



FROM SHADOWS
TO LEADERSHIP

From Shadows to Leadership

Women's Voices, Civil Society Strength, and Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh

This publication was funded by the European Union under the Empowering Women Through Civil Society Actors (EWCSA) project, implemented by Oxfam in Bangladesh in partnership with 33 civil society and women's rights organisations across Bangladesh.

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CONCEPT, SUPERVISION and MOBILIZATION

Md Sariful Islam, Head of Influencing, Communications, Advocacy and Media, Oxfam in Bangladesh

ADVISORS

Ashish Damle, Country Director, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Mahmuda Sultana, Programme Director, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Shahajadi Begum, Programme Coordinator, Oxfam in Bangladesh

CONTRIBUTORS

Tarek Aziz, Programme Coordinator, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Mutasim Billah, Manager, Influencing, Advocacy Communications & Media, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Khadeja Akter Antora, Senior Programme Officer, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Mohammad Shafiqul Islam, Programme Officer, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Shamerul Huda, Assistant, Influencing, Advocacy Communications & Media, Oxfam in Bangladesh

And 33 Partners of EWCSA Project

Photos: Habibul Haque/Drik, Suman Kanti Paul/Drik and M.H. Akash/Drik

Text: Isaba Shuhrat/Drik, Nafisa Nawal/Drik and Oxfam

Design & Layout: Simul Chowdhury/Drik, Monoranjon Ray/Drik

Production: Drik Picture Library Ltd.

Publisher

Oxfam in Bangladesh

House 23, Road 28, Block K, Banani, Dhaka 1213, Bangladesh

Email: oxfambd@oxfam.org.uk; Website: www.oxfam.org.bd

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Women's Voices, Civil Society Strength, and
Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh



Co-funded by
the European Union











H.E. Michael Miller

Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the
European Union to Bangladesh

Message

Empowering women in the informal economy is a matter of justice and dignity. It is part and parcel of inclusive and sustainable development.

According to figures from the latest Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Survey, nearly 85% of total employment in Bangladesh is informal, and informality in the workplace is overwhelmingly the experience of women. Many work in insecure conditions and for low pay.

Change is possible. Gender equality, human rights and civil society empowerment underpin the European Union's global partnerships.

In Bangladesh, the EU's collaboration with government, private sector, trade unions and civil society partners has helped advance women's leadership, economic opportunities and access to justice.

The Empowering Women Through Civil Society Actors (EWCSA) initiative is a key part of this work, helping reduce inequalities and amplify female voices. It is a partnership between the EU, Oxfam and 33 civil society organisations, rolled out across 19 districts under 8 divisions that has directly reached 45,000 female workers in key sectors.

EWCSA has helped thousands of women to understand their rights and engage directly with employers, policymakers, and local authorities. As a result, domestic workers have started gaining access to formal contracts, tea garden workers are leading advocacy forums, and fisherwomen are

obtaining official ID cards that enable them to access state benefits and social protection schemes.

The project has strengthened over 40 grassroots organisations and sectoral networks of domestic workers, home-based garment workers, workers in fishing and tea plantation labourers. It has helped them advocate for fair wages, safe workplaces and gender-responsive governance. The photobook *From Shadows to Leadership: Women's Voices, Civil Society Strength, and Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh* features ten stories of transformation from the EWCSA project. They illustrate how visibility, voice and solidarity can drive lasting change. The examples show that when women lead, families are more secure, communities more just, and governance more inclusive.

As we celebrate this progress, we must also recognise that many challenges remain, such as unpaid care work or domestic tasks, or violence against women and girls. These are not unique to Bangladesh, but the severity of exposure to climate and economic shocks, the rates of child marriage and the weakness of women's participation in decision-making or control of resources continues to be striking.

The European Union is steadfast in its support for sustained and self-sustaining progress. We will continue to advocate for the enforcement of labour protection, investment in skills and social protection, and partnerships that link local voices to national reforms.





Ashish Damle

Country Director, Oxfam in Bangladesh

Message

I have witnessed firsthand how community-led change takes root. The Empowering Women Through Civil Society Actors (EWCSA) project has been one such journey, where we saw women rise from invisibility to leadership. This photobook, *From Shadows to Leadership*, captures their voices as changemakers.

The odds were daunting. Our baseline research revealed that only 0.73% of women had formal contracts, 85% were unaware of their rights, and four in five had never been reached by a CSO. From tea gardens to coastal communities, women endured exploitation without recourse. We knew change would require deep community engagement — not just services, but empowerment through voice, solidarity, and action.

Through support to CSOs across 19 districts under 8 divisions, Oxfam helped create safe spaces for women to learn, lead, and organize. The transformation was powerful. Quiet participants became vocal advocates. Informal groups evolved into structured associations. Engaging male allies and local leaders also helped shift norms.

In Sylhet, tea worker Shila Kurmi began negotiating with authorities and prevented a child marriage. In Barisal and Dhaka, domestic workers formed unions, demanded compensation for abuses, and now advocate for formal

recognition and contracts. In coastal areas, women like Sobita formed collectives, opened savings accounts, and lobbied for clean water and health services. And in the Manta community, long denied legal identity, women secured national ID cards and fisherfolk registration, unlocking access to vital support.

What's most promising is how these women now mentor others. Forums are growing, and voices that once whispered now speak with conviction. But the journey is far from over. Women seek formal legal safeguards, and resilience against climate and economic shocks.

These stories are a reminder: real change comes from the ground up. I thank our community partners and the EU for their invaluable support. To the women featured — and all those they represent — you are lighting the path forward.

I invite readers to listen deeply to these voices. They carry not just memories of hardship, but blueprints for a more just and inclusive Bangladesh. Let us walk beside them.





Empowering Women through Civil Society Actors (EWCSA)

From Awareness to Agency: Feminist Leadership Transforming Bangladesh's Informal Economy

Bangladesh's informal and marginalised formal economy employs most working women, yet these millions of women often have no voice or protection under formal systems. Informal work – from domestic labour to home-based garment piecework – typically means no contracts, no job security, poverty wages, and rampant abuse. Women in informal sectors like domestic work, home-based garment work, fisheries, and tea gardens face persistent gender-based discrimination rooted in social norms. They are expected to earn income and shoulder all household care, while their labour remains “invisible” and undervalued. This exclusion of women from decision-making has perpetuated unsafe conditions and exploitation in the very sectors that rely on their work.

Feminist leadership—grounded in solidarity, self-awareness, and collective power—was EWCSA's strategy to close inequality gaps. It empowered marginalised women as agents of change, enabling them to challenge patriarchal norms and claim rights. This aligns with Oxfam's vision of co-creating feminist spaces, strengthening women's movements, and ensuring women's voices in policymaking.

EWCSA's interventions combined grassroots leadership development, strengthening of Civil Society Actors (CSAs) and women's rights organisations, and evidence-based advocacy. The goal was to transform governance systems – from local level workers' communities to the national policy forums by making them inclusive of women's voices. In short, when marginalised women lead together, institutions start to listen, paving the way for more responsive and equitable governance.

Supported by the European Union, Oxfam in Bangladesh led the EWCSA project with 33 civil society and women's rights organisations. This collaborative effort empowered women through training, association building, and advocacy. Together, partners catalysed transformative changes, advancing women's rights and inclusive governance across communities.

Key Findings from the Project Baseline – The Power Gaps

Entrenched gender norms severely restricted women's awareness, mobility, and voice. Most informal women workers lacked knowledge of their rights or recourse options. In governance, their participation remained tokenistic, with even elected women excluded from decisions. Patriarchal attitudes reinforced beliefs that women “don't belong” in leadership. Burdened by unpaid care—eight times more than men—and facing widespread gender-based violence, with over half experiencing abuse, women were trapped in cycles of domestic drudgery and fear, silenced and excluded from leadership, economic opportunity, and public life..

The baseline also exposed how laws, policies, and power structures were failing informal women workers. In the world of work, women in domestic, home-based, agricultural, or fishery roles were largely unrecognised and unprotected by existing laws. A policy was adopted in 2015 for domestic worker welfare, but it lacked legal force or enforcement – in practice domestic workers still had no labour rights or social security. Similarly, women in fisheries and aquaculture were “invisible” to authorities –

very few had official fisher ID cards or access to government support programmes. Across sectors, women's contributions went uncoun­ted in statistics and unacknowledged in policymaking. Local institutions and governance bodies were also male-dominated and not accountable to women. Labour unions and cooperatives in the informal sector often had weak capacity or lacked women in leadership. CSAs serving these communities were under-resourced and had limited reach for advocacy.

Evidence-Based Impact – Feminist Leadership in Action

EWCSA showed how women's collective leadership drives change—transforming marginalised women's lives from individual empowerment to collective agency.

At the individual level, women informal workers received training on rights and leadership and joined safe spaces to voice their concerns. Once hesitant, they gained confidence to claim their rights. Guided by a feminist approach, empowerment expanded collectively—through domestic workers' associations, fisherfolk groups, and tea garden committees. These networks evolved into advocacy platforms, engaging employers, local governments, and policymakers.

The EWCSA project's impact is perhaps best illustrated through four groups of informal and marginalised formal women workers it engaged – domestic workers, home-based garment workers, women fisherfolk, and tea garden workers. In each of these sectors, women's leadership translated into real changes.

Women domestic workers organised leadership collectives and pushed for recognition of their rights. They formulated their major demands, such as like fair employment contracts and decent wages, and submitted them to the Labour Reform Commission (LRC). The recent LRC's final report reflects

Challenges from Baseline Report

1. Low rights awareness among women workers across impact groups (domestic workers, fisherfolk, home-based RMG workers, tea-garden workers): only 10% knew their rights at baseline (n=1,507).
2. Extremely limited agency to influence governance and development processes: just 1% reported taking any active steps (e.g., joining alliances, seeking leadership, political representation).
3. CSAs' initial capacity constraints: 11% reported using of new technical skills; 10.6% reporting improved representation capacity; only 1.19% reported involvement in advancing policies or practices—indicating a weak advocacy pipeline at the project's start.
4. Participation and learning exposure were low: small shares of women reported participation in awareness, training or coaching; the logframe planned ambitious scale-ups (e.g., 15,000 reached through campaigns; 9,000 trained/coached) to close these gaps.

the demand of domestic workers. These collectives amplified their voices in policy forums and garnered support from allies, resulting in their issues gaining unprecedented visibility.

Bangladesh's home-based women garment workers, earning Tk 4,000–5,000 monthly on a piece-rate basis, were invisible in supply chains. Through EWCSA, they formed associations, held dialogues with industry and government, and voiced concerns about low pay and unsafe conditions. Their advocacy led regulators, including DIFE, to recognise informal workplaces and recommend extending labour inspections and safety monitoring to these neglected worksites.

In coastal fishing communities, women played vital roles in catching, processing, and sustaining livelihoods yet remained unrecognised in policy. Without citizenship papers or fisher ID cards, they were excluded from state support. Through EWCSA, Oxfam and partner Jago Nari organised Manta women to document their contributions. At a National Policy Dialogue, women addressed senior officials; the Fisheries Advisor acknowledged their equal role, noting only 4% held ID cards. The Fisheries Director General pledged to issue IDs to women fishers.

In Sylhet's tea plantations, where women comprise over 60% of the workforce, EWCSA focused on leadership development and rights awareness for female workers. Through dialogues with estate management and local authorities, women began demanding better housing, sanitation, and healthcare—services often controlled by estates. They also pushed for greater representation in labour unions and wage committees. As a result, women now hold leadership roles in unions and welfare bodies, adding gender perspectives to negotiations. Their advocacy achieved real gains: installation of separate toilets, formation of sexual harassment committees, and inclusion of women's input in

determining new daily wage rates—marking a shift toward more equitable and responsive workplace governance.

EWCSA's partner CSAs—community-based NGOs, worker associations, and women's rights organisations—served as catalysts for feminist leadership, not mere service providers. They shifted from delivering aid to accompanying women through mentorship, exchange visits, and network-building. Partners helped women document lived experiences as credible evidence to strengthen advocacy. Domestic workers collected data on wages and abuse, while fisheries partners produced policy briefs showcasing women's roles. These evidence-based testimonies empowered women to engage confidently with officials and claim decision-making spaces. Acting as intermediaries, CSAs bridged grassroots women and duty-bearers, ensuring women's voices directly influenced policies and institutional practices toward gender-responsive governance.

Major Learnings

Accompaniment builds confidence: One-off trainings were not enough for women with lifetimes of marginalisation. Sustained mentoring—through home visits, informal counselling, and modelling leadership—helped women internalise self-worth and trust in their abilities. Trusted relationships were key to this transformation.

Leadership grows in collectives: Empowerment accelerated when women worked together. Peer learning circles and exchange visits helped women realise their challenges were systemic, not personal. Solving issues together—like collectively negotiating with a hospital—built confidence and skills faster than classroom settings. Leadership became a shared journey.

Evidence empowers advocacy: Documented personal stories, backed by local research, proved powerful in influencing policymakers. For example, home-based workers who presented wage data to the Labour Ministry shifted the dialogue from anecdote to action. Producing evidence was itself empowering, affirming women's knowledge and role in advocacy.

Feminist leadership reshapes relationships: As women took leadership roles, attitudes shifted—among husbands, employers, and officials. Some men began supporting their wives' leadership, while sceptical local leaders created new spaces for women to engage. Women's assertiveness brought accountability and empathy into governance spaces, altering power dynamics from the ground up.

From participation to co-creation: True influence went beyond attendance. Over time, women evolved from attendees to co-designers of solutions, contributing to policies and programmes. Co-creation deepened ownership and improved implementation, as policies reflected lived realities. Empowerment moved from being heard to shaping systems.

Emerging and Anticipated Challenges – Keeping the Momentum

As project support winds down, sustaining momentum demands deliberate, systemic action. First, maintaining leadership spaces is essential. Women's collectives nurtured through EWCSA risk fading without institutional anchoring. Embedding them in local governance structures and fostering mentorship among women leaders can help ensure their continuity as self-sustaining movements.

While laws and commitments have been secured, implementation remains uncertain. Will labour inspectors monitor domestic work? Will fisherwomen

receive promised ID cards? Without budgets and enforcement, reforms risk becoming symbolic. Continued advocacy and community-led monitoring are vital to ensure accountability.

Marginalised subgroups—ethnic group, women with disabilities, and young women—still face under-representation. Targeted outreach and inclusive leadership pipelines are needed to ensure the movement represents all voices. Backlash and economic shocks pose real threats. Resistance from employers or conservative actors, coupled with economic downturns, can undermine progress. Finally, public awareness and media engagement must grow. Women's stories need greater national visibility to galvanise broader support. Investing in storytelling and media partnerships can amplify their voices and sustain momentum.

EWCSA's journey proves that feminist leadership is not a destination but a governance transformation strategy. What began as empowering marginalised women in the informal economy has evolved into a movement reshaping decision-making spaces. Domestic workers influencing national laws and fisherwomen gaining state recognition mark a profound shift in power. The project affirmed that individual empowerment drives collective action, leading to systemic change. Across sectors, women have moved from the margins to the negotiating table, making governance more inclusive and gender responsive. Sustaining this progress demands continued support, accountability, and institutional commitment to embed feminist leadership in Bangladesh's governance future.

Written by Md. Farhadur Rahim, Senior Officer – Knowledge Management and Murad Parvez, MEAL Manager, Oxfam in Bangladesh



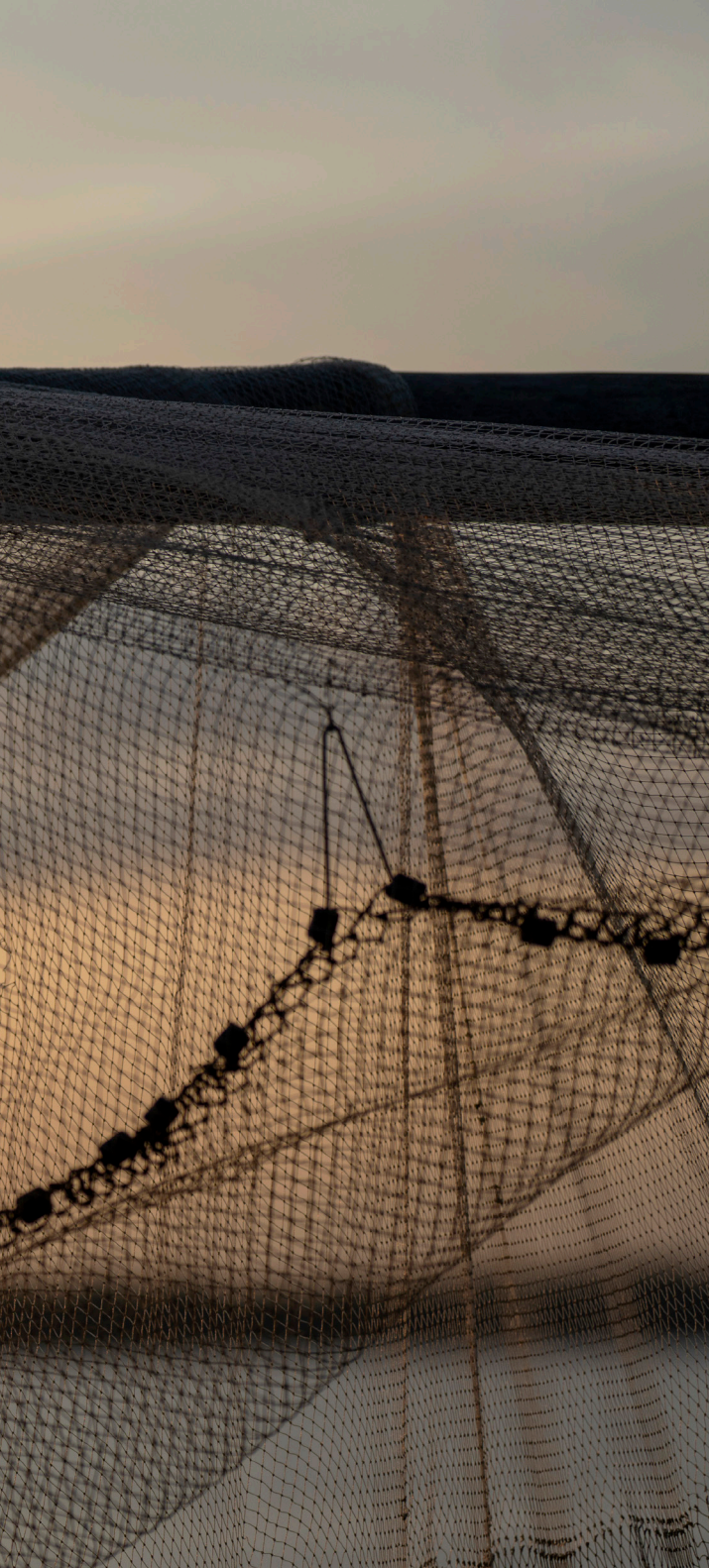


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Anima Almik

Tea-Garden Worker



Rhythm of Works and Words

For Anima, ‘empowerment’ is not just a random word. It is the everyday practice of knowing how systems work, and how speech travels within them. By building trust and dialogue among workers, families and local leaders, she demonstrates that empowerment can take shape through cooperation as much as through assertion.

In the tea gardens of Sylhet, daily life follows a familiar rhythm. The morning begins early, often with sunrise, from cooking for the family and then walking to the garden with a basket tied to the head. Anima Almik, 48, has lived this rhythm for most of her life. She knows the weight of the basket and the expectations that come with it. Inside the garden, however, women’s experiences are often the least acknowledged. Rules about wages, safety or benefits are decided elsewhere, and complaints rarely reach beyond the gate.

Bangladesh’s tea industry employs over 150,000 workers, most of them women, and contributes both to export earnings and domestic consumption. Yet, the foundation of this long-standing industry still rests on labour that remains economically underpaid and socially undervalued. The workers’ lives are woven tightly into the production chain — they pluck, sort and carry the leaves that fuel an entire economy, but seldom participate in decisions that shape their working conditions.



Anima and other tea garden workers submit their picked leaves to the truck transporting them to the factory. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Anima Almik conducts a courtyard session with neighbouring women as part of her community awareness work. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.

'I always wanted to say something, but I did not know how or to whom exactly.' Anima says, after joining the first sessions under EWCSA project. Within months, her participation turned into leadership. After several rounds of training, she was elected vice president, and later president, of *Belly* — a forum of women tea workers formed by the workers like Anima. The forum became a small but vital space where daily frustrations turned into collective discussions on rights, wages and dignity.

Her role began to extend beyond her section of the garden. Estate managers and panchayet leaders — once distant figures of authority started involving her in meetings, especially when disputes arose. 'It's easier to manage when workers themselves

lead,' says a local panchayet leader. This shift has also eased communication between workers and management, reducing tensions that often disrupt productivity.

At home, her family's reaction changed over time. Initially, her husband discouraged her public speaking, saying 'it brings no money.' But her son, who works abroad, and her daughter Ripa supported her. Gradually, even her husband began to help her arrange meetings in their courtyard.

Her story mirrors a broader transformation. As women's forums like *Belly* gain strength, they contribute not only to individual empowerment but to the sustainability of the tea sector itself.



Anima Almik draws an aalpona pattern in her courtyard as she begins her day. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Anima and her husband, in front of their home. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Anima Almik fetches water from her well, filling a bucket for daily use. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



In the afternoon, Anima sits with her neighbour, who helps arrange her hair before work. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.

Fairer conditions, improved communication, and awareness of rights have reduced absenteeism and improved morale among workers — outcomes that directly affect productivity. According to Procheshta's Executive Director, Ali Naki Khan, 'Empowerment here is not just social; it's also economic. When women are confident and organised, the garden runs more smoothly.' For Anima, she dreams of a day when every worker understands her rights as clearly as she understands the rhythm of plucking leaves.

Anima Almik holds a bowl of her breakfast before leaving for work. Kalitee Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Shila Kurmi
Tea-Garden Worker



A Tea Garden Worker Turned Community Leader

In the Lakkatura Tea Garden of Sylhet, Shila Kurmi spends her life working under the sun, plucking tea leaves from early morning until the afternoon bell. In this world of tea, order was maintained by the *panchayet* — an internal, semi-traditional council of workers and local leaders responsible for settling disputes, mediating between workers and management and enforcing garden rules — alongside the babu moshai, or administrative supervisors. Women like Shila remained at the edge of these decisions, expected to obey rather than to speak. The social distance between workers and power was sharp. ‘We did not think our words could matter,’ Shila recalls.

A year ago, Shila first heard about the EWCSA project from neighbours who mentioned a monthly meeting where women spoke about rights, voice and safety. For years, she had been in touch with a local NGO, but rarely spoke in meetings. Even during the 2022 tea garden protests, she stayed behind, afraid to speak against injustice. ‘I was afraid that I would get into trouble for demanding our rights,’ she admits. Month by month, she began to speak not only about her own struggles but for the women around her. She questioned unfair wages and learned about labour rights. It drew attention; even the *panchayet* chairman grew wary of her voice.



While getting ready for work, Shila Kurmi applies sindoor (vermillion) on her forehead, a part of her everyday ritual. Lakkatura Tea Estate, Sylhet.



Members of 'Asha'r Alo' (Light of Hope) gather for their monthly networking meeting with around 20 tea workers. Lakkatura Tea Estate, Sylhet.

The leadership training changed how she saw herself. Once, when a 15-year-old girl from a nearby village called her for help to stop a child marriage, Shila did not hesitate. She gathered a few women, contacted local NGO members and together they intervened — successfully halting the marriage. ‘That day, I felt people actually started thinking of me when they get into trouble. I’ve always wanted to be beside them.’

Her family stood by her. Encouraged by the confidence she gained attending the sessions, Shila convinced her husband to leave his unstable auto-rickshaw job and open a small food stall beside their home.



From her bedroom window, Shila Kurmi looks outside before beginning her daily routine. Lakkatura Tea Estate, Sylhet.

Now, she notices the change not only in herself but around her. Women who once spoke in whispers now raise their concerns aloud. ‘We talk, we ask questions.’ This shift is subtle but profound. The tea garden’s structure, rooted in colonial hierarchies of class and gender has not disappeared, but its edges have begun to blur. They are not challenging authority through confrontation, but through participation — by learning, speaking and being heard.

Looking ahead, Shila believes the future of the garden depends on whether this learning continues. ‘We have just started to speak,’ she says. ‘But if our daughters learn from us, then they will speak better than we do.’ For her, the next step is not only to keep these



Shila Kurmi and her husband stand by their window, quietly watching something outside their home. Lakkatura Tea Estate, Sylhet.





forums active but to make them visible to garden management and policymakers to bridge the gap between everyday talk and institutional change.

The tea industry, one of Bangladesh's oldest export sectors, depends on the labour and resilience of women like Shila. Their inclusion in dialogue, she believes, is not just a matter of justice, but of sustainability.

After half a day's work, Shila Kurmi and other tea garden workers walk uphill to the weighing section to measure their collected leaves. Lakkatura Tea Estate, Sylhet.

Jayanti Koiri
Tea-Garden Worker



The Weight of Words in the Garden

Meetings about ‘rights’ and ‘awareness’ were not new in the Hingajia Tea Garden of Kulaura, Moulvibazar, where Jayanti had worked most of her life. Her mother had worked there too, and after her death, Jayanti inherited the same job — as is customary in the tea gardens, where at least one person in every family must continue the lineage of labour. For 27 years, Jayanti has worked these same slopes, knowing every patch of land, every supervisor’s rule and every sign of weather that predicts a longer working day.

When she first joined the EWCSA meetings a year ago, she expected little more than another round of speeches. But this time the discussions stayed with her — the way women spoke together, questioned long-standing practices and began to think collectively. From there, Jayanti began to learn a new kind of language — words like rights, wage structure, collective bargaining and leadership. They offered her a way to understand what she and others had long experienced but could not name.

Her learning translated into practice. Together with other women, Jayanti began raising questions about wage cuts, the lack of drinking water and the absence of toilets in the fields. Gradually,



Jayanti Koiri standing in front of her home.
Hingajia Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Jayanti Koiri leads a group discussion with fellow tea garden workers in a courtyard session. Hingajia Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.

these conversations turned into small acts of resistance — refusing unpaid overtime, or approaching garden officials to demand repairs to a broken water pipe.

Soon after, Jayanti was elected president of the Rajanigandha Forum, a women's group formed through the EWCSA project. The forum brought structure to women's informal networks of mutual help and complaint. Under her leadership, the group began to meet with officials and panchayet members to demand fairer conditions. Their first achievement was modest but meaningful: a raise in the leaf-plucking rate from 4 to 4.5 Taka per kilogram. 'Half a taka may seem small, but it means we could make it happen ourselves.'

Beyond wages, Jayanti sees the deeper problem as she explains, 'Even if our work builds everything here, the land does not belong to us.' The question of land rights, still unresolved in most tea estates, continues to limit how far empowerment can travel. Without security of residence or control over land, most families remain economically dependent on the estates. Jayanti's own hopes are modest but steady. She wants to see a future where women can work without fear of harassment, where drinking water and toilets are basic rights, not privileges. But she is also aware that new challenges are emerging — the uncertainty of tea prices, the declining interest of younger generations in garden work and



Jayanti begins her morning by sweeping the courtyard in front of her home. Hingajia Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.



Jayanti standing with her sister-in-law outside their home, sharing a moment in the afternoon. Hingajia Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.





the absence of alternative livelihoods. 'Our daughters want to study and work outside, but there are no chances nearby.'

The contradictions of change in the plantation economy — growing empowerment vis-a-vis structural dependence — persist. The EWCSA project has given women like Jayanti a platform, but sustaining that space requires attention to deeper issues of economic justice and access. Jayanti's optimism remains grounded. 'Even if the big changes take time, we can at least speak together now. We can decide what to ask for.'

Jayanti Koiri along with other tea garden workers plucking tea leaves in their assigned section of the Hingajia Tea Garden.
Hingajia Tea Garden, Kulaura, Sylhet.

Putul

Domestic Worker



Mobilising to Demand Individual and Collective Rights

There are about 1.7 million domestic workers in Bangladesh, of which about 80% are women. However, this huge workforce still remains unrecognised in the country's labour force.

Putul worked for 10 years as a domestic worker in Barishal Sadar without knowing her rights, without knowing that she *has* rights. That changed when the Association of Voluntary Action for Society (AVAS) knocked on her door with the opportunity offered by the EWCSA project under the leadership of Oxfam with support from the European Union. When Putul joined the first community meeting, she learned about the rights she has. For a driven woman like Putul, this was an eye-opener. She said, 'I didn't know that we, domestic workers, have rights. No one even acknowledges our work as a profession. But now that I know, I want to go even further. I want to achieve more for myself and my community.'

Being a dreamer and a hard-worker, Putul did not forget about her community in her attempts to pursue a better future. She attended the meetings and training programmes provided through the project and soon became someone who can lead her community in their struggle to achieve their rights. She mobilised her fellow domestic workers and together they started the *Aparajita Grihakarmi Unyayan Sangstha* (Aparajita Domestic Worker



A portrait of Putul's regular workday.
Barishal Sadar.



Putul leads a community meeting session.
Barishal Sadar.

Development Organisation). They opened a bank account and now raise a monthly fund and put it away as a safety net, so that they can support one of their own when necessary without having to be dependent on others. Putul was selected by her fellows to be the treasurer of their collective because of her leadership and organising skills.

Putul attended policy-making meetings as a representative of domestic workers to voice their demands. The biggest dream she has now is the formal recognition of domestic workers as a labour force. She also wants the implementation of a contractual employment system so that employers cannot exploit domestic workers anymore. In Barishal Sadar, the implementation of such a

contract-based system is already under discussion at the policy level because Putul and her community have been relentless in their attempts to achieve this.

Putul said that the training sessions empowered her and her community by making them aware of their rights and showing them the way to access the different resources available to deal with the challenges they experience. This is the biggest takeaway from the project, according to Putul. She plans to train other women in leadership and mobilising, so that more leaders rise up to take the cause of domestic workers' rights further.

Putul has been able to communicate with her employers and successfully achieve her rights. Now she wants to see the entire



Putul hard at work.
Barishal Sadar.



Putul with her employer, who treats her like family.
Barishal Sadar.



Putul during a routine checkup.
Barishal Sadar.



Putul and her niece smile brightly.
Barishal Sadar.

domestic worker community of the country recognised and empowered. While speaking about her daughter's ambition and steady determination, Putul's mother said that she has no doubt Putul will be able to realise her dreams one day. Putul herself seemed resolute when she confidently declared, **'Our work has only begun and we have a long way to go. I want to spread awareness about domestic workers' rights to every corner of the country. And I'm ready to make any sacrifice necessary to achieve my dreams.'**

Surrounded by her community, Putul smiles in hopes for a better future. Barishal Sadar.



Panna
Domestic Worker



A Journey Towards Empowerment

Panna is a female domestic worker based in Rupganj in Narayanganj. She was one of the firsts to join the 30-member forum of domestic workers in her area that was formed as part of the EWCSA project that aimed to raise awareness among domestic workers about their rights. It was at the monthly forum meetings that Panna and the other women became aware of their rights regarding fair pay, rest, maternity leave and abuse. They learned about gender-related issues, labour right laws and different legal and community resources they can access when they need to deal with a problem. This awareness of exploitation and rights gave Panna a newfound confidence in herself and the work that she does. She said, 'I used to feel small when I walked on the streets before. I thought I was somehow less because I worked at other people's homes. But now I know how important my job is. I know what rights I have.'

Soon, Panna was selected to be the president of the forum by her peers and attended a leadership capacity building training with another member. Later, the two of them trained the others in their community on how to raise their voice against any rights abuse and how to present their issues to the authorities concerned at the community, local and national levels.



Panna smiles as her fellows look on.
Rupganj, Narayanganj.



Panna and her forum during a monthly meeting.
Rupganj, Narayanganj.

Panna and some of her forum members went to the police to file a general diary when of their own fell victim to a financial scam. Panna's surprise at her own assertiveness was evident as she retold the story. She said, 'The past me never would have dared to do such a thing! We grow up being scared of the police; we view dealing with any legal matter not worth the effort because who would listen to us? But after the training, I feel like I can do this. I can help myself and help others with what I know.'

When one of their fellow domestic workers lost her job without proper compensation because she hurt her leg and was unable to work, Panna and the others mobilised and went to the employer's house to talk to them and point out how unfair their action was.


In the end, they managed to get compensation for the injured worker from her employer who also promised to give her job back once she got better. Panna said, 'They can't just fire us if we get injured. We're human too, we get sick. While we should ideally receive extra support during such difficult times, we at least need to be paid what we are owed.' This is why Panna's forum believes that the formalisation of domestic work and enforcement of strict regulations are necessary. Her community believes that an official registry of all domestic workers and the implementation of contractual employment will immensely help the marginalised group to ensure their rights.



Panna sweeps the room that her employers use to tutor students. Rupganj, Narayanganj.



Panna and her employer. Rupganj, Narayanganj.

A close-up photograph of a woman with a warm, joyful expression, smiling and looking slightly to her right. She is wearing a teal-colored headscarf with a white and orange floral pattern. A hand is gently resting on her right shoulder, suggesting a moment of connection or support. The background is a solid teal color, possibly a door or wall, with a small white rectangular object visible in the upper left. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the woman's features and the texture of her clothing.

Panna and a dear friend, Ruma Akter, take a break and laugh. Rupganj, Narayanganj.



Madhobi Rani
Home-Based Garment Worker



Learning to Name the Violence

Madhobi's days begin with cutting loose threads from factory-made tupi (caps), sometimes sewing them together for local contractors who paid little and often late. The work used to strain her back and eyes, but it was the least of her burdens. Inside her home, she lived under the authority of her in-laws, where domestic abuse — both verbal and physical — was a constant. Over time, the humiliation and occasional beatings came to feel like part of what it meant to be a woman and a wife.

In areas like Savar — one of the key hubs of Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) supply chain — thousands of women work from home, stitching, trimming and finishing factory-produced items. Madhobi Rani is such a 43-year-old home-based worker from Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Although their labour remains largely informal and unregulated, it contributes quietly to one of the country's largest export sectors, which sustains millions of livelihoods and drives national economic growth. These home-based workers, often subcontracted through layers of middlemen, form the invisible foundation of the RMG industry — linking the formal production lines to the domestic economy.



Madhobi Rani stands in the street.
Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.



With other Asram residents, Madhobi Rani cuts vegetables for bhog - shared work that sustains both faith and daily living. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.

Madhobi's encounter with the EWCSA introduced a new vocabulary into her world. It began with a neighbour who was already attending the project's regular community sessions — someone who had quietly stood by her side during her most difficult days. The first meeting became a moment of recognition. The discussion centred on naari nirjaton (violence against women) and gender discrimination. Listening to others share similar experiences, Madhobi realised that what she had endured for years was not private misfortune but part of a wider, structural pattern. 'I learnt there was a name for what was happening to me — and that I could resist it.'



Outside her room, Madhobi Rani talks with neighbour Rani Khatun - planning their next Core Committee meeting over casual conversation. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.

Over time, the meetings became more than a source of information; they turned into a space for solidarity. It was no longer just the NGO gatherings — Madhobi and a few others formed what they now call their *core committee*, a local network of women who support each other when someone faces abuse or discrimination. 'When someone tells me her husband hit her, I tell her she has a right to stop it. We were never taught that before.'

With guidance and encouragement from her peers, she eventually made the difficult decision to leave her in-laws' house. She now lives in an Ashram in Savar, where she earns a small income by



Madhobi Rani at an advocacy programme. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.





cutting vegetables for the temple's daily meals. Her focus now is on her daughter's education — a future she hopes will not repeat her own. 'If she studies, she will not have to depend on anyone.'

Her story, however, also reveals the deeper challenges that persist. Economic insecurity continues to tie women's safety to dependence; social stigma still follows those who step outside domestic boundaries. While projects like EWCSA have opened new pathways for awareness and collective voice, the structural conditions of poverty and gender hierarchy remain slow to shift.

At her sewing corner, Madhobi Rani carefully trims loose threads from factory-made tupi cloth, part of her regular home-based sewing work. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.

Rani Khatun

Home-Based Garment Worker



Journey to Resilience Through the Threads

The machine, second-hand and slightly rusted at the edges, sits in the corner of Rani Khatun's one-room home. Rani bends over the machine, stitching carefully, pausing only to wipe the sweat from her forehead. 'When I first came to Dhaka, I used to cut threads from factory-made clothes by hand, now at least this machine makes my living a little better.'

Rani is one of thousands of home-based garment workers who form the invisible foundation of Bangladesh's RMG sector — a global industry that employs over four million people and contributes nearly 84% of the country's export earnings. While large factories dominate the statistics, a vast network of women like Rani operates from their homes, taking up small-scale finishing work such as cutting, stitching or attaching decorative elements. Their labour supports the formal supply chain, yet remains outside its protections.

In Ulail Bazar, Savar, located in Dhaka District of Bangladesh, 36-year-old Rani lives in a single-room home. Rani came to Dhaka in 2007 after her marriage, hoping for a better life. Her first jobs were irregular and low-paid — attaching beads to clothes, sewing sweaters in winter, cutting threads in summer. Each season brought a new kind of work and a new uncertainty. Payments were



At home, Rani Khatun hangs washed clothes in the sunlight to dry as part of her daily chores. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.



Rani Khatun's hands guiding fabric through the sewing machine during her tailoring work. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.

often delayed or reduced, and once the season ended, the work stopped. Still, she continued, moving from one task to another, balancing wage work with unpaid household labour.

One afternoon, while cutting threads at home, a neighbour told her that someone from a foundation wanted to meet her. Tired and uninterested, Rani initially refused. But the woman she now calls apa — came again and persuaded her to attend a community meeting. There, she heard discussions on health, hygiene, workplace safety and gender discrimination — topics she had rarely connected to her work before. The session was part of the EWCSA project. Through its training on leadership and advocacy, Rani learned how to identify unfair practices and how to speak

about them. ‘They explained that rights are not only for big workers in factories. We, who work from home, also have rights.’

Over time, she began applying what she learned. When a neighbour faced domestic violence, Rani helped her contact support services. Other women in her area now approach her when they face delayed payments or verbal abuse from middlemen.

Her story reveals the structural gap in Bangladesh’s garment industry — the skill and visibility boundary between formal and informal workers. While the RMG sector thrives on global demand and factory productivity, home-based workers like Rani remain outside formal training, legal recognition and wage



Before returning to work, Rani Khatun washes her hands with soap outside her home in Ulail, Savar. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.



A child’s drawing at Madhobi Rani’s home. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.





standardisation. They contribute to the industry's flexibility but not its benefits. 'We can work hard, but we need someone to teach us how to work better.'

These words point to the future challenge: bridging this gap through skills development, recognition and inclusion. As Bangladesh seeks to maintain its position in the global garment market, the sustainability of the sector increasingly depends on integrating its invisible workforce — the women who sew, cut and stitch from their homes.

Rani Khatun speaks with community members outside her home, discussing shared issues about work and family life. Ulail Bazar, Savar, Dhaka.

A portrait of a smiling woman, Ranjida Begum, wearing a vibrant pink and orange patterned headscarf and matching garment. She is standing in front of a lush green background with large leaves and a thin black wire with small yellow flowers. The text "Ranjida Begum" and "Woman Fisherfolk" is overlaid in the top left corner.

Ranjida Begum

Woman Fisherfolk

Leading Women Fisherfolk Towards Empowerment

In Mongla, Ranjida Begum's day starts at dawn. She goes to the ponds behind her house to collect the previous night's catch from the nets, and sorts and gathers them to sell at the local market. Then she heads to the market and sells her catch. On her way back, she checks in on the neighbourhood women, who are also part of the women fisherfolk community like herself. Ranjida has taken on this extra responsibility because she is the leader of a 30-member committee, which was formed when the women received training sessions as part of the project.

While women are not usually contributors in the mainstream fisherfolk community, men and women equally take care of the livelihood where Ranjida lives. But Ranjida and the other women are not acknowledged as fisherfolk because they are women and their labour is invisible. Their fish are bought for less money than the men fisherfolk get. Ranjida and the other women fisherfolk have been fighting such obstacles all their lives.

Ranjida and the other women fisherfolk in the area were made aware of their rights through the courtyard meetings that they attended during the project. They learned that they deserve equal treatment and equal pay because they do the same work as the



Ranjida Begum, soaking wet, heads home after a day at the fish ponds. Khonkarer Ber, Mongla.



Ranjida Begum and her husband, Lutfar Khan, team up.
Khonkarer Ber, Mongla.

men. Most of the women in the area contribute equally, if not more, in the fish farming business. In some families, where there is no male breadwinner, it is the woman who takes care of her entire family by toiling away at the ponds and fish markets from dawn till dusk. Yet, such women are not recognised in the occupation and thus are robbed of the rights and benefits — such as the fisherman registration card — that they are entitled to. This is why women fisherfolk like Ranjida Begum believe that their formal inclusion in the labour force is not only essential, but extremely crucial for a better future for them and their children.

Ranjida and the others in her community received in-depth training on health, personal hygiene and different social challenges. Ranjida

said, ‘I’ve never received such a comprehensive training. We learned about so many things in such a short time that it felt like someone turned on the lights. Years of ignorance were replaced with awareness and knowledge.’ Ranjida, who never really gave any thought to her work beyond performing a duty, learned about feminist leadership, the rights of women, how to speak to the authorities concerned about the issues that the women fisherfolk face and how to negotiate better terms to advance their cause.

With the newfound awareness, Ranjida mobilised her fellow fisherfolk and formed a committee. They now arrange monthly courtyard meetings to discuss their challenges and to train newcomers on the matters they had received training on to spread



Ranjida Begum's catch of the day.
Khonkarer Ber, Mongla.



Ranjida Begum shows off her catch with a smile.
Khonkarer Ber, Mongla.





awareness to all corners of their community. Ranjida and her community, however, said that they require financial and infrastructural support to truly make sustainable, positive changes.

Ranjida Begum shares a light moment with her community.
Khonkarer Ber, Mongla.

Sobita Roy

Woman Fisherfolk



From Individual Struggle to Collective Dream

The EWCSA project, implemented by Oxfam and supported by the European Union in collaboration with Badabon Sangha in Mongla, Bangladesh, approached Sobita Roy and hundreds of women fisherfolk to provide them with training on their health and financial challenges as well as to empower them to raise their voice against the social and gender norms of society.

Sobita's husband has been sick for a long time, which is why it is usually Sobita who has to go fishing daily to support the family. The place she usually casts her net in the river is a long and tiring walk from her home. She spends hours in mud and water, soaking wet, as she drags her net near the riverbank to catch shrimp fries. Such conditions can cause different types of skin diseases and, in women, they can lead to severe harm to their reproductive health.

Sobita and hundreds of women fisherfolk were provided with training on their health, financial challenges as well as on feminist empowerment so that they can raise their voice against the social and gender norms of society. Sobita and the others learned how to minimise the risk of water-borne infections, especially during menstruation and pregnancy. As rainwater is the main source of drinking water in coastal areas, Sobita and her community learned how to properly conserve rainwater and purify it before drinking using different filtration methods. Through training sessions, they were



Sobita Roy stands on her boat.
Chila, Mongla.



Portrait of a lady with determination.
Chila, Mongla.

made aware of feminist leadership, the necessity of mobilising and the various resources available at different levels of the government which they can access to solve many of their problems.

Sobita claimed that her biggest takeaways have been courage and confidence. With subtle pride, she said, 'Before, I didn't really go out much; I never was one to talk much either. But I've changed since the training. I can talk confidently now, especially about issues that concern our rights. I'm not scared to go to different offices and talk to the people there anymore. It's a huge deal for me.' Not only has Sobita become more confident, she has also developed her leadership skills to help her community. She now takes others to relevant local authorities to help them get their fisherman registration card or their allowances for maternity, old age or disability.



Taking care of household chores.
Chila, Mongla.

The project taught Sobita about independence and the importance of safety nets. She has organised 20 women in her community and formed a collective, which is now going through the process of registration. Sobita went to Mongla to file the application for her collective herself. Their plan is to have a rainy day fund to use during the periods of ban on fishing and in cases of community emergencies. Sobita's dreams, however, have now expanded beyond her tiny home. She wants to make the collective bigger, so that it can become a solid platform to raise the women fisherfolk community higher and higher. Sobita's eyes gleamed with hope as she said, 'This is just the beginning. I really hope the future will be better. That all of us women and our children will have a better life one day.'



Sobita Roy and her husband, Samar Roy.
Chila, Mongla



Sobita Roy drags her net in Pashur River.
Chila, Mongla, southern part of Bangladesh.



Nurbanu

Woman Fisherfolk



Finding Solid Ground Through Recognition of Identity

The Manta community, a floating fisherfolk in Bangladesh, lives out their entire lives in their tiny boats. There are less than 10,000 Manta people in the country, and most of them still remain outside the country's citizenship register in the absence of national recognition. Nurbanu is a Manta woman. Her life is one of resilience and endurance. As someone who belongs to a marginalised group, her lived experiences are full of discrimination and obstacles. Most of the problems that the community face are the direct result of them not having a national identity card. Basic government services, such as health and education, remain unavailable to them to this day. Moreover, Nurbanu and her community are unable to access the facilities and benefits that mainstream fisherfolks can enjoy using their fisherman registration card, the application for which also requires an NID.

Through the project, Nurbanu became aware that everyone in her community can register for the fisherman registration card and access the different benefits the government has to offer for the fisherfolk. She said, 'We didn't know that the government offers alternative employments during the seasonal ban on fishing. Our income is already poor because the riverine fish population has declined alarmingly. That difficult situation becomes an impossible one when we are restricted from fishing for a long stretch of time.'



Nurbanu rows her boat.
Gilatali, Barishal.



Nurbanu in the middle of catching fish.
Gilatali, Barishal.

In spite of fishing being their traditional and only occupation for generations, the Manta had never been officially recognised as fisherfolk. Nurbanu and the others in her community have now applied for the fisherman card. Once they are officially registered as fisherfolk, they will be able to receive subsidised food supplies and alternative means of income during fishing bans. The project also provided the Manta women with training on personal hygiene, gender equity and feminist leadership so that they can mobilise and demand their rights to make their lives better.

Previously, the Manta community only ventured out of their floating homes to sell fish and buy supplies. Their horizon has expanded

now that they know their rights and where to go to get them. When collectives of women within the Manta communities were formed during the implementation of the project, Nurbanu became the president of her own. With hopes for a better future, she mused, 'I no more feel like I'm just floating hopelessly. I can feel the ground beneath my feet. These opportunities have taken us a little higher than where we have been stuck for so long. Now, we need our basic rights.'

Nurbanu, however, lamented that the Manta people, regardless of their gender, are exploited and face discrimination because of their minority identity when they go to fish markets to sell their



Nurbanu with her national identity card.
Gilatali, Barishal.



Nurbanu with her son and daughter.
Gilatali, Barishal.



A tender moment among family.
Gilatali, Barishal.



Nurbanu presents her catch with a smile.
Gilatali, Barishal.

catch. Their fish are bought for less, and sometimes people even try to not pay them at all. To truly progress towards a better future, the Manta community demands basic rights: they need accessible WASH facilities, and permanent land to build homes and send their children to school. These are the challenges that must be overcome for the Manta people to live a life of dignity and respect.

Hopes that tie Nurbanu and the next generation.
Gilatali, Barishal.



PARTNERS



FROM SHADOWS
TO LEADERSHIP

