

Navigating the Waters of Policy: Assessing the Impact of Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy 2011 on Women in Char Areas

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Abstract: This paper critically examines Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy 2011 (NWDP 2011) and its effectiveness in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women residing in char areas. Despite NWDP 2011's commendable commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality, this study highlights its limitations in catering to the unique vulnerabilities of women in char regions. Through a comprehensive SWOT analysis, the paper identifies the policy's strengths in promoting gender equality and women's roles, provision of support services, economic opportunities, and educational initiatives. However, it also unveils weaknesses, such as its limited focus on char areas and the absence of a gender-responsive budget. Opportunities for improvement include tailoring policies to char areas, fostering collaboration, increasing awareness and education, and leveraging data-driven insights. The paper underscores the importance of refining policies to ensure that every woman in Bangladesh, irrespective of her geographic location, can progress towards empowerment and gender equality.

Keywords: Women, Char, Economic Vulnerability, Social Vulnerability, Environmental Vulnerability

Received : 18 March 2024

Revised : 24 April 2024

Accepted : 11 May 2024

Published : 28 June 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Md. Deen Islam & Jamil Sayeed (2024). Navigating the Waters of Policy: Assessing the Impact of Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy 2011 on Women in Char Areas. *Indian Development Policy Review*, 5: 1, pp. 1-14.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, a nation where women constitute approximately 50% of the population, the development and empowerment of women are not just societal ideals but integral components of national progress. Acknowledging the profound impact women can have on a country's socio-economic landscape, and recognizing the historical abuses and neglect suffered by a significant portion of its female populace, Bangladesh embarked on a journey towards women's empowerment with the formulation of the first-ever National Women Development Policy in 1997. This policy marked a pivotal

moment in the country's history, underlining the imperative of gender equality, equal rights, and opportunities for women.

As the custodian of this transformative vision, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs initiated numerous programs and interventions to uphold the rights and well-being of women across the nation. However, as Bangladesh traversed its path of development and transformation, it became evident that a more holistic and all-encompassing approach was needed. The vulnerabilities of women were manifold and intricately intertwined with societal, economic, and environmental factors. It was against this backdrop that the National Women Development Policy 2011 (NWDP2011) emerged as a beacon of hope, seeking to address these multifaceted challenges and tailor interventions to meet the diverse needs of women.

NWDP2011 is a comprehensive framework that outlines a myriad of objectives aimed at ensuring gender equality, safeguarding the rights and security of women, and eradicating discrimination and abuse. It envisions a society where women are not just equal partners in development but active contributors to the nation's growth. The policy underscores the importance of education, skill development, and economic opportunities in emancipating women from the clutches of poverty and nurturing their talents to their fullest potential. Furthermore, it recognizes the critical role of women across various domains, striving to eliminate existing gender disparities in administration, politics, culture, and family life.

However, while NWDP2011 represents a laudable commitment to women's advancement, it is imperative to critically assess its effectiveness, especially in addressing the unique challenges faced by women living in char areas.¹ These vulnerable regions are characterized by distinct social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities that necessitate tailored policies and interventions. Economic vulnerabilities, such as limited access to skill-building opportunities and employment, continue to impede the progress of women in these areas. Social vulnerabilities, encompassing inadequate access to essential services like housing, healthcare, and education, persist as barriers to women's well-being. Moreover, environmental vulnerabilities, including the threat of natural disasters and climate change, pose unique challenges to the women of char areas.

This study delves into NWDP2011, dissecting its policies and interventions to ascertain their efficacy in addressing the intricate social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities of women residing in char areas. By conducting a thorough SWOT analysis, we aim to unveil the policy's strengths and weaknesses and identify potential opportunities and threats concerning the well-being and empowerment of these women. In doing so, we endeavour to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding

the development of policies that not only empower women but also ensure that no woman, regardless of her geographic location, is left behind on the path to progress.

Literature Review

The char areas of Bangladesh, situated in dynamic riverine landscapes, present a unique context where women grapple with unique economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities. This literature review synthesizes findings from various studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional challenges that women in char areas face.

Social vulnerabilities among women in char areas are deeply influenced by factors such as access to resources, livelihood opportunities, and gender dynamics. Mobarek (2016) conducted a comparative study, focusing on the Jamuna River Char, revealing distinctions between areas covered by the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP) and those without CLP intervention. The study highlighted that access to livelihood programs can significantly impact women's social resilience, demonstrating the importance of targeted interventions. Domestic violence remains a pressing issue within rural Bangladesh. Bates, Schuler, Islam, and Islam (2004) delved into the socioeconomic factors associated with domestic violence in rural contexts. They emphasized the role of economic empowerment in mitigating women's social vulnerabilities, shedding light on the complex interplay between gender, poverty, and violence.

Climate change poses significant economic challenges for women in char areas, particularly in terms of food security. Parvin and Ahsan (2013) explored the impacts of climate change on food security among rural poor women, underscoring the direct connection between environmental shifts and women's access to food resources. Ferdous and Mallick (2019) delved into the gendered vulnerabilities within the lower Teesta basin, shedding light on the norms and practices that perpetuate women's economic disadvantages. They emphasized the need to challenge societal norms and practices to enhance women's economic resilience.

The environmental vulnerabilities of women in char areas are closely intertwined with climate change and disasters. Rahman (2013) conducted a study across two divisions of Bangladesh, highlighting the intersection of climate change, disasters, and gender vulnerability. This research demonstrated the disproportionate impact of environmental shifts on women, especially in terms of displacement and livelihood loss. Alam and Rahman (2014) focused on the southern coastal region of Bangladesh, providing a case study that revealed how women's lives are deeply affected by natural disasters. They emphasized the need for gender-responsive disaster risk reduction strategies to address the unique vulnerabilities of women.

Naz and Saqib (2021) investigated gender-based differences in flood vulnerability among men and women in char farming households. Their research illuminated distinct impacts on men and women during floods, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive disaster preparedness and response. Azad, Hossain, and Nasreen (2013) analyzed the flood-induced vulnerabilities and challenges faced by women in northern Bangladesh, revealing the far-reaching economic consequences of floods on women's livelihoods. Islam (2017) conducted an assessment of women's vulnerability to flooding hazards and socio-economic conditions in Char Gonai of Tepamadhapur Union, Kaunia, Rangpur, Bangladesh, further highlighting the environmental vulnerabilities of women.

The complex interplay of factors, including access to resources, gender norms, climate change, and disasters, underscores the need for targeted policies and interventions. Empowering women economically, challenging gender norms, and implementing gender-sensitive disaster management strategies are pivotal steps toward mitigating these vulnerabilities. Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by women in char areas is essential for ensuring their resilience and contribution to sustainable development in Bangladesh.

National Women Development Policy 2011

In Bangladesh, approximately 50% of the population is women. Therefore, the development of women, particularly ensuring equal rights and opportunities, was a pre-condition to national development. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, which was responsible for implementing most of the policies, undertook many different programs to ensure empowerment, equal opportunities, and rights of women, but there was a need for developing broad-based programs covering many different vulnerabilities of women. The National Women Development Policy 2011 (NWDP2011) was formulated to address women's unique needs.

Objectives

The National Women Development Policy 2011 of Bangladesh outlines a comprehensive set of objectives aimed at ensuring gender equality and empowering women in all aspects of socio-economic life. The policy aims to establish equal rights for women and men, ensure their safety and security, and eliminate discrimination and abuse against women and children. It also seeks to provide women with education, skills, and opportunities to escape poverty and reach their full potential. The policy recognizes the vital contribution of women in various areas and endeavours to remove existing gender disparities. It also emphasizes the importance of nurturing talented women, providing appropriate support services, and ensuring sound nutrition and health for women. The

policy additionally aims to reflect gender perspectives in mass media and provide safety and assistance for marginalized groups of women, such as those affected by armed conflict, natural calamities, or belonging to smaller ethnic groups or with disabilities. The main objectives of the National Women Development Policy 2011 are as follows:

- To establish equal rights of women and men in areas of state and public in light of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
- To ensure socioeconomic, administrative, political, and legal empowerment
- To ensure the safety and security of all women in areas of the state, family, etc.
- To raise women as skilled and educated human
- To help women escape from the curse of poverty
- To establish the human rights of women
- To ensure equal and full participation of women in mainstream socioeconomic development
- To appropriately recognize women's contribution in socioeconomic areas
- To remove existing female-male disparities
- To eliminate all kinds of discrimination and abuse against female children and women
- To establish gender equality in administration, politics, and other areas of socioeconomic activities, sports, education, and culture and in all areas of family life
- To assist in nurturing talented women to reach their creative potential
- To provide appropriate support services for the development of women
- To import and innovate technology favouring the interest of women
- To prohibit innovating technologies that are anti-women
- To ensure taking appropriate measures for sound nutrition and health of the women
- To ensure priority for women in the provision of housing and proper shelter
- To arrange rehabilitation of women affected in armed conflicts and natural calamities
- To extend overall assistance to ensure the rights of women belonging to the smaller ethnic groups and women who are disabled
- To arrange the safety of the aged, widow, husband abandoned, unmarried and childless women

- To reflect gender perspective in the mass media, including a positive image of female children and women

Policies in NWDP2011 for Vulnerable Women in Char Areas

Many programs in the policy document have addressed the vulnerabilities of women, but these are not specific to people living in char areas and to women from backward communities. For instance, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, the implementing agency of the National Women Development 2011 took the following programs-

- Under the safety net for women, there is a VGD program for the food security of the distressed women of the country. This program can potentially address the vulnerabilities of women from all walks of life, including women from backward communities.
- There is also a poverty alleviation loan program that could be availed by women who want to engage in productive economic activities. This program is designed to cater to the unique needs of women, and thereby any woman who has an interest can benefit from the program activities.
- For women who want to be involved in income-generating activities, extensive broad-based programs are there to increase women's skills, create employment opportunities, and improve women's participation in the country's labour market.
- To ensure economic empowerment, there are even collateral-free credit facility programs under simple terms for women interested in small and medium entrepreneurial activities.

Analysis of the Interventions/Policies in NWDP2011

In this section, the main policies for the development of vulnerable women have been analyzed to understand their ability to deal with the unique social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities of women living in char areas:

Economic Vulnerabilities: There are many policies in the NWDP2011 regarding- a) mobilizing poor women to increase their skills and creating alternative socio-economic opportunities b) involving poor women in productive activities and mainstream economies, c) undertaking all-out initiatives for employment of the educated and illiterate women labour force, d) increasing quota at entry and all levels to ensure increased employment of the women of the country. These policies are instrumental in improving the economic conditions of vulnerable women. However, these policies are

not unique to the special needs of chars. For implementing the policies, there is also no fixed gender-responsive budget, which in turn makes it impossible to address the issues immediately. A few particular policies for ensuring all the rights of the small ethnic and backward groups of people for the development and growth of their womenfolk are there, but more gender-disaggregated data on the economic vulnerabilities of women of chars are needed to address the vulnerabilities that are specific to them only.

Social Vulnerabilities: Access to essential services such as housing, training, and social services, including healthcare, education, and social safety nets, are critical for ensuring that women can live in decent conditions. The National Women Development Policy 2011 contains several policies aimed at directly addressing women's health and nutrition, education, and training needs. Additionally, the policy includes provisions to eliminate all forms of abuse against women. However, despite the National Women and Children Development Council, which addresses some of the social vulnerabilities of women and children, there remains a gap in addressing the specific vulnerabilities faced by women living in chars.

In order to improve the living conditions of women in char areas, there is a need to update and revise the policies outlined in the National Women Development Policy 2011. This must include the creation of institutional arrangements to ensure that women living in char areas have access to basic social services and safety nets. It is essential that these measures are put in place to effectively address the challenges faced by women in char areas and to ensure that they are able to lead safe and dignified lives.

Environmental vulnerabilities: The National Women Development Policy 2011 acknowledges the safety and security needs of children and women in the pre-disaster situation and thereby points out widespread awareness training and programmes to deal with upcoming disaster incidences. The policy document also mentions the rehabilitation of children and women affected by natural calamities and river erosion. Appropriate measures aimed at ensuring the security of women on a priority basis to deal with disaster and post-disaster rehabilitation are there. Despite all these, institutional arrangements and an appropriate administrative framework, mentioned at a limited scale in the policy document, will not function, without which policy implementation will remain impossible. There is also limited mention of the special arrangements for women of backward communities, particularly in the case of climate change-induced natural calamities. As such, the environmental vulnerabilities of women of the chars remain unaddressed.

Women of Chars face unique challenges. The interventions that are mentioned in the policy document 2011 address women's different challenges, but gaps remain as there is still no gender-disaggregated data, particularly of women of chars in Bangladesh.

The policies there address women's vulnerabilities, including social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities, but there is no mention of backward women and women of Bangladesh. Also, no ministries or departments are identified in the policy document, so it becomes very difficult to determine who would be responsible for addressing the special needs of women living in the chars of Bangladesh.

SWOT Analysis of the National Women Development Policy 2011 of Bangladesh

In this section, we perform a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat analysis of Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy 2011. The analysis reveals the effectiveness of the policy document in addressing the manifold vulnerability of women in Char areas of Bangladesh and suggests important insights for further improvement.

Strengths

- **Comprehensive Gender Focus:** The National Women Development Policy 2011 is founded on a comprehensive gender-focused approach, recognizing the unique needs of women. It is explicitly committed to establishing equal rights, ensuring the safety and security of women and children, and eradicating discrimination and abuse, fostering an environment of gender equity.
- **Promotion of Women's Role:** The policy places significant emphasis on acknowledging the vital contribution of women in various domains and endeavours to remove prevailing gender disparities, thereby creating an atmosphere where women can actively participate and excel in diverse areas of socio-economic life.
- **Empowerment through Support Services:** Recognizing the importance of nurturing women's talents, the policy underscores the provision of support services. It emphasizes the significance of sound nutrition and healthcare for women, creating a foundation for their holistic well-being.
- **Economic Opportunities:** NWDP2011 introduces programs such as the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), poverty alleviation loans, and collateral-free credit facilities. These initiatives provide valuable economic opportunities for vulnerable women, enabling them to engage in income-generating activities and gain financial independence.
- **Educational and Skill Development Initiatives:** The policy focuses on education and skill development for women, addressing critical aspects of empowerment by providing them with tools to escape poverty and enhance their socio-economic standing.

Weaknesses

- **Limited Focus on Char Areas:** The policies within NWDP2011 do not adequately address the unique social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities of women living in char areas. These regions require specific attention due to their distinct challenges.
- **Lack of Gender-Responsive Budget:** A notable weakness is the absence of a fixed gender-responsive budget, hindering the immediate and effective allocation of resources to address the multifaceted issues faced by vulnerable women.
- **Implementation Challenges:** Implementation of these policies may encounter challenges stemming from a lack of resources, political will, and deeply entrenched social norms that perpetuate gender disparities, which may impede progress.

Opportunities

- **Tailoring Policies to Char Areas:** The policies outlined in NWDP2011 can be adapted and customized to cater to the unique needs of women residing in char areas. Tailoring interventions to the specific vulnerabilities of these regions can yield more significant positive impacts.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** Collaborative endeavours involving various stakeholders, including government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations, can be harnessed to effectively implement the policies. This collaborative approach can pool resources and expertise to achieve better results.
- **Increasing Awareness and Education:** Promoting awareness and educating women about the policies can empower them to assert their rights and access the opportunities provided. Education and advocacy can play a pivotal role in ensuring the policies reach their intended beneficiaries.
- **Data-Driven Policy Adjustments:** Gathering gender-disaggregated data, especially concerning women in char areas, can aid in making informed policy adjustments. This data can help in addressing vulnerabilities specific to these regions.

Threats

- **Patriarchal Resistance:** The policies may face resistance from deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes and social norms that limit women's participation in public life, thereby impeding the realization of gender equality goals.
- **Political Instability and Corruption:** The implementation of policies can be hindered by political instability and corruption within the government machinery. These issues may divert resources away from women's empowerment efforts.

- **Climate Change and Natural Disasters:** Women in char areas are particularly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. Such environmental challenges can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and undermine the effectiveness of policies unless robust disaster resilience measures are in place.
- **Evolving Socioeconomic Context:** The rapidly changing socioeconomic landscape of Bangladesh presents a challenge in keeping policies relevant and adaptive to evolving needs. Failure to adapt may render the policies less effective over time.

Policy Recommendations

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment within the context of the National Women Development Policy 2011 is of paramount importance for Bangladesh's holistic development. Women residing in char areas encounter multifaceted challenges that impede their progress towards gender parity and socio-economic upliftment. To address these intricate issues, we present a comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at fostering gender equality and women's empowerment within char areas, as follows:

1. **Holistic Livelihood Support:** To counter the economic vulnerabilities faced by women in char regions, the government should establish comprehensive livelihood support programs. These initiatives could encompass vocational training tailored to the specific needs of char areas, such as agriculture, fisheries, and handicrafts. By equipping women with essential skills, these programs can empower them to engage in income-generating activities and contribute to their households' economic stability.
2. **Microfinance and Entrepreneurial Support:** Facilitating access to microfinance and entrepreneurial resources is pivotal for women's economic empowerment. The government should collaborate with financial institutions to provide targeted microloans to women entrepreneurs in char areas, enabling them to initiate and expand their businesses. Moreover, offering mentorship, business development training, and access to markets can further bolster women's entrepreneurial ventures.
3. **Healthcare Accessibility and Awareness:** The National Women Development Policy should prioritize increasing access to healthcare services tailored to the unique needs of women in char areas. Establishing mobile health clinics and awareness campaigns focusing on reproductive health, family planning, and maternal care can significantly improve women's overall health and well-being.

4. **Legal Literacy and Gender-sensitive Justice:** Enhancing legal literacy among women is essential to protect their rights and combat gender-based violence. The government should implement awareness programs that educate women about their legal rights, particularly in cases of marriage, property ownership, and domestic violence. Simultaneously, fostering a gender-sensitive justice system that efficiently addresses and prosecutes cases of violence against women can act as a powerful deterrent.
5. **Technology and Digital Inclusion:** Harnessing the power of technology can bridge information gaps and provide new avenues for economic engagement. The government should introduce initiatives that facilitate digital literacy and connectivity in char areas. This can empower women to access online marketplaces, financial services, and information resources, expanding their economic opportunities and enhancing their social connectivity.
6. **Community-Based Childcare and Education:** Enabling women to participate in economic activities necessitates reliable childcare services. Establishing community-based childcare centres can ease the burden on women, enabling them to work while ensuring their children's care and early education. Additionally, investing in adult education programs can enhance women's literacy and numeracy skills, fostering their economic independence.
7. **Promoting Sustainable Agriculture:** Given the predominantly agrarian nature of char areas, promoting sustainable agricultural practices can uplift women farmers and ensure food security. The government should introduce programs that provide training in modern agricultural techniques, access to quality seeds, and improved irrigation facilities. Empowering women farmers can contribute to increased agricultural productivity and household income.
8. **Awareness Campaigns and Advocacy:** Raising awareness about women's rights and empowerment through targeted campaigns is crucial. Collaborative efforts involving government agencies, NGOs, and community leaders can effectively disseminate information about available resources, services, and opportunities. These campaigns can challenge societal norms and encourage women's active participation in economic and social spheres.
9. **Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection:** Accurate and up-to-date data is instrumental in designing effective policies. The government should prioritize the collection of gender-disaggregated data specific to char areas. This data can shed light on the nuanced challenges faced by women in these regions and inform evidence-based policy adjustments.

10. Inclusive Disaster Preparedness and Response: Char areas are susceptible to natural disasters, exacerbating women's vulnerabilities. Implementing gender-responsive disaster preparedness plans that consider women's specific needs can minimize their exposure to risks and ensure their safety during emergencies.

By integrating these policy recommendations into the National Women Development Policy 2011, Bangladesh can take substantial strides towards promoting gender equality and empowering women in char areas. Such a comprehensive approach addresses the multifaceted challenges faced by these women and facilitates their active participation in social, economic, and political spheres, ultimately contributing to the nation's overall progress and sustainable development.

Conclusion

In a nation like Bangladesh, where women constitute nearly half of the population, their development and empowerment are not merely aspirations but integral prerequisites for national advancement. The journey towards women's empowerment in Bangladesh commenced with the formulation of the inaugural National Women Development Policy in 1997. This historic policy heralded a commitment to gender equality, equal rights, and opportunities for women, laying the foundation for comprehensive socio-economic progress. Over the years, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has championed numerous programs to safeguard women's rights and welfare across the nation. However, as Bangladesh evolved, it became evident that a more holistic approach was required to address the multifaceted vulnerabilities faced by women.

The National Women Development Policy 2011 (NWDP2011) emerged as a beacon of hope, designed to address the intricate challenges faced by women. NWDP2011 encompasses a multitude of objectives aimed at ensuring gender equality, women's safety, and the elimination of discrimination and abuse. It envisions a society where women are not just equal partners but active contributors to the nation's growth. Education, skill development, and economic opportunities are emphasized, empowering women to escape poverty and achieve their full potential. Moreover, NWDP2011 recognizes the pivotal role of women across various domains, endeavouring to eradicate gender disparities in administration, politics, culture, and family life.

However, a critical assessment of NWDP2011 reveals certain shortcomings, particularly in addressing the unique challenges encountered by women living in char areas. These regions are marked by distinctive social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities that necessitate tailored policies. Economic disparities persist, stemming from limited access to skill-building opportunities and employment. Social vulnerabilities, including inadequate access to essential services, persist as barriers to

women's well-being. Environmental challenges, such as natural disasters and climate change, pose unique threats to women in char areas.

This study conducted a SWOT analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of NWDP2011 in addressing these complex vulnerabilities and to provide insights for improvement. While NWDP2011 boasts significant strengths in its comprehensive gender focus, promotion of women's roles, support services, economic opportunities, and educational initiatives, it also exhibits weaknesses in its limited focus on char areas, the absence of a gender-responsive budget, and potential implementation challenges.

Opportunities exist in tailoring policies to char areas, fostering collaborative efforts among stakeholders, increasing awareness and education, and using data-driven insights for policy adjustments. However, threats such as patriarchal resistance, political instability, corruption, and environmental challenges loom large.

In conclusion, NWDP2011 represents a significant stride towards women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Yet, it is imperative to refine and adapt policies to address the unique vulnerabilities of women in char areas comprehensively. The quest for women's empowerment is not complete until it encompasses every woman, regardless of her geographic location. To achieve this goal, concerted efforts are needed, grounded in data, collaboration, and a commitment to women's rights, ensuring that no woman is left behind on the path to progress in Bangladesh.

Note

1. A "char" is a land area encompassed by ocean, sea, lake, or stream waters, typically forming within a river's course or estuary. It contains various types of bars, including lateral (point bars) and medial (braid bars). In the context of erosion and sediment deposition dynamics in the rivers of Bangladesh, these sandy bars can emerge as islands within the river channel, referred to as "island chars," or as connected land along the riverbanks, known as "attached chars." These areas often present new opportunities for settlement establishment and agricultural activities. It's important to distinguish between "island chars," which remain surrounded by water throughout the year, and "attached chars," which are linked to the mainland during normal water flow conditions. Once these lands become vegetated, they are commonly referred to as "chars" in Bangladesh.

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