

Marginalization or Empowerment? Women's Involvement in Shrimp Cultivation and Shrimp Processing Plants in Bangladesh

Sadeka Halim¹

Introduction

This paper will give an insight into whether the involvement of women in the shrimp sector may be considered as empowering them and providing a viable option for their sustainable livelihood. The above-mentioned aim of the paper will be assessed against the context of women's involvement in various activities related to shrimp production, specifically at the production level and in the shrimp processing plants. The findings of this paper will enable us to arrive at some useful directions and implications for policy formulation.

Commercial shrimp culture began in the 1970s when the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) realized that export of prawns could bring in foreign exchange to the country. The World Bank has prescribed the GoB to make prawn farming to be a viable livelihood option so that the poor can find gainful employment and improve on the return from their land. In reality, however, the business interests of the outsiders have dominated the industry, which results in the exclusion of local people (Christian Aid, 1996). Tempted by lucrative western export markets and the prospects of making quick profits, the government decided to promote shrimp on a larger scale. Thus, in Bangladesh for almost two decades now fry collection has become the chief source of livelihood for women and children in many coastal areas.

Background

Change in Landscape: Ecological and Economic Deprivation

Shrimp production in the coastal areas (Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Cox's Bazar districts) has led to the change of the total landscape. Various environmental studies have been conducted to highlight the impact of shrimp production, which is quite evident from the disappearance of the mangrove forests and their conversion into shrimp farms. This ecological change is a major factor behind floods and cyclones in the coastal areas alongside the health hazards of the local people (UBINIG, 1997). Many villagers lack adequate shelter, since the mud and bamboo houses have deteriorated due to the constant dampness caused by flooding. Apart from such natural environmental degradation, the activity of fry catching with very thin nets is environmentally harmful. People while catching fries killed other species of marine resources in a ratio of 1 fry to 500 other species (UBINIG, 1997). Thus the other dimension of the change is the scarcity of indigenous fish species.

The adverse impact of shrimp production on environment has negatively affected the situation of women. It has been claimed that the deforestation in the coastal region increases women's workload. Ahmed (1996) points out that women used to collect cow dung, leaves and wood but they can't do so since the trees are gone. Women and girls also spend more time and energy

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Sociology & Department of Women's Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

E-mail: sadeka@bangla.net

each day - a minimum of three hours to collect safe drinking water and fuel for cooking, due to the dwindling supplies of firewood and cow dung.

Furthermore, it has been pointed that in the south-west region the influential *gher* owners have deprived the marginal people of their livelihood by displacing them from their ancestral homesteads. Due to various malpractices in commercial shrimp culture the landless people have also lost their right to *khas* land. It is estimated that shrimp culture occupied 20,000 hectares of land in 1979-80 while a total of 410,000 hectares of land came under this business in 1996-97 (Barkat, 2004) The health condition of the entire poor population has suffered from the transformation of the landscape and declining incomes. Villagers can no longer produce or purchase adequate nutrition for their families. In particular, their diet lacks protein from fresh water fish, dairy products, meat, and poultry. Even livestock has declined as the grass in the former grazing commons has disappeared. Poor nutrition has resulted in increased birth defects, stunted growth, night blindness, and various childhood diseases, as well as in an increase in miscarriages and maternal mortality and morbidity (Ain O Shalish Kendra 1994).

Are Women Benefiting?

Practically in all areas of the developing world, women are contributing to the growth of economy through participating in various types of economic activities and fishing is one such important sector. Women in fishing communities contribute a great deal to the fishing economy, either directly by harvesting, processing and marketing, or indirectly by providing vital extra income, food crops and a host of supporting activities that ensure the well being of the family.

Women's involvement in the shrimp sector in Bangladesh is part of the global economy. In Bangladesh women's movement into labour market is indicated by the labour force participation rate (LFPR). The official statistics indicate that the LFPR for women in the labour market is still lower than the LFPR for men, but female LFPR has been growing at a faster pace than male LFPR in rural areas. Between 1984/85 and 1990/91, 33 percent of the incremental increase in total employment was due to increase in women's employment; in rural areas 59 per cent of the increase in employment came from female entrants to the labour force. During this period the share of rural women in total rural employed population also rose from 9 percent to 13 percent (Mahmud, 2001). Clearly it indicates that rural women have been involving themselves in market based economic activities (relative to home based economic activities) since the late 1980s at a pace that is growing much faster than that of men.

Within the literature on globalization there has been a focus on both negative and positive effects of globalization, particularly on women (Elson and Pearson 1981; Mitter 1986; Stichter and Parpart 1990; Ward 1990; cited in Afshar and Barrientos, 1999:4). The contradictory effects of globalization on women have been both empowering and disempowering. It has been argued that globalization has created opportunities and sources of employment for women. Women in developing countries have become an integral part of this liberalized labour market. Usually, in the global economy the industrial expansions are concentrated in 'special economic,' zones. In most cases companies in these zones hire young unmarried women, women's work is often insecure and low paid. Women labourers are mostly employed through subcontracting. Women of all ages are employed in smaller firms, workshops, or at home producing for transnational companies. The consequences have been a gradual decrease in any separation between the 'formal' and 'informal' sectors. Female labour is, thus, increasingly integrated into global production; however, in a fragmented form with contradictory implications. The fragmentations of the labour processes combined with the feminization of labour market have imposed new demands on women's time. Women's participation in income generating activities has generated the 'triple burden' for women. So the process of exploitation of women in global economy is perpetuated based on the assumption that women's time is infinite. Further studies show that in the new global labour market based on low-paid, flexible work, poor households cannot depend on a single (traditionally, male) breadwinner to sustain (Standing, 1989; cited in Afshar and Barrientos, 1999:4). Women have become an integral part of this liberalized labour market,

however, simultaneously been marginalized within it. (Afshar and Barrientos, 1999: 3-5). Moreover, patriarchal structures have not disappeared and which is reinforcing marginalization of women in all spheres of social, economic, political and environmental arena.

It is against this national and global context that we need to look at women's involvement in shrimp farming and processing.

Organization of the paper

The paper is divided in to two sections. Section I highlights women's involvement in shrimp cultivation, the problems encountered by women while working in the shrimp *gher* and the prevalence of violence against women are also discussed. The paper then turns to Section II where attempts are made to depict the situation of women workers in the processing plants. This paper concludes with some specific policy challenges.

Section I Women's Involvement in Shrimp Cultivation

Women's involvement in shrimp cultivation is not a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh. Poor women living in coastal regions of Bangladesh have been traditionally engaged both in fisheries and agriculture for a long time. The first case study on women's involvement in shrimp cultivation is drawn from an earlier study on the Fourth Fisheries Project. (2001)² Various techniques (both qualitative and quantitative) such as household survey, focus group discussion (FGD) and case study³, were employed to explore the situation of women and children in the shrimp sector

1.2 Women's Labour Exploited

Women in the shrimp production mainly get work as wage laborers, building the embankments around prawn ponds, maintaining service roads and weeding in the shrimp fields. Women from various polders reported that they have been working in the shrimp sector for the last 20 years. Women and children do various types of work related to shrimp production. Most women and children of the study area maintain their livelihood by collecting shrimp fry, preparing *gher* as day labourers, clearing the *shaowla* and working in the processing plant. It is mostly the poor women who are working in the shrimp sector.

During peak fry collection periods (locally known as *Ghone*), women spend the entire night collecting fries. Shrimp fry collection starts from the month of Boishak (mid April) and peaks from the month of Jaishtho (mid May). This fry collection continues through the month of Bhadro (mid September) when the numbers of fry collected start falling. The women and children spend early dawn hours or the late evening catching the shrimp fry from the rivers, canals, etc. During the full moon the fry availability increases and collectors work any hours that they are available.

The *gher* owners prefer women workers to male workers. It is because women could be paid less than the male workers and usually women never resist such exploitation. The labour

² This case study draws from an earlier study, Women and Children Study, Feasibility Study for the Shrimp component of the Fourth Fisheries Project (FFP), Fourth Fisheries Project, The Department of Fisheries and The Department for International Development (DFID), submitted by Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (2001)

³ For the purpose of the present paper qualitative data were used extensively. The study area comprising of five polders (polder no. 5, 15, 23, 31 and 32) are located in the South West Coastal region of Bangladesh. Of the five polders, two (polder no .5 and 15) are located in Satkhira and three (polder no.23, 31 and 32) are located in khulna.

requirements in the *gher* are to repair and reconstruct *gher* embankments, which require earth excavation and movement, clearing the weed and other aquatic plants from the water bodies, liming the *gher* water bodies, fish sorting, etc. The preparatory work begins from Choitro (mid March) and Boishak (mid April) when the *ghers* are prepared for stocking. Generally, women and children are engaged in the *ghers* for five hours beginning at 7 am and extending till 1 pm.

During the lean period, some of the women and children continue providing services to the *ghers*, while others seek employment in homesteads, repairing homes, processing crops, or for domestic services. Some also seek work in the crop fields, road repair and development, canal excavation, etc. Of the 36 out of 40 women who were interviewed from five villages located in the five polders were wage laborers, while four came from households that owned small shrimp farms and occasionally worked in these *ghers*.

1.3 Exploitation of Wages

The women in the study area reported that the wage rate for the *gher* preparation is too low to maintain their family expenses. The average wage rate for women per day is between Tk. 45 - 50 and for the children it is Tk. 15 -20. In all the activities related to shrimp production women receive lower wage compared to their male counterparts. The participants drew attention to the fact that men get preferential treatment in terms of wages, although both men and women are engaged in similar type of activities. Women reported that they receive Tk. 30-40 per day for earth excavation in the *gher*, while their male counterparts receive Tk. 50-60 per day. For cleaning and de-heading they receive Tk. 25-30 per day while their male counterparts receive Tk. 30-40 per day. The children get even less, Tk. 10-15 per day. (FGD conducted in Sutarkhali, polder # 32).

Women continue to accept the low wage only to maintain their subsistence. There are several reasons for women receiving lower wages. These are as follows:

- The supply is more than the demand for women labourers; therefore, the employer takes the advantage of the situation and exploits women's labour.
- Absence of any other better alternative is compelling women to do such works with low wage.
- Paymaster claims that men work more than women.

The other form of exploitation women have to encounter is being subjected to bonded labour as evidenced by FGD reports. Poor men and women take loans in advance from local wealthy people. This system of taking loan is known as *dadon*. Majority of the poor families take *dadon* from the *faria* (local small scale buyers of fries who later sell the fries to the market) during their crisis period. The pre-condition of such *dadon* giving is to sell the collected shrimp fry to the *faria* from whom *dadon* was taken. The *farias* exploit the poor families because they (*farias*) buy the shrimp fry for less than the market price. If the member of any family, who has taken *dadon* from *faria*, does not collect fry, the *faria* creates pressure on them to do so.

As women and children fry collectors sell their catch at shore or at home, they have to agree to whatever rate is offered. Men fry collectors on the other hand can travel to trading points/centers where they can compare rates of several purchasers and decide whom to sell to and at what rate. Women are forced to sell to the *faria* alone, who is the sole buyer, controlling the price to his advantage. The above finding is similar to the findings of many other developing countries (FAO, 1990) where marketing, supervision and management of fish production remains a male domain.

Shrimp fries collection has attracted the women across classes. In the study area women from the affluent section is also catching fries. It has given them an additional source of income, which they enjoy for petty luxuries. There were four women out of 40 who were interviewed for semi-structured interviews who spent some time catching large *bagda* shrimp during the season, and this venture has been rewarding as the catch trades for good cash. The injection of cash economy therefore is breaking traditional barrier in certain gender specific tasks.

However, employment in shrimp production is seasonal, menial and poorly paid. The income of women workers from working in shrimp production has to be set against a reduced contribution of women's traditional unpaid work in agricultural activities and household production. With such a low income women respondents mentioned that they cannot manage their family properly. In FGD discussions in five polders large number of participants expressed that they did not consider their engagement in shrimp fry collection and ancillary services to be of significance in terms of improving their overall living conditions. The daily rearing barely covers for two meals. All other essential expenditure for their family's upkeep, for example clothes, medical treatment, etc. are left unattended because of poverty.

Some reports pointed that women's prawn-related cash income had given them some economic independence, raising their status in the family (Christian Aid, 1996) but their income contribution does not necessarily help improve the status of fisherwomen as a group nor does it significantly improve women's control over their development (FAO, 1990). Women see employment in shrimp as the only resort in a *no-choice situation* where opportunities for productive engagements are scarce.

1.4 Burden on Women

Despite women's involvement in the shrimp sector women still do their routine household tasks and involvement in shrimp production has increased their total workload. Women reported that their workload at home has also been increased particularly due to the increasing shortage of drinking water and also to collect fuel wood and biomass (this findings also support Nilufar's earlier findings of 1996). In FGD women participants of various polders mentioned that previously they used to spend an hour for the collection of fuel wood. These days fuel collection takes about two hours. Women mentioned that because of the heavy workload in shrimp farms women couldn't do family work. If women fail to prepare meal on time their husbands usually beat them up.

1.5 Insecurity in Shrimp related activities

The work environment is not free of problems. Women and children have to encounter some problems while working in the shrimp production. During shrimp fry collection from the river, especially young girls and women are harassed either physically or verbally. Women do not feel secured while collecting fry from the river especially in early hours of the morning. FGDs on the insecurity of women and children progressed with stimulated responses from participants. Some of the major points to which all participants agreed are summarized below:

- *Insecurity of women and children has been on the increase.*
- Although the apparent monetary benefit attracts the women and children to work in shrimp related activities, they work against the context of occupational risks, hazards as well as absence of social laws. The women and children have no means to challenge these obstacles. According to the participants the rule of business is to *accept this situation or perish* (FGD conducted in polder #32).

Majority of the respondents stated that harassment and violence against women and children is quite visible in the society, as elsewhere in the country.

The main problems the women respondents identified are as follows:

- They were not allowed leave even if they fell sick;
- They were jeered at and verbally and physically harassed by male guards, managers and male youth inside the *gher*;
- They were fired from work if they arrived late for work.

Case studies conducted in various polders reveal that male agents like gher owners and gher guards sexually exploit women. There is instance where male trade agent takes advantage of women and makes sexual advances. A woman (living in Kaminibashia, polder no. 31) mentioned that when she found that she was pregnant by a male agent in shrimp trade, that particular man refused to marry her. When her family contacted him for marriage he demanded dowry of Taka10, 000 to be given. The family couldn't meet the demand. A few days later the person responsible was not found anywhere. So she was compelled to live with her newborn daughter alone, without a father. Soon, society identified her as a "fallen," women and she was asked to live separately. Her elder sister also fell prey to similar situation and she also lives with her son by herself.

Women in various FGD pointed out that it is because of women's helplessness and vulnerable position in shrimp trade that women are left at the whims and wishes of those engaging them in work.

Furthermore, the shrimp fry catchers' women and children are exposed to different diseases because of the nature of the work. Women are also not aware of the diseases that might be caused for being in the water for such long periods. There is a lack of proper health care facilities in the study area. Further, unequal power relationships between men and women hinder women to get access to whatever health service is available.

1.6 Organizational Capacity and Support

The prevailing social and cultural norms prevent women from having a public role. Therefore, in the study area there is no such incidence of women collectively protesting for low wage and sexual harassment. The FGD participants in various polders mentioned that they (women) have little option of seeking justice to such harassment, violence, torture or bondage. The women participants considered the following reasons for harassment and discrimination:

The number of women and children available in the area and willing to engage in shrimp farm services outweighed the demand for labour by the farms; providing a scope to the employers and their staff to suppress them and their legal rights.

Increase of status, influence and power among *gher* owners, fry traders, etc. have made them more arrogant, and in the absence of proper practice of law and order, these people behave in whatever manner they deem appropriate.

The sudden rise in cash income from the shrimp-farming sector also provides some men to resort to gambling, alcohol and womanizing and verbal/sexual harassment.

Shrimp production in southwestern Bangladesh has been encountering resistance. There was resistance in the beginning of shrimp production. The people in 22 polder have been struggling for years to retain the shrimp free status of the polder confronting various intrigues, physical attack and intimidation. Since 1980 they have been facing movements against the forcible encroachment of their lands for shrimp. In their fight for survival the landless had to sacrifice the life of Korunamoyee Sarder, a leader of the area in 1990. However, currently the resistance has become more scattered. People do resist but cannot raise their voices much because shrimp traders are highly influential. (NIJERA KORl, Annual Report, 2002-2003:40)

There are some large national NGOs like BRAC, Grameen Bank who are working with the rural poor in the study area but their major focus is on credit disbursement and not on social justice issues. FGD reports show that majority of the women in the study area are the members of organizations such as CARITAS, BRAC, GANAUNNAYAN, HEED Bangladesh and Shushilon. FGD reports from various polders reveal that the lack of organizational support to women and children in the study area is depriving them of justice. The role of local organizations is not satisfactory in terms of women and children's interest. The absence of organizational support is preventing women from mobilizing in groups. Group

mobilization is supposed to give women strength to fight for their rights. The women participants need legal education and other support to deal with the local power structure and other problems.

Majority of the women in the study area have no political affiliations or other involvement. They just cast their vote during the election and in the case of casting vote they are influenced by their husband or by the male head of the family or by the powerful male elite of the society. Furthermore, women participants mentioned that they do not have frequent contacts with the elected female members of union *parishads* through whom they expected to get some assistance.

1.7 Challenges Ahead

The above case study reveals that large number of women and children's livelihood is dependent on shrimp production related activities. As mentioned earlier in the past these poor women used to engage in agricultural activities or household production. These traditional occupations are now less available as women have been increasingly entering into the cash economy by taking wage work in shrimp *ghers*. However, in shrimp related project no such labour standards, social protection for women and a social security system for seasonal, part-time, temporary work is provided. Against these circumstances the legal provision that is most relevant for addressing women's equality relates to employment, including the right to work and receive equal pay for equal value as stated in (Article 11) of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Section II: Situation of Women Workers in the Processing Plants⁴

2. Study Area and Sample Covered

Factories visited were four in Khulna and two in Chittagong, and the total interviewed were 50 female workers (approximately) and 10 employers' representatives, and eleven NGO representatives. Women workers were interviewed inside and outside the factory. The high-level management authorities of the visited factories were interviewed. Relevant information was also collected by interviewing government officials.

2.1 Agencies Involved: Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock

Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock is directly involved with the shrimp processing plants. The Department of Fisheries (DoF) is responsible for checking the quality and safety of the seafood, which is exported to the EU and various other countries. It also issues the certificates and licenses to the shrimp processing plants.

2.2 Department of Fisheries and European Union

Department of Fisheries under the ministry of Fisheries and Livestock is the only agency responsible for controlling food safety standard for fish and fishery products intended for export. Realizing the importance of quality and safety of fish and fishery products the department of fisheries have established laboratories in the field. The responsibility of the Department of Fisheries is only limited to the quality control of the products and the supervision of the technical side of shrimp processing plants. Department of Fisheries Quality Control division selects factories for EU certificates. The European Union is concerned with the "Health of the Shrimps". The 50 EU certificate holders out of total 127 plants (Seafood Bangladesh, A Journal of BFFEA,

⁴ This case study draws from an earlier report by the author and Omar Farque, Study of fact Finding –II (Processing) of Frozen Food (Shrimp) Sector, Project: Women Empowerment through Employment and Health (WEEH), Sub-project: Women Empowerment through Decent Employment (WEDE), Private Sector Initiative Component, International Labour Organization (ILO) September, 2002.

Volume-3, August 2002) claim that they are strictly abiding by the HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) module to maintain the quality of the products. HACCP is a pro-active approach to seafood safety. FAO, WHO and Codex Alimentations Commission are supporting the HACCP concept as a good logical system that can ensure safety and assure quality of seafood.

The EU works as a business mediator between the local prawn entrepreneurs and the overseas buyers. They also make sure that the shrimp exported are not affected by any kind of bacteria and safeguard the health of the consumers of European countries. EU, USA and Japan are the major importing countries of Bangladesh fish and fishery products.

2.3 Women workers in the Plants

Both permanent and casual workers are working in the processing plants. Majority of the workers are casual labourers. These casual workers are employed through the contractors. According to The Industrial Relations Ordinance 1969, a worker “is a person who enters in to a contract of service under the management and does not include a person who works under the control and supervision of the contractor.” The terms of employment must establish a relationship of master and servant or employer and employee between the person employed and the establishment. It is against this context that we need to examine the status of casual women workers who are working in large numbers in the shrimp processing plants. This means that workers employed through the contractors would not be able to enjoy the protection offered to other workers under the Industrial Relations Ordinance.

Women (and men) employed through contractors do not fall under the purview of factory laws and inspection by the concerned government inspectors. The factory owners maintain no timetable. The policy of the processing plants is that during the peak season the factories contact the contractors to supply them with women workers. The employment of these women depends upon the production of raw shrimp i.e. during the period of the supply of the raw shrimp. The peak season of the supply of shrimp is between March and October. Workers have to work 24 hours (3 shifts a day) during peak season. During off-season, there is almost no work in the shrimp processing plants. The permanent workers work from 9 a.m. to 9 p. m. and 6 days a week and can take leave for 12 days without pay. Minor girls and boys are found working beside their mothers. Some factory owners denied the involvement of child labor in the shrimp industries. However, an insignificant number of employers admitted to the fact that minor girls and boys are involved.

The interviewed personnel of the management mentioned that permanent employment is highly limited in the processing plants. Permanent work would provide them with certain benefits such as dress, medical facilities, festival bonus, etc. However, it has been found that most of the female permanent workers are switching jobs from one factory to another. Therefore, they do not remain with one factory for a long period. It is because of their dissatisfaction with the salaries that these women changed factories so frequently. The factory owners are also taking advantage of this situation. If these workers stay for a year then these female workers become eligible for all the benefits that fall under the purview of The Factories Act, 1965. Thus, the owners do nothing to give raises in their salary and keep these skilled workers.

2.4 Inadequate Income for Workers

The management of the factories directly pays the salaries of the permanent workers involved in the shrimp processing activities. But the management of the factory does not pay the salary of the casual workers directly. As mentioned earlier, women workers who work as casual workers are not paid directly by the factory owners but by the contractor who himself is paid by unit of production (e.g. Kilogram) by the factories and later the contractor provides salary to these workers. Casual workers, as noted earlier, are in the payroll of the contractors and are maintained separately and independently by the contractors themselves. The contractors who are

responsible for their discipline maintain their attendance sheet. They are hired and fired by the contractors on which the management of the factories has no control at all. Therefore, these workers are surviving on the mercy of the contractors.

The casual workers are not aware of the amount of money paid for their hard labor to the contractor by the factory owners. It is revealed from the field investigation that the factory owners fix a price for the processing each Kilogram of the raw shrimp. The contractors get the bill considering the volume of the raw shrimps. Finally, they distribute it to the workers according to their own ways. The factory owners are not aware of the salary system of the contractors. In many cases the contractors pay not only low salary but also delay the payment to the workers. The salary paid by the contractors varies for work in different sections. For example, women get Tk. 3 for peeling and Tk. 2.75 for de-heading one Kg. of raw shrimp and Tk. 1 per Kg. for packaging. Children get far lesser amount. Overtime is usually not paid in cash but in kind (e.g. food). Women continue to accept the low wage for the reasons mentioned above.

2.5 Protection Against Contingencies and Uncertainties

There are no formal policies in terms of work related benefits. The management provides two bonuses during the *Eid* festivals to the staff. Informal arrangement exists for leave (if required). Women come from areas adjacent to the factory and employers do not provide them with any housing facilities. Some factories have built tin sheds for their permanent workers for emergency stays overnight. However, female workers are not encouraged to stay in such temporary residences. Not transport is provided for coming to the factory and going home in the evening, particularly when working for long hours and late nights. Women workers do not get leave or compensation for illness and ill treatment by the contractors and supervisors. The large factories provide women workers with better facilities than the small factories in terms of toilets and rest rooms.

2.6 Harassment at Workplace

Sexual harassment is reflected in the words, look or gesture, which offends the target person. Such harassment can range from jokes and mere touching to blackmails and physical assaults. Female workers also mentioned that if a male worker harasses a women worker, the employers do not respond to provide justice. Sometimes the offender is fired, but so too is the woman!

2.7 Freedom of Association

Like their sisters in the shrimp cultivation sector women workers in the plants as well do not have any platform to express their grievances. Nor do they have any NGO's support, trade union or other organizations to fight for their rights. There is a provision in the Industrial Relations Ordinance (1977, section –24) to form a 'Participation Committee,' in each factory. Both the workers and the management of the factory will be included in this committee. The management staff of the factories visited had Collective Bargaining Agents (CBA) to represent their Problems but the women labourer's voices were not taken into consideration. No such 'Participation Committee' was found in the factories visited. Women workers opined that if there were women's associations, the opportunity of getting jobs and better work environment could have been attained⁵.

2.8 Health and Safety

⁵ It could be pointed out that the Government has ratified numerous ILO conventions, including the Convention on Equal Remuneration, 1951 (No. 100), Convention on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958 (No. 111), Convention on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, 1948 (No. 87) and Convention on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining, 1949 (No. 98). However, no such conventions are practiced to respect the rights of workers in the plants and companies.

Many workers suffer from various diseases in the shrimp industries such as colds, severe muscle strain, back pain, irritation of the eye, diarrhea, and other stomach related diseases, and cuts and bruises. The management during interviews claimed that there were designated local doctors to treat all their workers, including the casual workers. However, many workers complained that the treatment by these doctors usually amounted to little more than the supply of some ointment for fungal infection in their hands. Women workers also expressed their reluctance to use gloves because this slowed down their work. Long work hour takes its toll on the women workers' general health condition and well-being, making them more susceptible to diseases. The factories have no policy on maternity leave. Employers were uncomfortable when inquired about maternity leave.

2.9 What could be done?

The Department of Fisheries is aware of the employment situation of the permanent and causal workers in the shrimp processing plants. The officials expressed their inability to improve the working conditions in terms of wage, health care for the causal workers and other facilities within the factories. The officials mentioned that in various workshops with the factory owners they have expressed their concerns for improving the condition of the workers. As mentioned earlier, the Department of Fisheries' tasks do not include the supervision of the situation of the permanent workers except the hygiene of both permanent and causal workers. However, according to the officials of the Department of Fisheries, the prawn entrepreneurs, who can make substantial profits within a matter of months, take little or no responsibility for the betterment of the workers' conditions. The EU, however, has the scope to include the "Human Face" of the production within their Corporate Responsibilities and if EU wish they can chalk out strategies to improve the employment situation of the workers in the shrimp processing plants by providing direct and indirect supports. The training components designed to provide technical assistance to ensure better quality production following EU certified HACCP but no training is provided to address the human face of the production. The HACCP training does not address training on workers fundamental rights, decent employment etc. HACCP is completely devoid of social dimensions.

As a member state of the ILO, Bangladesh has undertaken to respect, to promote and to realize the principles contained in the 1998 ILO declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and can call upon ILO assistance to help achieve this. Bangladesh also ratified the CEDAW in 1984 and also, as mentioned earlier, the provision that is most appropriate to be used for advancing women's equality relates to employment, including the right to work and receive equal pay for equal value, as stated in Article 11 of CEDAW.

2.10 Challenging Tasks

- To initiate dialogue with Bangladesh Frozen Food Exporters Association to motivate the factory management to have effective social dialogue between management and workers
- The ILO can also approach EU to bring changes in policies and put emphasis on the Human Face of the production
- To review Labor Laws/Code and CEDAW in line with the ILO conventions and other declarations to examine the negative impact of labor policies on women's living standards

3. Concluding Remarks

In Bangladesh over the last 20 years, women's participation in economic activities has moved beyond agriculture to all areas. Women's increasing participation in the labour force is expanding beyond the family farm enterprise to global market economy. However, women still have a smaller percentage of shares than men in the local and global market economy but the number of women involved has increased. It is evident from the relevant data that women and children labourers work with low levels of income and little job security and encounters various forms of

oppressions. The two case studies discussed above lead us to conclude that globalization has facilitated participation of Bangladeshi women in various economic sectors and involvement in shrimp cultivation and in processing plants are two such important sectors. It is obvious that globalization is exploiting women in Bangladesh as cheap source of labour. Women are deprived of due wages. Meanwhile, the shrimp traders are getting more and more powerful. Further, women workers are working without any government regulatory control in the private sector where women's labour is exploited to bring foreign cash into the national economy. Women are encountering various forms of work related discrimination and violence. Such discrimination exists not so much because of discriminatory laws but because of non-applicability of some crucial laws to the specific situations particularly to casual women workers. Therefore, it could be asserted that shrimp production has not only led to economic deprivation and ecological degradation of the coastal areas but has also marginalized the poorest of the poor, who are mostly *women*.

References

- Afshar, Haleh, & Barrientos, S.(1999). *Women, Globalization and Fragmentation in the Developing World*, London: St. Martin Press.
- Ahmed, N. (1996). *Commercial Shrimp Cultivation in Khulna, Bangladesh: Its Negative Impact on women, Their Families, and the Environment*, ICRW Report.
- , Study on Marketing of Fresh water Prawn in Bagerhat to International Markets (no date of publication).
- Ain O Salish Kendra, (1994). *Shrimp Cultivation and Socio-Economic and Environmental Impact on Women in the Coastal Area: A Case Study*. Dhaka.
- BFFEA, (Bangladesh Frozen Food Association) (2002). *Seafood Bangladesh*, Volume-3, August.
- Barkat, A. (2004). Commercial Shrimp, Farming Threatened Ecology and the Livelihood of the Poor, paper presented in workshop on Terrorism-Based Trade, Democracy and Rights of the Poor, organized by NIJERAKORI, Dhaka, 4-5 April.
- Begum, A & S.M. N.(2000)..Social Aspects of Coastal Shrimp Aquaculture in Bangladesh, Dhaka, CARITAS-Bangladesh.
- Bundell,K.& Maybin, E. (1996) .After the Prawn Rush, The Human and environmental costs of commercial prawn farming, Christian Aid.
- FAO: (1990a). Shrimp Seed Collectors of Bangladesh, FAO, India.
- FAO (1990b). Bay of Bengal Programme: Small Scale Communities.
- FAO (nd) The Role of Women in Small-Scale Fisheries, FAO
- Halim, Sadeka & Farque, O. (2002). Study of fact Finding –II (Processing) of Frozen Food (Shrimp) Sector, Project: Women Empowerment through Employment and Health (WEEH), Sub-project: Women Empowerment through Decent Employment (WEDE), Private Sector Initiative Component, International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Halim, S. et.al. (2001). Women and Children Study, Feasibility Study for the Shrimp Component of the Fourth Fisheries Project (FFP), Fourth Fisheries Project, The Department of Fisheries and The Department for International Development (DFID), submitted by Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies,(BCAS) Dhaka.
- Mahmud, S. (2001). The Labour Use of Women in Bangladesh,” in Rehman Sobhan and Nasreen Khundker (eds.) Globalisation and Gender: Changing Patterns of Women's Employment in Bangladesh, Centre for Policy Dialogue and UPL.
- NIJERA KORI, Annual Report, (2002-2003). Published by 3/3 Block A, Lalmatia, Nijera Kori, Dhaka-1207, Bangladesh.
- UBINIG,(Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharoni Gobeshona) (1997). When the Trees Are Gone, Social and Environment Costs of Converting Mangroves into Shrimp Fields, UBING, Dhaka.