

Cultivate Fellowship for Gender and Youth Activity

Qualitative Inquiry Study Report

Empowering Young Women in Char and Haor Regions for Sustainable Livestock Rearing through LSP Support: Challenges and Key Learnings



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1. Introduction

SHOUHARDO III Plus, a two-year USAID-funded initiative (2022-2024) aims to improve gender-equitable food and nutrition security and resilience for 168,521 Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) households in the Char and Haor regions of northern Bangladesh covering eight districts. The program supports diversified income sources, inclusive agricultural growth, market access for women, and financial services, emphasizing sustainable integration of Local Service Providers (LSPs) with government and private sector entities. Additionally, SHOUHARDO III Plus promotes nutrition for children under five, pregnant and lactating women, and adolescent girls, with a core focus on private sector engagement, gender equity, and governance.

Targeting primarily female participants—70% of whom are young married women the program addresses challenges related to decision-making, movement restrictions, and gender-based violence (GBV) which impact resilience and response in emergency situations. Studies indicate that these vulnerabilities are exacerbated by gendered biases in politics, socioeconomics, and culture¹. This study examines the unique challenges faced by young married women in the Char and Haor regions in accessing livestock services from LSPs, especially during emergencies, to enhance the sustainability of SHOUHARDO III Plus.

Building on SHOUHARDO III Plus's experience in women's empowerment, the Cultivate Fellowship for Gender and Youth Activity aims to deepen its understanding of inclusive resilience, particularly to strengthen youth engagement. This study aligns with SHOUHARDO III Plus's goal of developing nuanced, inclusive approaches focusing on specific food security issues that require tailored solutions. It examines barriers impacting equitable gender dynamics in private and public spaces and seeks strategies to enhance men's and women's engagement in accessing livestock-related services.

¹ See World Health Organization, Department of Gender and Women's Health, *Gender and Health in Disasters* (Geneva: WHO 2002), <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/68886/a85575.pdf?sequence=1>; and Alvina Erman, Sophie Anne De Vries Robbé, Stephan Fabian Thies, Kayenat Kabir, and Mirai Maruo, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience: Existing Evidence* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/926731614372544454/pdf/Gender-Dimensions-of-Disaster-Risk-and-Resilience-Existing-Evidence.pdf>; "Gender Analysis Study for SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity (June 2024)"

2. Study Objectives

2.1. Overall Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to document the challenges married young women in the Char and Haor regions face in accessing LSP services for livestock rearing, aiming to enhance the sustainability of program activities.

2.2. Inquiry Questions:

- What specific challenges do married young women encounter in livestock rearing activities, particularly during recovery from shocks and stresses?
- How have program interventions enhanced their ability to access these services?
- What barriers hinder married young women from establishing connections with Local Service Providers (LSPs) to access these services?

3. Design and Methodology

This study utilized a comprehensive qualitative approach, incorporating document reviews, team mobilization and qualitative data collection. Key documents from the SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity, previous gender analysis reports and relevant policies were reviewed, guided by USAID's "Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment" (ADS Chapter 205) and CARE's frameworks.

3.1. Primary Data Source

The primary data source consisted of livestock participants (young married women) from the SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity database, defined as those newly married or up to 35 years of age.

3.2. Inquiry Methods

The study involved reviewing project literature and organizational reports, employing qualitative tools such as Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

3.3. Participatory Activities: Card Sorting

Card sorting engaged respondents in organizing information, generating insights on inclusive resilience. The SHOUHARDO III Plus project introduced Local Service Providers (LSPs) offering livestock services, assessing whether young married women face gender-specific challenges in accessing these services.

3.4. Method Summary

Qualitative methodology included FGDs with married young women through participatory card-sorting activities and semi-structured topic guides. KIIs were conducted with LSPs and key household influencers, such as mothers-in-law, to understand barriers and opportunities. The analysis focused on stakeholders' contributions to program sustainability and resilience capacities.

3.5. Selection Criteria

FGDs: Conducted six FGDs with young married women involved in livestock rearing—three in Char areas and three in Haor areas considering geographic remoteness.

KIIs: Conducted 12 KIIs, covering six LSPs and six mothers-in-law, with six interviews in each region.

3.6. Recruitment Strategy

Villages were purposively selected based on remoteness in disaster-prone areas. The Village Development Committee (VDC) identified active livestock-rearing participants, with field facilitators assisting in participant selection from the project database. Each FGD included 7 to 10 participants and one LSP and one mother-in-law were interviewed from each community.

3.7. Data Collection Method

FGDs: Note-takers used paper and pen for immediate data capture.

Transcription: Notes and recordings were transcribed into digital text for analysis.

3.8. Study Team Composition

Two teams were mobilized—one for Char and one for Haor—each comprising a trained facilitator, note-taker, translator/observer, and photographer.

3.9. Training and Data Analysis Plan

Day 1: Staff training on data collection methods and tools.

Day 2: Field testing of tools, feedback collection, and logistics arrangement.

3.9.1. Training Materials

The Qualitative Inquiry Planning Sheet (QuIPS) was provided for reference.

3.9.2. Data Analysis Plan

- **Respondent-Level Analysis:** Collective analysis for each respondent.
- **Question-Level Analysis:** Individual analysis for distinct insights.
- **Analysis Tools:** Microsoft Excel for qualitative matrices; Microsoft Word for detailed text analysis.
- **Field Data Collection:** Conducted from September 1-5, 2024.

4. Key Findings

Despite progress in women's empowerment, significant challenges persist for women and girls in accessing services in public and private spheres. These barriers, often more pronounced for women than men are rooted in religious conservatism, social mobility restrictions, safety concerns, and fear of sexual violence. Char districts are particularly restrictive while Haor districts offer more flexibility due to men working away from home, allowing women greater independence and reducing gender-based violence.

However, women still struggle to balance domestic responsibilities with economic activities limiting their engagement in income-generating opportunities. In agriculture, they face disadvantages such as lack of land ownership, wage inequality, and unpaid labor. Cultural norms, including biased inheritance systems, hinder women's asset ownership, while traditional views undervalue their decision-making roles at home and in public. Consequently, women's participation in public decision-making remains minimal and often un-respected.

4.1. Gender Roles in Livestock Rearing:

Interviews highlighted distinct gender roles in livestock management. Women primarily manage homestead tasks including feeding, cleaning, milking, caring for poultry, assisting with births and providing medical care. They also engage with local service providers and rural livestock doctors. However, their domestic responsibilities limit their participation in other activities reinforcing gendered divisions of labor.

In contrast, men typically handle external tasks such as gathering feed, constructing sheds, conducting artificial insemination, managing complex veterinary care, grazing, delivering vaccinations, and marketing livestock. This division of labor reinforces gender stereotypes that restrict women's participation in decision-making and external interactions.

In the past five years, traditional gender roles have shifted, with women becoming more involved in decision-making, visiting livestock hospitals, and overseeing livestock treatment. Meanwhile, men are increasingly engaging in tasks previously considered women's responsibilities. This evolving dynamic is fostering greater collaboration between genders and challenging entrenched gender norms.



4.2. Availability and Accessibility of Livestock Services:

In focus group discussions, participants engaged in a card-sorting exercise to categorize and rank the accessibility of services provided by Local Service Providers (LSPs) for livestock rearing. This method enabled primarily young married women from the Char and Haor regions to reflect on their experiences with LSP services, scoring them from 1 (hardest to access) to 7 (easiest to access).

Most Accessible Services:

Livestock Feed (5.5): Ranked highest, this service is perceived as the most accessible, with minimal barriers.

Livestock Perinatal Care (5.2): Close behind, this service is also readily accessible, offering essential support for livestock care.

Moderately Accessible Services:

Livestock Shed (4.3) and Livestock Treatment (4): These services are moderately accessible but present some barriers, such as distance or limited resources.

Services with Significant Accessibility Challenges

Livestock Vaccination (3.8) and Livestock Medicine (3.2): These services face moderate accessibility issues due to logistical or financial constraints, which may restrict usage.

Most Challenging Service to Access

Artificial Insemination (AI) (2): AI services rank lowest in inaccessibility due to significant barriers, including the need for specialized skills, limited providers, high costs, and potential cultural restrictions. Overall, while basic services like livestock feed and perinatal care are relatively accessible, specialized services such as AI face considerable challenges. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve access to these specialized services.



4.3. Access and Utilization of Livestock Services:

Local Service Providers (LSPs) in the Char and Haor regions offer vital livestock services, such as vaccinations and health guidance. However, young married women often face mobility restrictions and cultural barriers, relying on male family members or mothers-in-law for interaction with LSPs, particularly in the Char areas. While these services are recognized as valuable, logistical and social obstacles frequently hinder women from fully benefiting.

Community events often prioritize male participation, undervaluing women's contributions. Nevertheless, there have been positive changes in women's roles in livestock management. Women are increasingly responsible for obtaining medical care and purchasing supplies. In Haor areas, significant strides have been made toward gender-equitable access with women easily obtaining medicine or accessing services via phone or community markets. In contrast, 40-50% of women in the Char regions continue to face persistent barriers due to traditional gender roles and mobility constraints.

A mother-in-law from Thaikarer Para village highlighted the challenges of communication with Local Service Providers (LSPs), noting, "Cultural barriers prevent young married women from directly initiating phone calls to LSPs. Typically, the first call is made by the mother-in-law or another family member to request support." This practice not only delays service delivery but also diminishes the quality of information exchanged between LSPs and women.

4.4. Barriers to Accessing LSP Services:

Access to Local Service Provider (LSP) services is hindered by geographical challenges including poor infrastructure, damaged roads, and expensive river transportation. In Char regions, social norms severely restrict the mobility and decision-making abilities of young married women limiting their access to livestock services. Institutional barriers also exist, such as government livestock programs that primarily benefit men and a lack of recognition of women's roles in livestock management.

In contrast, Haor districts demonstrate more gender-equitable access to services, supported by better awareness and resources to address the challenges women face.

4.5. Challenges During Shock and Stresses

In the Char and Haor regions, frequent shocks, particularly floods and flash floods, exacerbate existing challenges in livestock management. During these events, women encounter increased mobility restrictions and heightened household responsibilities, making it more difficult to access LSP services. LSPs also face challenges reaching affected areas, leading to delays in essential services like vaccinations.

Focus group discussions highlighted that the burden on women intensifies during crises as they must ensure livestock survival while managing household duties often with minimal external support. Young married women face significant challenges in feeding livestock, caring for sick animals, and relocating them to safer areas. Common coping strategies include seeking family support, taking loans from Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), and reducing livestock feed during these crises.

4.6. Program Contribution to Positive Outcomes:

The study findings indicate that program interventions have significantly enhanced awareness and access to livestock services in the Char and Haor regions. Training programs for both men and women have improved livestock management practices, although men tend to benefit more directly. Including mothers-in-law as key influencers has been instrumental in encouraging young women's involvement in livestock rearing, leading to gradual shifts in traditional gender roles as families increasingly assign daughters-in-law more responsibilities.



[A MOTHER-IN-LAW; PHOTO CREDIT: ELIAS MAHMOOD]

The SHOUHARDO III Plus program has been crucial in improving access to livestock services through training, awareness-raising, disaster preparedness and establishing connections between women and LSPs. These efforts have empowered young married women to independently visit livestock hospitals, interact with LSPs and access treatment

and medicine. Couple sessions and community meetings have also promoted collaboration in livestock management, breaking down social barriers and fostering joint decision-making.

4.7. Improvements in Livestock Services Accessibility:

Although significant barriers remain, there have been gradual improvements in women's access to livestock services through program interventions. Some LSPs have adapted their service delivery to better meet women's needs, offering home visits and working through women's groups. Training and capacity-building initiatives aimed at women in leadership roles are beginning to dismantle socio-cultural barriers. However, much service utilization continues to be mediated by male family members, highlighting the need for further availability of AI services, door-to-door medicine delivery, and institutional treatment facilities, especially in Char areas.

4.8. Behavior of Livestock Service Providers (LSPs):

LSPs are generally perceived as reliable and competent receiving positive feedback from both young women and their mothers-in-law. However, LSPs face challenges in directly engaging with young women due to cultural restrictions. They strive to remain accessible by maintaining strong relationships with key family members who act as intermediaries. Their adaptability and reputation for delivering quality services are vital in building trust within the community. Overall, LSPs have been well-received with women reporting positive interactions and responsiveness to community needs.

4.9. Support System for Livestock Rearing:

Participants identified several key supporters in livestock rearing including CARE Bangladesh, government organizations (GOs), NGOs, Union Parishads (UPs), and the private sector. Mothers-in-law play a crucial role by providing practical and logistical support, facilitating interactions with LSPs and often serving as key decision-makers in livestock management.

As program interventions engage both older and younger generations support systems around livestock rearing are gradually evolving. Families are becoming more open to young women taking on greater responsibilities though traditional hierarchies remain prevalent. The community has expressed interest in collaborating further with GOs and NGOs to access additional training and resources, including improved livestock varieties and modern treatment facilities.

5. Summary of Insights by Inquiry Question:

Inquiry Question 1: What specific challenges do married young women face in livestock-rearing activities, particularly when recovering from shocks and stresses?

- Women encounter mobility restrictions, economic challenges, and limited market access that hinder their participation in livestock farming.
- Domestic responsibilities primarily fall on women, restricting their ability to engage outside the home. The dual demands of domestic and economic roles pose significant obstacles.
- Access to specialized services, such as artificial insemination (AI) and vaccinations, remains challenging for women.

Inquiry Question 2: How have program interventions facilitated their ability to access these services?

- A gradual shift toward joint decision-making in livestock management is emerging, with men and women sharing responsibilities, challenging entrenched gender norms.
- Local Service Providers (LSPs) have modified their service delivery to address women's mobility and cultural barriers by offering home visits and collaborating with women's groups.

Inquiry Question 3: What barriers prevent married young women from establishing connections with LSPs to access services?

- The primary barriers include mobility restrictions and deeply rooted cultural norms.
- Institutional challenges persist, such as the prioritization of men in government livestock programs and a lack of recognition for women's roles in livestock management.
- Mothers-in-law play a crucial role as influencers in changing family dynamics and supporting women's involvement in livestock rearing.

6. Learnings

Key learnings from the findings of the focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) include:

Gendered Division of Labor: Livestock rearing is highly gendered with women responsible for homestead tasks (feeding, watering and caring for livestock) while men manage external activities (vaccinations, artificial insemination and marketing). This division restricts women's decision-making and access to services.

Gradual Shift in Participation: Over the past five years, there has been a gradual increase in women's involvement in decision-making and interactions with service providers. Despite this progress, men continue to dominate external tasks. SHOUHARDO's programs have led to a rise in women seeking livestock services from local LSPs or DLSs, a notable change from previous years.

Impact of SHOUHARDO III Plus Activity: The program interventions have significantly improved women's access to livestock services, promoting equitable participation in livestock management. Prioritizing female LSPs has enhanced accessibility and facilitated communication for young women resulting in a more effective support system.

Role of Key Influencers: Involving key influencers, such as mothers-in-law, has been effective in shifting family dynamics and encouraging women's involvement in livestock rearing.

7. Recommendation:

- **Community Awareness:** Increase awareness to challenge social norms that restrict women's roles in livestock management. Engage men, boys, and key community influencers, such as mothers-in-law to foster a supportive environment.
- **Comprehensive Approach:** Promote gender-equitable access to livestock services in the Char and Haor areas through community awareness, capacity building, and financial inclusion. Collaborate with NGOs, government, and private companies to implement these initiatives.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Enhance women's access to low-interest loans for livestock rearing to secure capital and expand their businesses, fostering economic empowerment and financial independence.
- **Service Delivery Models:** Establish home-based or group-based service delivery models for Local Service Providers (LSPs) to assist women facing mobility challenges, creating mutually beneficial opportunities for both women and LSPs.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** Encourage collaboration among stakeholders, including government organizations, NGOs, and the private sector to address infrastructural and policy barriers that hinder access to livestock services.
- **Gender-Focused Strategies:** Integrate gender-focused strategies into future programs to continue addressing the social norms and structural barriers limiting women's participation in livestock management.

8. Conclusion:

This study offers valuable insights into the barriers that young married women encounter in accessing livestock services from Local Service Providers (LSPs) in the Char and Haor regions. By documenting these challenges and proposing actionable recommendations, the findings seek to inform future program strategies, promote gender-equitable access to services, and enhance the overall sustainability of SHOUHARDO III Plus activities.