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**CSOs UPHOLDING MARGINALIZED
VOICES**

**A STUDY ON TEA GARDEN WORKERS AND HAOR
COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH**

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RP - Series



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study rigorously examined the role of CSOs in amplifying the voices of marginalized tea plantation workers and Haor inhabitants, often overlooked within socio-economic and political frameworks. Adopting a qualitative approach due to the scarcity of existing studies, it employed methodologies such as case studies, IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs, integrating theoretical perspectives and scrutinizing prior research, journal articles, academic books, and various reports to gather qualitative and secondary data. Fourteen CSOs in the Moulavibazar district were identified, focusing on marginalized communities, youth, and adolescents, chosen for their significant engagement with these underprivileged groups and their activities in the tea gardens and Haor regions.

The findings of this study showed that the healthcare facilities in Moulavibazar were severely lacking, with insufficient physicians, equipment, and facilities, driving many to expensive private clinics or local quacks, leading to mistreatment and deaths. The Haor region was found to face medication shortages, with no nutritional support for females or iron tablets for adolescents. Tea estates' rigid management was found to prevent external scrutiny, leaving workers in poor conditions without intervention from NGOs or activists. Communication infrastructure was found deficient, with frequent electricity failures during natural calamities. Shelters were also found inadequate, lacking capacity and separate toilets for women. WASH facilities were poor, with sexual health knowledge taboo. Gender disparity was found rampant, with women silenced and abused, while child marriages prevailed. Economic sustenance was found eroding, particularly in Haor areas, with large corporations undermining local fisheries. Indigenous women face increasing sexual abuse, driven by patriarchal norms and a lack of legal repercussions. Public defecation persisted due to colonial norms, with women burdened by water scarcity and health issues. The overall findings revealed that complex, interwoven factors lead to marginalization. Tea garden workers endured persistent poverty, limited healthcare, and education access, information scarcity, and exploitative labor practices, while Haor regions were beset by frequent flooding, inadequate infrastructure, and livelihood erosion. Gender inequality was stark in both areas, severely worsening women's vulnerabilities and leaving little room for their participation in decision-making or freedom of speech. It was also found that CSOs played a crucial role in enhancing the lives of underprivileged individuals, though their efforts were complex and varied. The study aimed to understand social justice and sustainable development by analyzing the dynamics between local communities and CSOs. However, these organizations faced challenging operational environments, capability deficits, and resource constraints. Addressing these issues required a multifaceted strategy, incorporating regulatory reforms, increased investment, and strengthened collaborations between the government, CSOs, and the commercial sector to effectively support marginalized groups. Recommendations underscored the necessity for a multifaceted approach, integrating efforts from the government, Civil Society Organizations, and the private sector to effectively tackle these challenges.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABJS	Abda Bahumukhi Juba Shangha
ABMS	Abda Bahumukhi Mohila Shangha
ARI	Acute Respiratory Infections
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BTB	Bangladesh Tea Board
BTIMC	Bangladesh Tea Industries Management Committee
BTRI	Bangladesh Tea Research Institute
CBO	Community-Based Organizations
CBSM	Community-based Sustainable Management
CEGIS	Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services
CMSM	Community-based Sustainable Management
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
ECA	Ecologically Critical Area
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Reports
HDRC	Human Development Research Centre
JF	Jalalabad Foundation
IDI	In-Depth Interview
ILO	International Labor Organization
ISA	Institute for Social Advancement
KII	Key Informant Interview
MCJAF	Moulavibazar Cha Janagashthi Adibashi Front
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MT	Metric Tonn
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NSS	Nishwa Shahayak Shangstha
PIC	Project Implementation Committee
PWD	People With Disabilities
SAKO	Social Advancement Cooperative Organization
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SSKS	Srishti Shamaj Kalyan Shangstha
SSS	Shishu Shohayak Shangstha
SUS	Sanchayan Unnayan Shangstha
TJKS	Tarapasha Juba Kalyan Shangstha
TSS	Tarapasha Shomaj Kalyan Shangstha
UDC	Union Digital Center
UNB	United News of Bangladesh
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
VSDO	Village Social Development Organization
VSWO	Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations
WAFFH	We Are Friends For Human
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene

1. INTRODUCTION

The current study delves into the prevailing conditions confronting the inhabitants of the Haor region, as well as the tea garden workers within the Moulavibazar district of Bangladesh. A number of CSOs, which are non-state, non-profit, and voluntary entities formed by individuals in the social sector of the area, work with the conviction of creating opportunities, solving problems, and improving the socio-economic conditions of disadvantaged and marginalized tea garden workers and Haor dwellers, to include them in the larger socio-economic framework. These CSOs include mostly philanthropic groups, citizen coalitions, and private voluntary agencies (ICNL, 2024). Considering the role of CSOs, the present study further focuses on how CSOs seek to raise the voices of disadvantaged or neglected tea garden workers and Haor dwellers in addressing the need for opportunities to improve their empowerment status and to engage in advocacy for social change. This study also intends to understand the ongoing efforts for social justice and sustainable development in the region by analyzing the dynamics between local communities and CSOs.

The exact number of CSOs in Bangladesh is unknown, though an estimate suggests that 250,000 CSOs are registered with various governmental authorities (ibid). Of these, fewer than 50,000 organizations are believed to be active (ibid). CSOs can be categorized into three groups/types based on regulatory laws, funding sources, and their areas of activity. Firstly, Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations (VSWO)s type CSOs that are small and operate locally, relying on funds mobilized from local donations and government grants. Most Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are identified as VSWOs. Secondly, CSOs typically known as “development NGO(s)” receive grants from external sources and are registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau. Such CSOs include local registered organizations as well as foreign or international organizations (ibid). Thirdly, CSOs generally work as microfinance institutions (MFIs) or NGO-MFIs (ibid). These categories help to better understand the structure and function of each organization. Beyond merely enumerating CSOs and categorizing their undertakings, the present inquiry delves into the intricate roles these organizations play in tackling pertinent issues and scrutinizes the efficacy of their endeavors to amplify the voices of the marginalized.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

2.1 VULNERABILITY OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS

After independence, the Bangladesh Tea Industries Management Committee (BTIMC) was established to revive abandoned tea estates, prioritizing labor welfare by providing free housing, clean water, childcare centers, primary education, and rations, and he elevated the Bangladesh Tea Research Station to the Bangladesh Tea Research Institute (BTRI) in 1973 (BTB, 2024). Tea workers lack housing rights, being permitted only a conditional use of company-provided housing as long as at least one resident works on the plantation, coupled with limited income, lack of asset ownership, inadequate healthcare, rampant child marriage, and poor living conditions including unsafe water supply and sanitation, results in low standards of living and hindered human development (UNDP, 1990) (Islam and Al-Amin, 2024) leading barely-paid slaves on the Bangladesh tea plantation for generations (Shahadat and Uddin, 2021) which is conceptualized as a life not worth living (Sen, 1999). The snapshot of the vulnerabilities of these people is explained below.

2.2.1 EXPLOITATION IN DAILY LIFE AND WORKPLACE

Tea garden workers endure exploitation by different tiers of management and live in dire poverty exacerbated by inadequate facilities of protective gear such as masks, aprons, gloves, spectacles, and gumboots during pesticide spraying, exposing them to significant health risks (Hossain, 2021). Historically entrenched indentured labor system in tea plantations is characterized by rigid wage structures, limited promotion, opportunities, and a labor-management dynamic resembling a master-slave relationship which is termed “*Modern Slavery*” in the organizational context (Shahadat and Uddin, 2021). Despite unionization being allowed, laborers' dependence on managers for both employment and housing, rooted in centuries-old traditions, undermines the effectiveness of broader labor union movements, perpetuating conditions of unfreedom and bondage despite the formal abolition of the indentured system (Kara, 2012). Although the existence of a union, corruption and isolation from broader labor movements hinder effective advocacy for improved conditions, while the workers' precarious tenure on leased land further entrenches their exploitation and restricts their mobility, echoing historical patterns of coerced migration and labor akin to slavery (Ullah, 2014).

2.2.2 WORKER AND HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The hidden transcript in the tea industry strategically controls workers to maximize profitability and ensure industry sustainability, often at the expense of violating workers' rights and interests (Scott, 1990). Tea garden workers in Bangladesh encounter modern slavery marked by extensive working hours, meager wages, substandard housing, limited educational opportunities, and inadequate healthcare. Their situation is exacerbated by exclusion from certain labor protections, such as wage laws, and exploitation by plantation owners who deduct essential costs from already insufficient earnings. Wage inequality persists among tea garden workers, with women earning less than men, while the sector also faces issues like bribery, unlawful wage deductions, and child labor; unionized workers generally receive higher wages than non-union members (Khan et al., 2023). The isolation of tea garden workers from mainstream society perpetuates their unawareness of labor issues elsewhere, leading to dependency on the tea industry and reinforcing psychological distress (Alam and Sarker, 2009).

Fundamental rights of tea garden workers are violated including low union participation due to leadership issues (Freedom of association and collective bargaining), mandatory overtime work for income stability (Free from forced and compulsory labor), informal child labor support roles (Free from child labor) and gender segregation in job sectors, and wage parity between male and female workers, are violated (Freedom from discrimination) (Ahmed and Hossain, 2016). Thus, it can be concluded that several articles of ‘The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh’ are being violated regularly regarding the vulnerability of tea garden workers. These violations of these articles are- Prohibition of forced labor (34), Emancipation of peasants and workers (14), Provision of basic necessities (15), Freedom of association (38), Rights to property (421), Protection of home and correspondence (43), The culture of tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities (23A). Furthermore, ‘The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006’ particularly ‘Child Labor Act’, ‘United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’, ‘Children Act by UNICEF (2013)’ have been brutally violated in terms of employment conditions, housing, education, sanitization and recreational facilities of tea garden workers in Bangladesh (Kashem, 2015).

2.2.3 FRAGILE TRADE UNIONS

Despite the role of trade unions in advocating for worker representation, their actual impact in the tea industry has been minimal, primarily benefiting union leaders rather than workers which violates the principles outlined in the 1998 ILO *“Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work”* emphasizing the right to collective bargaining (ILO, 2002). UNB observed active protests by tea garden workers in Sylhet demanding wage increases highlighting a contentious zero-sum game where workers seek higher earnings while owners aim to maximize profits and minimize costs (Begum et.al, 2022). The government-set daily minimum wage for tea workers is Tk 170, falling below the World Bank's poverty line threshold of \$2.15 (252.09 BDT) per person per day (The Financial Express 2023; World Bank Group 2022). Most of the tea plantation workers do not have any idea about the political parties of Bangladesh (Das and Islam, 2006).

2.2.4 RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Hindu Tea workers are frequently stigmatized due to their caste suffering from significant wage disparities and economic hardship (Gain, 2021). Many tea workers in Bangladesh, predominantly Dalits, and religious minorities, endure persistent discrimination that restricts their mobility and perpetuates their status as a captive labor force with contractual practices designed to prevent the simultaneous completion of contracts by married couples (Ullah, 2014). Due to their caste position, the tea workers—the majority of whom are non-Bengali Hindus, are also viewed as social outcasts.

2.2.5 POOR STANDARDS OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION

NGOs provide crucial services like credit, education, and sanitation but face restrictions from tea garden authorities who fear inciting labor unrest; meanwhile, government labor officials' inefficiency hinders employment opportunities for educated children of plantation workers (Ahmed and Hossain, 2022). Continuous expenses associated with medical treatment further worsen their economic vulnerability (Mahmud et al. 2017).

2.2.6 GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Female tea workers in Bangladesh endure daily hardships, facing severe deprivation of basic human and labor rights including minimal wages, unsanitary work conditions, and discrimination, rendering them marginalized and economically undervalued (Auntu, 2021). Female tea garden workers face significant health challenges due to early childbirth with high incidences of miscarriage exacerbated by the lack of maternity leave and access to emergency medical services. Young girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment while performing household chores in the manager's Bungalow intensified by unrestricted access to alcohol (Bangla Mod) within the tea garden attracting outsiders and boosting illegal activities and crime (Hossain, 2021). Female tea workers' activities involve physically demanding tasks such as tea plucking over long distances often without access to childcare or adequate sanitation facilities contributing to their vulnerability to physical and mental abuse in the workplace (RAPID Bangladesh, n.d.).

Table 1 Wage Situation of Female Tea Garden Workers in Moulavibazar

Female Population	Location	No of Tea Gardens	Wage Rate	Female Wage Rate	Working Hours	Amount of Leaves Per Day
More than 50,000	Moulavibazar Sadar	3	Tk 120	Tk 85	8 to 10	Generally, 22 kilograms-25 kilograms
	Rajnagar	11				Additional 20 kilograms -25 kilograms or more
	Juri	11				
	Kamalganj	14				
	Baralekha	15				
	Kulaura	19				
	Sreemangal	19				

Source: Bhasker, 2022

Wage discrimination is a very common practice in tea gardens all over the country where the males receive BDT 120 and the females receive only BDT 85. Furthermore, the working hours are very long therefore, the females have less time for WASH activities. They have to walk 4 kilometers to 5 kilometers to reach the collection point and again go back to plucking. They also need to submit an average of 22 kilograms to 25 kilograms of tea leaves, however for extra income and work pressure they end up adding more to that amount, an extra 20 kilograms to 25 kilograms. Pregnant workers face arduous labor with limited prenatal care due to fears of income loss, despite entitlement to eight weeks of maternity leave (Huq, 2020). Women's representation in *Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union* (in English, Bangladesh Tea Labor Union) and local councils remains severely limited, constituting only a third of members and nine out of 35 central committee members, without any holding top leadership positions. Despite reserved seats for women, they have never occupied the positions of chairperson, general secretary, or treasurer roles, facing systemic barriers and discrimination in recruitment, with male-dominated supervision and office staff along with pervasive physical and psychological abuses including verbal abuse, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and assault (Gain, 2021).

Women tea workers seek alternative sources of income due to inadequate wages yet they face hindrances due to social isolation from mainstream society impeding their economic opportunities (Kamruzzaman et al., 2015). Female tea workers experience systemic neglect of labor laws regarding sexual harassment policies, maternity leave, working conditions, and wage structures which is exacerbated by familial and societal constraints that limit their autonomy, freedom of expression, and awareness of their rights. Their low awareness and the apathy of authorities further prolonged their exploitation with many women unaware of legal protections or avenues for recourse against pervasive gender-based discrimination and abuse in the tea industry (Hassan, 2014). Female tea garden workers, children, and adolescent boys and girls generally lack access to recreational amenities (Das and Islam, 2006). The practice of dowry among tea garden workers frequently forces workers to prematurely retire, termed "selling permanent position," to secure funds for their daughters' marriages, resulting in economic insecurity and limited alternatives for the family (Ahmed and Hossain, 2022). The lack of adequately maintained or accessible schools within tea estates contributes to the early discontinuation of education, particularly among girls, while the educational level of mothers significantly impacts their children's schooling outcomes (Sundas and Saha, 2023).

2.2 VULNERABILITY OF HAOR PEOPLE

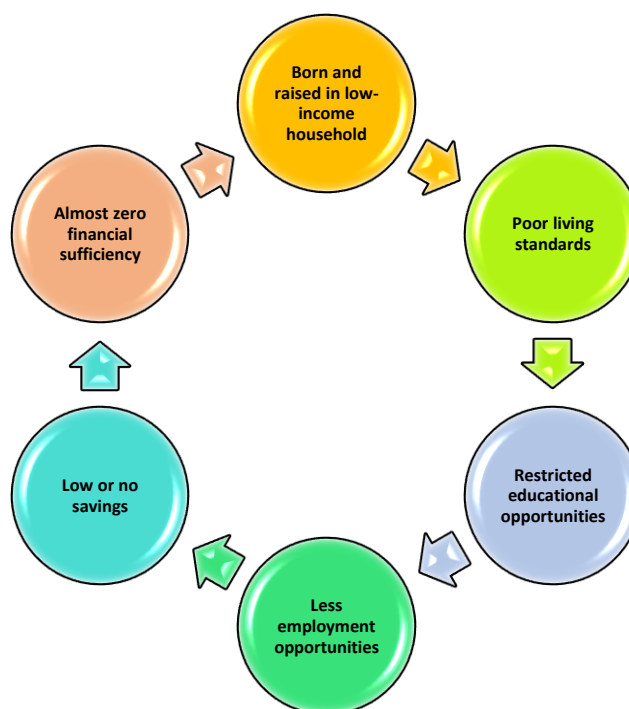
Haor is a distinctive floodplain depression characterized by its bowl-shaped morphology and diverse hydro-ecological features. It comprises wetlands interspersed with rivers, streams, irrigation canals, and extensive areas of seasonally flooded agricultural lands (Pandit et al. 2015). Globally, Bangladesh ranks 3rd globally in open-water capture fisheries production (FAO, 2018) and has produced 13.22 MT of fish from the open-water bodies of Bangladesh (DoF, 2024). The Haor area, situated in northeastern Bangladesh with an estimated population of 21.38 million in 2020, encompasses 373 Haors and over 238 interconnected beels, forming the country's largest inland freshwater wetland ecosystem (Hiramoni, 2023) covering almost 43% of the total areas of Haor districts. (CEGIS, 2017). Hakaluki Haor serves as a critical habitat and breeding ground for aquatic species, recognized as one of Bangladesh's principal fisheries. Due to significant degradation, Hakaluki Haor was designated an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA) in 1999 and is also a protected Ramsar site in international importance for wetland conservation and sustainable use. (Uddin et al. 2013, Sharmin and Khan 2012). Haor area has a diverse array of wetland environments comprising rivers, streams, canals, expansive seasonally inundated cultivated plains, and beels. The Haor region has resources including land, livestock, marshlands, electricity, and mobile telecommunications, which could enhance the well-being of its inhabitants (Hossain et al., 2023).

2.3.1 PERSISTENT POVERTY

Poverty levels in the majority of the Haor basin vary from moderate to very high, particularly in administrative districts such as Kishoreganj, Netrokona, and Sunamganj where approximately 75% of fishermen's yearly earnings fall within the range of USD 488 to USD 732 (Hiramoni, 2023). People in the Haor area experience elevated poverty, inadequate sanitation, and limited educational resources due to susceptibility to flash floods, seasonal communication disruptions, and the adverse impacts of sedimentation, as documented in multiple studies (Choudhury et al. 2019, Kamal et al. 2018). Poverty in the Haor area is intensified by extensive sedimentation, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of aquatic resources (Islam et al., 2022). Livelihoods of Haor people have diverse sectors including business, non-agricultural labor service, fishery, and transport with a notable dependency on remittances, particularly in Sylhet, Moulavibazar, and Brahmanbaria (Oakkas and Islam, 2020).

Multiple interrelated circumstances have locked the Haor community in Moulavibazar in a cycle of poverty. The distinct environment of the area, which is typified by recurrent floods and waterlogging, hinders the production of income and agricultural output (Islam & Islam, 2021). Inadequate access to high-quality healthcare and education hinders the development of human capital. Furthermore, poor infrastructure and communication prevent their produce from being sold on markets, keeping them ensnared in low-paying jobs. Last but not least, the lack of viable alternatives for a sustainable livelihood and debt increases their susceptibility, extending the poverty cycle.

Figure 1 Poverty Cycle of Haor Community



Source: Adapted from the concept of the Poverty Trap (Payne, 2005)

Poverty levels in the majority of the Haor basin vary from moderate to very high, particularly in administrative districts such as Kishoreganj, Netrokona, and Sunamganj where approximately 75% of fishermen's yearly earnings fall within the range of USD 488 to USD 732 (Hiramoni, 2023). Higher levels of poverty exist in the Haor basin area compared to other parts of the country with approximately one-third living below the lower poverty line and only around 30% above the upper poverty line (Islam and Islam, 2021). A recent study by Hussain et al. (2024) found that the respondents' average household size was determined to be 6.5, which was 54.8% larger than the norm for the country. Furthermore, a household's average income was BDT 19,625 and its average expenditure was BDT 14,600. This illustrates that most households find it difficult to cover their basic living needs with their existing income.

2.3.2 LIVELIHOOD OF HAOR PEOPLE

Enhanced sand sedimentation in Haor areas has forced residents to transition from farming to less stable livelihoods such as quarrying or fishing to falconry, exacerbating vulnerability amid unpredictable precipitation patterns affecting employment stability (e.g. Das, 2015 for northeast India; Hossain et al., 2020 for Bangladesh). Unpredictable sedimentation disrupts livelihoods and settlements displacing residents from residential areas near cultivated land with migration offering some relief from sedimentation but potentially exacerbating risks such as drug use, infectious diseases, and food insecurity (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2016) while Sedimentation disrupts vegetation successions, causing forage shortages and degradation of grazing lands, significantly reducing livestock productivity and contributing to food insecurity and chronic poverty among wetland community residents (Islam et al, 2022). People in the Hail

Haor utilize diverse strategies for sustaining livelihoods such as livestock rearing, homestead vegetable gardening, bank loans, selling assets, and fishing longer hours to sustain livelihoods amidst challenges.

2.3.3 HEALTH VULNERABILITY

Haor people commonly experience a range of communicable diseases such as asthma, peptic ulcer, anemia, acute respiratory infections (ARI), worm infections, hypertension, diarrhea, malnutrition, skin diseases, dysentery, malaria, pneumonia, and influenza, with peptic ulcer, diarrhea, anemia, ARI, asthma, worm infections, skin diseases, and hypertension is the most prevalent. Additionally, emerging non-communicable diseases include ischemic heart disease, diabetes mellitus, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, mental health disorders, and injuries (CEGIS, 2012). The rise in diseases and resulting deaths have significantly impacted poultry breeding (Goosen et al. 2018).

2.3.4 CLIMATIC CHANGE IN HAOR AREA

The silent impact of sediment has changed the landscape of the Haor area due to sedimentation between 1965 and 2021 (Islam et al., 2022). Climate change impacts on Hail Haor communities include loss of income, fish diversity, migratory bird availability, crop production, and food security, exacerbated by decreased aquatic plant availability, sudden floods, intensified storms, and reduced water-retaining capacity of beels and Haor. Furthermore, climate change manifests in increased droughts, rising temperatures, drying water supply canals, altered rainfall patterns, heightened fish diseases in winter seas, increased human viral diseases, introduction of unknown paddy diseases, and accelerated erosion due to hill and plant cutting in upstream areas, heightening vulnerability (Monwar et al., 2014). The heightened reliance of local communities on Hakaluki Haor has resulted in declined freshwater fish diversity, resource overexploitation, biodiversity loss including swamp forest destruction, limited alternative income sources, water pollution from agrochemicals and illicit fishing gear like monofilament nylon gill nets, alongside increased human settlement and infrastructure development (Islam et al. 2021, Monwar et al. 2014, Islam et al. 2011).

Inadequate management practices, policy shortcomings, non-compliance with fisheries regulations, extreme climatic events, siltation, conversion of habitats to agricultural lands, limited awareness, and insufficient alternative income opportunities contribute significantly to the decline in fish species diversity in Hakaluki Haor (Islam et al., 2021). Anthropogenic factors such as water extraction for irrigation, overharvesting of fish and other aquatic resources, wetland conversion for agriculture and brick-making, coupled with climate change impacts and population growth are significantly degrading the natural productivity and biodiversity of the Hail Haor (Kumar, 2013).

2.3.5 CONDITIONS OF FEMALE HAOR POPULATION

Women residing in Haor regions are actively engaged in household decision-making, with nearly half assuming roles that are nearly equivalent to those of male family members (Hiramoni, 2023). Women in the Haor area, particularly adolescent girls and newly married women, experience heightened vulnerability exacerbated by the decreased availability of firewood resulting from the sedimentation-induced reduction in aquatic vegetation, which increases their workload and health risks (Maikhuri et al., 2017). In Hail Haor, Moulavibazar, women primarily engage in unpaid domestic roles such as childcare,

livestock care, poultry rearing, sewing, handicrafts, and occasional income-generating activities like selling locally bought and prepared rice from home while males primarily engage themselves in fishing and agricultural work. The highest percentage (72%) of literate women aged 15-24 years are found in the Moulavibazar district (CEGIS, 2012). Pregnant women in the Haor area suffer from malnutrition and the effect is carried away to future generations (Bari and Ashmaul, 2019).

In the Haor Basin area, Elderly women play crucial roles in transmitting early warning messages and constructing temporary embankments to safeguard crops, leveraging their extensive knowledge and experience as effective agents of disaster risk reduction and repositories of adaptive strategies against river bank erosion (Rahman and Haider, n.d). In Haor areas, approximately 95% of women give birth at home with the aid of untrained birth attendants, contributing to elevated maternal and infant mortality rates attributed to resource constraints, severe weather conditions, and traditional parental expectations. The preference against hospitalization and cesarean births reflects societal gender norms that prioritize women's rapid return to domestic duties following childbirth (Chakraborty et al., 2020).

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal aim of this study is *to scrutinize the function of CSOs in amplifying the voices of tea plantation laborers and Haor inhabitants, who are typically viewed as marginalized within socio-economic and political paradigms*. More specifically, this study includes three specific objectives. These are:

- *to understand the environmental and socioeconomic issues that the marginalized people (tea garden workers and Haor residents) face.*
- *to investigate how CSOs function and what they do to meet the needs of these marginalized communities.*
- *to learn about the opportunities and difficulties CSOs in the area confront in their activities.*

4. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Some of the theories in the extant literature that delve into the socioeconomic perspectives of society provide insights that are applied to this study. To understand the intricate relationship that exists in Moulavibazar between CSOs and marginalized communities requires us to look at it through the socioeconomic lens. Through an understanding of the extant theories, the study is able to investigate the nature of marginalization, the effectiveness of CSOs, and the effects of interventions. Furthermore, it adds to the body of information about CSO-community relationships that are already established and helps shape the creation of evidence-based approaches to the problems that the region's underprivileged communities face.

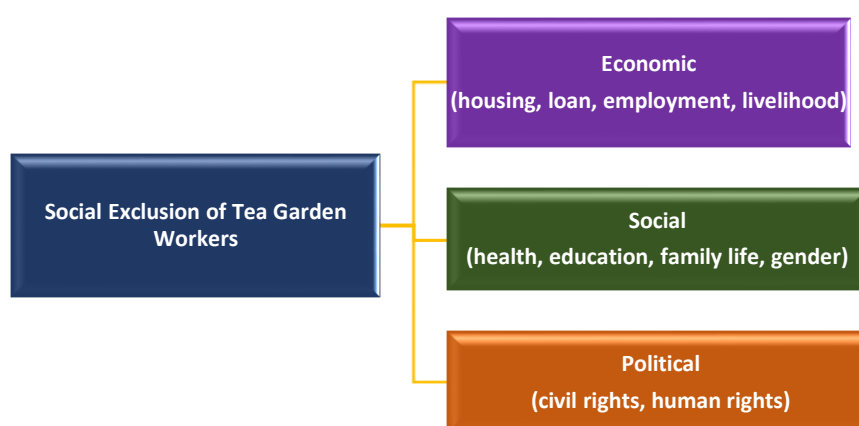
Dr. Mahbub-ul Haq introduced the concept of the Human Development Index (HDI) in 1990 defining human development as the empowerment to expand individuals' choices and improve their quality of life (Sundas and Saha, 2023). Bangladesh ranks at 129th place out of 191 countries in the UNDP's Human Development Index for 2023-2024 (UNDP, 2024). The capability approach by Amartya Sen entails two normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and, second, that well-being should be understood in terms of people's capabilities and functioning. Sen's

broader framework suggests that development should be seen as expanding the capabilities of individuals to lead lives they value. For marginalized women in Moulavibazar, this would mean addressing not just their immediate needs but also enhancing their capabilities to participate fully in society, including their ability to express themselves freely.

The intersectionality approach by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw examines how multiple identities (such as class, gender, and ethnicity) intersect and contribute to unique forms of oppression and discrimination. For tea garden workers, intersectionality could highlight how their socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and labor conditions intersect to limit their ability to express their concerns. It's a term used to describe the idea that social relations involve multiple intersecting forms of discrimination. This means that a person might experience several forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and ableism, all at the same time. Marginalized women in Haor mostly face the part of gender discrimination specifically when it comes to livelihood and collection reliefs during epidemics.

A condition known as social exclusion pertains to the inability of individuals to engage fully in economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of life, as well as the factors that contribute to and maintain this condition (UN, n.d.). Therefore, 3 primary factors have been examined in the analysis of tea garden workers' social exclusion- economic, social, and political. Here, the economic components of exclusion are linked to housing and land, credit and loans, employment type (temporary or permanent), and livelihood. The social dimensions of exclusion are associated with health services, education, family, sociability, and gardener respect. Once more, voting, citizenship, legal equality, and political decision-making are all connected to the political dimensions of exclusion. Workers in tea gardens are, in fact, not included in these broad categories. Theoretically, they are shut out of the political, social, and economic spheres because they are marginalized or isolated from these facets (Al-Amin et al., 2017).

Figure 2 Factors of Social Exclusion for Tea Garden Workers



Source: Adapted from Al-Amin et al., 2017

Lastly; the theory of empowerment, depicts that people who do not have an equal share of valued resources can access and control those resources more easily through an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community (Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). It involves mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation. Put another way, it is a process that empowers people to take

charge of their lives, participate democratically in the life of their community, and develop a critical understanding of their surroundings. Theories of empowerment encompass both processes and results, implying that certain behaviors, events, or arrangements may be empowering and that the end result of these processes is a degree of empowerment. It provides a prism to examine how CSOs might help marginalized people improve agency and control over their lives.

5. METHODOLOGY

Given the dearth of studies on CSOs and marginalized communities in tea gardens and Haor areas in the extant literature, this empirical study entails a qualitative approach. Within the framework of this exploratory study, an array of methodologies—comprising case studies, in-depth interviews (IDIs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs)—were employed to procure pertinent qualitative data.

While developing the tools, this research extensively studied the available theories. Therefore, the study worked with an approach that encompasses all the theories that can be used to comprehend the roles of CSOs in addressing the challenges of marginalized communities. In parallel with gathering empirical data, this study meticulously scrutinized previous research, journal articles, academic books, news reports (both online and in print), as well as governmental and NGO reports. These sources were examined to amass secondary information pertinent to the investigation.

5.1 SAMPLE SELECTION

This study employed a non-random sampling method more specifically purposive sampling method. Initially, comprehensive data on active CSOs in Moulavibazar were amassed via secondary sources, estimating approximately 25 CSOs operational in the region. Subsequently, based on predefined selection criteria (CSOs engaging with our target demographics—marginalized communities, ethnic minorities, and youth), 15 CSOs were identified. In the third phase, the sample size was further refined to exclusively encompass CSOs with direct affiliations to the target population and associated beneficiaries (tea garden workers and Haor region inhabitants of Moulavibazar), culminating in a sample size of 14 CSOs. These organizations operate within three Haor regions and across 92 tea gardens in Moulavibazar. Data collection from the target demographics was executed through the formulation of standardized interview methodologies.

Table 2 Information of the Selected CSOs in Moulavibazar

CSO Name	Operation Area in Moulavibazar	Activities	Type of Beneficiaries	No of Beneficiaries
We Are Friends For Human (WAFFH)	Kulaura, Rajnagar, Kamalganj, Juri and Sreemangal	Lowering mother and child mortality, improving WASH, increasing literacy rates, alleviating poverty, and empowering women	Marginalized community, Haor community, PWD, and youth	11,183
Abda Bahumukhi Juba Shangha (ABJS)	Moulavibazar Sadar Upazila	Educating and training youth for better living standards, and safeguarding the environment	Youth	7,000

CSO Name	Operation Area in Moulavibazar	Activities	Type of Beneficiaries	No of Beneficiaries
Abda Bahumukhi Mohila Shangtha (ABMS)	Moulavibazar Sadar Upazila	Training marginalized women for better livelihood	Marginalized woman	3,000
Jalalabad Foundation (JF)	Moulavibazar	Empowering ethnic minorities, fighting gender discrimination, empowering women for constitutional rights, providing wash facilities, and providing assistance during calamities	Marginalized community, ethnic minorities, and adolescents	1,52,716
Village Social Development Organization (VSDO)	Kulaura, Kamalganj, Juri, Baralekha and Rajnagar	Improving livelihood for the community, and protecting biodiversity	Haor community	5,809
Social Advancement Cooperative Organization (SAKO)	13 Unions of Kulaura	Educating youth and marginalized women	Youth and marginalized women	5,000
Shishu Shohayak Shangstha (SSS)	Baramchal	Educating ethnic children and women	Ethnic children and woman	115
Srishti Shamaj Kalyan Shangstha (SSKS)	Srimangal Upazila and Moulavibazar District	Maternal and child health training, providing adolescent healthcare and WASH facilities for marginalized community	Marginalized community, Haor community, and ethnic minorities	25,150
Sanchayan Unnayan Shangstha (SUS)	Moulavibazar District	Provides micro-credit, facilitates WASH activities, and gives healthcare facilities to the elderly	Youth, adolescents, and marginalized community	176,0
Moulavibazar Cha Janagashthi Adibashi Front (MCJAF)	Moulavibazar District, Sreemangal and Kamalganj	Facilitates WASH and SRHR activities, environmental safeguarding, female education support center, and free high schooling of ethnic students	Marginalized communities, ethnic minorities, and adolescents	10,310
Tarapasha Shomaj Kalyan Shangstha (TSS)	Kulaura	Woman empowerment through livelihood activities and preventing child marriage	Marginalized communities, and ethnic minorities	66,465
Tarapasha Juba Kalyan Shangstha (TJKS)	Tarapasha Tea Garden, New Line, and Longla Tea Garden	Facilitates SRHR education, tackles malnutrition problems, and helps substance-addicted youths	Youth and adolescents of ethnic minorities	120
Nishwa Shahayak Shangstha (NSS)	Moulavibazar	Alleviate poverty and address inequality in society by promoting and delivering health care, sanitation, and education programs	Marginalized and destitute community	-

CSO Name	Operation Area in Moulavibazar	Activities	Type of Beneficiaries	No of Beneficiaries
Institute for Social Advancement (ISA)	Sreemangal and Moulavibazar	Facilitates primary education, empowering women through human and civil rights	Marginalized community of tea garden and Haor areas	8,000

Source: Present Study

5.2 DATA COLLECTION

This investigation encompassed the execution of five in-depth interviews (IDIs), seven key informant interviews (KIIs), two focus group discussions (FGDs), and five case studies.

Table 3 Qualitative Data Collection Details- Location and Participations in Moulavibazar

Location	CSO	No of IDI	No of KII	No of FGD	Case Study
Baramchal	SSS	1	1		
Baralekha	NSS, JF	0	0		
Tilagaon	WAFH, SAKO	1	1		
Rajnagar	TSS, TJKS, SUS	0	0	2	5
Bramanbazar	VSDO	0	0		
Srimangal	ISA, MCJAF, SSKS	3	3		
Kusumbag	ABJS, ABMS	0	2		
Total	14	5	7	2	5

Source: Present Study

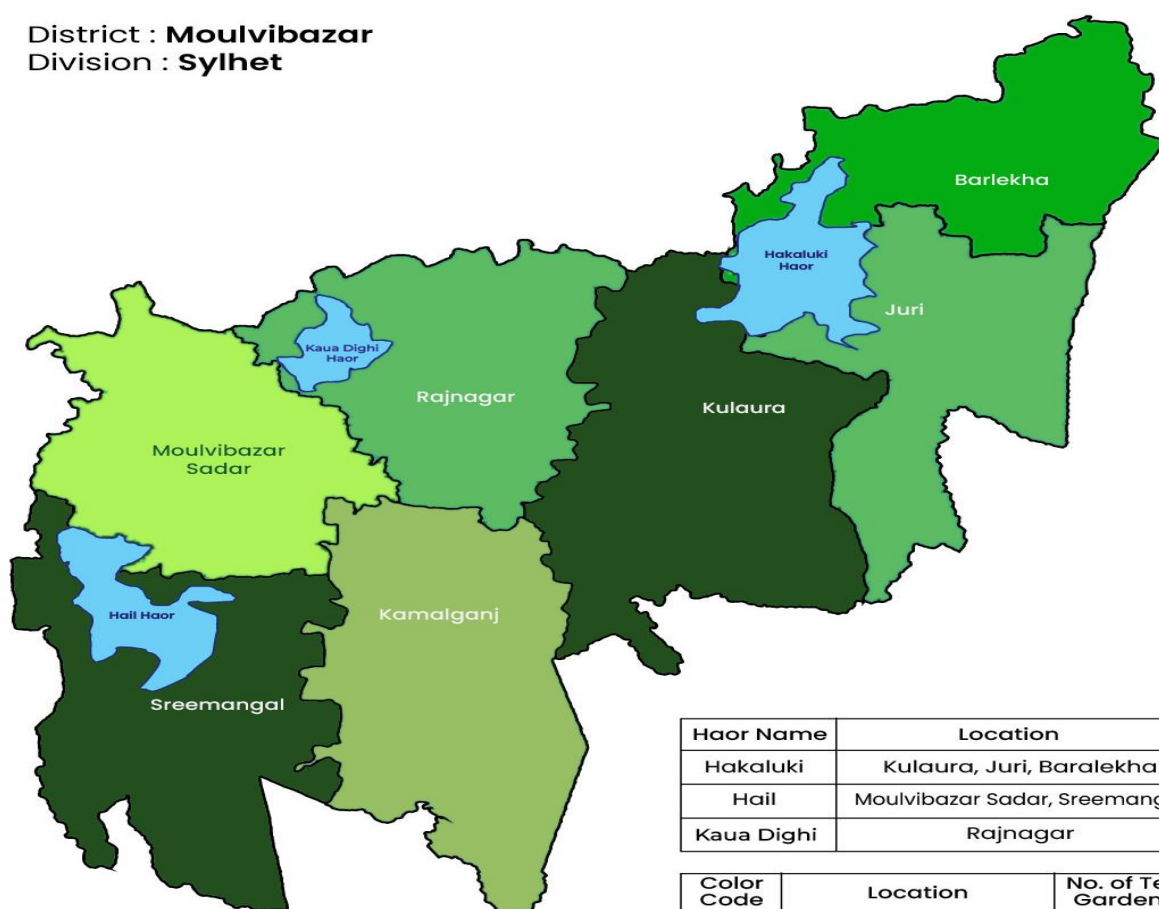
It is also noted that this paper includes one case study from secondary sources due to the high visibility gained throughout the country and the case is relevant to this study.

5.3 STUDY AREA

For this study, the Haor regions and tea estates within the Moulavibazar district were designated as the focal study areas. The district of Moulavibazar, situated in northeast Bangladesh, is distinguished by its distinct socioeconomic environment, which is dominated by tea plantations and Haor areas. In Bangladesh, the term "Haor" refers to a bowl-shaped depression that submerges under water for approximately half of the year during the wet season (marshy wetland ecosystems), derived from the Bengali word 'Sagar' or Arabic 'Bahar' meaning 'Sea' (Choudhury and Nishat, 2005). Three types of Haor exist in Bangladesh namely 1. Deeply Flooded Haor 2. Floodplain Haor and Foot hill Haor (CEGIS, 2017). The Haor Basin in the northeastern Sylhet Division is characterized by two distinct depressions: the Northern Depression, which contains numerous closely spaced and interconnected Haors, and the Southern Depression, where Haors are sparse and separated by significant distances due to intervening hill range (Masum and Omer, 2019).

Map 1 Map of Moulavibazar District

District : **Moulvibazar**
Division : **Sylhet**



Haor Name	Location
Hakaluki	Kulaura, Juri, Baralekha
Hail	Moulvibazar Sadar, Sreemangal
Kaua Dighi	Rajnagar

Color Code	Location	No. of Tea Gardens
Light Green	Moulvibazar sadar	3
Medium Green	Rajnagar	11
Dark Green	Juri	11
Light Green	Kamalganj	14
Dark Green	Baralekha	15
Dark Green	Kulaura	19
Dark Green	Sreemangal	19

Moulavibazar comprises seven upazilas: Moulavibazar Sadar, Sreemangal, Juri, Rajnagar, Kulaura, Baralekha, and Kamalganj. This district boasts 92 tea gardens spanning 1,60,264.78 acres, yielding an annual tea production of 3,20,51,500 kilograms (Bangladesh National Portal, 2024). Moreover, it is home to various Indigenous communities, including the Manipuri (Mithoi and Vishnu Priya), Khasia, Santal, Tipra, Tripura, and Garo, with a total Indigenous population of 42,910, most of whom are considered marginalized. The district also encompasses three Haors: Hakaluki Haor (in Kulaura and Baralekha), Kaua Dighi Haor (in Rajnagar), and Hail Haor (in Sreemangal).

Bangladesh boasts 168 registered tea gardens, with Srimangal housing the highest concentration, while Moulavibazar, Habiganj, and Sylhet are recognized as the nation's tea plantation epicenter (Ahsan and Chowdhury, 2021). These estates collectively employ nearly 300,000 laborers, with women constituting over 75% of the workforce (BTB, 2024; MoFA, 2024). In 2023, an unprecedented 102.92 million kilograms of tea were produced from these 168 tea gardens and smaller plantations nationwide, setting a new benchmark in tea production history (BTB, 2024).

The region offers an optimal climate for tea cultivation, owing to its rolling hills, fertile soil, and ample precipitation. Moulavibazar's tea estates are typically vast properties with substantial labor forces. Distinct socioeconomic enclaves have emerged within the district due to the geographic dispersion of these estates. The labor force of Moulavibazar's tea gardens comprises both seasonal migrants (predominantly from other parts of Moulavibazar and Sylhet) and indigenous workers (BTB, 2024). Many workers have resided on these estates for generations, fostering close-knit communities and becoming dependent on the tea trade. Their livelihoods are intricately tied to the fortunes of the estate, and their lives are deeply interwoven with the cycles of tea cultivation. Tea garden laborers communicate in a unique dialect amalgamating Bangla, Deswali/Deshali, Hindi, and Assamese, although the use of this native language is waning due to diminishing practice (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

The majority of inhabitants in these gardens continue to derive their income from tea farming, yet their socioeconomic conditions are often marked by poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to healthcare and education (Noor, 2017). Despite their crucial role in the national economy, tea garden workers endure social and economic marginalization. These communities have experienced significant life changes due to the stark contrast between their physical and socioeconomic environments. Residents of the Haor region primarily engage in agriculture, fishing, and cattle farming, adapting their livelihoods to the fluctuating water levels inherent to the Haor's hydrological cycle. Nonetheless, these areas persistently grapple with poverty, illiteracy, and insufficient infrastructure (Khatun and Rahman, 2021).

A substantial portion of the district's population, encompassing tea garden workers and Haor region inhabitants, has historically faced an array of challenges, including poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and restricted access to essential services (Haque & Kamruzzaman, 2022). There has been increasing acknowledgment of the pivotal role that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play in ameliorating the lives of these disadvantaged populations. These organizations have tirelessly strived to support local communities, enhance their living standards, and advocate for their rights. However, the challenges faced by the people and CSOs in this region are complex and multifaceted.

6. DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

In terms of deriving findings, this study initially focused on the narrative discourse derived from the case studies. In apprehending the intricate and unique challenges faced by tea garden laborers and Haor communities in Moulavibazar, these case studies are instrumental in offering marginalized populations a platform to articulate their perspectives and experiences.

Chan Mia (pseudonym) was born and raised near Hakaluki Haor, where his and his ancestors' livelihoods were intricately tied to the fisheries of the Haor. However, in 2022, he and his family were barred from fishing in the Haor due to a portion of the area being leased to a large corporation. Such corporations typically do not employ local individuals; instead, they bring in workers from other districts. Although *Chan Mia* and his family were assured alternative livelihoods, such as overseeing the fish stock and feeding specific species of fish, these activities offered meager compensation, making it arduous to cover living expenses. His wife, daughter, and sisters, who were previously involved in fishing, were promised other opportunities but ultimately found themselves unemployed. According to Chan Mia, influential individuals play a crucial role in seizing control of the regions and obliterating local livelihoods. Such nefarious practices are now commonplace in the Haor regions of Moulavibazar, compelling residents to seek alternative livelihoods. Although there are a few Fishermen's Associations, they lack power against the influential authorities. Tragically, women are the most affected by these practices, as they do not receive livelihood opportunities, whereas men receive some benefits. Consequently, the poverty level among women in the region is

Mithila (pseudonym), a 22-year-old tea laborer at Hossainabad Tea Garden in Sreemangal upazila, was seated beneath a tree shortly after giving birth to her child following three miscarriages. Merely an hour had passed since the birth of her baby girl, who was being tended to by her relative, Maya Tanti. At birth, Mithila's baby did not cry and experienced breathing difficulties. Physicians at the health complex directed her to Moulavibazar District Hospital. To transport Mithila to Moulavibazar, her brother Madan Nayek and husband Narendra Nayek sought a vehicle, incurring a cost of 500 BDT—a substantial expense for the family. The majority of women employed in the tea gardens give birth with the assistance of unskilled midwives, or "Dhatri," resulting in higher incidences of stillbirths, maternal deaths, and delivery-related fatalities compared to the national average. After her water broke the previous evening and all the amniotic fluid had drained, Mithila visited the Upazila Health Complex, as the inexperienced midwife she had consulted was unable to deliver her baby overnight. This woman was unaware of the local healthcare helpline and local volunteer or NGO healthcare providers. Moreover, she had never attended any health camps nor received care from Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) or NGOs.

As a result of the flash flood, nearly 250,000 individuals across the district's 500 villages and 50 unions were adversely affected. The regional thoroughfare between Kulaura and Baralekha was partially submerged in floodwaters, and the majority of Kulaura, Juri, and Baralekha experienced power outages. Flood-affected individuals were relocating from their homes to safe centers. Among the displaced was a 23-year-old woman, **Maya** (pseudonym), who was sexually assaulted in the shelter she sought refuge in with her family. The assault occurred at night when she went to the toilet and was cornered by several men. The absence of separate washrooms for women, inadequate lighting, and the amalgamation of diverse societal groups posed significant threats to women's safety. Due to the cramped conditions and the distance women had to travel to reach the refuge, there have been numerous instances of occasional abortions. A considerable proportion of women also experienced theft and robbery in addition to sexual harassment. Most of these women were deprived of healthcare facilities during the calamity period. Furthermore, the lack of law enforcement exacerbated such heinous acts. In some cases, victims contacted shelter volunteers out of fear of directly approaching the authorities, resulting in their complaints going unheard. Consequently, these women were unaware of how to raise their voices and whom to approach to assert their rights.

Lovey (pseudonym), a 42-year-old woman, was savagely beaten by her husband in the afternoon, in the presence of her children and neighbors. Her transgression was her refusal to feed the cows, opting instead to attend adult school (seasonal classes and awareness campaigns provided by local NGOs) to educate herself on using mobile phones. The beating was so severe that she sustained a black eye and multiple fractures in her legs. That evening, the village panchayat (a local governing body) convened to further investigate her supposed faults and determine additional punishments. However, due to her elder brother's employment with the UNO office, the panchayat refrained from imposing further penalties, instead fining the husband 2,000 BDT. Such instances of domestic violence are rampant in Moulavibazar, stemming from a lack of decision-making opportunities and the perpetuation of harmful social norms. The concept of freedom of speech is virtually nonexistent for most women in this region, regardless of their social status. Even when a woman's family has political connections or wealth, they are often forgiven. Tragically, impoverished women bear the brunt of societal wrath, and in 95% of cases, they are punished despite their innocence.

In Kamalganj upazila of Moulavibazar district, a heinous crime occurred when a 12-year-old girl, employed part-time in a tea garden, was sexually assaulted. The victim vanished in the evening and was found unconscious in a nearby garden the following afternoon by local residents. Her family alleged that she was forcibly taken into the garden by assailants who raped her throughout the night, inflicting grievous injuries. After a frantic search, locals transported her to Sreemangal Upazila Health Complex in an unconscious state. As her condition deteriorated, doctors urgently referred her to Moulavibazar Sadar Hospital. Such incidents are alarmingly common in the tea garden areas, particularly affecting indigenous young women and adolescent girls. Despite some cases being shared on social media, authorities remain silent on providing security for female workers. These women are often prohibited from seeking assistance from law enforcement, as many offenders are fellow tea garden workers or authorities. Due to a lack of education and access to information, these women and girls are unaware of their constitutional and basic human rights.

The aforementioned synthesis endeavors to encapsulate case studies from tea gardens and Haor regions. The respondents' experiences elucidate intersecting themes, including livelihoods, gender-based violence, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Additionally, the narratives highlight issues related to freedom of speech and the frailty of healthcare systems. The plight of ethnic minorities is also prominently featured. Collectively, these themes underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by marginalized communities.

In conjunction with the case study method, this study also implemented the IDI, KII, and FGD methods. The objective of the IDIs was to comprehend the activities conducted by the selected CSOs and identify areas for further investigation. The primary focus of the interviews was to evaluate the capacity of the CSOs and determine the assistance they require to aid their beneficiaries. Remarkably, the interviewers unearthed unforeseen information that further enriches this study and opens new avenues for a deeper understanding of the related outcomes. The KII method was pivotal for grasping the intricacies of these marginalized communities. They provide a platform for these communities to articulate their needs, aspirations, and concerns, thereby facilitating the identification of the most pressing issues they encounter. Additionally, KIIs illuminate the interactions between community members and external entities. The FGD method constituted a significant qualitative research methodology for elucidating the needs, perspectives, and experiences of underrepresented cohorts. This method offered a unique avenue for amassing comprehensive and extensive data through collective dialogue. FGDs provided participants with the platform to articulate their shared adversities and experiences. Moreover, they can uncover issues that were previously underreported or entirely unknown. In light of the aforementioned data collection methods, the overarching findings of this study are delineated as follows:

6.1 DEFICIENCY OF HEALTHCARE FACILITIES

The governmental healthcare infrastructure is precarious, characterized by a scarcity of physicians, inadequate equipment, and an absence of essential treatment facilities. Consequently, these rudimentary healthcare institutions often refer patients to private urban clinics. These private clinics are prohibitively expensive, leading many individuals to seek treatment from local quacks, which frequently results in mistreatment of various illnesses and, in severe cases, even death. Additionally, in the Haor region, there is a significant shortage of medications for any ailments. Moreover, there are no nutritional support services for females, nor are there iron tablets available for adolescents in both the tea garden and Haor areas.

6.2 RIGID MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF TEA ESTATE

The management structure of tea estates is highly rigid, with most estate owners prohibiting any external entity from accessing or scrutinizing their operations. Consequently, the impoverished conditions of the tea workers remain unaddressed. Neither NGOs nor human rights activists are permitted to intervene in this domain, leading to the stagnation of the workers' lives. As a result, these workers lag behind contemporary societal advancements by more than two decades.

6.3 INEFFICIENT COMMUNICATIONAL MODE

The region suffers from a severe deficiency in communication infrastructure, characterized by the absence of telecommunication towers, limited internet access, inadequate electricity supply, low literacy rates, and rigid adherence to the British colonial administration system in the workplace. During natural calamities, electricity frequently fails, leading to a total collapse in communication.

6.4 INADEQUATE SHELTERS

The shelters in these regions are plagued by significant issues, including inadequate capacity and deteriorated infrastructures. Additionally, there is a dire absence of separate toilets for women, exacerbating the problem. Overall, these deficiencies underscore the inefficiency and inadequacy of the refuge structures.

6.5 SCARCITY OF SRHR EDUCATION AND FACILITIES

Tea garden laborers thus observed a profound deficiency in WASH facilities in these regions, where sexual health knowledge remains taboo. Adolescent girls suffer severe hygiene issues due to the lack of knowledge dissemination and prevailing social norms. The scarcity of educational resources exacerbates these problems, leaving young women vulnerable. Consequently, the neglect of sexual health education perpetuates a cycle of ignorance and poor hygiene practices.

6.6 PERVASIVE MANIFESTATION OF GENDER DISPARITY

6.6.1 COMPLETE SILENCING OF WOMEN'S VOICES

When women endeavor to protest or assert their rights, they endure physical abuse from society and fall prey to domestic violence. Their husbands, conforming to entrenched social norms or radical ideologies, suppress their attempts to voice concerns. Communal edicts govern every facet of life in these regions, and non-compliance results in savage reprisals by the village arbitration (*panchayat*). Typically, these judgments are biased against women, leading to their subjection to severe sanctions.

6.6.2 TOTAL SUPPRESSION OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS' VOICES

Adolescent girls are the primary victims of such activities owing to the lack of security and the entrenched social norms of early and child marriage. It has been observed that the parents of most adolescents, and even younger children, clandestinely marry them off to circumvent law enforcement authorities.

6.6.3 MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN IN RELIEF ALLOCATION

During relief distribution, women are prohibited from seeking aid, and even if they attempt to collect it, men often seize their relief supplies. Additionally, individuals from the same family monopolize relief, thereby depriving numerous women-headed households. Nepotism is rampant in these situations, exacerbating the inequity. Such practices must be unequivocally eradicated to ensure fairness.

6.7 NONEXISTENCE OR DYSFUNCTION OF UNION DIGITAL CENTERS (UDC)

In these regions, there is a significant chasm in technological literacy, exacerbated by the near non-existence of Union Digital Centers (UDCs). The local populace exhibits a marked reluctance to utilize UDCs, opting to visit only when no alternative options are available. This reticence may stem from cultural factors or a general unawareness of the services provided by UDCs. Consequently, this demographic is perceived as a regressive community, characterized by low standards of living and livelihood. The absence of technological integration further entrenches their disadvantaged position.

6.8 CHILD MARRIAGE

Early marriages and child marriages are prevalent in these regions, exacerbated by the gaps between legal enforcement and religious practices. Frequently, when either the groom or bride is uneducated, marriages are conducted without proper certification. This lack of regulation facilitates the ease of such unions. Consequently, these practices perpetuate the cycle of underage and unregistered marriages.

6.9 EROSION OF ECONOMIC SUSTENANCE

The most pressing concern is the erosion of economic sustenance, particularly evident in the Haor regions. Despite numerous capacity-building workshops and governmental assistance programs, their effects are not enduring. The livelihoods of the Haor populace, which predominantly depend on fisheries, are jeopardized by large corporations leasing the Haors and employing individuals from outside the local area. This external employment undermines the local economy and exacerbates the economic plight of the Haor residents. The lack of sustainable intervention further entrenches their vulnerability.

6.10 SEXUAL ABUSE OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

There is an alarming increase in sexual criminal activities targeting Indigenous women in these regions, with incidents often being videotaped and disseminated on social media. This behavior is primarily driven by entrenched patriarchal norms and the complete silencing of young women's voices. The lack of legal repercussions further emboldens perpetrators. Additionally, the societal acceptance of such norms perpetuates a cycle of abuse. Consequently, Indigenous women remain vulnerable and marginalized.

6.11 DEFICIENCY OF ADEQUATE WASH INFRASTRUCTURE

Sanitation remains a significant concern in these regions, especially for women, who are compelled to defecate in public spaces. This practice persists due to the adherence to British colonial norms that regard public defecation as a primary source of natural fertilizer. Additionally, there is a dire scarcity of potable water in the tea estates, exacerbating the plight of the workers. Women, in particular, are burdened with the task of transporting their water supplies, which significantly hampers their productivity. This arduous

chore not only affects their efficiency but also leads to chronic physical health issues. The systemic neglect of proper sanitation and clean water infrastructure continues to undermine the well-being of these communities.

To conclude, for the tea garden workers and Haor residents the governmental healthcare infrastructure is precarious, characterized by a scarcity of physicians, inadequate equipment, and the absence of essential treatment facilities. Consequently, patients are often referred to prohibitively expensive private urban clinics, leading many to seek treatment from local quacks, resulting in mistreatment and death in severe cases. The Haor region faces a significant shortage of medications, and there are no nutritional support services or iron tablets for females and adolescents. The management structure of tea estates is rigid, with estate owners barring external entities from accessing their operations, leaving workers' impoverished conditions unaddressed. The region suffers from deficient communication infrastructure, including the absence of telecommunication towers, limited internet access, inadequate electricity supply, and adherence to the British colonial administration system. The shelters in these regions have inadequate capacity, deteriorating infrastructure, and lack separate toilets for women. There is a profound deficiency in WASH facilities, with sexual health knowledge remaining taboo, exacerbating severe hygiene issues for adolescent girls. Women endure physical abuse and domestic violence, with their voices suppressed by entrenched social norms. Early and child marriages are prevalent, facilitated by gaps between legal enforcement and religious practices. The Haor populace's economic sustenance is jeopardized by large corporations leasing the Haors and employing outsiders, undermining the local economy.

A robust web-based communication system is crucial for the existence of CSOs to foster strong bonds among each other, ultimately aiding those in need. A prominent organization acting as a central hub can empower smaller entities to excel in their fields. INGOs and NGOs can support local CSOs and CBOs through various funding and donations. However, due to their small size, these CSOs and their beneficiaries often suffer in the long run, needing to restart when donations cease. To enhance capacity building, the ILO and international trade union federations could offer training sessions and logistical support to unions representing tea workers. The ILO can assist the government in enacting and enforcing legislation that protects workers' rights. Unfortunately, government endowments and foreign aid are typically insufficient. These organizations occasionally carry out capacity-building initiatives but fail to ensure the sustainability of their programs. Consequently, the continuance of capacity development workshops and government assistance in the Haor areas is not seen. The livelihoods of Haor residents, primarily dependent on fisheries, are at risk due to large corporations leasing the Haors and employing outsiders. This external employment undermines the local economy and exacerbates the economic plight of Haor residents. A continuous, well-coordinated effort is needed to support these communities effectively. Without sustained support, the progress made through capacity-building workshops is short-lived. The persistent challenges faced by these communities highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach. It is essential to maintain the momentum of development initiatives to ensure long-term benefits for the affected populations.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for this paper are divided into two categories which are depicted below:

7.1 GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH

- ▶ Despite most tea estates being located in the Sylhet division, workers cannot access the Labor Court, which is situated in Chittagong. Every tea district should have an active Labor Court. Legislative changes and the creation of new laws regarding tea plantation laborers should be based on effective communication between the government, tea garden owners, and laborers (Ahmmad and Hossain, 2016).
- ▶ The Department of Labor must routinely send representatives to tea gardens to evaluate labor standards. This would allow authorities to identify gaps and challenges in providing tea estates with decent working conditions, in line with national labor laws and ILO standards.
- ▶ The Bangladesh Tea Research Institute (BTRI) could enhance productivity at tea farms while advancing the rights of tea plantation workers. Government officials should consult with plantation community authorities when drafting any legislation related to the tea industry.
- ▶ In Tanguar and Hakaluki Haors, Community-based Sustainable Management (CBSM) and the Project Implementation Committee (PIC) have been trialed to democratize household governance methods (Barkat et al., 2019). These models could be effective, and their shortcomings addressed with a proper mix of public and private funding.

7.2 ALL FORMS OF CSOs

- ▶ At the policy level, labor rights of tea garden communities should be prioritized. Tea garden management must support CSOs' efforts in education, water, sanitation, hygiene, population control, microcredit, and awareness raising.
- ▶ National labor unions should connect tea plantation workers to their activities, raise national concerns about tea workers, and advocate for acceptable working conditions. Additionally, they should train union leaders to enhance their bargaining skills.
- ▶ Continuous programs or value-adding practices are essential for Moulavibazar due to frequent natural calamities destroying local livelihoods.
- ▶ Alternative livelihoods should be explored, such as agriculture and tourism development in Haors. The biodiversity of Haor areas must be prioritized to mitigate the impact of frequent floods on the ecosystem.
- ▶ Engaging with tea gardens through *Upazila Nirbahi Officers* (UNO) can improve workers' lives. Constant government monitoring is necessary to help this marginalized community integrate with the mainstream population and find alternative livelihoods.

8. CONCLUSION

The district of Moulavibazar in Bangladesh embodies distinct socioeconomic contrasts, with tea plantations prevailing in one area and Haor regions in another. The residents, including tea garden workers and Haor dwellers, contend with severe challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to essential services. Despite these adversities, CSOs strive to ameliorate their livelihoods and secure their rights.

Female tea workers endure numerous hardships, including minimal wages, unsanitary conditions, discrimination, and a stark lack of basic rights. Their economic vulnerability is exacerbated by significant health risks, limited representation in labor unions, and systemic neglect of labor laws, perpetuating their social marginalization. The absence of adequate healthcare facilities further intensifies these health risks, leaving them with insufficient medical care. In Haor regions, women engage actively in household decision-making, assuming roles akin to male family members. Their vulnerability is heightened by factors such as reduced firewood availability, increased workload, and health risks. They mainly partake in unpaid domestic work and face severe challenges like malnutrition during pregnancy and high rates of home births with untrained attendants, jeopardizing maternal and child health. Despite these adversities, they exhibit remarkable resilience and contribute significantly to disaster risk reduction, particularly in safeguarding crops from river bank erosion.

The study highlights the lack of voice for adolescent girls, the deprivation of women in relief distribution, and the rigid management system of tea estates. These systemic issues compound the vulnerability and marginalization of these groups, necessitating urgent action and reform. Furthermore, challenges in healthcare facilities, communication barriers, inefficient shelters, and scarcity of sexual and reproductive health education exacerbate the hardships faced by community members, particularly women and adolescents. Critical issues include the loss of livelihoods in Haor areas, sexual abuse of Indigenous women, inadequate WASH infrastructure, dysfunctional Union Digital Centers (UDCs), and the prevalence of child marriages. These pressing challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address the complex socioeconomic and cultural issues afflicting these communities.

It is anticipated that 14 CSOs will collaboratively serve as beacons of hope for underserved areas. Their primary responsibilities encompass providing essential services, capacity development, and advocating for the voiceless. Additionally, these CSOs aim to empower underprivileged individuals, foster resilience, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society by addressing systemic injustices and creating opportunities for sustainable development. Through their dedicated efforts, there is potential for significant positive change in the lives of Moulavibazar's residents, leading to improved living conditions and a more equitable future.

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