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## Gendered ownership of aquaculture resources: Insights from two villages in Bangladesh



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## **Authors**

Afrina Choudhury and Cynthia McDougall

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# Contents

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Background	4
Bangladesh	6
What does ownership mean to fish farmers?	7
How is ownership gendered?	8
What factors shape ownership?	10
How does gendered ownership affect associated risks and benefits?	12
Lessons learned	14
Notes	17
References	18

# Background

Ownership rights are crucial for increasing women’s decision-making power and empowerment outcomes, which in turn will impact household efficiency in agricultural productivity (Doss et al. 2014). In Bangladesh, however, there remains a large gendered gap in asset ownership. Unless we use a gendered lens to understand and address this gap, women’s ability to access, use and benefit from innovations that can enhance productivity and income to cope with shocks and fight poverty will remain a struggle. This brief attempts to do just that by using a gender lens to understand the nuanced gaps, perceptions and practices of ownership in aquaculture in Bangladesh and present lessons and recommendations for aquaculture interventions. The study on which this is based is summarized in Box 1; an outline of aquaculture in the study sites<sup>1</sup> is presented in Box 2.

In this brief, the terms “asset” and “resource” are used interchangeably. They refer here to goods and services with economic value that are owned or controlled by individuals or groups to produce products for current or future benefits. They include land, ponds, seeds, financial capital, tools and technologies.



Asset ownership, control and access mapping exercise with Hindu women’s group.



## Box 1. Study design.

### Study purpose

To understand the nuanced patterns of gendered ownership and how they influence positive outcomes, including empowerment.

### Research questions

1. How do women and men understand the term “ownership” and how does this definition differ across different contexts?
2. What factors enhance or constrain women’s ownership of assets and its benefits?
3. How do these nuanced patterns of ownership influence empowerment and the availability of and access to food and income?

### Methodology

This is a qualitative study. It was carried out in two villages in Bagerhat district, Bangladesh, where WorldFish has been active in separately training men and women farmers on aquaculture. The villages were purposively selected to represent one that is majority Muslim and one that is majority Hindu with aquaculture as the main source of livelihood.

A total of 8 focus group discussions (4 from each village), 16 in-depth interviews (2 from each category of sex and wealth group) and 2 key informant interviews (1 from each village) were conducted. The focus group discussions were disaggregated by gender and wealth group, i.e. one each per village with low-income women, low-income men, middle-income women and middle-income men. A total of 63 women and 55 men took part in this study.

## Box 2. Aquaculture in the study villages.

Aquaculture forms the mainstay of the study villages, with *ghers* (a trench around a rice field where fish can be grown simultaneously or alternatively) and ponds being the two main aquaculture resources from which the villagers make their livelihoods. *Ghers* are the most sought-after resource in both villages and shrimp the most sought-after product for sale and income. However, key informants indicated that shrimp production and *gher* ownership come with risks as well. Many farmers are afraid of the shrimp being poisoned by jealous neighbors, and concerned that disease and climate change could destroy hundreds or even thousands of dollars of investment. In fact, there were examples of farmers in the study sites who had lost everything.

Study participants reported that many young men in the communities look forward to the day they inherit the *ghers* from their fathers. However, key informants pointed out the problem of dividing ownership between many sons. Sons from the same household who now live in different households with their own families end up dividing their inherited *gher* into smaller portions or sharing the *gher* and the pond in a system of multi-ownership. Women, who are largely unable to inherit assets and are married off with the expectancy that they will depend on their husband’s resources, face another layer of gender challenges in this context of shared ponds, as they have to negotiate with more relatives in order to use and derive benefits from the resource in question. Multi-ownership ponds are often situated between the households that share it, since ponds are often difficult to subdivide. Women take part in aquaculture activities mostly at the homestead level but do support their husbands in *gher* management and vegetable cultivation on dikes. Key informants also mentioned that property disputes are common among families.

# Bangladesh

Overall, in Bangladesh, women's ability to derive benefits from the agriculture sector—including aquaculture—is hindered by their restricted use, control and ownership of all three types of capital: productive, physical and human (Sraboni et al. 2014). This is rooted in a combination of national policy and religious laws<sup>2</sup> and their implementation.

Although Clause 25(2) of the Bangladesh National Women Development Policy 2011 stipulates that women shall be given the rights to wealth and resources they obtain from inheritance, earnings, loan/credit, land and market management,<sup>3</sup> persistent unequal inheritance practices limit women's ability to acquire wealth to begin with. Religious guidelines provided by Islam, and to a lesser extent Hinduism, determine land ownership patterns in practice (Box 3). Bangladesh is a patriarchal society in which 85 percent of the population follows Sharia law. This law permits

property rights for women but with restrictions. Even then, many women cede their property to their brothers in return for security in times of need (Sproule 2015). Hindu laws, on the other hand, do not usually allow women to own any property except under certain conditions, which vary according to their identity in the family (Box 3).

In practice, according to the Bangladesh Agricultural Census of 2008, only 1.32 million (4.6 percent) of almost 28.7 million agricultural landholders were women (FAO 2015). But between 2011 and 2012, as per the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey, only 22.6 percent of women had their ownership documented (FAO 2015). World Bank statistics reveal that less than 10 percent and 3 percent of all women and young women, respectively, have their names included on marital property papers (World Bank 2008).

### **Box 3. Systems of ownership under Hindu and Muslim law.**

Under Sharia (Muslim) law, a woman receives half of that of her male sibling and half of the entire property if she does not have a male sibling (the rest would go to her next male kin). A Muslim widow receives one-eighth of the property if she has children and one-fourth if she has no children. Muslim law allows giving property as a gift without restriction by those who own the property. Under Sharia law, women are supposed to have complete autonomy over their inherited or gifted property (Khan et al. 2016).

Under Hindu law, women's property rights have not changed since British rule in Bangladesh, unlike in India. Hindus in Bangladesh are widely governed by the *Dayabhaga* school of Hindu law and British colonial laws (Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act 1937) are practiced to this day. In cases of property disputes not covered by colonial law, ancient Hindu law is used. Daughters and mothers do not have an immediate right to, respectively, their father's or son's property but are surpassed by four others: sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and widows. They only inherit property in the absence of all these, and if a daughter is barren or bears no son, she cannot inherit. A widow receives equal to that of a son but can only use, sell and enjoy benefits from the property during her lifetime. After her death, the property goes to her husband's heirs (Zahur 2016). Property as gifts to women is allowed under Hindu law.



## What does ownership mean to fish farmers?

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Men, women, girls and boys in this study defined the term “owner” as the head of the household, the one who takes responsibility of the resource, or the person who has his or her name on the ownership deed. Accordingly, they defined the owner as anyone who has inherited, bought, leased, sharecropped or pawned the resource. Women and men explained that the only cases in which legal ownership for women can occur is (1) if a husband legally writes the property to his wife before he passes away or buys the property in his wife’s name, (2) she pays for it herself, (3) she inherits from her father as per Islamic law or (4) she inherits it because she has no brothers.

In addition, men, women, girls and boys also said that ownership means “by right of it being owned by their father or spouse.” The women, girls and boys explained this by mainly linking ownership to benefits. They added that a woman, girl or boy would take care of a resource because it would benefit not only the legal owner but also them and their family. This points toward psychological ownership. In that sense, every member of the family is an owner because they all benefit from it.

Separate from the concept of legal ownership, women identified the significance of psychological ownership (Marks and Davis 2011). Specifically, they identified other scenarios denoting ownership: by right of performing certain roles for the resource, by frequency of usage, by understanding the resource and how to use it, by making decisions about the resource, and because of the dependency of the resource on their care and upkeep.

A middle-income Muslim woman from Kolla Rajpath expressed a sense of ownership (i.e. psychological ownership) over fish during feeding because of their dependency on her. “I feel like the fish are mine when I give the feed because they won’t live or grow without the food,” she said. Men from both villages also alluded to psychological ownership by mentioning that a woman can feel that his property is hers, even though she does not legally own it. By virtue of being a wife, a woman could feel a sense of ownership psychologically. “Since she is married,” said a low-income Muslim male from Kolla Rajpath, “why not consider what belongs to your husband as your own? She can.”

This gendered difference in emphasis on legal versus psychological ownership was also evident in the language used by male and female participants of different ages regardless of wealth. In the local Bengali language, *malik* (owner), *amar* (mine) and *amader* (ours) were used to express the definition of ownership. Women, girls and boys from all groups tended to use the word *amader* in their discussions while men used *malik* and *amar* more often. This tendency is reflected in the specification stated by the male participants in the Hindu village that women usually have to use the plural when referring to ownership of the resource while men can claim singular ownership. The men said the reason behind this was that women usually do not legally inherit a property or resource. Furthermore, the resource usually also belongs to the husband’s brothers. One male participant went on to explain that a woman cannot verbally claim a man’s possessions as her own because she did not bring them from her father’s house. “In her mind, she can call them [his possessions] her own but cannot express it loudly,” said a low-income Hindu male from Arulia. “She can consume from them but cannot call them her own. How can she call them her own? Did she bring them from her father’s house?”

## How is ownership gendered?

Table 1 summarizes the aquaculture resources that men, women and youths from both the Hindu and Muslim villages own, based on their own perceptions and experiences of ownership themselves and of those around them. The men listed most of the aquaculture resources as their own except for two items that the women mentioned as exclusively their own, i.e. buckets and fish for consumption. The women listed buckets as well as fish for consumption and vegetables but also reiterated that they own everything their husbands own, which the husbands confirmed.

For example, a man from the Hindu village explained, "In our Hindu religion, once married, the wife becomes the equal partner. The wife's stuff becomes the husband's and vice versa." Another low-income Hindu male explained the sense of ownership he feels over his wife. "I married her and brought her here," he said. "Since I brought her here, she is mine and everything I own is hers." One middle-income Muslim woman from Kolla Rajpath, while agreeing that men and women co-own resources, differentiated between men's and women's ownership based on who is mostly responsible for the resource, who paid for it and/or who received the resource as a gift. "Men have the *ghers*, ponds and land," she explained. "Women have vegetables, livestock and jewelry." In digging deeper, women from both villages described a more complicated reality. By marrying his wife, a husband has given her some right to his possessions, but the degrees of ownership differ. While women may have the right to use and derive benefits from their husband's possessions, women from both the Muslim and Hindu villages explained that men have more ownership because they legally own the resources. This, in turn, affects women's decision-making over resources.

However, women from both villages have also expressed feelings of insecurity over their lack of legal ownership, which renders them vulnerable in cases of divorce or separation. Women explained that they have to limit their views and opinions and simply accept many decisions so as not to upset their husbands in case they throw the women out. A middle-income Hindu woman expressed her desire to own a *gher* in light of the insecurity she faces. "If we have a fight, he might kick me out of the house and then I would have nothing," she said. "So it would be good to have one of my own." A middle-income Muslim woman explained the strength that would come with ownership. "He can kick us out and we would have nothing then," she said. "If we had ownership over certain things, then it wouldn't be so easy to kick us out."

The male participants from both villages emphasized the importance of woman's subordination, attributing it to their dependency on the men. "She cannot do as she wishes, she is dependent," said one low-income Hindu man from Arulia. "Before she does anything, she thinks about her guardians; since they exist, she asks them. This is showing respect and because they know best. This happens and I think this should continue to happen since they are her guardians."

Even though both women and men claimed to own whatever the other spouse owned because they are partners through marriage, men and women from both villages explained that men do not allow women to control, access, use or even look after certain assets for fear of their partners destroying the resources or because sociocultural norms do not allow women to use them. For example, *ghers* are usually too far away for women to access because of norms around mobility (e.g. *purdah* and domestic work), which

Men	Women	Boys	Girls
<i>Ghers</i> , <sup>4</sup> ponds, nets, boats, feed, fertilizers, fingerlings/fry, labor, lime, pumps, fish for sale, shrimp.	Buckets, fish for consumption, vegetables on <i>gher</i> dikes, whatever the husband owns, things bought with the money from selling fish and shrimp.	Inherits <i>gher</i> , pond and his father's other resources.	Feels ownership over her father's and mother's resources until she gets married.

Source: Summary of men's and women's focus group discussions in Hindu and Muslim villages.

**Table 1.** Aquaculture resource ownership by gender.



restrict women's movement, as long as they have an able man in the house. "There are certain social norms that exist here," said a low-income Muslim male. "If I allow her to go, people will look at her and say, 'Look, it's the wife of the fourth of the seven brothers. She prays five times a day yet she is going to the [gher] to feed the fish in a sari.' Similarly, a woman is not supposed to catch fish and if she does, community members will speak ill of her and her family. "Before marriage, at my father's, my father had a big pond," said a low-income Hindu woman. "We used to cast the nets ourselves. Now, it's a respect issue. Now, people will say, 'That person's wife is catching fish.' So many women do not catch fish." Another low-income Muslim woman expressed the fear she faces in going to the *gher*. "Other males can be a problem," she said. "It does feel scary to go that far because of the other men who can bother us." Furthermore, many men from the Muslim village said that women do not understand fish culture and so are unable to take care of their *gher* or pond. This is despite the fact that some of the Muslim women participants received aquaculture training. Other Hindu men said they keep some of their fishing tools and inputs away from women and children because of their concern that they might accidentally destroy them.

Boys usually inherit their father's *gher* or pond and its related aquaculture resources, but they have to wait for the transfer of ownership, and the aquaculture resources are often distributed between brothers. Male adults and youths explained that boys help their fathers and, in turn, fathers try to acquire assets for their sons. However, fathers do not have to worry about accumulating assets for their daughters because the daughters' spouses are expected to look after them. Sons harbor the hope that their fathers will put the property in their name one day. While many youths strive to move away from the village and in many cases have managed to do so, participants explained that at least one son stays back to help his father and inherit the property in the hope that his brothers will not come back to claim their share. One Hindu man expressed relief that he does not have a son, so he does not have to worry about accumulating property and can easily lease property and live as he pleases. Female adults and youths explained that a daughter feels ownership over her parents' resources until she gets married and her sense of ownership then shifts to her husband's resources. Female youths explained that daughters help their mother and feel more ownership over the resources over which their mothers have greater ownership. At the end of the day, they aspire to happy marriages where their husbands treat them well and provide for them.

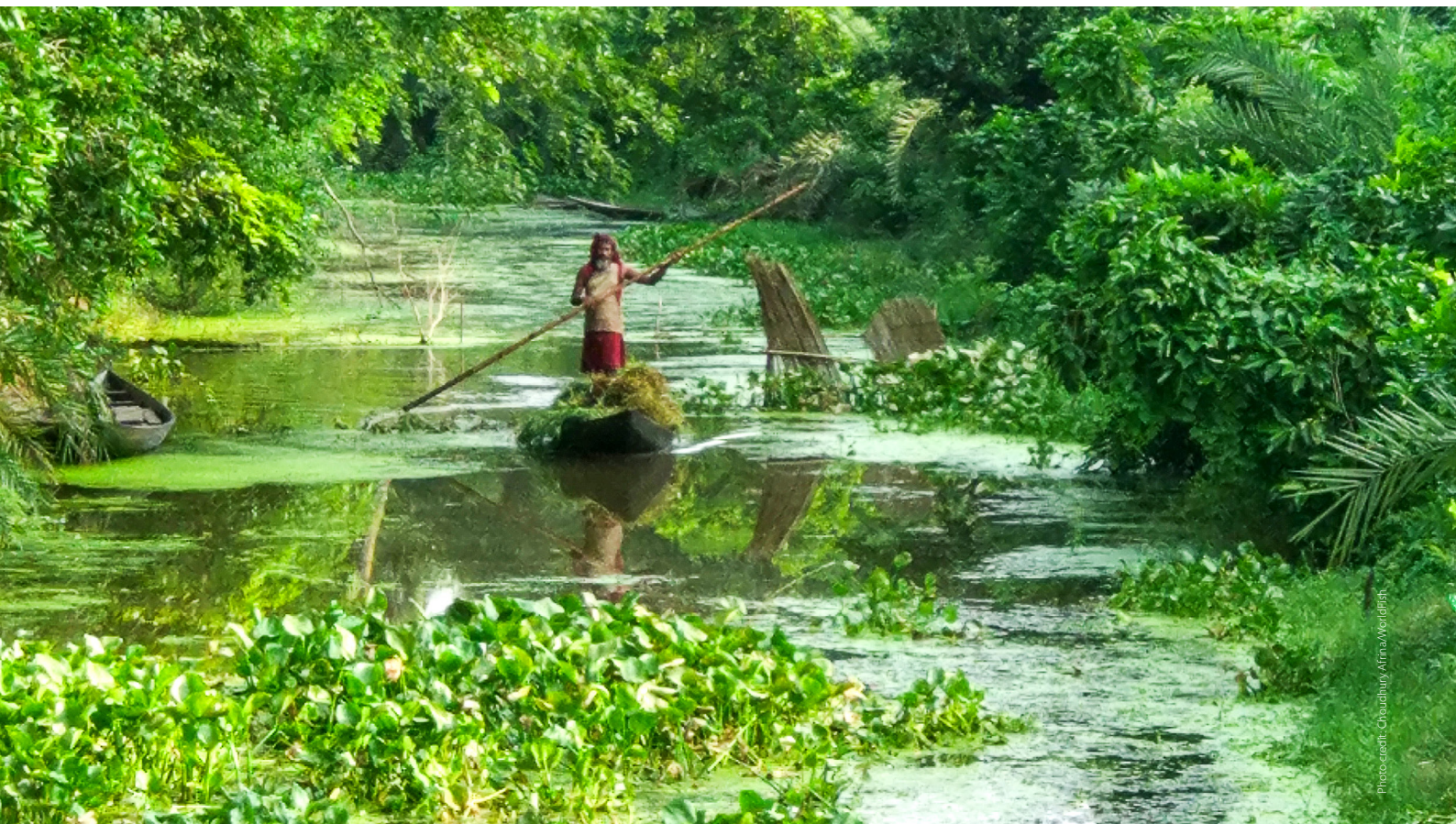


Photo credit: Chanchay Afrin/Merifish

Fishing boats along a canal in Bagerhat district.

## What factors shape ownership?

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A number of factors shape not only how men and women define and perceive ownership but also how they come to experience ownership and use and derive benefits from resources. This includes the systems of inheritance, financial contributions from women and their families toward asset accumulation, the responsibilities undertaken to maintain and derive benefits from an asset, knowledge and skills, age and number of years of marriage, and joint ownership—all of which are discussed below.

Inheritance laws and procedures in Bangladesh dictate men's and women's ownership and control over property. These inheritance laws are mostly based on religious laws that favor men and boys. However, there is a stark difference in the systems of ownership between Hindu and Muslim communities. Even though Muslim women receive a certain legal share of property, most of those in the study said they did not claim their property but left it for their brothers to enjoy. Some women said they would claim their property if necessary but they do not presently need it, and some mentioned that the reason they do not claim their property is so that their brothers can take care of them if their husbands are no longer willing or able to do so, which serves as future security. Men and women in both the Hindu and Muslim communities also revealed that a husband may write his property to his wife as a gift or buy the property in her name if he loves her enough, in line with Muslim and Hindu religious laws.

However, women, especially young women, struggle to implement asset-related decisions even when they legally own something. One Hindu woman who inherited her mother's property<sup>5</sup> because she did not have any male siblings to contest it, as per Hindu law, said she faces a range of problems with her uncles and cousins who do not feel she deserves to own the property, which is in close proximity to theirs and shares a pond. She has tried to transfer the rights to her husband, but he is ridiculed for living off his wife and her property. She finds it difficult to carry out any decisions, and her relatives constantly try to trick her, exclude her from property-related discussions or do not share beneficial property-related information with her.

Apart from systems of inheritance, women's monetary contributions to the acquisition of aquaculture resources also influence their ownership and control. A

number of women and men mentioned that a woman can claim ownership and have complete control over anything she brings from her father's house, or is given to her as gifts by her parents and brothers, to her in-laws' place.<sup>6</sup> This highlights the intersection of gender and wealth, whereby wealthier women or women from wealthier families are more likely to have more decision-making power over a resource.

One Hindu woman from a middle-income family described how her parents married her to a low-income man. Because of her dark skin,<sup>7</sup> she had limited marriage prospects. However, her father and brothers contributed money to help her husband acquire a *gher*, and she feels this has earned her respect and decision-making power over the *gher* from her husband. "I think it [the *gher*] is mine more because we worked hard together to build everything from scratch," she said. "He didn't inherit anything. I got help from my father's house." Similarly, other women mentioned how they sold their jewelry, poultry or livestock either to help their spouse acquire a *gher* or keep from losing it during a crisis. Since a *gher* is the family's main and most expensive source of livelihood, they are willing to make these sacrifices and, in turn, their contribution has led to more equitable decision-making over the resource.

Using, caring for and maintaining a resource also shape ownership and control. For example, men sometimes depend on women to feed the fish or fulfill other responsibilities while they are away, and this makes women feel more ownership over that resource. "I feel like the *gher* or pond is mine more when I'm the one who has to fulfill the responsibility," said a middle-income Muslim woman from Kolla Rajpath. She also mentioned that she was entrusted with these responsibilities because she received training on aquaculture. In contrast, not having fishing knowledge or not having grown up in an aquaculture village hampers ownership, control and trust to properly take care of the resource. One Hindu mother-in-law from a middle-income family described how she does not let her newly wed daughter-in-law near the family pond because she has no experience or knowledge of aquaculture. "My daughter-in-law is not from this land," she said. "She doesn't understand fish culture nor does she know how to feel it. We understand and do it, my daughters too. My daughter-in-law doesn't feel for<sup>8</sup> the fish as much." During the interview, the mother-in-law kept reinforcing that, as



a result, her daughter-in-law does not partake in any responsibilities or decisions about the pond, despite her eagerness to learn and be involved.

Ownership is also shaped by age and years of marriage. Men and women alike mentioned that mothers and mothers-in-law are consulted in most decisions over their aquaculture resource, as a sign of respect. The widowed mothers are also often property owners as under Hindu and Muslim law, widows inherit some share of the property from their husbands to use independently as they desire, even if they have sons. Apart from mothers, in joint families,<sup>9</sup> participants noted that the opinion of the older brother's spouse is also given importance over other younger women. Similarly, men perceive women who have been married longer as having a better understanding of aquaculture resources and therefore being more able to take care of them.

Pooling resources and income to purchase resources jointly also shapes ownership and control. Apart from sharing ponds (Box 2), many of the study

participants' families have remained in a joint family system of ownership and sharing to be better able to maintain, acquire or lease resources and share risks and accountability. However, some married women expressed dissatisfaction with this system because their opinions about how to use and derive benefits from the resource are sidelined by the decisions of older male relatives, who determine resource use and the distribution of the benefits. "Living in a joint family that has built everything from scratch is hard," said a Muslim woman from a middle-income family. "Every single thing has to be shared and discussed. I cannot express or try to achieve my own desires. Even a piece of fish has to be distributed between our four families. It does not matter who put in more work or money. Everything is everyone's." Most male youths also expressed similar dissatisfaction with having to obey their father's orders about resource use and said that they would have used the resource more innovatively if it were legally theirs. As a solution to this problem, some youths mentioned that they informally form groups with other youths to pool money and acquire aquaculture resources.



Asset ownership, control and access mapping with Hindu women's group (low income).



## How does gendered ownership affect associated risks and benefits?

Resource ownership helps households cope with different types of shocks, both aggregate and personal, such as divorce or illness (Hulme and McKay 2005; Hulme and Shepherd 2003). However, there are gender implications surrounding whose asset is used to mitigate vulnerability to shocks, which may lead to more gender inequality in assets (Quisumbing 2011). The study found that in times of loss or crisis, women's assets are usually disposed of first. While the study indicated that it may be empowering when a woman helps build a resource with her husband, as it leads to more ownership and control, she may lose an exclusive income source or a source of security if her asset is used to cope with the shock. It is important to note that while women claim to own what men own, the main difference between their assets and those that men own is that women can make decisions about the assets they own exclusively.

Some women said that, in times of crisis, in order to cope, their husbands have negotiated with them to sell their livestock and have paid them back, while others said they had not been paid back when the crisis had been resolved. Some men explained that since they bought the livestock for their respective wives, these livestock actually belong to them. However, their wives consider these assets their own because they take care of the livestock and, as a result, the men have to negotiate with and convince their wives to let them sell the livestock.

Other women said they willingly sold their jewelry and/or had taken out loans to help their husbands because their main source of livelihood was at stake. The men justified the selling off of secondary or tertiary sources of livelihood, such as livestock, in order to save the main source of livelihood, in other words shrimp *ghers*, for the entire family.

In line with this study's findings, women's property is perceived as being small, easily disposable and relatively easy to accumulate. This makes it a feasible choice to sacrifice for the greater welfare of the family (Rakib and Matz 2014; Quisumbing 2011). However, studies have showed that men also sacrifice their own durable assets to protect their larger income-earning assets (Quisumbing 2011; Rakib and Matz 2014). Quisumbing, Kumar and Behrman (2011) found that women's assets in Bangladesh are used to cope with illnesses and men's assets for their daughters' dowry and marriage expenses. However, other studies have

shown that a woman's assets, which are usually the result of a dowry, are controlled by her husband and in-laws, so she has little say in how they are used (Davis and Baulch 2011).

Women's limited legal ownership puts them at a greater risk of poverty than they already face (Doss et al. 2008). The converse has also been shown to be true: greater asset ownership provides women with better security and capacity to cope in the face of risk or shocks, such as droughts or floods or even illness and divorce (Moser 2007; Hulme and McKay 2005; Hulme and Shepherd 2003; Meinzen-Dick et al. 2011). Women in this study expressed an underlying fear that if their husband leaves them for some reason, they will have little to live on. In other words, women's property rights only last as long as their marriages do, leaving them vulnerable and at risk (Quisumbing, Haddad and Peña 2001). So even though women say they also own what their husbands own, they are aware of the insecurity they face. However, the husbands believe that men rarely leave their wives in their communities, because marriage is for life.

As outlined above, women's property rights are mostly dependent on marriage and, in turn, these rights influence their bargaining power with the household. This also has implications for power relationships, with women feeling obligated to listen to their spouses because they are providing for them. Women in the study said they have to be careful their husbands do not leave them and so they listen to them. This, again, has implications for women's ability to innovate or adopt improved practices. While women in Bangladesh may be willing to embrace new technologies, their decision-making is hindered by their limited ownership of the resource for which they need to adopt the technology. Although some trained women participants from both villages mentioned being entrusted with more responsibilities because of their training knowledge, others claimed that the legal pond owners did not pay heed to women's new learning because they deemed themselves to know more or better. Similarly, in a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) study (Choudhury et al. 2017), most women pond aquaculture trainees emphasized the importance of spousal and family approval to apply the knowledge they had gained from training to their homestead pond. Similar scenarios were found by Morgan et al. (2015).



Women, as well as both male and female youths, in this study said they cannot do as they please because they are not the legal owners. There are also negative implications when women do attain legal ownership. Legal women owners face certain trade-offs compared to male owners because their ownership challenges local patriarchal norms where women do not usually own property (Quisimbug and Kumar 2011). A prime example of this was described beforehand of the Hindu woman in this study who said she has to face her family's dissatisfaction with her inheriting the property and the related consequences of being tricked or excluded. Furthermore, since women are usually excluded from market-oriented activities and labor markets, their livelihood strategies and ability to accumulate and benefit from assets differ from men (Quisumbing and Baulch 2013).

The study emphasized that women have better decision-making power when they have contributed money to accumulating an asset or take care of it. This supports Doss et al. (2008), who analyzed a number of South Asian surveys (Mason 1998, Allendorf 2007 and Agarwal 1998), showing that women who own land had more decision-making power than women who do not. Doss et al. (2008) also point to a Friedemann-Sánchez (2006) study in Colombia where women used their ownership of assets to negotiate their mobility, work and income and to avoid violence. However, this study also reveals exceptions showing that no matter the contribution, in joint multiple family-owned resources, women have less control because the male

household heads decide how resources will be used and how benefits will be distributed. There is thus another layer of gender relationships that women have to navigate.

Experience, background and knowledge have implications for ownership. If women come from a fishing village (i.e. before marriage), they are believed to understand fisheries better and are thus entrusted with responsibilities. However, women's training knowledge is not always taken into consideration by their husbands and/or fathers-in-law since women said their husbands and/or fathers-in-law already know everything about fish farming.

Age and years in a family have implications for ownership too. Newly married women reported having less say over resources in their families, whereas mothers and women married longer reported having a bigger say. Some mothers recalled how when they were newly married their opinions were rarely elicited but that the situation has changed over the years. This agrees with a study by Sproule et al. (2015) that looked at life cycle effects on land ownership in four countries, including Bangladesh. The study showed that the chances of women owning land and the size of a landholding increased with age in Bangladesh, although the reason for this was mostly attributed to inheriting land from parents or deceased husbands rather than years of marriage and trust, or because they had purchased it themselves.



Asset ownership, control and access mapping with men's group.

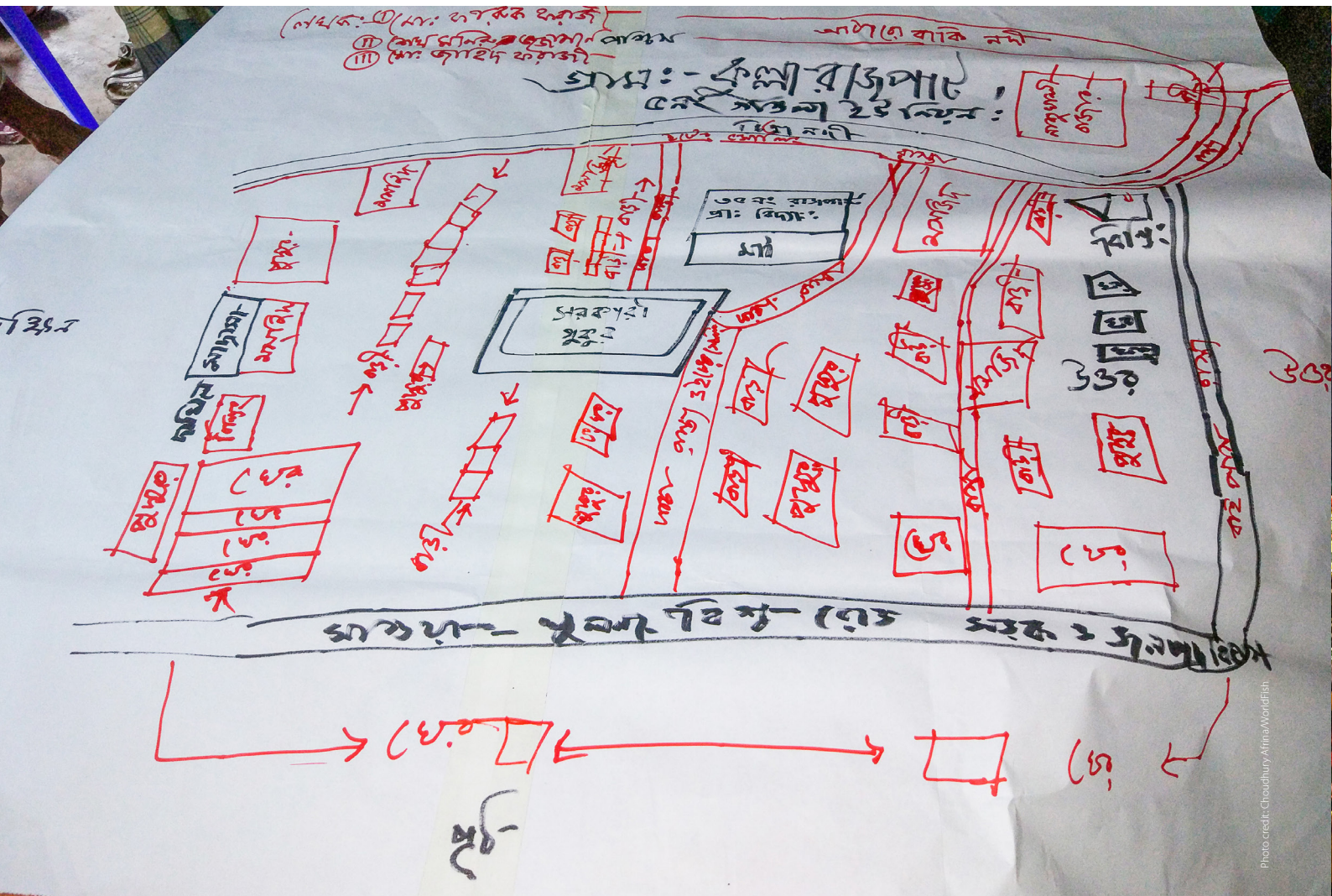


# Lessons learned

Overall, the study revealed the gendered and nuanced nature of ownership, which is perceived and experienced differently by men and women. The women interviewed were more often found to experience psychological ownership while men more frequently claimed legal ownership, both of which have their own sets of outcomes based on the level of decision-making and control men and women are able to exert. Factors ranging from property laws to age, experience and wealth also determine the extent to which men and women are able to influence decisions about a resource. Finally, the study revealed gendered implications for women, whether they attain legal ownership or continue to experience psychological ownership, which includes the different trade-offs women and men have to make, women's bargaining power within a household, their capacity to innovate, and their ability to cope with shocks. Many studies have recognized ownership as a means to increase women's empowerment. This study

argues that while ownership holds value for women's empowerment, the very nuanced and gendered nature of ownership needs to be understood and addressed for ownership to be truly empowering. Here, we make the following recommendations for researchers and development practitioners in the design and implementation of gender-sensitive aquaculture projects.

1. Aquaculture projects should recognize joint ownership as a significant barrier to women's capacity to innovate. Targeting women for aquaculture training with homestead ponds may not be enough, considering that a large number of such ponds in Bangladesh are jointly owned. Women aquaculture trainees from nuclear households already face constraints from unequal gender relations and from legal owners of ponds in applying their knowledge. In the case of jointly owned ponds, the constraints



Village resource mapping with men's group.



are bigger considering the added layers of gender relationships that hinder women's ability to adopt technologies in a pond with many different stakeholders, interests, investments, labor contributions and strategies to distribute benefits. Further research is needed to understand the dynamics behind jointly owned ponds to find ways to target these women so that they may undertake and benefit from aquaculture.

2. Ownership is important to combat women's future insecurities. The prospect of an insecure future makes women more likely to conform to the demands of the owners of assets, who essentially have power over them. Asking permission before using or benefiting from a resource also becomes relevant in this case. Aquaculture projects need to ensure powerful owners and/or family members are involved and consulted in the extension process so that women are better able to access and use the resource and thereby introduce innovative practices that will be beneficial to the whole family.

3. Ownership is also linked to decision-making. Women who contribute financially in acquiring resources or are fortunate enough to own a resource have better abilities to negotiate and to decide on usage and benefits derived from a resource. Aquaculture projects can consider providing some form of leverage to women by providing subsidized resource ownership opportunities, such as inputs (e.g. fingerlings, feed) or technologies that meet women's needs and preferences (e.g. gill nets for catching mola, a local small fish, that do not require women to enter the pond). Projects should keep in mind that women's financial capabilities (mostly derived from small-scale endeavors such as poultry) to purchase resources are limited and so resources made available to them need to be affordable.
4. The study showed that women's knowledge of aquaculture influences their ownership, so transferring knowledge and building skills in aquaculture can have positive impacts on women's



Village resource mapping with women's group.



control over ponds and men's willingness to trust women with aquaculture resources. However, training and knowledge transfer may not be enough as these conclusions demonstrate.

5. Young women and girls are especially vulnerable to ownership gaps relative to older women. They face an uncertain future and often find themselves in new volatile relationships brought about by marriage. This frequently happens at an age before they are able to acquire the knowledge, skills and resources to live a self-sufficient life. This creates a cycle of dependency. The notion of the man providing for the woman or girl renders it unnecessary to invest in women's resources, skills or self-sufficiency. Therefore, targeting young, newly married women and girls is necessary, and non-aquaculture attributes such as assertiveness, self-confidence and negotiating skills should be built into the extension process.

6. Social norms should not be overlooked. Even with resource ownership and the knowledge to effectively use a resource, social norms and stereotypes around what roles are deemed appropriate for women can hinder their capacity to use and benefit from a resource. For example, the study showed that women are not able to access *ghers* because of such normative constraints, or women who do legally inherit property find it difficult to exercise their decision-making rights. Therefore, aquaculture projects should take steps to build family and community acceptance around new roles for women. What could help are exercises that aim to change perceptions and behaviors, open dialogue on hopes and fears, attain buy-in from community members and build an understanding of the benefits to the family as a whole.



A woman watches as her husband catches fish.



# Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, the names of the villages and respondents are kept anonymous.
- <sup>2</sup> In Bangladesh, communities are allowed to follow their own personal religious laws, customs and belief systems, which coexist with public laws. In fact, Bangladesh had reservations on Article 13(a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) regarding equal rights to property because it would hurt religious sentiments.
- <sup>3</sup> The 1997 policy had stipulated equal property rights, but it was taken out of the 2011 policy. Even though equal property rights were deleted from the 2011 policy, there were protests by religious groups against the policy, under the assumption that it still included them.
- <sup>4</sup> Rice field with a trench around it where fish can be grown simultaneously or alternatively.
- <sup>5</sup> Her late widowed mother had inherited it from her father.
- <sup>6</sup> Any assets a woman brings with her to her in-laws are appreciated because her in-laws gain the resource even though the woman can claim ownership over it. However, taking the resource away from her parental home may cause resentment among her brothers or cousins, who would have otherwise enjoyed the benefits from it.
- <sup>7</sup> In Bangladesh, there is a strong perception that fair skin is more beautiful. In arranged marriages therefore, girls with fair skin are in demand, and young girls often try to lighten their skin with cosmetic products.
- <sup>8</sup> By “feel it,” the woman explained that she means her daughter-in-law does not love and care for fish and fish culture.
- <sup>9</sup> Joint families are families where multiple generations of family members and their respective families live together and share resources. It is the opposite of nuclear families.

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