

## Bangladesh: Spatial mobility and women's empowerment (IFRTD)

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These case studies are being compiled to draw lessons from the experience of a wide range of organizations. They are considered as works in progress and will be updated periodically. Comments on the cases are welcomed, as are suggestions on additional cases which could be included in the series.

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### **SPATIAL MOBILITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: Implications for developing rural transport in Bangladesh**

The authors begin with an assertion of the known linkages between spatial mobility and the social and economic empowerment of women. This study explores these linkages, and analyses the gender aspects of transport in the context of rural Bangladesh, where the limitations on women's mobility are entrenched and where gender issues in transport are an under-explored area of research.

Two geographical areas of the country were selected, Faridpur and Netrokona. Villages within 2km of a paved road were termed 'easy access'. These villages have access to motorized transport. Villages further from the paved road which can only be reached via earthen tracks and using non-motorized transport are termed 'remote'

The existing pattern of transport in Bangladesh is determined by the dominant topography. Therefore most modes of transport are non-motorized and pedestrian traffic still dominates. In 1986 non-motorized transport accounted for 94 per cent of commercially operated vehicles and two-thirds of carrying capacity. The other district feature is the regular flooding experienced during the monsoon in large areas of the country. The earthen roads, which are the majority, are flooded during the monsoon and remain muddy for much of the year. Country boats are much used.

In 'easy access' rural areas, the available modes of transport are bus, rickshaw, tempo, rickshaw van and during monsoon, country boat.

Women in rural Bangladesh face a rigid division of labor in the composition of work being done by women and men. Rural men spend 5.97 hours daily on work and rural women spend 7.57hrs. Of this, 5.57 hours are spent by women on subsistence activities and housework, men devote little more than half an hour to such work.

The gender division of labor has been on the one hand induced by the traditional cultural restrictions on women's mobility, and on the other hand has reinforced the restrictions. There is a strict code regarding when and for what reasons women may leave their homes. Women have broken out of seclusion to some extent, but the social psychology is reproduced in the present day policies for women's development: development agencies design most of their activities for women in the field of subsistence home-based activities which do not require much mobility. This, though it has helped women to participate in income-generating activities, in turn also contributed to the perpetuation and reinforcement of traditional restrictions on women's mobility outside the home.

The authors gathered data in Faridpur and Netrokona in easy-access villages and remote

remote villages. Participatory techniques were used and some of the findings and variations are summarized below.

Women are greatly assisted in their duties by the presence of clean water in or near their village (e.g. tube well). If there is no school in the village then boys and girls have to walk for perhaps 25 minutes. Some schoolgirls are starting to ride bikes, and those who can afford it pay for a rickshaw or tempo. Schools located in villages save much time and expense. Likewise healthcare facilities.

A paved road is a great help to all transportation needs in a village, and working on road construction can bring in income for men and women where such projects have been instigated. In remote villages there can be great hardship during the monsoon flooding; men cannot get to work or children to school; health workers do not come to the village and women hardly go out at all. NGOs are reluctant to run credit programs in the villages because they are in isolation for half of the year. As such, women have almost no employment and income earning opportunities and no way of attending training programs. Women also do not attend markets or travel to gather firewood, using dried leaves or dung available domestically. Where social restrictions are very tight in such remote villages, women express a wish for better jobs for the men in their families, not themselves, despite abject poverty.

In the easy access villages of Netrokona in the drier part of the country, women enjoy much more freedom to move about. They can access credit and training and go to the market to trade. Poorer women have to walk if they cannot afford a rickshaw, but still enjoy greater mobility than their counterparts above. Even in the remote villages of this region women have greater mobility. They are free to work outside the home and have access to the family land to raise an income. This means that they are often carrying loads, on heads for the poorest. but the well-off can hire rickshaws. They also have to cover some distance to collect firewood. Only men use bicycles.

The report encompasses considerable variation, but the authors note how women from many different locations and backgrounds have been able to break through barriers, and have established examples of increased spatial mobility as a means to empowerment with minimum aid from outside institutions. Class, wealth and caste have complex effects on women's mobility, but generally the poor and destitute have fewer restrictions than the well-off. Women-only buses or the availability of rickshaws help women to move around in a restrictive society.

Other recommendations to increase women's mobility include:

- well-maintained earthen roads
- increased availability to women of non-motorized means of transport (credit programs)
- Bicycle incentives for schoolgirls to ride to school
- women friendly bus services

**(Source:** "Spatial Mobility and Women's Empowerment: Implications for developing rural transport in Bangladesh" By Nilufer Matin, Mahjabeen Chowdhury, Hasina Begum and Delwara Khanam. *Case study presented at the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development workshop in Sri Lanka. June 1999.*)