

HOME GARDENS AND GENDER IN BANGLADESH

Does home garden training contribute to greater gender equality in poor households in Bangladesh?



Socially constructed gender roles strongly influence household food consumption. Most home garden programs that aim to increase household vegetable consumption typically target women, but few studies have analysed how these programs affect gender roles.

In 2012, AVRDC – The World Vegetable Center initiated a multi-year evaluation study to examine the impact of training women in home garden vegetable production, nutrition, dietary diversity and gender equality. The study was conducted with project partner the International Potato Center (CIP) under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Horticulture Project. DFID provides core funding to AVRDC for research and development activities to enhance vegetable production and consumption worldwide, and provides opportunities to develop multi-year, multi-project assessments.

Results indicate the home garden training raised women's social stature in their communities, gave them control over the food consumed by the household, and provided a small but significant source of cash income. The research is being used to refine AVRDC's home garden training approaches.

Introduction

In rural Bangladesh, men eat first, children second and women last. Women prepare all food, but men do the shopping for food. Home gardens can diversify household diets with a ready supply of fresh vegetables—but they can also change some long-standing gender-related practices for food production and income distribution to benefit overall household welfare.

Skilled enumerators collected data in April-May 2014 from trained and non-trained women in Jessore and Barisal districts using a structured questionnaire survey, group discussions, and individual interviews. The quantitative survey gathered information on household characteristics, changes in garden management, and quantities harvested and consumed. Selection bias was addressed through the sampling and the analysis.

Research Findings

Since 2011, AVRDC has worked with BRAC, a large international nonprofit organization, to implement home gardens in Bangladesh. In 2013, 3,500 poor rural women in Jessore and Barisal districts participated in one-day intensive training that covered gardening as well as family nutrition. Trained women received seed packs for seven nutrient-rich vegetable varieties and vines of sweet potato. A BRAC officer provided regular technical assistance.

Focus group discussions were organised separately for men and women to allow for freer discussion. On average, households had five members; the women were 35 years of age, with five years of formal education; the home gardens were 17 m².

Results point to an expansion in scope of women's household decisionmaking, from home garden management to decisions about food consumption; expenditure on clothes, food and other household goods; and where and how women spend their time.

Outcomes and Impacts

After participating in the training, women made many improvements to their home gardens: erecting strong fences to keep out farm animals, creating raised planting beds, using quality seed, and planting a greater diversity of vegetable crops. Husbands and other women who had not been trained began to recognize the trained women's agricultural skills and sought their knowledge, which raised the women's self-confidence and stature in the community. The men learned new things about vegetable cultivation from the women, and found they could work together with women in the home gardens—a radical departure from gender norms.

The home gardens allowed women to provide their households with more and better quality vegetables,

and lessened their dependency on men to purchase food from the market. The trained women could harvest a quantity of vegetables that was 186% greater than for the comparable group of non-trained women.

When converted to nutrient yields, the garden supply of plant proteins was higher by 271%, vitamin A by 289%, and iron by 272%. Family diets were diversified, as money previously spent to purchase vegetables could be used to buy fish or meat.

Home gardens make a positive contribution toward greater empowerment of women in poor communities in rural Bangladesh

The effect of women's training in home gardens on harvested quantity and nutrient yield, average per household member per year

	Control	Intervention	% difference	Significance
Total harvest (kg)	19.8	36.8	186	***
Plant proteins (g)	317.1	860.0	271	***
Vitamin A (mg)	182.3	527.3	289	***
Vitamin C (g)	3.0	11.6	390	***
Iron (mg)	152.2	414.4	272	***
Calcium (g)	9.3	35.7	384	***

*** Significant at 99% confidence interval

Wider environment

Women in Bangladesh have little control over land, which prevents many from establishing or expanding home gardens. This issue is common globally, not only in South Asia, but throughout much of the developing world. With informed training addressing local concerns and needs, home gardens can empower women to make positive changes for their families, and to improve their livelihoods.

Next steps

As AVRDC continues to expand its home garden activities in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa, the information gained from this, and other similar studies, will enable the Center to make its home gardens more relevant, more effective and more sustainable.

References

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