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Research Summary

Gender Analysis Study for SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity



Background

Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III Plus is a two-year Activity (2022-2024) funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Activity aims to improve food security, resilience, and income for 168,521 Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) households in the remote Char and Haor regions of Bangladesh. The SHOUHARDO III Plus activity has been working diligently to improve the condition of gender-based violence (GBV) in the Chor and Haor regions while also promoting increased consumption of nutritious foods and micro-nutrients for children under five, pregnant and lactating women, and adolescent girls.

The Activity initially worked on addressing GBV at its roots by implementing initiatives like Couples Dialogue, Wife-in-laws gossip, Tea stall discussion, Counselling, Home Visits, and Storytelling. During SHOUHARDO III, the Activity aimed to empower women to voice their issues and to enhance family cohesion, including caring for pregnant women in the household, which significantly reduced physical and mental abuse by husbands towards their wives. However, during the phase of SHOUHARDO III Plus, the Activity was much more focused on ensuring women's equity and decision-making abilities both at home and in public, greater mobility for women, and further reductions in physical, verbal, and mental abuse. Given this context, this study aimed to identify the constraints/barriers that affect equitable relationships in both private and public spaces between men and women and to identify ways to ensure better engagement of men and women, enabling them to benefit from the program interventions equally and equitably.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the research were to explore:



Identify the differing needs, roles, interests, opportunities, barriers, and experiences of women and men, boys and girls in household livelihoods.



Identify the root cause of unequal power structure and gender-based discrimination that prevails in families, societies, and the communities at large.



Provide an overview of the existing gender constraints, emerging changes, and the pace of those changes and their implications for development outcomes in the SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity.



Identify the good practices developed by SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity to carry forward the basis for successful gender integration.

Methodology

This study employed a comprehensive methodology to achieve its objectives, incorporating document review, team mobilization, and qualitative data collection. Key documents from SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity, previous gender analysis reports, and relevant policies were reviewed. The analysis was guided by USAID's "Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment" (ADS Chapter 205) and CARE's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Framework, supplemented by CARE's Good Practices Framework and USAID Guidelines. Fieldwork included 32 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), 24 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), 41 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), 8 Village Development (VD) consultations, and 8 Access and Control Profiles, following a predesigned checklist. A total of 548 respondents participated, including 301 women and 247 men, among them pregnant and lactating women (PLW), their husbands, community groups, village committees, local leaders, program staff, government and private stakeholders, and national experts.

Findings

Scenario of gender equity and women empowerment

SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity's particular strategies and interventions for promoting gender equality, women's empowerment, and decreasing GBVs have resulted in considerable changes in the views and practices of boosting WE and reducing GBV in the program domains.



The key changes achieved during the SHOUHRADO III plus Activity are the ability of girls and women to move around, make decisions, communicate independently outside the homestead periphery, practice joint decision-making, increase access to services by both men and women and reduce gender-based violence. By engaging in various livelihood activities such as homestead production, agriculture, and raising cattle and poultry, women's financial contributions to the household have markedly increased. Moreover, changes in women's self-esteem and confidence have been identified as another achievement of SHOUHARDO III Plus, as women's financial strength increased because of the cumulative effects of various SHOUHARDO interventions in different phases. Women are now more concerned about consuming additional and nutritious food, taking rest, and getting regular antenatal and postnatal check-ups by pregnant and lactating women, as well as awareness of reproductive health rights by adolescent girls.

Empowering Women Through Access and Technology

The study revealed substantial increases in women's mobility and access to services in the Char and Haor areas. Women and girls now frequently visit local markets, dispensaries, schools, and offices, with many reporting improved access to various services. Previously, women needed to seek permission from the household head to visit nearby places for services, especially for health-related needs, while men typically accessed agricultural services. Continuous advocacy efforts have enabled some women to seek support from agricultural offices, enhancing their involvement in public decision-making. Social support networks and local service providers have facilitated access to maternal and child health, agriculture, and livestock services.



Moreover, social support networks, such as VDCs, LSPs of different categories like Vaccinators, PCSBSA, Seed Agent, Sanchay Sathi, and Vegetables Collectors nowadays facilitate easy access to different services on maternal and child health, agriculture production and marketing, livestock and poultry rearing. Women from both Char and Haor have a higher tendency to join as local service providers or urges to increase the number of female LSPs, particularly in seed selling.

Women are increasingly using advanced technology and modern agricultural practices. Women now use advanced technology like mobile phones, improved varieties of seeds, agriculture inputs, organic fertilizers, modern technology for watering plants, using pesticides, etc. They know about modern agricultural technologies like planting vegetables in seedbeds, using high-yielding varieties, and early varieties, using integrated pest management techniques, adequate pesticide and fertilizer management, etc. Women are now even more spontaneous in calling hotlines for services from different government officials.

Prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV)

Although nearly all the respondents reported a decrease in GBV, violence persists in Char and Haor despite improved GBV conditions. The decline in GBV has been attributed to economic stability and increased awareness of its effects. Even though child marriage has decreased, respondents reported that child marriage, dowry, and public sexual harassment are still issues in their communities. Both men and women defined GBV as fighting between spouses and mothers-in-law, abusive comments, physical and mental abuse, disrespecting women, ignorance of opinions, preventing going out, ceasing to speak, claiming dowry, child marriage, and emotional abuse. Not giving food/maintenance, husband assault, mental abuse by husband and in-laws, treating the wife as domestic help, constant pressure, economic abuse, harassment, and polygamy was also GBV.

Most of the respondents know the immediate causes and effects of GBV. Different categories of respondents cited financial crisis, addiction among men, treating women as weak, the father's family's poor financial status, moral decay due to financial starvation, considering girls a burden for the family, dowry, child marriage, etc. as common causes of GBV. According to respondents, child marriage, dowry, and polygamy cause family strife.

Table 1: Prevalence of GBV in Char and Haor

Prevalence	Perception	Status
Child Marriage	All the respondents identified child marriage as GBV	Yet occurring
Dowry	Large gifts, including furniture, TV, or refrigerator	Reduced
Decision-making capacity	Household matters, movement outside the home, earning opportunities, nutritious food, and healthcare services	Increased
Verbal & Physical Abuse	Verbal and physical abuse (slapping) take place in the household due to issues related to cooking, meal preparation, delayed responses to the husband while he is stressed with financial or other external issues	Reduced
Outside engagement	Maintaining roles inside and outside the family, communicating with Union Parishad members and chairman, and working with local government, Seeking healthcare services at hospitals.	Increased

Barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity

Despite improvements in women's empowerment, girls and women still face significant challenges in accessing services in both public and private areas, with greater barriers compared to men due to religious conservatism, social mobility restrictions, safety concerns, and fear of sexual violence. Char districts are particularly restrictive, while Haor districts are more liberal, with men working away from home, allowing women more independence and reducing gender-based violence.

Women struggle with dual roles and domestic responsibilities, limiting their ability to engage in income-generating activities. Additionally, women in agriculture face disadvantages due to a lack of land ownership, salary inequality, and unpaid work. Cultural customs and gender-biased inheritance systems hinder women's asset ownership, and traditional views undervalue their decision-making abilities, both at home and in public. Women are often excluded from public decision-making, and their participation is not respected in community events. The major identified barriers are:

Religious conservatism and social rejection of mobility

Greater impediments for women, particularly in Char districts.

Social norms

Adolescents and women often fear sexual violence and social gossip hinders women's freedom. Moreover, they often face criticism for not adhering to religious dress such as not wearing a burka in public spaces.

Lack of asset ownership

Gender-biased inheritance systems and cultural customs restrict women's asset ownership. Lack of land ownership, salary inequality, and unpaid work put women in agriculture at a disadvantage. Lack of awareness of asset ownership's relevance hinders women's capacity to save and build assets. Women earn approximately half as much as males despite doing similar jobs due to the belief that women are less capable and efficient.

Family and communal limitations

Family and communal limitations: Women are primarily responsible for domestic chores, which limits their outside engagement. Their dual/double roles remain a substantial obstacle.

Men's dominance in community events

Men's dominance in community events: Women's participation is not respected, and men gain priority.

Good practices developed by SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity

Joint Decision-Making

The practice of joint decision-making of the husband and wife has significantly increased. The Activity enabled husband and wife to make decisions together has enhanced women's authority and involvement in domestic matters, contributing to family expenses and boosting self-esteem.

Involving Men and Boys in Gender Equality Efforts

Initiatives like the ‘Men’s Forum,’ ‘Boys’ Group,’ and ‘Male Champions’ have improved home dynamics by engaging males in domestic chores and childcare, reducing domestic violence, and fostering male family collaboration.

Engagement as an LSP

Engagement as an LSP: Local service providers (LSPs) like Sanchay Sathi, Livestock Vaccinators, Seed Agents, Produce Collectors, Fish Fry Hawkers, Blue Star Providers (BSPs), and Private Community Skilled Birth Attendants (PCSBAs) have improved their abilities through focused training. Focused training for various LSPs, especially women, has improved their business efficiency and livelihood, benefiting local communities through better sector guidelines and agricultural input services.

Financial Autonomy for Women

Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) programs have enabled women to use banks and access low-interest microloans, enhancing their financial autonomy and ability to handle finances independently.

Addressing Domestic Abuse and Child Marriage

Girl’s Forum, Peer Leader, Village Development Committee, and Community organizations address domestic abuse, child marriage, women’s income, and family status, and gender-equitable food intake and nutrition to enhance community cohesion. Families now understand the special demands of lactating and pregnant women and teenage girls regarding nutritious food and practice gender-equitable food intake as their capacities allow.

Conclusion

Reducing GBV and enhancing WE through increasing food security, resilience, and income for poor and extremely poor households in the remote Char and Haor has been the transformative program known as the SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity. Gender equality, women’s empowerment, and the reduction of gender-based violence have all been significantly improved as a result of the Activity thus far in the Char and Haor. The value of women in these locations has increased, and they are now more involved in decision-making, income-generating activities, committee participation, leadership roles, and family and personal importance. The program ensures that its beneficiaries maintain good practices long after the program finishes through engaging LSPs, building peer leaders, female forums, and male champion sessions, among other activities. Nevertheless, the onus is now on the LSPs, Girls forum, Peer leaders, Male Champions, ICT Champions, VSLA, and Shanchay Shati’s to guarantee the survival of these excellent programs.

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