



Blue Gold Program success story

Women's leadership in WMA polder organisations

Context

The responsibility for water management in Bangladesh is shifting from the government to community-based water management organisations.

Water management organisations exist in two categories. Water Management Groups (WMGs) operate at a community level, and are typically responsible for water management in around 250 ha. Water Management Associations (WMAs) represent the WMGs and polder inhabitants in a polder (several thousands of hectares of low-lying land surrounded by an embankment to prevent flooding).

The Blue Gold Program supported:

Total polders: 22

Total WMGs: 511

Total WMAs: 35

In small polders, there is one WMA. In larger polders, there are two WMAs.

Each WMG nominates 4 representatives as WMA members, of which at least one must be a woman. At least 4 seats for every 12-member WMA Executive Committee are reserved for women.

WMA functions

WMAs have responsibilities that exceed the mandate of individual WMGs. These include:

- preparing water management plans

- managing the operation of main sluices
- coordinating maintenance work
- resolving conflicts between WMGs
- communicating with local government institutions such as Union Parishads and districts, relevant authorities such as the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), and with the private sector

WMAs liaise with the above actors to improve and better manage water infrastructure and to enhance agricultural development in their areas.

Constraints faced by women members of WMAs

Despite an increasing number of women with leadership capacities and water management knowledge, women still face specific constraints to becoming WMA leaders. These include:

- Social and religious barriers, including the pressure of domestic responsibilities
- Issues relating to travelling and an absence of security, as WMA meetings and activities often take place outside of their own villages. Inspections at night of illegal operations of sluice gates or illegal fishing are more problematic for women
- Limited acceptance of women as leaders and decision-makers, and in liaising with government officials

Characteristics of water management organisations

Water Management Groups are the basic organisational units representing local stakeholders. In Blue Gold polders, one WMG on average represents 250 ha, 365 households, and just over 1,500 people.

Water Management Associations are the polder level representatives of WMGs. WMAs sign O&M agreements with the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) for the operation and maintenance of the water infrastructure in the polders.

WMA O&M sub-committees are responsible for planning, operation and maintenance of water infrastructure in a specific sluice catchment. One O&M sub-committee usually represents several WMGs.



Observed changes

- Women's involvement in WMAs has shifted from passive membership to active membership. Women influence WMA decision-making, and take their own initiatives
- Women leaders ensure more attention to the socio-economic development of both men and women
- Acceptance and recognition of women's leadership has increased
- Women WMA leaders successfully stood for Union Parishad elections

BGP interventions

- Gender awareness training for men and women, that also included addressing gendered norms
- Encouraging the participation of women in all BGP activities, which increased their capacities
- Special support to women WMG leaders, facilitating the process of suitable women joining WMA leadership
- Gender topics were integrated into WMA capacity building workshops of early 2021. The workshops highlighted the importance of water management for women farmers, emphasised that women's involvement in decision-making enhances the functionality of WMAs, and ensured that women WMA members were introduced to local government officials

Rationale for women's WMA leadership

- Growing number of capable women who are motivated to contribute to the development of their communities and polders
- Better representation of the interests of all polder dwellers
- Tend to be more attentive to social aspects, including women's empowerment. They can be more successful in ensuring neutral decision-making in mediation or conflict resolution
- The government mandates that at least 33% of all WMA leadership positions must be filled by women

Poshari Rani's story

Poshari Rani, from polder 55/2A, was a member of the Bataghi Chikarbad WMG under a past water management programme. Under BGP, she became an active member, and was elected as the President of her WMG in 2019.

She also became the General Secretary of the WMA and was elected as UP representative. Her excellent networking and leadership skills have contributed to the improvement of social and economic well-being in her area. These skills have made her a prime candidate for upcoming local government elections.

Poshari's initiatives included:

- work to reduce waterlogging by organising the construction of culverts in Betagi and drainage canals in Thakurhat and Chikarbad
- economic empowerment of poor women through their involvement in earthwork to dig canals and repair roads
- removal of illegal cross bundhs and fishing nets
- prevention of illegal sluice operations
- organisation of the distribution of 50,000 orange shrubs and vegetable seeds among WMG members, and organisation of poultry vaccination campaigns
- development of linkages between farmers with trusted traders
- encouragement of WMG members to contribute to WMG O&M funds

By mid-2021, there were 144 women executive committee members in the 35 WMAs in Blue Gold polders. This meant that at least one third of the members of each committee were women.

About two-thirds of all women WMA EC members are recognised as active leaders. Women are still underrepresented in most key positions as WMA President (0 out of 35), General Secretary (1), Cashier (3) and Vice-President (7), but well represented as Joint Secretaries (19 out of 35).

In BGP polders in Patuakhali, four women WMA leaders have successfully secured positions as UP representatives in recent elections. Poshari Rani is now an upcoming candidate for the role of UP Chairperson.

