

Negotiating for participation in co-management: How women manoeuvre within gender norms and practices in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Women are far less likely than men to be involved in community-based natural resource governance structures and systems due to gender norms and practices. However, there is limited evidence on women's ongoing participation in these systems, particularly in patriarchal societies. Using a case study approach, I analyse women's experiences in donor-supported fisheries co-management projects in Bangladesh. I found that women in co-management structures deliberately and willingly engage in gendered practices of *Ijfat* (honour) and *Purdah* (physical and spatial restrictions and segregation), showing reluctance in taking leadership positions, veiling, asserting themselves non-confrontationally and adopting silence. Drawing on the concept of instrumental agency (Burke, 2012), I focus on two strategies these women utilise: compliance with norms and self-muting. Their strategic choices elevate their place in their communities, enable them to secure access to credit, and enhance their status within their families and in public spheres. My findings show that women's use of norm compliance and self-muting empowers them individually but hampers collective gains and limits co-management functioning.

Introduction

Women make up 40 % of the global fisheries workforce (FAO, 2024), yet their contributions—particularly in harvest and post-harvest roles—are often overlooked and largely unrecognised and are rarely included in decision-making concerning fisheries resources (Freitas et al., 2020; Galappaththi et al., 2022). This marginalisation stems from male-centric views of fishing and androcentric management, lack of gender-disaggregated data, and narrow definitions of 'work' and 'fisheries' (Alonso-Población & Siar, 2018; Chambon et al., 2024; Freitas et al., 2020; Lentisco & Lee, 2015). Co-management, which involves power-and responsibility-sharing arrangements between government and local resource users, is seen as a potential avenue for enhancing women's participation (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005; Galappaththi et al., 2022). In the fisheries sector, the adoption of co-management often involves the "formation of a local committee or user group, with legislation or guidelines, setting out the composition of the resource user group, as well as their roles and responsibilities" (Nunan & Cepić, 2020, p.1). However, simply establishing new institutional arrangements alone may not ensure inclusion or meaningful policy changes that benefit marginalised actors (Gaventa, 2006).

Effective co-management requires inclusive participation, especially from women (Nunan et al., 2012; Pomeroy et al., 2001). According to Cornwall (2002), participation is about creating spaces, making room for different opinions to be heard and allowing people to engage in previously denied spaces. Participation is often directly linked with claims of empowerment and transformative development — i.e., development that can effectively challenge existing power structures, institutional practices, and capacity gaps (Cornwall, 2003). Through involvement in community organisations and activities, individuals gain experience in organising people, identifying resources, working with others toward a common goal, understanding factors that influence decision-making processes and developing strategies for achieving goals, which makes them feel more competent and less alienated (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

However, women's active involvement in co-management is often limited to implementation (Baker-Médard, 2017; Galappaththi et al., 2022; Nunan & Cepić, 2020). Gendered power relations and social norms, practices about what women are 'not allowed to' and 'not supposed to' do, mobility restrictions, essentialisms regarding women's reproductive role, and men's restrictive attitudes regarding equal access to resources limiting the scope for women's participation in resource

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governance, even if formal access is guaranteed (Chambon et al., 2024; Cornwall, 2003; Galappaththi et al., 2022). These factors disadvantage women both individually and collectively, excluding women's voices, experiences, and knowledge from resource governance and decision-making processes (Agarwal, 2001; Galappaththi et al., 2022).

Although expansive literature (Agarwal, 2001; Chambon et al., 2024; Choudhury et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2017; Galappaththi et al., 2022; Nunan & Cepić, 2020; Samndong & Kjosavik, 2017) shows how gender norms and practices limit the effective participation of women, there is limited evidence of how women negotiate for participation in co-management by manoeuvring within gender norms and practices. This paper addresses this gap by analysing the experiences of women in two donor-supported fisheries co-management projects in Bangladesh. I argue that women deliberately and willingly engage in practices of *Ijfat* (honour) and *Purdah* (physical and spatial segregation, behavioural restrictions), demonstrating their reluctance to take on leadership roles, veiling, asserting themselves non-confrontationally and remaining silent, thereby creating their own space and identity and, by doing so, exercising autonomy and power. Through norm compliance and self-muting, women secure their position within the Executive Committees (ECs) of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) established for fisheries co-management, gaining both material and relational benefits beyond the sphere of co-management itself.

Bangladesh was selected for this study due to the strong influence of social and religious norms in rural areas, which restrict women's autonomy and public participation. Co-management, in theory, provided a unique space for rural women to be involved in resource management. I chose two community-led fisheries co-management projects introduced in two religiously conservative areas where women's public roles are limited due to strict societal gender norms. While some literature on fisheries co-management in Bangladesh highlights women's financial gains through such programs, it also notes their participatory exclusion due to entrenched gender norms and lack of genuine empowerment (Choudhury et al., 2018; Mamun et al., 2016; Rahman & Begum, 2010). This context creates a foundation for understanding how certain women navigate participation in patriarchal settings.

The article reviews the literature on gender-based barriers to women's participation in natural resource co-management and strategies women use to participate in the public arena. It outlines the study's methodology and a subsequent section describes the existing gender norms and practices in the studied areas. The findings highlight how ideas of female domesticity, time restrictions, gender division of labour, and men's expectations regarding women's behaviour hinder women's involvement, yet show how women navigate these limits through norm compliance and self-muting as well as the importance of the negotiation. The discussion situates these findings within the broader literature, concluding that such strategies enable women to manoeuvre agency, create space and identity in both public and private spheres, and gain individual empowerment.

Gender and women's participation in natural resource co-management

The literature review develops an analytical framework to address how women negotiate for participation in co-management by manoeuvring within gender norms and practices. It draws on broader research from fisheries and community-based forest management, where the literature is more extensive than on women's participation in fisheries co-management. The review informs the framework on how gender limits women's participation in natural resource management, why women conform and non-conform with gender norms and practices and includes insights from studies on women's negotiating strategies to gain access to other public spaces, addressing the limited research on women's participation in fisheries management (Nunan & Cepić, 2020).

Gender is a constitutive element of every social relationship, sanctioned and reinforced by a host of cultural, political, and economic

institutions, manifested through the division of labour and resources, ideologies, and representations, and affected by status, class, and ethnicity, wealth, age, and sexual orientation (Cornwall, 2003; Evans et al., 2017; Samndong & Kjosavik, 2017). A significant issue in natural resource management, as argued by Agarwal (2001), is the effective exclusion of women from resource management despite the increasing emphasis on community participation through group formation in all forms of development intervention. How women are excluded from participatory spaces echoes and reinforces hegemonic gender norms (Cornwall, 2003).

Many societies have certain stereotyped perceptions about women's capabilities and activities, which often hinder women's participation in resource management. For instance, in a study on community forestry in South Asia, Agarwal (2001) reported that men viewed women's involvement in forestry committees as purposeless, perceiving women as lacking the knowledge and institutional capital needed for decision-making regarding forest resource management. Evans et al. (2017) found, in a study on communal forests in Nicaragua, that men in leadership positions actively discouraged women from participating in resource management through intimidation and withholding information. Similarly, in a study on the Kenyan fishery, Matsue et al. (2014) reported that men resisted female fish traders from becoming members of fisheries associations, as women do not engage in fishing.

Perceived differences in resource management skills stem from gendered societal roles. In a study on a Bangladeshi fishery, Deb et al. (2015) reported that fisherwomen's roles in fishing-related activities are determined by the wider society and are embedded in male supremacy. Men firmly believe that fishing is not women's work – "Men can't give birth, women can't fish" (Deb et al., 2015, p. 305). Men believe that women are born to serve men and perform domestic activities (Deb et al., 2015). Their participation in development activities can result in disobedience and can undermine males' authority (Evans et al., 2017; Samndong & Kjosavik, 2017). The household is the primary place where gender norms are learned, internalised, reinforced, and modified. In the community sphere, these norms are permeated and solidified into everyday concrete practices (Evans et al., 2017). Gender-differentiated roles in society are closely tied to how the voices of women are valued publicly and how eloquent they are in decision-making. In the case of marine protected areas in Madagascar, Baker-Médard (2017) mentioned that socially ascribed roles – what women and men "should do" and "already do" – led to the underrepresentation of women in decision-making on resource management.

Gender norms often constrain women's actions, but these norms may also be internalised through socialisation, making them appear natural rather than imposed. When a norm is internalised, it becomes "a part of the person, not regarded objectively or understood or felt as a rule, but simply as a part of himself, automatically expressed in behaviour" (Campbell, 1964, p. 393). Internalisation, therefore, indicates the deepest level of conformity to norms, where an individual commits energy in maintaining cultural norms, regardless of motivation or outcome of such behaviour (Burke, 2012; Campbell, 1964). In a study on women's participation in a wetland co-management project in Bangladesh, Choudhury et al. (2018) showed how cultural norms, such as staying at home, obedience, and avoiding conflict with men were internalised through socialisation, discourage women from aspiring to leadership in resource management and hinder them from claiming their rights. Women may conform unquestioningly to social and cultural norms and patriarchal culture when they are habituated to inequality, unaware of the possibilities of social change, or do not consider these norms unjust but instead natural (Kabeer, 2024). Women have often grown up within these cultures and acquired their gendered sense of self through their practices (Kabeer, 2024). Even when aware of injustice, many women comply with gender-expected behaviour to avoid social "backlash" (Kozłowski & Power, 2022, p. 9).

Social norms, perceptions, and internalisation indeed create barriers to women's active participation in the public arena, but this does not

entirely rule out the employment of strategies by women to counteract male domination and expand their space in the public arena. Women can strategise within a structure of constraints and opportunities to optimise their life choices and maximise their security and autonomy within a patriarchal system, which [Kandiyoti \(1988\)](#) identified as 'patriarchal bargains'. [Narayan \(2018, p. 420\)](#) shows how drawing on the notion of patriarchal bargaining facilitates understanding of women's choices in the Global South, noting that women "are not dupes of patriarchy who completely and uncritically endorse the values and practices of their culture". This concept of bargaining and negotiating suggests human agency, i.e. the "ability to define own goals and act on them" ([Gerson & Peiss, 1985](#); [Kabeer, 1999, p. 438](#)). [Kandiyoti \(1988\)](#) argues that a systematic analysis of women's strategies and coping mechanisms helps to comprehend patriarchal systems within their cultural context and can uncover how men and women resist, accommodate, and adapt to resources, rights, and responsibilities.

Scholars employ the concept of negotiation to explore how women navigate patriarchy to access public spaces. One strategy is strategic withdrawal—in a study on Indian women's access to parliament, [Rai \(2012\)](#) showed that Indian women temporarily step back from politics to gain long-term access and sustainability in parliament through family support in campaigning, constituency work, helping with everyday housework or childcare, and providing emotional support. Another strategy is cultural accommodation. In a study on Muslim women's experiences of empowerment in northern Pakistan, [Ali \(2014\)](#) showed that a Muslim woman complied with traditional norms—accepting household burdens, mobility restrictions, and surrendering her salary—to work at a healthcare centre. In the public arena, despite facing an unequal distribution of work, she avoided open conflict and built relationships with colleagues, using these relationships to provide healthcare treatment to her relatives and neighbours. These strategic choices facilitated gaining respect, control over income, and a new identity at home, demonstrating how women use negotiation to gradually reshape their roles ([Ali, 2014](#)).

[Grünenfelder \(2013\)](#) shows that Muslim female development workers in rural north-west Pakistan employed physical and discursive strategies, such as delegating field-level administrative work to men and limiting male interactions, to align with social norms, establish themselves as good workers and good Muslim women, while maintaining their professional roles. Similarly, [Rozario \(2006\)](#) found that Muslim Bangladeshi women strategically adopted veiling to avoid male harassment, gain social acceptance, and secure educational opportunities. According to [Kandiyoti \(1988, p. 285\)](#), "women's strategies are always played out in the context of identifiable patriarchal bargains that act as implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options".

The literature review above provides a structure for the findings and analysis. The analysis is informed by definitions of gender and the concept of instrumental agency ([Burke, 2012](#)), which focus on how women use their participation in gendered spaces for relational and material benefits in their lives. The first area of findings and analysis focuses on how gender norms and practices challenge women's participation in co-management and their strategies of negotiation, while the second area highlights the importance of negotiation to women.

Methodology

The fieldwork that produced the findings in this paper was conducted from November 2019 to March 2020 in the inland waterbodies of northeastern Bangladesh ([Fig. 1](#)). The northeast part of Bangladesh is well-known for its richness in wetland resources, locally named *Haor* (saucer-shaped naturally depressed waterbody). Fisheries co-management has long been practised in parts of the inland waterbodies under different donor-funded projects. Two donor-supported fisheries co-management projects (Project-1 and Project-2) were chosen that adopted a community-led approach, involved the local

community (fishers, women, farmers, elites, etc.) in managing fisheries resources, and only completed projects with active community-based organisations (CBOs)¹ were considered, as this study sought to understand how and why women negotiate to participate in CBO committees.

Five CBOs were selected from 36 CBOs across two case-study sites, based on whether CBOs are currently active, relevance to fisheries co-management, and remoteness. In case-study site-1 (CS-1), Project-1 established 8 CBOs. Two of the 8 CBOs were purposively chosen—one actively managing waterbodies, and another involved in a legal battle over lease renewal after government withdrawal. In case-study site-2 (CS-2), Project-2 established 28 CBOs; however, not all CBOs were given the authority to manage the waterbody, and some were dysfunctional during fieldwork. I selected three active CBOs out of 9 that have the authority to manage waterbodies.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling at each site, with 15 men and 9 women interviewed. Key informants were chosen based on their position in the CBO's Executive Committees (EC) and gender (president, secretary, treasurer, women). The sample size depended on the research purpose, the richness of the information gathered during fieldwork, and data saturation. Data were collected on women's participation experiences and the perceptions of male EC members regarding that participation.

All interviews were conducted at time-convenient and comfortable locations for the participants, and lasted about an hour each in a non-directive style. Participants shared their experiences with co-management and follow-up questions were asked. Most interviews were recorded, with notes taken when recording was not allowed by the informants. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and nature, as well as the measures to be taken to maintain confidentiality. Once understanding was fully secured, verbal or written consent was sought. No identifying information about anyone present was recorded. Data were transcribed and manually coded into two themes: first, the ideas and practices involved in controlling women's participation and their negotiation through the practice of *Purdah*, and second, the practice of *Purdah* as a strategy to manage both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Confidentiality and anonymity of data were ensured by assigning codes to notes and transcripts. Confidentiality is also maintained by not naming the studied projects, CBOs, other respondents, the Sub-district and waterbodies.

Women's role in public life and gendered norms in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, social structures are characterised by the institutionalisation of very restrictive codes of behaviour for women, influencing women's mobility, education, economic participation, and involvement in decision-making processes ([Kabeer, 1988](#)). However, the entire picture of women in Bangladesh is not the same. Urban women often have greater opportunities for education, land ownership, and employment, enabling them to escape from some of the strictly gendered, time- and labour-based norms related to domesticity ([Lata et al., 2021](#)). In contrast, the activities of rural are often constrained by social and religious restrictions, primarily limited to domestic and agricultural tasks ([Asaduzzaman et al., 2015](#)). However, women's roles also vary by region due to differing social, cultural, and economic conditions ([Asaduzzaman et al., 2015](#)).

This study took place in a rural part of Bangladesh, which is highly religious and conservative. *Ijbat* (honour) is a key social value that governs women's actions and shapes their status and role in society. One

¹ Community-based organizations (CBOs) were established under donor-funded projects to protect and sustain wetland resources. Comprising local fishers, farmers, landless people, elites, and women, CBOs represent the community and are formally connected to local Government administration—Upazilla Parishad and District administration through various administrative committees.

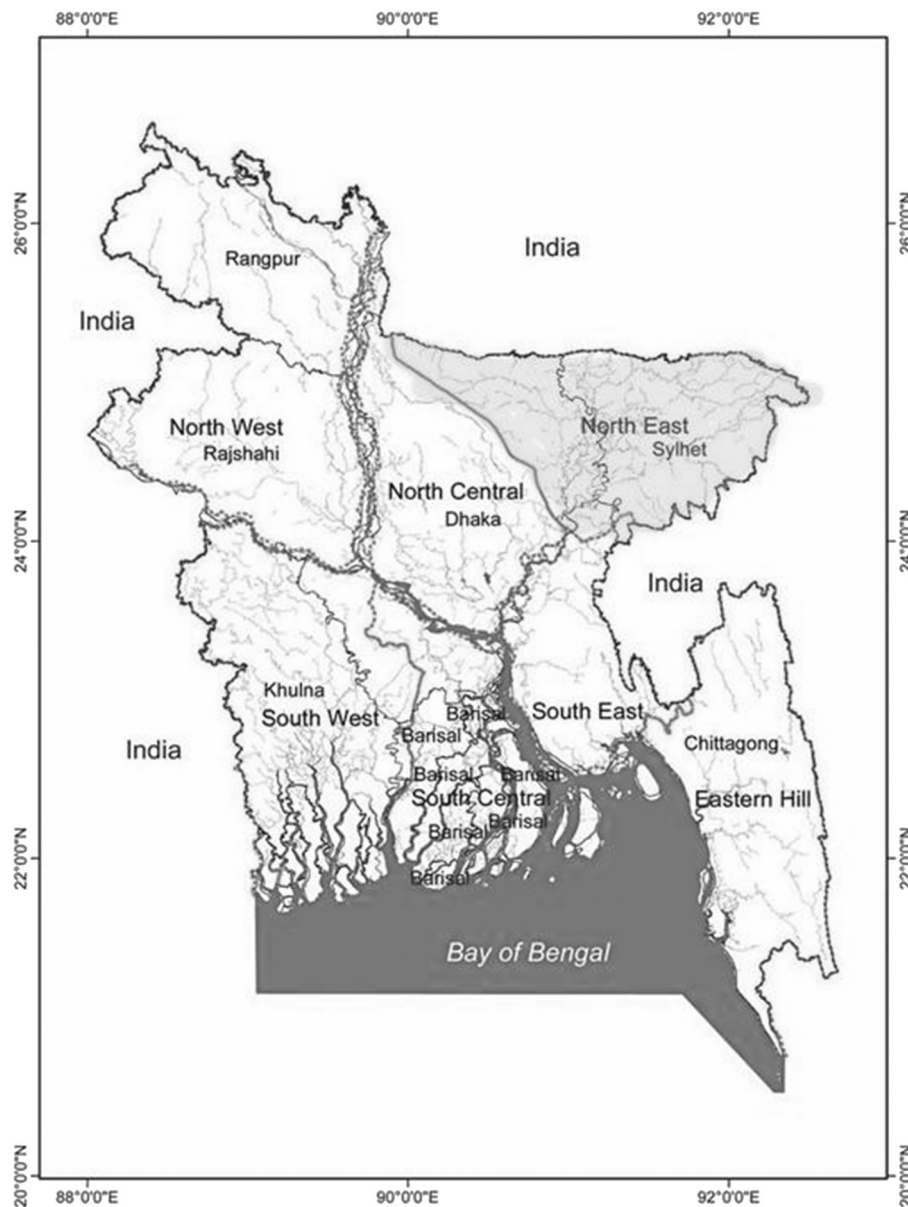


Fig. 1. Map of Bangladesh (shaded areas are the study area).
Source: Qureshi et al. (2015).

female respondent conceptualised *Ijfat* as ‘*Water on a lotus leaf*’, which carries the meaning of instability - once it drops down, it cannot be brought back up. As Gupte (2013, p. 76) mentioned, “Women are not traditionally bearers of honour, rather they are holders.”

To protect women’s *Ijfat* in the studied areas, *Purdah* is used as a key instrument. *Purdah* is operated through physical segregation by wearing a *Burkha*² so that no one can see a woman. It is also operated in many other ways — for example, through spatial segregation. In the studied areas, a clear demarcation exists between spaces occupied by men and women. One respondent said:

Our women do not go to the *Haor*. Why do they go for fish? Yes, if anyone wishes, she can fish from the pond with a *Barshi* (hook) next to her house in a certain way and at a specific time, so that no one can see her.

² A long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, many Muslim women wear this in public place.

(EC-2, CBO-2)

Outside the house, a woman’s movement is restricted in terms of time, purpose, and in distance. People do not consider those women who stay outside in the evenings to have a ‘good character’. According to the respondents, spatial segregation is related to preserving chastity and purity. Losing chastity results in social exclusion; these women are accused of being *Noshta* (one who loses chastity), damaging the social reputation of the women’s family and the *Para* (small settlement) where she lives. Women’s *Ijfat*, in this case, is the reflection of their individual action. The cultural schema of *Purdah* is therefore not only limited in its literal meaning of veiling but also focuses on upholding the image of ‘good woman’.

In the studied areas, *Purdah* is a boundary that determines what a woman should wear, where she can go, how she walks, how she speaks, and how she separates herself so that her family’s *Ijfat* is not put at risk. One respondent gave a stringent interpretation of *Purdah* and said:

Purdah does not mean only covering yourself top to bottom; it indicates putting a veil on your mind, on your voice, and in everything. She should not speak loudly or walk in a way that people can understand her presence in the room or in that place, and start to think of her. To force a man to think of a woman is *Gunah* (sin).

(EC-1, CBO-5)

Along with public places, *Purdah* operates strongly in private spaces. In private spaces, *Purdah* indicates a state of being submissive. Women in the studied areas do not speak loudly or get involved in arguments with their husbands and in-laws, because if these matters are taken to the *Panchayat*,³ the woman will be punished, which will also lower the family's *Ijrat*. [Gupte \(2013\)](#) mentioned that men's honour is never at risk through their conduct but always at risk through women's behaviour. *Ijrat*, therefore, governs the social reputation of both men and women, but differently. In the studied areas, men's *Ijrat* indicates three things: their position in the social hierarchy, financial wealth and their control and enforcement of *Purdah* on women. However, in the case of women, differential views and logic are applied, reflecting various aspects, such as observing *Purdah* properly, being a member of a good family, and being perceived as having a good character. This shows how *Ijrat* is inherently gendered and regulates women's and men's differential access to opportunities in society. A key issue here is how women participate in fisheries co-management despite the strict application of *Purdah*.

Ideas and practices involved to control women participation and how women negotiate for participating in co-management

In the studied CBOs, only 2–3 of the 15 Executive Committee members were women, while office-bearer roles were held by the *Panchayat Murubbis*,⁴ usually men. These *Murubbis* reinforced several ideas and practices, including protecting *Ijrat*, maintaining the culture of female domesticity, restricting women's mobility, and promoting a culture of silence, which hindered women's active participation in fisheries co-management. Rather than opposing these norms, women members deliberately and willingly practised *Purdah* by avoiding leadership positions, accepting gender division of labour, veiling, and remaining non-confrontational, to secure and maintain their position within the EC. This section focuses on how gender norms constrain women's participation and their negotiation process for participation in co-management.

Gender division in the CBO committees

In the constitutions of the CBOs, it was mentioned that women should be involved; however, they lacked clear guidelines on the number or criteria for selection. *Murubbis*, chose female members based on kinship, class, and family ties. In some CBO's constitutions, there is a position on the EC called *Shommanito Sodosho* (respected member), where a woman from a respected family, particularly a president's or secretary's wife, was always selected. A female EC respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) said, "Every woman in this village obeys me as their guardian. As a guardian, I have selected women for the CBOs with minimal education." This suggests that the women involved in co-management were not necessarily involved in fisheries. Female members from fisherfolk families, who are actively engaged in pre- and post-harvesting activities, are excluded from CBOs due to *Murubbi's* class/caste biases and cultural norms of purity. As a result, women's participation was shaped by intersecting gender, class, and caste dynamics, challenging the notion of women as a homogeneous group in resource management ([Choudhury](#)

[et al., 2018](#); [Meinzen-Dick et al., 1997](#)).

Male EC members perceived women in their villages as ineligible for works related to fisheries co-management and incapable of holding leadership positions. A male respondent said:

At the beginning of the project, it was said that women needed to be given priority, so we allowed them to sit in the meeting. Our women lack sufficient knowledge about the outside world. They always stay at home. What else can women do here? At most, they can cast a vote during the CBO election.

(EC-1, CBO-1)

Regarding the inclusion of women in leadership, a common concern among *Murubbis* is that this would upset long-established social norms and practices of *Ijrat* and *Purdah*, the prime sources of their unequal power practices. For some *Murubbis*, involving women in office-bearer positions is equal to losing men's *Ijrat*, lowering their social position and losing control over women, and *lojja* (shame) for the male community. One respondent (EC-1, CBO-5) said:

Why should women sit where elders are sitting? Now, if a meeting is held in the Upazilla (sub-district) office, we will go there, but if we send our women, it will be a matter of huge shame for our male community. This will make our male community socially-degraded.

To implicitly control women's participation in CBO elections for leadership positions, *Murubbis* re-established the cultural norms of female domesticity. For example, one respondent (EC-2, CBO-1) said:

What our women always do—take care of their family. Looking after the house and ensuring peaceful relations among members are their primary duties. If they can manage time after finishing these works, then we have no problem.

Another norm *Murubbis* used to limit women's involvement was restrictions on women's time. One respondent (EC-1, CBO-1) mentioned:

If our women members express interest in an office-bearer position, we will think about that, but can she dedicate the necessary time to the committee? We do our meetings in the afternoon. Only general meetings are held in the morning, as they take up the whole day. Can they spend the whole day here?

Another respondent (EC-2, CBO-1) said:

Our women cannot stay outside after *Maghrib* (evening prayer). If they move freely following *Maghrib*, anything bad can happen to her. She can be harassed sexually, and her *Ijrat* and her family's *Ijrat* both will be lost.

Murubbis did not directly compel women to leave leadership roles, but used socially accepted notions of *Ijrat* to limit women's participation in such roles. Their insistence on women's participation, while simultaneously advocating for the retention of restrictive gender norms, creates a contradiction, implying that women will remain excluded from key positions ([Gerson & Peiss, 1985](#)). This highlights a key question: how do women negotiate participation in such male-dominated co-management settings?

Women's negotiation for being involved in the EC

In the studied CBOs, most female EC members were well-educated but showed no interest in leadership roles, expressing contentment with their current positions as EC members. Female respondents shared that, although *Murubbis* asked them to contest elections, they were reluctant due to family obligations and social norms. For example, one respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) mentioned, "We are fine this way." She further said:

³ An informal social organization, govern the studied villages informally.

⁴ Members of the *Panchayat*, who came from influential families (high patronymic titles) in the village.

I cannot always attend the general committee meeting because I have two small kids. I must take care of them. Besides, relatives come from my in-laws' house for treatment purposes.

Another female respondent (EC-4, CBO-1) said:

If I take responsibility, I must patrol the *Haor* at night. In the case of an emergency, I must move along with the police, whether it is day or night. Women are not allowed to visit the *Haor* in this *Samaj* (society). If I do this, villagers will make offensive remarks, calling me a *Byadob Mohila* (impudent woman).

Women members were aware of their social environment, the culture of female domesticity, and the time restrictions, which shaped their negotiation strategies. From the above interview extracts, it is apparent that women members did not think they were unable to stand in the election and take leadership roles; instead, they were unwilling to take responsibility. If they took on leadership responsibilities, women would sometimes be unable to devote time to their families, and there was also a risk of damaging their reputation. For them, supporting *Murubbis* rather than leading was a gesture of goodwill, respect, and a means of keeping themselves in the *Murubbis*' good books. One respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) said, "If I show him respect, then my honour will not lessen; rather, he will know me as a good person and recommend my name in many cases." These strategies secured women's position in the EC, leading to many women members of the EC retaining their posts since the founding period.

Gender-based spatial segregation and women's negotiation for participating in co-management-related activities

Gender-based spatial segregation was evident in both the allocation of duties and meeting spaces within the CBO. Women were not involved in waterbody management under co-management, justified by norms around mobility and *Ijrat*. Initially, some women were given patrolling roles, but this stopped after a female member faced physical harassment by an EC male member during a patrol. According to one EC respondent (male), such a situation is troublesome because it challenged village honour and risked legal action, which the *Panchayat* eventually settled in favour of the male accused. Some female respondents believed their exclusion was more about protecting male members from legal consequences and public shame. Female respondents pointed to unequal access to justice for men and women when any issue needs to be resolved through the *Panchayat*. A man, whether non-fisherfolk or fisherfolk, is never punished when there is an issue between a male and a female, because this will lower the male's community and that family's *Ijrat* in front of society. Hence, their *Murubbis* forced that physical harassment case before the *Panchayat* instead of the Judiciary, gave judgment in favour of that man, and accused the woman.

According to female respondents, their *Murubbis* thought that their lack of access to the *Haor* would limit their ability to gain essential knowledge and resource management skills for effective participation in the EC. Female respondents knew that they were not assigned certain co-management-related tasks such as patrolling, monitoring sanctuaries, and enforcing fishing bans, so they did not want to undertake these duties on their own and accepted them as physically beyond their capacity. One respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) said:

At the inception period, one day, Apa (female NGO official) took us to the *Haor*, as we had never visited that area earlier. But suddenly, the weather changed, and we all got caught in a storm in the middle of the *Haor*. We only prayed to Allah. On that day, we understood it was not our work; we did not have such physical strength.

In some CBOs, women were part of waterbody management sub-committees but did not actively participate or visit the *Haor*. According to women respondents, male members handled the waterbody management-related activities and briefed them before the EC or GC

meeting, expecting their support. Women chose to leave the responsibility in the hands of male members because they found that, in this way, they could be involved in the CBO sub-committees without challenging mobility restrictions practices in the studied areas.

Gender-based spatial segregation was evident in meeting arenas. Respondents reported that, during meetings, women sit apart from men, typically in a poorly lit corner, to remain unseen. This social segregation, rooted in *Purdah* and control, and maintained by the *Murubbis*, aimed to prevent interactions between men and women because if women are clearly seen, it will distract male members, they will try to talk with the women openly, a socially unacceptable practice, disgracing the women. In response, women EC members adopted a strategy of norm compliance, deliberately practising *Purdah* to negotiate for better positions in the EC. They used '*Purdah*' as a 'Symbolic Shelter' (Papanek, 1973, p. 315) to counteract offensive comments by *Murubbis*, uphold the image of a good character woman and remain "appropriately feminine" (Grünenfelder, 2013, p. 608). One female respondent mentioned:

At first, *Murubbis* did not accept our involvement in the project activities in a good way. Some made lots of bad comments. However, when they realised we were adhering to proper social rules (wearing clothes on our heads, sitting separately and away from males, and refraining from talking to other men), they stopped making bad comments. Look, a woman's honour is in *Purdah*.

(EC-4, CBO-1)

Purdah is often characterised as epitomising women's oppression, but it can also be used strategically (Feldman & McCarthy, 1983; Rozario, 2006). Regarding women's adoption of the veil, Azari (1983, in Kandiyoti, 1988) mentioned that this is a small price that women pay in exchange for their security, stability and presumed respect.

Culture of silence and women's negotiation for participate in decision-making arenas

In the studied areas, being silent is considered proper gender behaviour for women. Regarding women's behaviour, a widely familiar saying is,

When we hit the land (*Mati*) hard, whether it says anything or gives any response, no, it never responded. Our women are just like the *Mati*.

Murubbis allowed women in the EC, but expected them to remain submissive. In response, women chose self-muting, a strategy of negotiating to secure positions in the EC. Self-muting manifests in various ways, including avoiding communication. According to some female members, avoiding conversation was not always a cultural issue, but rather a fear of being publicly humiliated. For instance, one female respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) recalled being mocked by male leaders when trying to speak on waterbody issues, highlighting the dismissive attitude toward women's input.

Now *Beitiyanra* (women) will also talk about waterbody-related issues. Ok, tell us what you want, but do not make us laugh.

This derisive attitude discouraged female members from active participation. She added, "For this reason, we just stopped saying anything".

Women's self-muting was also manifested in their non-verbal behaviour, for example, one female respondent (EC-3, CBO-2) noted, "When our leaders talk, we nod our heads in agreement with them..." Behaving in this manner was strategic, as *Murubbis* financially assisted women in attending the meeting by covering the costs of transportation and allowances. To maintain these benefits, female members chose to remain silent, even when aware of the financial misappropriation of their *Murubbis*:

We can understand everything when our leaders arrange light refreshments for us during the meeting, and document costs differently. We never say anything because they will be ashamed. In our society, a man can never be embarrassed in front of others.

(EC-4, CBO-2)

Female members who faced financial injustice, such as unequal pay for CBO's election duties, also chose non-confrontation. For instance, one female respondent (EC-4, CBO-1) shared that while her male counterparts were paid, she was not.

Our leaders appointed me to the steering committee member in the last CBO election. The other two male members were remunerated for election-related work, but I was not. I asked once, but they replied about what work I did during the election time. I no longer discussed this issue.

Why female members willingly engaged in practicing *Purdah*-Instrumental agency

In summary, women's norm compliance and self-muting in the context of co-management were strategic, rather than driven by a deep-seated commitment to *Purdah*'s values. These strategic choices helped them secure and maintain their position in the EC, allowing them greater room to manoeuvre in both private and public arenas, access benefits, and explore diverse possibilities, ultimately achieving greater autonomy, as discussed below.

Intrinsic benefits-psychological satisfaction

Women EC members gained respect and recognition in their communities through their roles in co-management. Once confined to their homes, they are now greeted with a *Salam*⁵ by the village people. They feel honoured when they are entrusted with tasks by *Murubbis* such as organising *Ghorowa boithok*,⁶ and mobilising members during CBO elections, resolving minor fish-theft cases, and distributing winter clothes among villagers. One female respondent mentioned, "Our *Murubbis* think that we can do this work well, this is enough for us" (EC-4, CBO-2). Such responsibilities enhance their social standing, making them seen as *Kaser lok* (people kept close) of the *Murubbis*. Women respondents mentioned that their position in the EC and having good relationships with *Murubbis* also strengthen their networks with other women in the village. Whenever anyone needs assistance from *Murubbis*, they contact them, which brings a sense of *Shomman* (pride) to them.

Extrinsic benefits

Women gained extrinsic benefits from *Murubbis*, such as credit support and alternative livelihood-related facilities, including poultry, livestock, and agricultural equipment, which facilitated them to expand their space into other public and private arenas. For example, one female respondent (EC-4, CBO-2) mentioned:

Our organization received funding from the government for buying agricultural equipment (tractor). Our *Murubbis* first decided to give this machine to members on a rotating basis. However, before the decision was taken, I asked our President to give me the machine first. He kept his word.

She demonstrated her ability to manage the tractor for agriculture, which significantly contributed to her son's and husband's work. She spent the profit earned through agri-business to send her son abroad, greatly strengthening her position within the family. Once criticized by

in-laws for leaving household chores unfinished, she now attends CBO meetings without objection, as her involvement benefits the family's status and finances. Another female respondent (EC-4, CBO-1) focused on relational benefits, securing credit from the CBO fund through *Murubbis*, lending the money with interest, establishing a financial tie with fisherfolk women in her village, and earning the title and independent identity of *Mohila dadon* (women moneylender).

One female respondent (EC-4, CBO-1) emphasised the material benefits. She described how her self-muting against unequal treatment expanded her space in another public arena and enabled her to be selected as a Ward (Village) committee member. In the studied village, a common practice is that if anyone wants to participate in a Ward-level election, they must first share their intention with the *Panchayat Murubbis*. If *Murubbis* think them capable, then they instruct villagers to support them. Elected twice as a Ward member with the support of the CBO president, she used her role to build her house, buy an autorickshaw for her son and access public funds from the Union Parishad⁷ for social work. People now refer to her by her position, *Memberni* (female Ward member), seek her help if anyone has work at Upazilla office, as she has made key contacts among the local bureaucracy through her position.

Discussion

The findings outlined above provide new insights into how women negotiate for participation in co-management by manoeuvring within gender norms and practices and why negotiation is essential for women to secure a position in the EC.

Fisheries co-management has opened up opportunities for women's participation in resource management. *Panchayat Murubbis* had the perception that it might undermine their authority. Unlike findings in Evans et al. (2017) and Matsue et al. (2014), they did not overtly oppose women's inclusion. Instead adopted cultural practices rooted in societal norms of *Ijlat* and *Purdah*, such as maintaining a culture of female domesticity, time restrictions, a gender division of labour, and proper gender behaviour, to restrict their roles subtly. Congruent with Narayan's (2018) argument, I found how women members make choices while remaining within the constraints imposed by cultural practices.

Women members negotiated for participation through two key strategies: compliance with local norms of *Puradah* and *Ijlat*, and self-muting. Negotiation was evident in the case of involvement within the CBO's executive committees, where women members adopted a self-withdrawal strategy from participating in the election, preferred to remain in the EC as members while backing *Murubbis* for leadership, similar to the tactics observed in Rai's (2012) study of Indian women MPs. Negotiation was also evident in co-management activities, where women accepted waterbody-management-related duties as physically demanding and deferred these duties to men, echoing Grünenfelder's (2013) 'physical strategy' among Pakistani female development workers, who used this to participate in formal labour relations. To access meeting arenas, women chose veiling, a strategy to counteract offensive comments by *Murubbis* regarding their participation and to uphold the image of a good, modest and decent woman, aligning with findings by Rozario (2006) and Narayan (2018). Negotiation is further evident in decision-making, where women adopted self-muting through silence, avoidance, and passive gestures, which helped women members to align with social expectations, a 'discursive strategy' noted by Grünenfelder (2013). Their self-muting also enabled *Murubbis* to make decisions in their favour. Viewing silence, therefore, as a form of regression rather than an advancement can be a restricted way of conceptualising it (Gatwiri & Mumbi, 2016).

Negotiation involves active agency, as argued by Gerson and Peiss (1985) and Narayan (2018). It is not that women are unable to take

⁵ A religious salutation among Muslims.

⁶ Informal meeting(s) arranged at home.

⁷ Lowest local government unit in Bangladesh, made up of 9 Wards.

leadership roles or raise their voices against unequal treatment and financial misappropriation. Their overt compliance is a strategic decision that manifests their agency and understanding of their social environment. They choose norm compliance and self-muting as instrumental tactics to secure EC positions, earn respect according to local standards, and carve out an independent identity (Haroon & Mohsin Ali, 2024). These tactics helped them access broader relational and material benefits—such as Ward committee roles and household influence—beyond co-management (Burke, 2012). Rozario (2006) describes this as ‘strategic-instrumentalism,’ where women managed something by upholding *Ijjat* and *Purdah*. *Murubbis* also supported women because women members did not challenge their authority or question their financial misappropriation. In this way, women were able to gain their trust. Secondly, women members often share kinship ties with *Murubbis*; hence, by involving them in the Ward committee, *Murubbis* were able to extend their power base in the local government administration. Although female members and *Murubbis* actively participate in negotiations, a fundamental asymmetry exists in the negotiation process, which is integrally tied to the negotiation power and resources each party uses in this process (Gerson & Peiss, 1985). Gendered ideologies, such as female domesticity and appropriate behaviour, as suggested by Moore (1994, cited in Kandiyoti, 2005), should not be seen as merely cultural practices, but rather as resources that are drawn upon in the process of negotiation. In the studied cases, women’s negotiating powers were less intense, but their strategic actions gave them greater room to manoeuvre both in the private and public arenas.

The study shows that self-muting and norm compliance enable female EC members to live a life with respect, greater autonomy, and mobility, which was previously denied to them. However, women must be tactful in this case; they must select choices in their personal lives by letting go of other choices (Kabeer, 2005) that fisheries co-management offers. While these choices empowered women personally, they limit the functioning of fisheries co-management and hinder collective outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature on the participatory aspects of fisheries co-management, particularly about the role of women. Co-management of small-scale fisheries, although it focuses on inclusiveness, participation, and representation of every affected resource user group, as well as transformative development, has often been critiqued for its inability to grapple with gender issues (Galappaththi et al., 2022; Nunan & Cepić, 2020). In this paper, I demonstrate that gender norms influence women’s involvement in fisheries co-management, while also investigating women’s ability to participate in fisheries co-management despite entrenched patriarchal societal norms and structures.

I argue that rural women in Bangladesh’s fishing communities strategise and use participatory opportunities to carve out their own space in public and private arenas. This observation differs from the literature, which finds that prevailing social structures and hegemonic cultural norms internalised through socialisation hold women back from exercising their agency (Choudhury et al., 2018). I show that agency is located in the strategic use and navigation of practices to meet the demands of contemporary life (Avishai, 2008). Using the concept of instrumental agency, I reveal that female members deliberately chose norms compliance and self-muting for strategic reasons to secure their position in the EC and manage external advantages.

By negotiating through culturally and locally accepted ways, female members gained *Murubbis*’ trust and access to benefits, strengthening their space at home where their families view them as having greater importance. They secured positions in the EC and Ward committee, built a support network in public arenas and created an independent identity. Kandiyoti (2005) sees such bargaining mechanisms as skilful tactics to maximise power and simultaneously benefit from it. The findings support Cornwall’s (2003) claim that women’s overt compliance can give women room to manoeuvre their hidden transcripts of securing a stake

in certain positions of power available to them.

Co-management created a unique space for women, as women in the studied areas were previously excluded from village-level committees. Co-management aimed to bring women to the forefront and on equal footing with their male counterparts, increase their ability to influence the political process so that they can play an assertive role in managing resources and potentially influence decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests. However, how women will experience participation and realise their interests under the weight of custom and tradition, and how they will act, cannot be predetermined. This study reveals that female members did not challenge the traditional power dynamics; instead, they negotiated for their positions, guided by cultural norms and expectations. Because they knew that without *Murubbi*’s support, they could not gain access and stay in EC, nor could they create their own space, where they would have autonomy and some power. Living a life with greater respect and honour in their domestic and public arena is more valuable to them. Hence, rejecting democratic experiences out of which female members’ consciousness about environmental factors, management, and ability to influence decisions, relationships, and interests can grow, they willingly engage in practising *Purdah*. Their cultural strategy of negotiation hampered collective gains and limited the effectiveness of co-management. The findings support Burke’s (2012) argument that progressive results of strategic participation may mask the ways in which strategic participation reinscribes inequalities and hierarchy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rehnuma Ferdous: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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