

Reasons for the Decline of Female Participation in CLP's IEP

Summary

- The Infrastructure Employment Project (IEP) is an effort on behalf of CLP to provide temporary employment for the extreme-poor living in the *chars* during a period of annual underemployment. Households are raised on plinths above the highest known flood level.
- IEP normally operates between September to December, a period known locally as *monga*. There is also a less severe lean period between March and April. IEP does not operate then.
- IEP's target is for 15% of all workers employed to be women
- It is important to generate working opportunities for women during *monga* as a total of 19% of CLP households are female-headed. Women's participation in IEP also contributes to women's empowerment (CLP's research has concluded that having one's own source of income is an important indicator of women's empowerment)
- The participation rate of women in IEP has been dropping annually since the 2010 IEP season
- The main reasons for low rates of female inclusion in IEP has been social conservatism, other employment generation schemes, and political instability
- The 2015 annual review team recommended that CLP review the trend and take positive actions towards increasing women's participation in the last IEP (October 2015-January 2016)



Background

A core component of CLP's comprehensive package of support and infrastructure work is raising homesteads on earthen plinths two feet above the highest known flood level. On the flood-prone riverine islands of northwest Bangladesh, known as *chars*, plinths are raised with the aim of mitigating the effects of seasonal flooding on *char*-dwellers. While plinth raising is an integral part of making a CLP household's progress out of extreme poverty sustainable, it also aims to support livelihoods among the extreme-poor by employing local workers to build plinths in a cash-for-work scheme called the Infrastructure Employment Project (IEP).

Generating work for *char*-dwellers is particularly important during a lean season of food and job insecurity known as *monga*. *Monga* is triggered by the annual underemployment of rural labourers who normally work in the transplantation and harvesting of paddy. They become unneeded during September-November (after the *aman* rice crop is planted) and March-April (after *boro* rice crop is planted) between planting and harvesting periods. This agricultural cycle leads to fewer available job opportunities during these months, resulting in the need for household members (normally males) to temporarily migrate in search of work.

Table 1: IEP Operating Areas by Year

District	IMOs	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Kurigram	AID-C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	BDSC	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	MJSKS	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	ZIBIKA	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	SOLIDARITY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	RDRS-K	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lalmonirhat	RSDA	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	SKS-L	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rangpur	RDRS-R	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	DCPUK		✓	✓	✓	✓
	POPI	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gaibandha	AKOTA	✓		✓	✓	✓
	GUK	✓		✓	✓	✓
Pabna	ASEAB		✓	✓	✓	✓
	NDP		✓	✓	✓	✓
Tangail	MMS		✓	✓	✓	✓
Jamalpur	ESDO			✓	✓	✓
	US			✓	✓	✓

CLP's cash-for-work scheme has operated through partner organisations (known as implementing organisations or IMOs) in seven districts in northwest Bangladesh (Table 1). In the Programme's second phase (2010-2016), IEP has employed an average of 11,500 people a year. During the March 2015 annual review, DFID noted that although annual targets for the total number of workers employed had been significantly over-achieved, women represented only a fraction of those workers. They recommended that the Programme take positive actions towards increasing women's participation in the IEP cash-for-work scheme during its final year (October 2015 - January 2016).

Table 2: Percentage of Female IEP Workers by Year

Year	Total IEP workers	# of women	% of female workers	Target
2010	10,090	2,531	25%	15%
2011	14,324	2,490	17%	15%
2012	14,008	1,968	14%	15%
2013	9,756	703	7%	15%
2014	9,736	218	2%	15%
Total	57,914	7,910	13.66%	15%

Overall (for 2010-2014 data combined), CLP is only slightly below (13.66%) its target of 15% of IEP workers being women (Table 2). However, since 2010 the proportion of women participating in IEP has declined significantly and the target of 15% has not been met in the last three IEP seasons. If this trend continues through into the final year of IEP, the cash-for-work scheme runs the risk of not achieving its overall gender target.

Methodology

This brief draws from data collected during two focus groups, limited field interviews with core participants (CPs) and a survey of all IMOs.

Two focus group sessions were held during CLP's Quarterly Meetings with district staff and IMOs on August 25 and 26 respectively. Approximately 60 staff participated. These focus groups helped identify the main reasons for the decline in female participation, namely 1) social conservatism, 2) competition from other employment generation schemes and 3) political instability.

The focus groups did not, however, provide information on 1) the degree to which the reasons impacted female participation 2) when they impacted i.e. which year, or 3) which districts were impacted. With this in mind, a questionnaire was circulated to all IMOs in order to collect this information.

A limited number of interviews with CPs were conducted on August 17, 2015 in Khamarjani, Gaibandha.

Annual Female Participation Rates

2010 IEP Season

As shown in Table 2, the overall inclusion rate of women in 2010 was high (25%). There are a few explanations for why this rate was relatively higher than in subsequent years.

Firstly, in 2010 IEP was not operating in Pabna, Tangail or Jamalpur (see Table 1). These districts were identified by IMOs as areas with

the highest degree of ‘social conservatism’, a factor that tends to have a negative impact on women’s participation. Secondly, there were no reported issues of political instability in 2010.

Furthermore, during focus group discussions, IMO and district staff explained that IEP was operational mainly in isolated (unattached to the mainland) *char* areas in 2010 with high male labour migration, prompting higher than usual rates of women’s participation.

Despite 2010’s overall success, four IMOs - AID-C in Kurigram, POPI in Rangpur and both Gaibandha-based IMOs, GUK and AKOTA-missed the target of 15% female inclusion. These IMOs have a history of low female mobilisation every year they implemented IEP.

All four of these IMOs identified social conservatism as their area’s highest barrier to female participation, in addition to other Government of Bangladesh (GoB), Christian Aid, Oxfam and World Food Programme (WFP) employment generation schemes (EGS) that directly competed with IEP for female workers in their areas in various years.

2011 IEP Season

The overall female inclusion rate for 2011 was 17%. According to IMO staff, the main factors responsible for this decline in female participation rates compared to the previous year were:

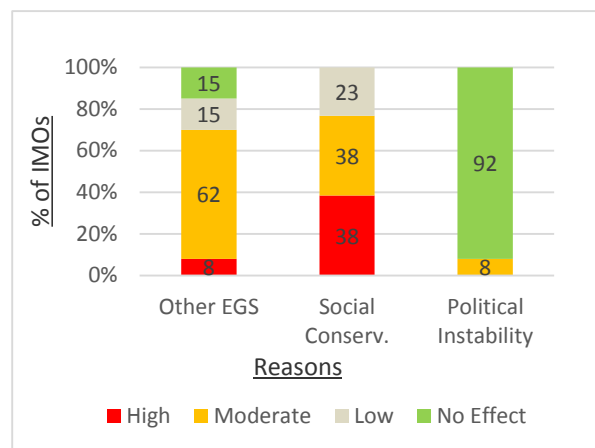
- Social conservativeness
- Competition from other employment generating schemes

Other EGS, such as the Employment Generation for the Poorest Programme (EGPP), proved more attractive for the following reasons:

- relatively higher wage rates and lighter work
- a guarantee of more work days compared to IEP

¹ World Bank, “Implementation Completion and Results Report: EGPP”, December 2014, p. 21

Figure 1: Reasons for lower female participation rate in 2011 IEP



Source: IMO questionnaire

Interestingly, in its early years, EGPP experienced challenges in achieving female participation targets, not dissimilar from the challenges faced by IEP. These challenges were addressed through subproject designs that allowed lighter workloads – essentially repair and maintenance works – in locations close to home. These were reserved for female workers.¹

Additional factors at play in 2011 included:

- a shift in working areas for most IMOs from mainly isolated *chars* to attached *chars* which are connected to mainland and relatively more accessible²
- IMOs in two traditionally conservative districts, Pabna and Tangail, began IEP work

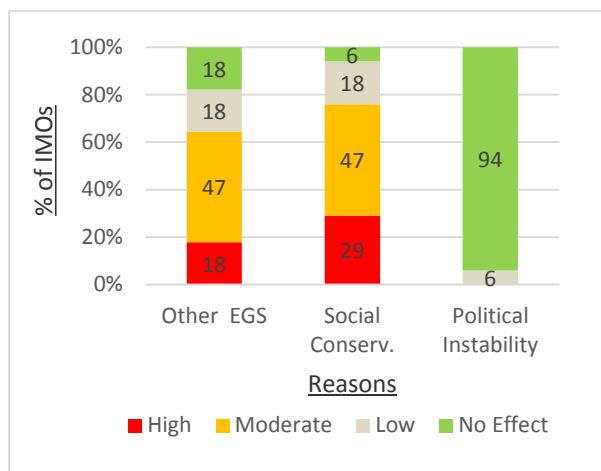
2012 IEP Season

According to IMO staff, the main factors responsible for low female participation rates (14% overall) in 2012 were:

- Social conservativeness
- Competition from other employment generating schemes.

² As noted earlier, operating in mainly isolated *chars* in 2010 may have caused an abnormal inflation in women’s participation

Figure 2: Reasons for low female participation rate in 2012 IEP



Source: IMO questionnaire

Additional factors at play in 2012 included:

- Two IMOs (ESDO and US) began IEP work in Jamalpur, another traditionally conservative area

These IMOs did not manage to mobilise any females in any years they operated (2012-2014). Both IMOs reported that competing EGS and social conservatism were the reasons for zero female workers.

2013 IEP Season

According to IMO staff, the main factors responsible for low female participation rates (7% overall) in 2013 were:

- Social conservativeness
- Competition from other employment generating schemes.

Additional factors at play in 2013 included:

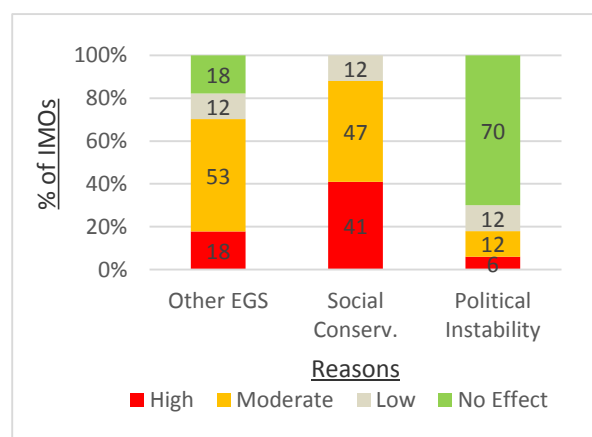
- Political instability had more of an impact than previous years

Political unrest in Bangladesh often goes hand-in-hand with regional general strikes (*hartals*). These *hartals* result in the restriction of inter-city movement. Rural male labourers, who often migrate to urban centres from the

³ Zelina Sultana, "Impact of Monga on Rural Urban Migration: Its Socio-Economic Consequences," *ASA University Review* 4.2 (2010): 151-167

chars in search of work during *monga*³ were unable to. In a study of a similar GoB employment generation scheme, Employment Generation for Hardcore Poor II (EGHP-II), a positive correlation was found between male migration rates and women's inclusion in EGS. It was noted that, "In areas like Nilphamari and Jamalpur where the migration rate is usually high, the proportion of female [workers] was found to be higher as the male member of the family can migrate to other districts for better opportunities."⁴

Figure 3: Reasons for low female participation rate in 2013 IEP



Source: IMO questionnaire

This finding was reiterated by CLP District and IMO staff who pointed out (during focus groups) that with men looking more locally for work, women were pushed out of participating in IEP. Women living in male-headed households were passed over for IEP work in favour of the male of the house, who earn more wages⁵ due to the hard physical aspect of this labour and the fact that plinth raising is paid on a piece rate. Also, only one member of any household may participate in IEP.

2014 IEP Season

According to IMO staff, the main factors responsible for low female participation rates in 2014 (overall 2%) were:

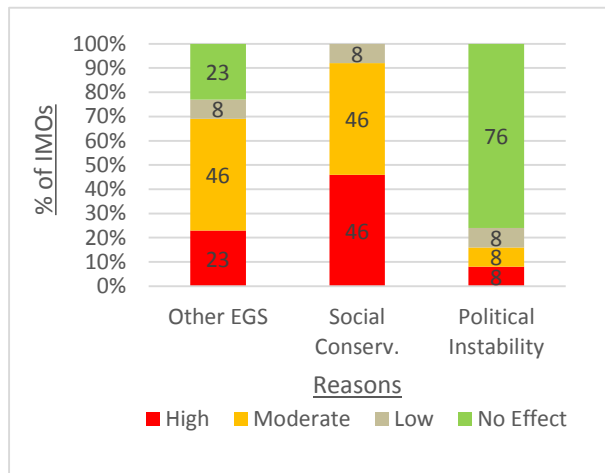
- Social conservativeness

⁴ Fahmida Khatun et al., "EGHP & National Service: Challenges of Effective Implementation", *Centre for Policy Dialogue*, September 2010, p. 11

⁵ Men on average earn about 20% more than women in IEP

- Competition from other employment generating schemes.

Figure 4: Reasons for low female participation rate in 2014 IEP



Source: IMO questionnaire

During focus group discussions, the general consensus was that political instability was a main factor impacting female participation this year. However, despite 24% of IMOs reporting political instability as a factor in 2014 in the IMO survey, the remaining majority did not feel it effected their women's participation rates.

Additional factors at play this year included:

- IEP had phased out of Kurigram areas that had consistent high rates of female inclusion
- IEP was operating mainly in districts that consistently had lower rates of female inclusion relative to other areas

Summary of Findings

The main factors responsible for low, and declining female participation rates in IEP between 2011 and 2014 were:

- Social conservativeness
- Competition from other employment generating schemes

Political instability had a very limited impact on women's participation during 2011 and 2012.

Political instability had some impact, though relatively minor, during the 2013 and 2014 IEP seasons.

Other factors included:

- IMOs not placing sufficient emphasis on mobilising women;
- *Char* access (whether the *char* is attached to mainland or not)

Recommendations

The following suggestions were proposed by District and IMO staff as measures that could increase the proportion of female IEP participants:

- **Relax the current restriction of only one member per household to accommodate female labour**
- **Identify plinths that require lighter workloads and reserve them for women IEP workers only:** As per EGPP's logic, identify plinths that are close to female participants' households, are smaller in height (therefore requiring less lifts), and require less soil transport (require shorter leads and less volume of soil). One IMO noted in the questionnaire that men are sometimes unwilling to take women into their IEP groups as they 'slow down' work time, resulting in decreased daily wages. They added that sometimes women hesitate to join an all or joint male working group as well. The proposed recommendation resulted in an increase in women's participation in EGPP and could have similar results for IEP.
- **Mobilise female members of the community:** Explain to IMOs the importance of getting women involved in IEP. This should be followed by community campaigns encouraging the participation of local women in IEP.