



# Fishing For A Future

Women in  
Community Based Fisheries Management







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As we turned off the main road in the CBFM project vehicle and threaded our way along the narrow tracks avoiding rickshaws, tethered animals and buffalo carts we wound down our windows and called out greetings to the men sitting by tea stalls or waiting for the next *tempo*-taxi under a shady tree. We could not do the same for any women folk because there were none but we knew where we could find them. Like most Bengali women they would be busy in their homes, managing their household chores. However we were going to see a very special group of women who are also managing fisheries and fish ponds, looking after poultry and livestock and earning their livelihood.

This is the story of women in the Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) project in Bangladesh. It is the story of many women, who through CBFM, have improved and will continue to improve the livelihood of their family. They are the women fishers of Bangladesh. This is their story.

## Profile of fisher-women in Bangladesh

In rural Bangladesh, many women are involved in inland fisheries and fish farming activities, yet annual statistics fail to capture their importance. Year after year these women continue to be essential in improving nutrition, increasing the production and distribution of food and enhancing the living conditions of their families. Yet, fisher-women remain among the poorest and most vulnerable in this part of the world.

- Women in Bangladesh play a significant role in the small scale fisheries sector.
- 30 percent of women in rural and coastal areas are directly or indirectly engaged in small scale fisheries.
- Of the total employed in the fisheries sector, about 10 to 12 percent are women.
- Major areas of women's involvement are aquaculture, shrimp culture, fish processing, net, gear and craft making.
- Women are not involved in active fishing from the sea.
- They actively enhance fish production through inland water bodies as a family along with the men.
- In parts of Bangladesh, where women are involved in fishing, it is only through activities such as shrimp seed and fish fry collection and mostly it is only women from the poorest families who get involved as fry collectors.
- Data on labour force employment indicates farming, raising livestock and fishing to be the primary occupation for 56 percent of working women in rural areas.





## Women in Fisheries

In the early 90s, one of the most familiar scenes in urban areas was thousands of women rushing in and out of garment factories throughout the day. We can never say it is the same for rural women in fisheries. Traditions have posed cultural barriers for women. You don't see them directly catching fish, like their men folk. Yet, many of these women are strong, influential behind-the-scene actors. They mend fishing nets, they breed fish and they dry and salt the fish. Most effort goes unpaid and unrecognised. This was before CBFM.

Today, you can see a handful of women managing their own fish pond, if you are lucky you might catch one or two of them navigating their own boats and even a few throwing in and dragging their own nets to catch fish in the water bodies. They excavate canals and dig the earth to establish, restore and save fish habitat. They are earning. Slowly they are being recognised. Slowly they are beginning to have the opportunity to have a say on how the water bodies should be managed.

As the CBFM project nears its completion in 2006\*, we sit back and ask ourselves whether all this was achieved through CBFM? We decided to ask the women themselves.

## Women in Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM)

It is hard to talk about women in CBFM if we do not give you a sneak preview of what CBFM is all about.

The CBFM project is about the fishers, their families and their water body management style. In the mid 90s, we could go on writing about the increasing fishing pressure and ineffective control measures to stop over-exploitation of their valuable inland fisheries resources. We realised too soon that this was not good enough. We needed approaches in which the fishing communities themselves would be actively involved in decisions which would lead to the preservation of aquatic resources for future generations. But first we had to ensure equitable access to fisheries resources for poor fishers, including the women folk.

The CBFM project is a ten-year long effort in which the Department of Fisheries, in partnership with the WorldFish Center and local NGOs, successfully expanded its remit from 14 water bodies in the first phase to 116 water bodies in the second phase, covering 22 districts, 48 *upazilas* (sub-district) and involving 23,000 beneficiaries in which 7000 women are directly involved as project beneficiaries. This is the largest project of its type in Bangladesh.

As much as we want the resources and any management decision to be enjoyed by the broadest possible group of poor fishers, we realised that we have to walk uphill in changing entrenched cultural barriers in which women are always suppressed. The project may have arisen from concerns over the inland fisheries resources, but in the process our work has touched and benefited thousands of women and their families. Women, who in the past were suppressed, are today representing their water body management committees. In terms of numbers, over half of the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) have women as part of their executive management committees. Twenty one percent of women participating in the project came forward and bravely accepted micro credit to begin their own businesses and twenty five percent attended trainings related to fisheries management and income generating opportunities. This is a good starting point and should spark something more. It has enabled us to move down the path in creating self-sustaining, independent women who will eventually take the lead in breaking the rural poverty cycle and offering hope and inspiration to other poor, rural women who will see that change is possible.

\* Extended upto March 2007

## LEARNING TO EARN

Bulu Rani Biswas, 35 sat down on her cool earth-floored veranda under a Banyan tree in her village and told us her story of how the CBFM project has helped to change her life after she hit a desperately low-point when she became a widow.

Bulu Rani lives in the rural village of Chuki Nagar in southwest Bangladesh. This predominantly Hindu village has the Fatki River running by its side. Fishing is the main economic activity here.

### *Hard life...*

At the tender age of 26, Bulu Rani lost her husband. She was young, helpless and had to shoulder the heavy responsibility of taking care of her young son and her aging father. She had no working experience. Previously, her husband was the only bread winner for the family.

Bulu Rani could have married again to share her responsibilities but it was beyond the well-accepted norms in the Hindu community and the society in general. She remained unmarried hoping to find a job soon. Life slowly became tougher. What she did not know is that life was going to be far tougher for few years before it got better.

She began working in low paid jobs, including as a *peon* (messenger) for a non-government organisation (NGO) where she took care of the trees planted on government land. Her earnings barely reached 1000 taka per month - less than USD 1 per day. There was never enough money for food. Fish, chicken, vegetables and *dal* are luxuries which Bulu Rani simply couldn't afford unless a kind-hearted neighbour spared them some. A small amount of rice, mixed with chilli and salt was their daily meal. Some days even this was not affordable and they went to bed with empty stomachs.

So desperate was her situation that she decided to cross the border into the state of Kolkata in India, hoping for something better. Together with her son, she tried to eke out a living in the slums of Kolkata, but nothing better came their way. If anything, life just got worse for Bulu Rani. After a year, she returned to her native village.

She decided to move in with her brother while her father continued to live with her sister in another village. In the traditional rural setting, women are not supposed to come out of their homes. But some do. These are women from the poorest of the poor, often widows, destitute and those who occupy the lowest caste in the hierarchy system set by the Hindu community. These women leave their homes. Many fish for day to day survival. As for Bulu Rani, her decision to fish in the river using a push net and a large lift net had nothing to do with breaking traditions, but was for her family's survival.

She admits this picture is still a rarity. Most women are still wrapped up in a gender segregated environment where the men catch the fish and women dry them. We could not resist asking her if what she does is accepted by the community at large. She tells us that many did not like what she was doing, but that changed when she joined the Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) project.





## Hope and Inspiration

Around this time she heard about the micro credit scheme for women under the CBFM project. Convinced that this might be the channel to improve her life and her son's life, she jumped at the chance to register as a general member of a project CBO.

You might wonder what a CBO is. Under the CBFM project, a number of NGOs were asked to identify fishing households who would like to be involved with the project. These had to be poor households and depending on the NGO, could be women, subsistence fishers, landless fishers or farmers. The villagers were organised into groups, referred to as Community Based Organisations who were then given the responsibility for looking after the 116 project water bodies spread all over Bangladesh. Each CBO then elected a committee to represent their group which were called *Beel* Management Committees (BMC) or River Management Committees (RMC), depending on the site.

Bulu Rani attended most of the meetings organised by CNRS, an NGO partner of the WorldFish Center, to understand how micro credit works. After just one month, having demonstrated that she could save 10 taka every week, Bulu Rani was eligible to take out her first loan. During this period she also qualified to be part of the training programmes organised by CNRS. She was taught how to fatten cows, cultivate fish in cages and how to grow vegetables. Soon Bulu Rani became the proud owner of ten chickens and a few ducks which she fattens for her family consumption.



## ...came a better life

While attending the training, Bulu Rani became fascinated by the idea of fish culture. In 2003 she borrowed 3000 taka and purchased a piece of land close to their home. With the help of her brother, they converted the land into a 12-decimal pond. She then purchased baby fish (fingerlings), mainly silver carp, ruhi and catla from *Hariwalas*, the local door to door fingerling sellers.

She knew the risk she was taking in her new venture, but she was confident that this might be just the right thing for her to do. Through her first harvest, she managed to repay her loan and made her first profit of 1000 taka. Not much, but for Bulu Rani this profit meant the world to her it was her first success and the first step to a better life. That alone was enough to motivate her to accept a second loan of 4000 taka the following year. She bought more fingerlings. She also bought a cow and a pig. As she learnt, it is always useful to invest in farm animals as well. She uses the cow dung and pig droppings to fertilise her fish pond which then allows the algae to grow as feed for the fish. Besides that, Bulu Rani also uses rice bran and oilseed cake to feed and fatten the fish. Her second harvest brought her 4000 taka profit, a four fold leap from the first crop.



## Sharing responsibility...

Rising from her difficult days, and moving into fishing, Bulu Rani has earned her place in the community. She is now an active member of the executive committee of the CBO. As much as she likes fishing, she also plays a central role in sustaining the resources.

A major part of the project accomplishment has been implementing a closed season on fishing, popularly referred to as the ban season. The idea of a closed season is for fishers not to fish for two to three months. This duration allows wild fish in the river to breed and grow to a reasonable size before they are caught. The challenge here is to get as many fishers as possible to adhere to the rule. One of the ways was to start a 24-hour guard system. In most cases, women guard the water body in the day and the men guard at night throughout the closed season. In the case of Bulu Rani, it is the other way round - she has volunteered to guard the water body at night. Her shift goes on until midnight most days. She does this willingly. She is also the first and only woman to bravely carry a torch-light and guard the water during the dark hours. Talk about making a difference by breaking traditional beliefs - Bulu Rani is an example!

## ...for a better life

Life improved for Bulu Rani. Her home is among the few which boasts luxuries such as a tin roof and functional toilet. She also owns a tube well just outside her house. Sitting under the summer heat, we heard the surge of pride in her voice when she told us about her new wardrobe which she recently purchased. She talked about her new earrings, her new saree and how she is now able to provide good meal which includes rice, dal, vegetables, fish and meat or occasionally fruit with puffed rice and sugarcane for her son, father and niece living with her.

If you ask her about her future plans, she will tell you that she will stick by her fish pond. Now and in the future it will continue to feed her family and provide them with the cash they need. She also chats about her plans for her now 20 year old son. She would like him to start a grocery business. She also has been able to put her 10 year old niece in school. Women folk from her village often ask her for advice, on all sorts of issues, from running a business to the best brand soap they could use. Her words are highly valued.

Bulu Rani on the other hand does not hesitate to encourage her friends, one of whom is Shoiba Rani Mandol, also a CBFM group member. Like Bulu Rani, Shoiba Rani benefited from the advice and training offered by CNRS. The small amount of credit assistance they offered helped her to start raising livestock and get into the rice processing business. Today, Shoiba Rani and her husband, Azay, have peace of mind because they have managed to ensure that their 7 year old daughter is registered and attending school regularly. Both have saved up some money to expand their business to ensure that their younger daughter has the 'luxury' of going to school as well.

Back in the cool veranda, Bulu Rani chats about her friends, what she has and what she wishes for others. She has plans to continue accepting loans and repaying them regularly in instalments so she can continue the growth and development of her fish pond, continue fattening her cows, goats and pigs for sale and assist her son to stand on his own feet. Not once did she sigh about what she does not have.

We understood why when she quipped, "*Beel Chara Goti Na*" - I can't live without the river. This has been central to her life and something she has throughout the year.



## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In the village of Kanchanpur in Brahmanbaria district of central Bangladesh, there is a sense of excitement within the household of Shumitra Rani Das, 38. Well, why not? Her eldest son recently received his High School Certificate. Shumitra tells us how it was possible for her and her husband to afford to send their eldest son to high school and how their other five children will follow in their brother's footsteps.

Shumitra married professional fisher, Dinesh Chandra Das in 1985. Life was harsh for the Das family. Like many other fishing families, they found it difficult to make ends meet on their meagre fishing income and there was very little for their six children. Shumitra's husband usually fished in Shakla *beel* from dawn to dusk, hardly earning 120 taka a day, less than USD 2. He was among the many fishers who used a current *Jal*, though it is illegal. He didn't mean to break the law. He kept using a net with smaller mesh size to catch more fish, out of desperation to provide sufficient food for his family. Soon, his activity was under threat, or so he thought.



*Looking out for other options...*

*Taking a firm stand...*

In 2002, Proshika, another NGO partner of the CBFM project together with the people of Kanchanpur formed a CBO at the village level. The CBO committee decided to introduce rules and regulations on how often one can catch fish and which fishing methods could be used in the *beel*. This decision was brought about by concerns about over-fishing which raised questions on the resource status of the Shakla *beel* and the sustainability of the fishing.

The CBO was keen on restricting and eventually abolishing any harmful gears and imposing a seasonal ban to help ensure the sustainability of the fishing resources. Both solutions are easier said than done. Some welcomed the new initiatives but for some, like Sumitra's family, following these rules was hard because if they did, life was going to be harder for them. Regulations on where to fish and how to fish might suit them, or so the Das family thought. Not long after, they realised the CBO decision was not optional, but maybe there were other livelihood options.

On a fine day, the family sat together and discussed the ways they could ensure a steady flow of income. Shumitra left school without completing sixth grade to get married. She has never had the opportunity to earn her own income, though on a number of occasions she did wish she could earn money to ease her family burden. Through discussion, both husband and wife agreed that she might be able to supplement the household income through Proshika's *Shapla Mohila Samity*, an all female, micro credit group.

As a first step, Shumitra received training on pond culture and fish processing. She then qualified for micro-credit assistance. She received a total of Taka 22000, around USD 350 in four instalments.

First, she bought a fishing net, to replace the harmful current *Jal* they had been using to fish. She then helped her husband to repair their fishing boat. Boat repair is an annual event for most families, which includes spreading a type of black paint, called pitch, over the boat for water proofing. If the family could afford it, then the boat is repaired and it goes back into the water. If they have no cash to do it, then you will see the boat lying around until they come up with the cash. This year, the Das's are lucky! Shumitra's husband will be able to use the boat to catch fish in the *beel*.



## The training works...

Shumitra's next decision to buy a 12-decimal (500 m<sup>2</sup>) plot of land near her home was very much to do with her interest in fish culture. The most interesting feature of the plot was a pond. As she learnt, the cash from the loan might be sufficient for purchasing the land, but she still needed to dig into her savings to buy the right number and type of fish to stock her pond. She opted for various types of carp. But before stocking her pond, she had to clean the pond first. She pulled out the weeds and other plants in the pond. She then limed the pond to reduce the soil acidity and promote the growth of plankton which will be the natural feed for growing fish. After this, she waited for the flood season so that the pond filled with water.

Since her first season as a fish farmer, Shumitra has learnt that she needs to quickly stock the pond with the carp fingerlings she buys from local fish traders. There may also be fish washed into the pond during the flood which is usually allowed to grow unless it is the wrong species. Shumitra is careful not to overcrowd the pond and leaves sufficient space for the fish to grow. Often she goes down to the pond to check if the growth of the fish is consistent and if they are disease-free.

All this knowledge has been picked up from the intensive three-day training she received from the representatives of Proshika, supported by the WorldFish Center, on the basics and the practical aspects of fish culture in ponds. Soon, Shumitra says that she hopes to attend other courses to turn her traditional pond culture into a more productive trade. For now, her income from the small pond has enabled her to pay off the loan. Taking count of her husband's income and whatever she made from the pond and other side activities, Shumitra discovered that together they have made a net profit of 12,000 taka, a massive difference from the 120 taka her husband used to make through fishing.

## ...you see the results

Since joining the CBFM project and taking advantage of four micro-credit loans, the Das's managed to increase their monthly household income four fold, and perhaps we could say the same about their effort and all their hard work. Besides, growing fish, Shumitra also catches fish and dries them during the peak season. Her husband, on the other hand, fishes in the *beel* daily for three to four hours and comes back to help Shumitra in the pond as well and walks to the local market to sell the dried fish. During the closed season, Shumitra and her husband work together to make and sell fishing equipment like nets, fish basket and boxes, a skill they picked up from training they attended.

Her husband is convinced that without Shumitra's alternative income they would have found it almost impossible to comply with the new fishing rules and regulations aimed at reducing the pressure on the *beel* resources.

Shumitra Rani knows that her pond fishing has made life better for her and her family. She looks back to the days when there were insufficient meals of rice, meat and vegetables for the family; when she was worried about being able to educate her children and how they could have a better home. Now she has no fear. She is confident that she can provide all this and much more for her family. These days they have the luxury of regular meals with meat and fish. Her house boasts a new toilet. She proudly announces how she has been able to put aside savings of 2000 taka for the children's education. You will understand how important this saving is because it costs about 1000 taka per year for a child going through primary education. Through CBFM, Shumitra had the opportunity to develop her skills, build her confidence to manage the family finances and most importantly, now she has a say on how the family spends their money.

Working and earning money definitely changes a women's fate!

## LEADING THE WAY

### Making a difference...

Kabita Biswas, 50 and Bina Roy, 30 are no ordinary women. They are not legends, but in Bakuli, a tightly knit village of 900 in Sheakhati union of Narail district of Bangladesh, both are well known for their leadership skills. After all, Kabita was recently awarded the prestigious National Fish Fortnight Trophy 2005 for her exemplary leadership in managing and protecting her community's fishing resources.

Kabita is the leader of Bakuli's Community Based Organisation (CBO), making her the only female to lead a CBO in the CBFM project. Young Bina on the other hand is the President of the Maliate Beel Management Committee (BMC). There are many proud things about Kabita and Bina.

Let us tell you Kabita's story first.



### How it all started for Kabita...

Stepping into the courtyard of Kabita's spaciouly painted five-room home, complete with concrete roof, concrete toilet and well constructed tube-well, one cannot help noticing her prosperity. Why not? She is a hard-worker, in addition to being ambitious.

Kabita hails from Rath Para of Kushtia district. Born into a traditional Hindu family, she managed to attend schooling until ninth grade. She was just 14 when her marriage was arranged to Nipen Biswas, a fisher and a farmer. For Kabita fishing and farming was something new. Who could blame her? Her father was a salesman in a stationary shop while her mother was a housewife. Marriage meant an altogether new journey that had just begun for her.

Settling down in her new life, Kabita got involved in the daily routine household chores. Along came a son and a daughter. Life was not easy, yet she was grateful because they were considered to be better off than most of their neighbours. On the piece of land they inherited, the Biswas family grew vegetables. Occasionally they had meat from the chicken and ducks which they reared in small numbers and milk from a cow they owned. Her family mostly survived on the daily fish catch which her husband caught in Maliate *beel*.

Maliate *beel* is a seasonal 100 ha floodplain covering the Southwest of Narail district encircling several villages including Bakuli village. The *beel* is connected with the Afra river. Local rainfall is the main source of water in the *beel* but during the rainy season water comes through the







## Something about Bina...

Bina Rani Roy is in a meeting in the community centre. The participants of the meeting are involved in a heated debate. They have concerns over several issues related to the number of times they can fish in the “*kuas*” a sort of a deep hole in a *beel* which acts as a sanctuary for the fish. Some stood up to voice their opinion. Some stood to shout their opinion over the others. For an outsider, this would have looked very chaotic. Not for Bina Rani Roy, 30, who is all too familiar with the scene. After all, she is the President of the Maliate Beel Management Committee (BMC) and she organized this meeting. Bina might be young, but she is no stranger to fisheries. Having been born into and growing up in a fishing household gives her the added advantage.

Bina is easily one of the most educated women in her village. She married Shushil Biswas in 1994 upon completing her tenth grade and receiving her Secondary School Certificate. Soon, she became a mother and domestic commitments beckoned. As much as she would have loved to work and support her small family, she knew there was not much of opportunity around the village.

That changed in 2001 when Banchte Shekha became a partner of the CBFM project.

canal from the Afra river. This is a private floodplain which mainly cultivates paddy during the dry season. During the monsoon season, which runs for four or five months from around June each year, this seasonal *beel* is declared as an open access water body. Anybody from the community living around the *beel* can catch fish in the *beel* area. The problem is that the families living around Maliate *beel* have noticed a slow but steady decrease in the total fish catch and many have voiced their concern over the disappearance of particular fish species which were noticeable during their parent's day. The growing population, increasing number of fishers, increasing fishing activity have not only taken a toll on fish stock but has put pressure on the daily income of fishers like Nipen Biswas and his family.

Life might not be too harsh on them, but Kabita realised that they needed to ensure a steady flow of income if they want to have a decent living. She knew fishing was not the only activity they could depend on. Kabita felt a restless need to improve. She had to ensure her children received a decent education. She needs to ensure her family has at least a proper roof over their head, and not one which might collapse during the rainy season. She had never earned an income before. She didn't exactly have a clear idea on how she could improve her present situation, but she did know that there was a local NGO called Banchte Shekha who had been offering training to teach women new skills so that they could improve their family income. Maybe there was something for her, she thought.

## Making it work...

Banchte Shekha, is a local NGO that had been working in and around Bakuli village since 1987. Programmes introduced by Banchte Shekha are primarily to improve the lives of destitute women in the area. The work being done by this NGO fitted well with the goals of CBFM. In September 2001, Banchte Shekha started receiving grants through the CBFM project. Besides improving livelihoods by providing micro-credit and training, they also had the responsibility to improve the *beel* fishery resources by forming a local fishery management committee, an advisory committee and establishing fish sanctuaries.

To achieve these goals, the Banchte Shekha team had to identify locally capable, yet exemplary leaders. Kabita's early achievements and Bina Roy's enthusiasm caught their attention.

## Self-determination works for Kabita...

In 1999, through self-initiative, Kabita mobilised and popularised all women micro credit assistance in her village. Fifty three women joined the group. Through the self-managed scheme, she encourages each woman to save small amount of money which was then accumulated in the savings of the group. The group, after a process of discussion led by Kabita, are then able to offer loans from the savings to any members at times of need.

In 2002, Kabita was approached by some people from Banchte Shekha. They asked if she would be willing to accept the cashier responsibility within the CBO they had formed. Kabita agreed. Kabita was among the first to receive the financial management training provided by Banchte Shekha. Soon Kabita was responsible for managing the CBO's financial matters, including keeping the accounts up to date and banking the money. Soon she was leading the CBO.

Around this time, Kabita and few local women joined hands with Banchte Shekha to form the all-female Maliate *Beel* Management Committee (BMC). The BMC started off with twenty four members and was led by the young and enthusiastic Bina Rani Roy.



## Bina learns to make decisions...

Joining the BMC as a member in August 2002, Bina never hesitated to raise issues that were of concern to the many women folk in the village. She was bold, yet did not fail to articulate her opinion or complaints with enough facts to support her. Soon she was elected to lead the *Golap Mahila Samity*, an all female micro credit group established by Banchte Shekha.

In the process, Bina took the opportunity to join the various trainings offered by the Banchte Shekha. She attended most of the trainings related to alternative income generating activities (AIGA) and fisheries management. She then applied for a 7,000 taka loan in two instalments from the CBFM project's credit fund to purchase a dairy cow. Soon she began her own dairy business.

Her day starts off by milking the cow. Then she bottles the milk and sells it to the villagers. As we listen to her speak in the community centre, she informs us that she has made a profit of around 20000 taka - a lot of money in rural Bangladesh! A profit which enabled her to cultivate and plant paddy in the 168-decimal plot of land she and her husband own as well to pay back her loan. She must be doing well in her ventures because today she has a savings of 11000 taka and she has just bought a further 24 more decimals of land.

Taking decisions is not a new experience for Bina when it comes to her own dairy business. But leading the 24 member BMC was altogether another issue. She first had to straighten out the many problems blocking the community and their resources.



## Working together...

The CBO and BMC had the responsibility to ensure that the *beel* fishery was managed in a sustainable, equitable and participatory way and to increase and diversify the household incomes of its poorest members. An important responsibility was ensuring local fishers do not fish during breeding season by giving them training and options to get involved in alternative jobs which will help to support them during the ban season.

Kabita, Bina and other CBO members had their minds focused on achieving this. In a very much a male dominated culture, one would have thought their aspiration was going to be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, with support from Banchte Shekha staff, backed by technical and research assistance from the WorldFish Center and the Bangladesh Department of Fisheries, this women-led group proved to be much more resilient than was initially thought.

They had some significant breakthroughs. Being the main stakeholders and decision makers, they outlined rules for fishing in the *beel*, which was then followed by tough enforcement led by the BMC itself. One of the most important responsibilities was to ensure that local fishers do not fish in the *beel* from mid-April to June - the fish spawning months. Unfortunately, there are fishers who cannot resist the temptation to catch fish during the ban period. This calls for a 24 hour guard system around the *beel*. Women are not left out from the guarding responsibility. They guard in the day and the men guard in the night.

As the leader of BMC, Bina's commitment towards managing the *beel* effectively was no easy task. She organised and motivated groups of villagers to clean the *beel*. She then set out to have discussions with other members of the committee. The purpose of her discussion was to identify the areas of the water body which could serve as a fish sanctuary. One could not help but wonder if she had problems sorting this out, especially with the men. A slight shrug of her shoulders indicates that she did run into problems. She did find ways to solve them - Bina said it was easier just to get the men in her advisory committee to meet and talk to those fishermen. Eventually, they came around and with the *beel* and the sanctuary being guarded around the clock during the non-fishing season, fishermen soon got the message.

Bina will also tell you about the other local fishing rules that they have adopted following their BMC meetings. Fishers are not allowed to fish in the *kuas* (deep holes) more than twice a year whereas previously they fished them at least four times a year. This decision was taken to allow the fish to multiply and grow before they are fished out.


Alternatively, these women know that enforcement alone is not enough to stop fishing in the *beel* during the breeding season. They have been working along with Banchte Shekha and encouraging their men folk, as well as other women to join poultry rearing and fish culture training.

## What do they do...

In the Biswas household, the breeding season does not provide the much needed break for them. It simply means shifting gears by going into farming. In 2004, Kabita realised that she needed to set an example for all. It was not enough to preach about alternate income generating activities and attend training, more needed to be done. She needed to turn her new found knowledge into reality which then became an example for all.

Kabita took her first loan of 10000 taka, to purchase agricultural land for growing rice. After repaying the loan she made very little profit. Her confidence pushed her to accept a second loan which she invested into different types of paddy. Today, her annual farming income is around Taka 50,000 a sound basis to build a life insurance policy for old age support and a complete turn-around from being an agricultural labourer to becoming 1.5 ha land owner. Listening to the animal sounds coming from Kabita's compound, we also realised that she is the proud owner of a growing number of cows, chickens and geese that produce eggs, milk and meat for the family and for sale.

During the peak season, you will occasionally catch the sight of Bina joining other women from the village to catch fish. They usually use the hook and lines or cast nets. Most women also grow their own vegetables at the back of their homes for household consumption. As we took a peek at the back part of her 3-room tin roofed house, with properly installed toilet and a tube well, we noted that Bina grows vegetables, not only for her family but also for sale in the local market. Besides her dairy business, managing her plot of land, occasionally fishing and farming and managing a pond full of geese, she still has time to privately tutor primary school children at her home. Then there is the major role of managing the BMC and its members and living up to the goals set by the CBFM project which requires her to constantly be interacting with her neighbours, the local elites, local influential people and the government officials. Indeed, she represents the new multitasking generation of rural women.



## The results show...

As we walked on the dyke by the *beel*, project staff pointed out to us that the harmful current net, which has very small mesh size and tends to capture even the smallest fish is not used anymore around the Maliate *Beel*. A quick check revealed that the women, led by Kabita have been staging campaigns and movement against using the current nets. They emphasised that they have the responsibility to ensure sufficient time for the young fish to grow to a reasonable size before they are caught. One cannot help but applaud their tough stand and firm action.

Generally, meetings held by the 24 member BMC in the new community centre, built under the CBFM project on a plot of land donated by Kabita, are interesting. One might wonder how far these women can go. For now, Kabita and Bina continue to push and encourage other members of the community to come, participate and help make decisions in the BMC meetings. What is amazing is that, most men folk sit and listen to what the all female led committee has to say, although they have their own sets of arguments and disagreements.

Besides building livelihoods and sustaining resources, the CBFM project has proved to be a platform for women to improve their social awareness. Kabita is now involved in solving domestic violence and conflicts between community members. On numerous occasions, she did not hesitate to help and support others using legal rights and women rights as a means of solution or protection.

## A clear future...

Kabita is hopeful about the future of her fishing community. To her fishing is a good profession. The Biswas family did make much profit from fishing, but coupled with other economic activities, they did make a good living for themselves and their children. Kabita's son is now working with the local NGO, Banchte Shekha, while her daughter is married and living in another village. Both children did not inherit their parent's profession, but moved on to something better. Kabita does not mind if her children want to be part of the fishing profession in the future. All they have to do is to manage their fishery in a sustainable way, so there will be enough fish to be caught by all for today, tomorrow and for years to come.

Looking around and enjoying Kabita's simple, yet in some ways luxurious home, we acknowledged that all the credit does not go to CBFM alone. Women like Kabita have been around for a long time before CBFM started. CBFM assisted in lifting and empowering capable women leaders. Along with individual and group initiatives, came changes. In Kabita's enthusiastic response, we see the goals of CBFM - improving livelihood of the rural poor through sustainable resource management.

## Sustaining the CBFM approach...

All of these women are optimistic about their ability to stand on their own feet after the project support phases out. They firmly believe they can manage the resources between the women and men who are part of the community. They are bound to problems? The all led women CBO and BMC are prepared to face it. On their side, they have the experience of learning the hard way, coming through challenging situations, yet remaining tough and resilient.





## Behind the scene making CBFM work for women

The empowerment of women has been an important aspect of the CBFM project. These stories represent unnamed number of rural women who are taking control of their livelihoods, providing a better future for their families, especially for their young ones and sowing their leadership skills.

We are only able to carry out this unique development and research project with the direct participation of the women beneficiaries themselves. Their participation is made possible through our very dedicated staffs, the many field assistants, research assistants, associates, consultants and research coordinators who have been working diligently to make CBFM work for rural women.

Finally we have our innumerable partners, because without their hard work and collaborative efforts, uplifting the livelihood of many women involved in the inland fisheries of Bangladesh would have simply not been possible.

Listed below are the partners of the the CBFM-2 project implemented by the Department of Fisheries, in partnership with the WorldFish Center:

- Banchte Shekha
- Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Associations (BELA)
- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)
- CARITAS
- Center for Natural Resources Studies (CNRS)
- Center for Rural and Environmental Development (CRED)
- Grassroots Health and Rural Organization for Nutrition Initiative (GHARONI)
- FemCom Bangladesh
- PROSHIKA
- Shikkha Shastha Unnayan Karzakram (SHISUK)
- Society Development Committee (SDC)



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 Gender Strategy and Action Plan of CBFM-2 Project, (Unpublished), Sept 2003  
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 Bridging the Divide, DFID Report 2004

Produced by



**The WorldFish Center**

Bangladesh and South Asia Office  
House 22B, Road 7, Block F, Banani, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
Phone (+880-2) 881 3250, 881 4624  
Fax (+880-2) 881 1151  
E-mail: worldfish-bangladesh@cgiar.org

In collaboration with



**The Department of Fisheries**

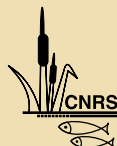
Matshya Bhaban (10th Floor), Park Avenue,  
Ramna, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh.  
Tel: (+880-2) 9571696  
Fax: (+880-2) 9571696.  
E-mail: cbfm@dhaka.net

**In association with**

Banchte Shekha, BELA, BRAC, CARITAS, CNRS, CRED, FemCom, GHARONI, Proshika, SDC and SHISUK



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**Text**

Ruh Afza Ruhi | Tara Vickers | Usha Kanagaratnam

**Edited by**

Malcolm Dickson

**Coordination**

Hillol Sobhan

**Photo credit**

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