

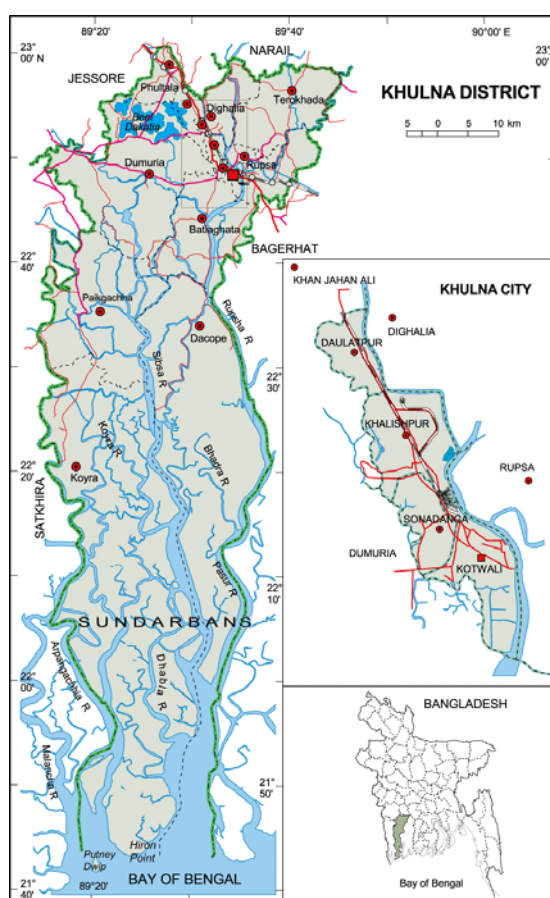
Coastal Women in the Sundarban Forest Zone

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The coastal women who live and work near the Sundarban mangrove forest have been impoverished for decades in the greater Khulna region. Even in this digital age, women continue to be victims of murder, rape, unwanted pregnancy, sexual harassment, work place discrimination, assault, acid attacks, eve teasing, human trafficking, domestic violence, and forced into prostitution. Women are not able to appeal to law enforcement agencies, hospitals and government authorities to address these hardships.

Due to socio-religious customs, many rural women are only able to live within the confines of their homes, spend the majority of their time caring for their children and the elder members of the family, manage their kitchens, wash clothes, assist during harvest time, collect fuel wood (i.e., cow-dung, straw, etc.), and are even deprived of education and literacy, with women in some areas of the country unable to vote. Vulnerable, marginalized women are born, live and die within a cycle of poverty, are unable to send their children to schools, live without sufficient food and nutrition, are deprived of health care, reside in government-owned shelters, and are denied employment due to a lack of education.

Nobel laureate Dr. MUHAMMAD Yunus was a pioneer for his work with micro credit. It is this credit provided to poor women that has resulted in hundreds of women becoming self-reliant and securing in micro-finance institutes and NGOs; these women are the real development actors of rural Bangladesh. They are grassroots builders in rural communities, launching income generating projects for development. Village women have entered teaching jobs at primary schools and high schools, and now work in nursing and the garment industry.



Sundarban in Khulna District

Two deadly cyclones—the Aila (May 25, 2009) and the SIDR (November 15, 2007)—destroyed the southern coastal zone of Bangladesh. The women and children uprooted and inundated by saline water became environmental refugees, victims of climate change: homeless and rootless, they had no access to normal food security, safe drinking water, clothing, shelter, health services, and schooling, and their only income from fishery, agriculture and forestry was devastated for more than two years. These refugees spent their days under the blue sky at makeshift huts upon flood-protecting WAPDA embankments.



Today, women work in agro-fishery and forestry, shrimp processing at export-oriented plants, cleaning weeds and grass at agro-fishery mud beds, conserving and growing homesteads, and rearing livestock. Micro credit is a boon to women in Bangladesh, and allows them to easily launch small businesses, such as shops and tea stalls. Due to chronic poverty, lack of employment and scarcity of income-generating schemes, climate change environment refugees and rootless women flock to cities for employment and food security, with thousands of women engaging in export-centered ready-made garments (RMG).

The education of girls is not ensured, and therefore, unemployment rates are alarming. They are unable to enter the job market as they lack the skills necessary to make a livelihood, vocational training and know-how. The migration rate is very high among women, girls and children from villages to urban slums. Government organizations (GO), non-government organizations (NGO), civil society organizations



(CSO), NPOs, women's networks, citizen's groups, lobbyists, media and political parties are vocal in their calls to empower women, provide education and employment and ensure gender equality. Their voices raised in appeal for gender balance help balance the field for women, although the playing ground remains uneven. The winds are blowing in

women's favor, but there remains a need to strengthen development initiatives of rural women, and help them unlock their potential. Micro finance is a blessing to women, and gives them an opportunity to run small-income generating schemes. Literacy among women is improving day by day, and more women have started working in schools, NGOs, family planning projects, clinics, and other sectors.

The gender gap in secondary schools which indicates an increasing overall dropout rate poses key challenges for education in rural Bangladesh. Despite improvements in enrolment levels at the primary and lower secondary levels, Bangladesh has a long way to go to achieve gender equality, says the UN Girls' Education Initiative, a worldwide initiative aimed at narrowing the gender gap in primary and secondary education. Gender parity has been achieved in primary enrolment, but the number of girl students significantly decreases at the secondary school level. Better gender equality is needed to improve the lives of the women who live in coastal areas.