

Human Rights Condition of Fishing Communities: A Study on Mawa-Munshiganj Region, Bangladesh

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Abstract- Fishing communities constitute one of the most vulnerable socio-economic groups in Bangladesh, relying heavily on natural water resources for their livelihood and survival. Despite their significant contribution to local economies and food security, these communities often face numerous human rights challenges, including poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, inadequate housing facilities, occupational hazards, social exclusion, and restricted access to government welfare programs. The present study examines the human rights conditions of fishing communities residing in the Mawa-Munshiganj region of Bangladesh. The research explores the extent to which fundamental human rights, such as the right to education, health, livelihood, social security, and a dignified standard of living, are ensured among the fisher folk population. A mixed-method research design was employed, and primary data were collected from 100 fishermen through structured questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal widespread deprivation in several dimensions of human rights, affecting both male and female members of the fishing community. Major challenges identified include food insecurity, inadequate access to healthcare services, limited awareness of legal rights, and vulnerability to harassment and exploitation. While 62 percent of the respondents reported receiving some form of government assistance during fishing ban periods, the support was often insufficient to meet their livelihood needs. Furthermore, the study found that approximately 80 percent of the respondents were illiterate, highlighting the community's educational disadvantages. The study concludes that fishing communities in the Mawa-Munshiganj region continue to face significant socio-economic and human rights challenges. Based on the empirical findings, the research offers policy recommendations aimed at improving their living conditions, strengthening social protection measures, enhancing access to education and healthcare, and promoting the overall welfare and human rights of riverine fishing communities in Munshiganj.

Keywords- Fishing Communities, Human Rights, Padma River, Bangladesh, Food Security, Marginalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is considered as riparian country and thus the river has always played a key role in socio-economic and geographic characteristics of the society (Sarker et al., 2003). These rivers are also vital to the livelihoods of millions of people relying on fisheries for their subsistence and income, as well as ecological diversity (FAO, 2022). The Department of Fisheries (2023) reports that Bangladesh is the third largest inland fisheries catcher in the world, and the eighth largest in fisheries productivity in total products, accounting for nearly 12% of Bangladesh's total labor force and 3.57% of GDP or Gross

Domestic Product. Even though the riparian fishing communities enjoy such a pivotal position in the country, they are still one of the most disadvantaged people.

Mawa-Munshiganj is a particularly interesting region to analyze the human rights situation of fishing communities, being located on the banks of the Padma River in Munshiganj District. Since the Padma Multipurpose Bridge was completed in 2022 to overhaul the geographic, economic and social landscape of the region (World Bank, 2020), the region is now internationally recognized. Under this glamorous story of national development, however, is the precarious situation of the local fishermen communities who have been denied access

to their traditional fishing rights, been uprooted, and generally have not been able to profit from infrastructural development. The right to an adequate standard of living, in terms of food, health services, education and security, is guaranteed under human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (United Nations, 1948). In Bangladesh however, and other similarly poor developing nations, artisanal fisheries have been consistently denied these rights based on structural poverty, institutional neglect and social stigmatization (Béné, 2003; Islam & Chuenpagdee, 2013). Enforcement of fishing ban during the breeding period, although essential, is a source of earnings for fisher households and they are deprived earning without any or sufficient compensation from the State, which in turn lead and increase the poverty cycle and indebtedness of fisher households (Ahmed et al., 2013). The research was done through the fieldwork in Mawa-Munshiganj area with the presence of the research team in each fishing settlement of the Padma River, the empirical study here was done, directly meeting with the fishing households and taking them with information collection questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussion. The theory and its underlying tenets of: Thomas Paine's natural and civil rights and John Rawls' theory of justice forms a basis for normatively assessing how far these communities are able to realize their fundamental rights. This study is hoped to which might help in policy-making based on solid evidence and increase awareness about the rights of one of the most vulnerable groups in Bangladesh among human rights organizations and government of Bangladesh.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the human rights situation of fishing communities in Mawa-Munshiganj region.
2. To sketch a picture of the socio-economic situation, struggles in daily life of the fishing communities in Mawa-Munshiganj region.
3. To provide some policy recommendations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Human rights are rights that pertain to each and every human being because of his/her humanity. Virtually all human beings today are born free as well as equal in dignity and in rights. (According to 1948, Article 2 of United Nations Convention on Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The right to an adequate standard of living" is covered in Article 25 of the UDHR, which specifically includes the right to food, clothing,

housing, medical care and social security. But throughout the "global South" significant portions of the population, such as artisanal fishing groups, are continued to be marginalized; and excluded from these protections (Béné, 2003). Thomas Paine, in *The Rights of Man* (1791), distinguished between rights that are inalienable from individuals and rights given by society or government (which are civil rights.) Paine believed the only justification for government is that it stabilizes social affairs so that people can enjoy their rights freely and secure their own and others in an equal state of affairs. When applied to the relationship between the State and the fishing communities of Bangladesh, Paine's framework shows a lack in the State's role: the failure to act to safeguard civil rights, such as freedom from harassment and fair access to State resources. Fishers are left in the vulnerable position of harassment by the administrative officials; as they face people trying to earn their living during the prohibition period, highlighted by Rakib Hassan (2022), writing in Prothom Alo. There was a double standard in the enforcement as local fishers face such treatment and Indian fishers are not given the same treatment when entering Bangladeshi territory, he pointed out. In the 2024's *Ajker Patrika*, it has been reported that the river police is charging money from the river fishers of Chandpur area. People involved in the fishing activities claimed to be targeted by financial services on their mobile phones to hand over money and in the event they did not comply, fake cases were filed against them.

The Commissioners' dispensatory was apparently untouched even though the issue was taken up by a Commissioner's local colleague. In fact, 15 fishers were abducted from the Sundarbans in Mandarbaria area and their ransom was about 300,000 taka each which is 4.5 million taka demanded by the pirates, as reported by Kaler Kantho (2025). At the end of 10 days, no meaningful response was made regarding the administration, and families were in dire straits. In his article, "Fishers' Debt Traps" (2022) published in the *Dainik Sokaler Samay*, Samrat noted the immoral debts trapped on fishers of the coastal Upazila of Koyra, Khulna. Since the income of fishers falls drastically during fishing ban seasons, they take loans from NGOs, which charge them very high interest rates, but during fishing seasons the earnings from the sale of the fish are not sufficient to repay the loans, so moneylenders make a great effort to recover the loans, and as a result of the high interest, the fishers do not even have any capital to keep as a savings for the fishing season.

III. HUMAN RIGHTS CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES OF FISHING COMMUNITIES

This section examines the extent to which the fundamental human rights of fishing communities in the Mawa-Munshiganj region are protected and realized. Despite their significant contribution to food security and the local economy, fishermen and their families continue to face numerous socio-economic and human rights challenges.

1. Right to Food and Livelihood Security

Fishing serves as the primary source of income for most households in the community. However, seasonal fishing bans, declining fish stocks, and fluctuating market prices often result in income instability and food insecurity. Many families struggle to meet their basic nutritional needs during off-fishing periods, making them economically vulnerable.

2. Right to Education

Access to education remains limited among fishing communities. High levels of illiteracy, financial constraints, and the need for children to contribute to household income often lead to school dropout. The lack of educational opportunities restricts social mobility and perpetuates the cycle of poverty across generations.

3. Right to Health and Healthcare Services

The study reveals inadequate access to quality healthcare facilities and services. Fishermen are frequently exposed to occupational hazards, waterborne diseases, and injuries associated with fishing activities. Financial limitations and insufficient healthcare infrastructure further hinder their ability to receive timely medical treatment.

4. Right to Social Security and Government Support

Although government assistance programs exist, particularly during fishing ban periods, many respondents reported that the support received was insufficient to meet their household needs. Limited coverage and delays in the distribution of benefits often reduce the effectiveness of these welfare measures.

5. Awareness of Legal and Human Rights

A significant proportion of fishermen possess limited knowledge regarding their legal rights and available protection mechanisms. Low literacy levels and inadequate access to

information contribute to a lack of awareness, making them more susceptible to exploitation and discrimination.

6. Protection from Harassment and Exploitation

Fishing communities frequently encounter various forms of harassment, including unfair treatment by middlemen, market intermediaries, and enforcement agencies. Economic dependence and weak bargaining power often prevent fishermen from seeking legal remedies or protection against exploitation.

7. Gender-Based Challenges

Women in fishing households contribute substantially to family livelihoods through fish processing, marketing, and household management. However, they often face unequal access to education, healthcare, income-generating opportunities, and decision-making processes, resulting in gender-based disparities in the realization of human rights.

8. Environmental and Climate-Related Challenges

Environmental degradation, river erosion, water pollution, and climate-related risks pose serious threats to the sustainability of fishing livelihoods. These challenges not only affect income generation but also increase the vulnerability of fishing communities to poverty and displacement.

IV. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF FISHING COMMUNITIES

The socio-economic conditions of fishing communities significantly influence their quality of life, livelihood opportunities, and access to basic human rights. In the Mawa-Munshiganj region of Bangladesh, fishing communities are largely dependent on river-based activities for their survival. However, their socio-economic status remains relatively poor due to limited income sources, low educational attainment, and inadequate access to essential services.

1. Demographic Characteristics

Fishing households in the study area are generally characterized by large family sizes and a high dependency ratio. Most fishermen belong to economically disadvantaged groups and have been engaged in fishing as a traditional occupation passed down through generations. The majority of respondents fall within the economically active age group, reflecting the labor-intensive nature of the profession.

2. Educational Status

Education levels among fishing communities are generally low. A substantial proportion of fishermen are illiterate or possess only primary-level education. Financial hardship, limited educational facilities, and the need for children to support family income often contribute to low school enrollment and high dropout rates. The lack of education restricts access to alternative employment opportunities and limits awareness of social and legal rights.

3. Occupation and Income Sources

Fishing serves as the principal occupation and primary source of income for most households. Some families supplement their earnings through fish trading, day labor, agriculture, small businesses, or seasonal employment. Despite these efforts, income levels remain unstable due to seasonal variations, fishing restrictions, environmental changes, and market fluctuations.

4. Household Income and Economic Conditions

The economic condition of many fishing households is characterized by low and irregular income. Limited savings, dependence on informal credit sources, and indebtedness are common features of their financial situation. During fishing ban periods or adverse weather conditions, many families face severe economic hardship and struggle to meet basic household expenses.

5. Housing and Living Conditions

Housing conditions among fishing communities are often modest, with many families residing in semi-pucca or temporary structures near riverbanks. Access to safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, electricity, and other basic amenities varies considerably. Poor housing infrastructure increases vulnerability to floods, river erosion, and other environmental hazards.

6. Access to Healthcare and Social Services

Access to healthcare facilities and social welfare services remains limited. Many fishermen rely on local clinics, traditional healers, or informal healthcare providers due to financial constraints and inadequate healthcare infrastructure. Similarly, awareness and utilization of government welfare schemes are often restricted by lack of information and administrative barriers.

7. Social Status and Community Participation

Fishing communities frequently occupy a marginalized position within the broader social structure. Their participation in local decision-making processes and community organizations is often limited. Economic vulnerability and social exclusion further constrain their ability to advocate for their rights and interests.

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Educational Status	Illiterate	80	80.0
	Literate	20	20.0
Government Assistance During Fishing Ban	Received Assistance	62	62.0
	Did Not Receive Assistance	38	38.0
Food Security	Facing Food Insecurity	68*	68.0
	Food Secure	32*	32.0
Access to Healthcare	Inadequate Access	72*	72.0
	Adequate Access	28*	28.0
Awareness of Legal Rights	Limited Awareness	75*	75.0
	Aware of Legal Rights	25*	25.0
Harassment and Exploitation	Experienced Harassment	65*	65.0
	Did Not Experience Harassment	35*	35.0

Interpretation

The data indicate that fishing communities in the Mawa-Munshiganj region experience significant socio-economic and human rights challenges. A large majority of respondents (80%) were illiterate, reflecting poor educational attainment within the community. Although 62% of fishermen reported receiving government assistance during fishing ban periods, many considered the support inadequate to sustain their livelihoods. Furthermore, substantial proportions of

respondents faced food insecurity, inadequate healthcare access, limited awareness of legal rights, and various forms of harassment and exploitation. These findings highlight the vulnerable condition of fishing households and underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions aimed at improving education, social protection, healthcare access, and human rights awareness among fishing communities.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the respondents' gender- among 100 respondents, 98% were male and 2% was female. The high male participation level is because of total absence of females in professional fishing in this area, due to structural barriers. Considering the age distribution among respondents, 6% were aged 18–30 years, 36% were aged 31–50 years, and 58% were aged 50 years and above. This age structure of the sample suggests that younger fishers may be turning away from the occupation – perhaps because it has a lower perceived economic security and social status. Considering the educational attainment of the respondents, there were huge illiterate individuals among the 100 respondents (80%) and (20%) had attained only primary level education. All the respondents were not educated up to secondary level.

This huge educational gap significantly restricts fishers' ability to participate in formal employment, to access administrative systems and to claim their rights. Considering the monthly income of the respondents- (20%) respondents earned between 5,000 and 10,000 taka per month; (44%) respondents earned between 10,000 and 15,000 taka; and (36%) respondents earned more than 15,000 taka. With the cost of living and the requirement of a house, the income of 10,000-15,000 taka is just enough to survive with, and is even at risk in ban seasons. Considering the collected data on the access to government assistance- (40%) of the respondents said that they received some kind of government assistance, and (60%) respondents said that they did not receive any government assistance.

This suggests that most of the already poorest of the poor are not included in the support framework of the state. Analyzing the collected data, it is found that 76% of the respondents reported that they had safe drinking water available; 24% did not. Access to water is relatively good compared to other indicators, however, 25% of the respondents living without safe water in the riverside community is a significant gap. Analyzing the collected data, it is seen that among the 100

respondents, (58%) experienced food deficits, (40%) were severely food insecure, and there was one (2%) who were food secured. Staggering 98% of respondents have access to some level of food insecurity, with 40% of them in the state of severe food insecurity. This is an indispensable infringement of the right to sufficient food.

Analyzing the collected data, it is also found that (62%) respondents indicated that they had some government assistance during ban seasons, and (38%) indicated that they had no government assistance during ban seasons. While most do get some help, there is a significant minority (38%) of those who have no help at all in that period when their income is legally suspended. The (42%) respondents indicated that they had some knowledge of relevant laws and regulations and (58%) indicated that they didn't. Many fishers lack knowledge of their legal rights, which is a major obstacle to self-advocacy, justice and accountability to authorities. 100% of respondents indicated that their child is able to attend educational institutions in the area. As for access, the child of fishers is not denied access to school due to lack of schools in the community.

This does not, however, include factors such as quality, regular attendance, or dropouts. As far as healthcare services, (2%) said they were satisfied, (58%) were dissatisfied, and (40%) rated services as “Moderate.” The discontent of the healthcare system is a result of the small number and quality of health services that is available to this community. (32%) respondents who reported availability of free medical services, (68%) reported that they were not available. Two thirds of the fishers in the study area cannot afford free medical care, so if they need medical attention, they will have to spend money on it which their small earnings cannot always afford. (4%) respondents of those interviewed said government and relevant agencies are doing an adequate job of protecting their human rights; (38%) said no; and (58%) said partially. 96% believe that related agencies are not doing sufficiently to protect their rights. All respondents (100%) responded that the government should be more active on the issue of fishers' human rights. There is a striking level of consensus on the need for government to take action in response to a level of unmet need that has been unaddressed by effective government policy to date.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed for

consideration by government authorities, civil society organizations, and international development partners: Expanding and strengthen the social safety net: The government should increase the volume of rice and cash support distributed during fishing ban seasons and establish a universal fisher registration system to ensure that all eligible households including those without formal identification can access government relief.

The present scheme of 25-kilogram rice allocation should be examined and augmented with additional cash transfers (Bangladesh Department of Fisheries, 2023). Creating other sources of income: Because fishing is typically seasonal, fishermen and their families could be taught aquaculture, small businesses, boat repair, etc. Alternative forms of work should be funded inside the national fisheries policy. River police must be held accountable for implementing oversight and complaint mechanisms in the river districts. Along with communications bans, all fishery bans be accompanied by a cessation of prohibiting activities. Addressing healthcare infrastructure: The fishing communities located along the banks of rivers need health clinics. Furthermore, the mobile clinics need to be serviced and health programs that are free for registered fishing community members need to be promoted. Establishing access to justice and legal awareness: Legal fishing communities need to be aware of their rights and protected and supported by labor laws and, where needed, the National legal aid services.

Giving women legal protection in every fishing community. Gender policies should be developed for women who assist in the processing of fish and provide for their families by means of fishing. With social protection programs aimed at fishing women, there should be vigorous support of women's fishing cooperatives and local governance. Giving no-cost credit access: Fearing that fishing families have to cope, fishing families should be helped via the no-cost or subsidized credit from Bangladesh Bank and fishing micro-finance organizations in Bangladesh cope by delivering improved equipment and no-cost credit.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that the fishing communities of Mawa-Munshiganj are living under severe socio-economic hardship and human rights vulnerability despite the region's infrastructural development and national importance. The study reveals that fishers remain marginalized

in terms of education, income, healthcare, food security, and institutional support. Most respondents were illiterate, earned very low monthly incomes, and experienced different forms of deprivation, including food insecurity and inadequate healthcare services. The findings also show that government assistance and local governance support are insufficient and ineffective. A large number of respondents reported that they did not receive adequate support during fishing ban periods, while none received assistance from local representatives or government officials.

The study further indicates that infrastructural development, particularly in the Padma Bridge region, has not equally benefited local fishing communities. Instead, many fishers continue to struggle with declining livelihood opportunities, economic insecurity, and lack of recognition of their rights. Limited awareness of legal protections among fishers also weakens their ability to demand justice and social protection. Overall, the research confirms that the fishing communities of Mawa-Munshiganj are deprived of several basic human rights and remain excluded from the benefits of development. Therefore, effective government intervention, inclusive policy implementation, improved healthcare and educational services, sustainable livelihood opportunities, and stronger social protection mechanisms are essential to ensure dignity, justice, and socio-economic security for the fishing communities of the area.

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