in household decision making, particularly around food preparation and purchases. The rationale is that men living in farming communities in rural Bangladesh influence nutrition in several key ways: They market women's produce, purchase items at the market, and may have certain preferences for what they and their families eat. This project focused on the attitudes, beliefs, and self-reported actions of men in relation to food-related decisions and practices. While no conclusions about causality can be reached, this information may be able to identify transformations in gender roles and men's perceptions of the factors contributing to changes.

Similarly, the project describes mothers'-in-law perceptions of their involvement in household decision-making, particularly around food preparation and purchases. Some researchers suggest that younger wives rarely make decisions alone, but do so in consultation with other actors, especially their mother-in-law. This project attempts to describe older women's perceptions of their contributions to decisions in their families. If older women are significantly involved in day-to-day food decisions, agricultural education programs might target nutrition education to this audience.

Finally, this project seeks to identify the potential for agricultural extension programs to include nutrition education and joint-decision making as outreach programs. This information will help determine how to target different audiences and their preferences for where and how to receive nutrition information. Thus, research-based information will be used to inform agricultural extension programs inclusive of nutrition education.

Overarching Questions

1. How are men involved in decisions about food preparation, distribution, and marketing?
2. To what extent do men share decisions about food production, distribution, and marketing with women, from men's point of view? What motivates men to share decisions, if they do?
3. How are elder women involved in decisions about household food production, preparation, distribution, and marketing, or other activities?
4. How do men/husbands view their attitudes about what are appropriate gender roles compared to their parents' generation?
5. What social and demographic variations may be affecting household decision-making patterns and gender role expectations?
6. Are villagers, particularly men and older women, interested in nutrition education delivered by agricultural extension? Who should receive this information? What content is of particular interest?

Study Area and Samples

This project took place in Barisal and Dinajpur where the Caritas Egiye Jai (Barisal) and Nijera Gori (Dinajpur) projects are located, respectively. With support from CRS, Caritas offers comprehensive agricultural extension projects through animators (extension agents) delivering information on production to villagers in these locations. All the participants in this activity were located by the project animators after a group meeting describing the purpose of the project and the desired profile of participants. The animators identified people meeting the requested profile of adult men, older women, and households. Animators added that a cross-section of Hindu, Muslim, and, in Dinajpur, tribal villagers, would best represent the region. Thus, the sample was composed of Muslim, Hindu, and tribal adult men, older women, and households that receive information and technical assistance on agricultural production from the Caritas projects and agreed to participate in the discussions.

Methodology and Procedures

Several approaches were used to gather information from different sources and produce a more complete picture of who is making what decisions about food and what they view as the most effective strategies for extension/educational outreach. Methods included: (a) semi-structured group discussions with men heading households; (b) semi-structured group discussions with older women (mothers' in law) about their roles in household decision-making; and (c) individual household interviews to better understand women's and men's perceptions of men's involvement in decision-making and their views of the value of agricultural extension nutrition education.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Bangla by the CRS collaborator, the researcher, and a translator. The translator accompanied the team and translated from Bangla to English; for three interviews in a tribal village, the translator spoke the tribal dialect and translated to English. Group interviews were held in a central area of the village or a household courtyard where there was space or a family compound with a roomy courtyard. Household interviews were held in families' courtyards.

At the beginning of the interview, the CRS collaborator introduced the study purpose, explained the procedures, and explained the consent process, including anonymity, the option to not respond to any questions, and permission to audio-tape and photograph. In the case of groups, participants who did not want to be recorded were advised not to respond; everyone in the household interviews agreed to be recorded. Photographs were taken after the interview was complete; those who declined permission were not photographed.

The two interviewers and translator worked together as a team, following a list of open-ended questions for the groups and an interview guide with the households. The interview guide for the men's groups asked about their role as a father, the mother's role, changes in these roles, responsibility for decisions, interest in nutrition information, and whether they had received nutrition education. Five group interviews were held, with 10-12 men of varying ages (from 20s to 60s or 70s, estimated) per group. During group interviews, particularly the men's groups, many villagers of all ages and both genders gathered around to listen. This did not appear to influence the willingness of group members to respond.

The interview guide for the older women's groups asked their role in the household, their involvement in food decisions, and whether they received nutrition information. For both men's and older women's groups, the question was asked to the group in general, and then each participant was asked to respond. Some participants spontaneously offered their views, while others were generally quiet throughout the interview. Five group interviews were held; with 8-12 women participating per group. Some were grandmothers, while some were not. Their ages ranged from early 40s to the 70s or 80s (estimated).

Participants in the household interviews typically included the adult man and woman (husband and wife), and the husband's mother and sometimes father. Occasionally children and teens would also be present. Two families consisted of the father, mother, their adult sons and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. The interview guide for households began with questions about the composition of the household that were answered by available household members. This was followed by separate interviews with the men and women apart, with the CRS interviewer asking questions of the men in the household, and the INGENAES interviewer and translator asking questions of the women. Men, women, and the mother in law were each asked a series of questions about their attitudes toward men's involvement in food-related decisions and market sales and purchases, responding to a series of Likert type questions. The household then reconvened for the final questions pertaining to how they would each like to get nutrition information and how decision making has changed since their parents' generation. Five household interviews were held.

Extensive notes were taken on the groups and household interview questionnaires. The researcher compiled field notes in the evenings, following the day's work. Prior to the next interviews, the researcher and CRS collaborator discussed findings so as to clarify points, check the usefulness of interview questions, and explore emerging themes.

Results

The following results are based on emergent themes from the group and household interviews.

Men's perceived involvement in decisions about food. Men view themselves as farmers responsible for food production and marketing, with their success making or breaking their household's economic stability. They believe good health and nutrition are essential to being strong and productive on the farm.

They also believe they play an important role in supporting their children's education and development. For the most part, it seems that men see themselves as peripherally involved in the day to day of good health and nutrition, although this may be changing with younger generations.

Shared decisions and men's motivation to share decisions. Men are not really interested in food preparation or the intricacies of food distribution, and they view these activities as women's domain. In two families, men reported that their wives gave more food to them and they did not object. *Food distribution* continues to be women's domain. However, men also point out that they buy food items at the market and are interested in being able to make informed decisions about purchasing healthy vegetables; when it comes to decisions about *spending on food*, this appears to fall predominantly on men. One rallying point for men and women seems to be the importance of providing the necessary funds for their children's education. While this study did not tease out whether men or women or both pay for this, in any case, earnings from women's sales of their own products directly or indirectly support their children's education. In addition, it appears that men may consult women about other major household purchases (such as replacing a roof), possibly because women's earnings are needed to make such a purchase.

Older women's involvement in decisions about food. Contrary to our expectations and common beliefs, mothers-in-law do not uniformly control the activities of daughter's in law around meal preparation and food distribution. In fact, in many cases, elderly women were clearly not involved and certainly not in charge. We propose several reasons for this. One, family structures are changing; even rural families are shifting toward a nuclear family structure of husband, wife, and children. Younger and older generations may live in the same household but cook and eat separately, thus reducing older women's control over food preparation and distribution. And, if husbands are inclined to share decisions with their wives, they may do so with or without consulting mothers-in-law. Second, younger women are often more educated than their mothers-in-law, and often have some earnings of their own, and have more authority in decisions. Another reason is the extended life expectancy. The groups we interviewed included quite elderly, as well as middle aged women. Mothers-in-law were probably more influential when they were younger but became less influential on the nutritional decisions of the household as they got older. However, they appear to be involved with their grandchildren on a daily basis, preparing breakfast, seeing them off to school, and supervising them after school (including feeding them). The extent to which they make decisions about their grandchildren's diet needs to be explored. In summary, the impacts of demographic and social changes related to aging on decisions about nutrition need to be better understood, and extension education programs targeted accordingly.

Perceived differences in gender roles compared to parents' generation. One of the most interesting findings was men's firm conclusion that gender roles have changed. When men were asked to compare how their mother and father made decisions with how they and their wife make decisions, they overwhelmingly responded that their fathers were responsible for virtually all household decisions. In contrast, these men perceived that in their own families, they and their wives shared decisions. It is important to note, however, that while men in groups seemed to present at least a shift toward more equitable relationships, household-level responses also revealed that most men assume the responsibility for most decisions.

Social and demographic influences on household decision making. It is important to point out that households are part of a larger social context that directly and indirectly affects their perceptions of their

roles and decision making. Women are placed in a strange situation when it comes to decision making processes. For instance, when men migrate away from the family farm to seek employment, women are thrust into a position where, by default at least, they have responsibility for more decisions. At the same time, when men with limited resources migrate, the women become *more* dependent on others for decision making and financial support, particularly on sons or sons-in-law. This is probably due to cultural reasons and limited livelihood options available to them. These paradoxes need to be studied further.

What happens to women at home depends in part on their own productivity and willingness of others to come to their aid. This needs to be explored further with regard to agricultural extension outreach to these families and improvements in nutritional status. Another development is the increase in women's education and its influence on shared decision making.

Interest in nutrition education. Men expressed an interest in receiving education about healthy food, particularly so they would know what foods to purchase at the market. They emphasized that this should be delivered in locations convenient to their work in the fields, or in a group setting in the village. They also emphasized meeting with a group of men (rather than in households) so they could share information and remind each other of what they learned. They expressed an interest in print materials, as well as verbal information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Nutrition decision making, like other family decisions, is complex and involves many family members and changes across the life cycle.

- Use different strategies to reach men, at a location convenient to the fields and group meetings with other men.
- Conduct a nutritional and affordability analysis of the vegetables and animal source foods available in the market (seasonally). Provide training to men about the health value of the items they see in the market so they can make the best purchases they can afford for their families.
- Identify the men in various villages who have assumed more responsibility for marketing and meal preparation. Consider conducting a positive deviance inquiry to find out more about what they do and why, and to examine how they are viewed in the community.
- Identify the women who are entrepreneurs and leaders. Examine their household decision making patterns and gender attitudes.

Extension agents should consider targeting mothers-in-law with messages about food quality and health.

- Address especially younger mothers-in-law and adult women who will be able to use this information for many years.
- Incorporate messages about the value of healthy food for brain growth and physical development throughout childhood and adolescence.
- Direct messages about feeding grandchildren healthy food to older grandmothers, using examples of healthy after school snacks or at breakfast.

Interestingly, some project beneficiaries believe that food security has been achieved because, with economic improvements in Bangladesh, they are able to eat two or three times a day. However, the nutritional quality of their food intake is not well documented, and in reality the nutritional value of foods consumed may be poor. Furthermore, food safety risks due to poor food handling may also compromise

health and nutrition. Another issue is that food security may have been achieved for men but not for their wives and children, depending on distribution of food among family members.

- Conduct a nutritional analysis of food consumed at the household level and by gender and age.
- Provide education about the meaning of “food security” and what it means to be well-nourished for overall health.

There also appears to be different needs among tribal members. The sale of their land has limited access to land to grow crops, and many have been forced to migrate or work locally for wages. This needs to be explored.

Nutritional needs are not the province of any one group—all family members need to eat well to meet their changing nutritional needs over the life course and circumstances.

- Provide information about varying nutritional needs by gender and across the life course: prenatally, infancy and early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence, adult and older adult years.
- Identify special needs such as during pregnancy and lactation or the later years.
- Target information to children, who are consumers in their own right.
- Identify the needs of single mothers (de facto by migration or de jure by widowhood).

CRS and Caritas are interested in developing shared decision making. This emphasis is appropriate and timely.

- Introduce or expand education of beneficiaries on budgeting and household resource management.
- Use desire to educate children as a motivator for savings and in particular encourage women's savings.

Caveat

The villagers attending the meetings are not representative of all villagers and results cannot be generalized.

Acknowledgements

This activity was possible thanks to Caritas Bangladesh and CRS staff. So many people gave generously of their time and knowledge. Special gratitude is expressed to Mr. Francis Atul Sarker for the countless ways he supported and assisted with the project: providing in-depth information necessary for understanding the Caritas projects, facilitating safe travel under difficult circumstances, graciously hosting meals and tea during travels and at the Caritas office, and working with other staff to ensure our safety and well-being.

Special thanks to collaborator and partner in this research, Dr. Kamal Bhattacharyya, Agriculture Technical Advisor for CRS Bangladesh. Thanks to his willingness to work side by side in the field and to share his insights over tea, meals, and long drives, I learned so much about doing field work, as well as the dynamics of the gendered relationships we were observing.

Many, many thanks go to the staff of Caritas projects--Egiye Jai in Barisal and Nijera Gori in Dinajpur. Project animators energetically assisted in locating study families and arranged discussion groups in villages, and hosted us in the field. Animators, M&E officers, technical and gender specialists provided valuable input about the direction of the project. The regional directors welcomed us and ensured comfortable lodging and wonderful food while we were in the field. These CRS supported Caritas projects are making a difference! Beneficiary after beneficiary proudly discussed how their production had improved. I am grateful to have had the time learning about the work of this organization and these dedicated staff. A heartfelt thanks to the many villagers who welcomed us to their villages and homes, and patiently and carefully answered our questions.

Thank you to the INGENAES project staff at the University of Florida for their guidance with the research and logistics, and for a travel grant to support this project. Thank you also to the University of Illinois, the lead institution for INGENAES. Alyssa Brodsky, project staff, was a wonderful traveling companion and encouraging and helpful colleague throughout this project. Andrea Bohn, associate director of INGENAES at the University of Illinois, inspired me to think in new ways about extension and a gender transformative approach, and gave me an opportunity to contribute to INGENAES.