

Border Haats and Women Empowerment

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Historically, women in South Asia are restricted from participating in the labour market due to various socio-cultural constraints. However, as with other countries in the region, opportunities for participation of women in labour force have increased in Bangladesh and India. This has happened due to gender-friendly changes in the policy advocacy and enactment of the legal provision in favour of women over the last decade.

As most of the Border Haats are located in remote areas, the means of transportation are inadequate. Although there are a few women visible on the Indian side of the bordering areas, women are almost invisible on the Bangladesh side (two percent only). This Briefing Paper argues that Border Haats can be instrumental to women's empowerment in the region by enhancing women's participation in the labour market.

Introduction

The empowerment of women is crucial to the promotion of gender equality. It focuses on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives.

Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realisation of human rights for all. Empowerment of women is measured through

several indicators such as economic, educational, political empowerment as well as access to reproductive health support and resources.

Economic empowerment through access to income-earning opportunities is one of the major indicators of women empowerment. However, discriminatory practices are discernible in the context of gender-based participation in public and private spheres, especially in South Asian countries.

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Women in South Asia are restricted from participating in labour market due to socio-cultural constraints and women's gender identity

Culturally, women in South Asia are restricted from participating in labour market due to socio-cultural constraints and women's gender identity. Reproductive roles of women, gender norms in the patriarchal social structure, and such other barriers militate against women's mobility and empowerment.

Although women in the region contribute significantly to the informal sector, much of their activities are counted as domestic or subsistence roles (women involved in food processing or packaging from within their households), their gender-assigned roles (women participate in almost all the production-related activities, in addition to their domestic chores, while men are mostly engaged in the public sphere) all of which are mostly unremunerated.

However, over the years, significant changes in policy advocacy, legal provisions in favour of women, access to credit, and other relevant actions in countries like Bangladesh and India have created opportunities for women to increase their participation in the labour force.

Bangladesh and India have shared-culture, trade, and language through history. Although the political division in 1947 interrupted many of the ties, formal and informal trade between the countries persisted.

However, over the years, both countries have been witness to informal ways of trading and attempted to overcome the challenges and risks involved in the process. Women and men in the small and marginal categories are mostly involved in informal trading.

As the informal trade (mainly in respect of agricultural commodities) has a gender face, the CUTS project attempts to develop a model to formalise the cross-border economic transaction opportunities for marginalised women and men.

It is expected that Border Haats could be instrumental to women's empowerment and encourage women to emerge as entrepreneurs.

However, in achieving such a goal, attempts should be made to usher in changes in the existing socio-cultural conditions, peoples' attitudes towards women entrepreneurs and create mass awareness and a favourable public opinion.

Why Women's Involvement in the Economy is a Major Indicator of Empowerment?

Despite being a fast-growing region, women's involvement in the labour force is quite low (23.6 per cent) compared to men (80 per cent) in South Asia. State machinery in the region does not seem to consider women's economic empowerment as crucial for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. Yet, convergent theories agree that income generation activities of women as individuals or groups are related to their economic empowerment.

Women's economic empowerment is related to the social, political, psychological basis as well as the transformation of society. With the provision of increased economic opportunities, a girl would be considered as an asset rather than a liability (Nasreen, 2012; 2019).

This will ultimately contribute to increasing women's participation in the labour force and thereby raise their status in society (Moyle et al, 2006; Hossain, 2001; Steps & GAD Alliance, 2020).

Although women's involvement in business or trade has increased in South Asian countries, their participation is very low compared to men. Research indicates that women's involvement in business or trade depends on factors such as autonomy and freedom in the workplace, security, and satisfaction with the work involved.

Economic empowerment, through entrepreneurship, running a business, or trade can provide a woman who has experienced redundancy, divorce, or such other crisis a sense of self-esteem and security.

Fulfillment of personal goals through income-earning opportunities is also related to improving women's status in society.

Over the last decade, governments in South Asian countries have taken remarkable strides in the direction of economic development and empowerment of women. In Bangladesh, for example, gender budgeting in ministries, the introduction of interest-free or low-interest loans in banking and microcredit systems for women's business, and the development of small entrepreneurship have encouraged a large number of women to start-up businesses and trading.

However, the concept of the Border Haat trade, especially the participation of women as vendors, is still at an infant stage and requires integration in the mainstream agenda.

Women Engagement in Border Haat as Vendors

It is evident in the Border Haat areas in both Bangladesh and India that men are outnumbering women as vendors. In the gendered culture, selling commodities in an open market or vending at the Haat is considered too strenuous, unsuitable, and unsafe for women, as most of the Border Haats are located in remote areas where transport is inadequate and connectivity poor.

However, although there are a few women visible on the Indian side of the bordering areas, women are almost invisible on the Bangladesh side (two per cent only). Even when there are some women, they are accompanied by male members of their families. There is also wage discrimination between men and women (CUTS, 2019).

There is a different social status of women in different locations in both India and Bangladesh. For example, in the Sunamganj border area, women's participation from Meghalaya of India, both as vendors and vendees, is not only significant but also dominating, however, in contrast, there are hardly any Bangladeshi women visible in that location, especially as vendors.

About 50-percent of vendors from India are female in contrast to only one female vendor from Bangladesh (Sunamganj). The major driver of this stark difference is the different cultural ethos in these mirror locations. Meghalaya society is a matrilineal society and Bangladesh is strictly patriarchal.

In Bangladesh, in some areas, even visiting a Haat is considered an offence for women who are liable to maintain the culture of *parda/purdah* (veiling) norms. The only one-woman vendor found in the Sunamganj belongs to a tribal/indigenous/ethnic community (Garo/Mandi), which is also matrilineal.

On the other hand, Tripura state of India is host to a patriarchal society and so hardly any woman is seen to be involved in trade at Border Haat, as highlighted by CUTS.

However, the participation of women vendors is dependent not only on their visibility, infrastructural facilities of the Border Haats also play a significant role in this regard. Not only are there no separate washrooms for men and women, but the toilets are also often unusable on account of paucity of water and hygiene.

The open spaces for sellers seem unsafe and there is a fear that women may lose things they carry. These conditions restrict women who fail to get the necessary approval from their families to participate in Border Haats.





Specific Challenges for Increasing Women Vendors

The process of selecting traders in Border Haats often works to the detriment of women traders. The following issues are considered in selection:

- Is the vendor a resident? (Whether s/he lives within 5 km of the Haat)
- Does s/he run any business of her/him own? (If so, copy of trade license)
- Does the applicant have a bank account corroborated by the Bank statement?

Women are aggrieved that they are often disqualified from doing business at the Haat for not complying with the afore-mentioned items/item. Farmers also face similar problems as they are neither involved in businesses of their own nor do they possess any trade license.

Such qualifications work to the advantage of the better off businessmen, making them the sole traders at the Haats. They purchase items from local people at relatively cheap rates and sell them at the Border Haat with a substantial margin for themselves.

It must be mentioned here that political clout is also invoked in ensuring selection as Border Haat traders.

The lack of political connection of women limits them from becoming traders at the Border Haats.

The Border Haat committee in Balat has taken special initiative to increase women's participation in the Indian part by increasing the number of vendor ships in favour of women, from 12 to 25. This is a remarkable step towards addressing the issue of gender equality. If other Haats also follow this instance, alongside enhancement of infrastructural facilities, women's participation in Border Haats would certainly increase.

In Balat, BSF has constructed separate toilets for women and men nearby of Border Haat. However, since these fall in Indian territory, women in Bangladesh would not be able to access them.

To increase women's interests and participation as vendors and vendees, initiatives may be encouraged about the exploration of local items based on women's interests. There are several handicrafts, homemade food products, and indigenous fruits and herbs which women fancy and which are, unfortunately, fading. These could be revived and popularised through research on indigenous knowledge and skills of local communities.

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Women as Buyers in Border Haat

Although women's participation as vendors is limited in Border Haats, their role as buyers/consumers is significant. A survey on 60 women in the border area around India indicates that 18 of them purchase goods from the Border Haat for sale in the local markets or for self/family consumption. These women usually purchase vegetables, fruit juice, melamine or plastic goods, and clothing.

Most of them own small shops through which they sell the goods purchased at the Haat in the local market. All the 18 women mentioned that they can't stay long or go to different Haats due to compelling domestic responsibilities like looking after children and other chores.

Border Haats also benefit women in poorer and marginal categories by offering them access to food items at relatively cheaper prices. As the Haats are located nearby their households, women can frequent these markets to procure necessary items with the help of their modest earnings or savings. This has consequences for the well-being of the household, in general, and for women, in particular.

For example, the intra-household food allocation system is far from equal, with men consuming the lion's share. Women visiting the Haats may also find items they like or fancy (such as household items or handicrafts, etc.) and which they feel reluctant to ask for out of fear of facing anything from ridicule to rejection.

Out of the above-mentioned 18 women, 12 are linked with the Balat Border Haat and consider that their annual incomes have risen after they engaged with the Haat. However, the lives and livelihoods of women (7 in number) in the Border Haat area of Tripura have not shown any significant change. They purchase items for their family consumption.

A similar survey was conducted in the Bangladesh part with 60 respondents, 13 of whom were women). These women visit the Border Haat occasionally for purchasing essentials for personal or family

consumption. They usually purchase cosmetics, fruits, spices, vegetables, and other food items.

Like women in India, women in Bangladesh also come to the Border Haat to purchase goods at cheaper prices. Some women on the Bangladesh side mentioned that in the Border Haat goods are sold in wholesale and they often have to return home without buying any item.

In most cases, women and men in Bangladesh purchase goods from the Border Haat for their consumption and show less interest in developing entrepreneurship.

However, the traders of Bangladesh requested an increase in the number of vendors in Border Haats. It must be mentioned here that, while the number of traders on the Indian side (Kalaichar-Baliyamari Border Haat) increased from 25 to 50 percent, no such development has happened on the Bangladesh side.

Conclusion

Border Haat is a relatively new venture in the region bordering India and Bangladesh. It is expected that the initiative will boost the quality of lives and buttress the livelihood opportunities of the local inhabitants. They would simultaneously work as instruments for limiting illegal businesses and formalise informal trade.

Border Haats can also be good avenues for enhancing women's participation in the labour market, thereby empowering them. Cultural norms and practices prevalent in a patriarchal society often restrict women from participation in public fora, especially in the Border Haats.

Given the conducive, secure, and flexible working environment of Border Haats, the community, in general, and women, in particular, need to be sensitised about women vendor ships and related prospects for women empowerment that Border Haats hold out.



Recommendations

To enhance women's participation in Border Haats, the following complementary measures are suggested:

- 1) Flourishing informal trade in the bordering areas between India and Bangladesh may be reduced through building the capacity of women in trading;
- 2) Making provisions for a flexible and safe working environment for women by putting in place adequate infrastructural facilities like clean, well-functioning, and separate washrooms
- 3) Extending financial support and incentives to women such as easy or interest-free loans;
- 4) Exploring and exploiting local resources and skills to get more women interested and involved in trading; and
- 5) Raising awareness of community and household members through gender-sensitive initiatives to help women overcome entrenched patriarchal customs, attitudes, and practices that retard women empowerment.

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