

Who plans for women? Representation of power in planning for climate change adaptation in Bangladesh

Debashish Sarker Dev,^{*}  Elske van de Fliert^{*} and Karen McNamara[†] 

^{*}Centre for Communication and Social Change, School of Communication and Arts, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 4072, Australia.

Email: d.dev@uqconnect.edu.au, e.vandefliert@uq.edu.au.

[†]School of the Environment, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 4072, Australia.

Email: karen.mcnamara@uq.edu.au.

Abstract: Gender considerations have been part of climate change adaptation planning in the Global South for the last two decades. Despite this, studies have reported a gap in understanding how organisations incorporate people's diverse experiences of climate risks into planning and implementing adaptation strategies, particularly for women disproportionately impacted by climate risks. Taking the case of Bangladesh, this study contributes to this knowledge gap by exploring the representation of power in organisational decision-making arenas concerning adaptation planning. The investigation involved an analysis of five major national adaptation guidelines and 22 projects conducted in Bangladesh, in addition to in-depth interviews with 36 development practitioners. This article argues that adaptation planning is a top-down organisational process in Bangladesh. Decisions are undertaken in 'inner circles' involving experts, bureaucrats and top officials of major national NGOs and often fail to include the voices of diverse social groups affected by intersecting inequalities, including ethnicity, disability, religion, locality and, in particular, gender. The study elaborates on the need for a major change to planning and decision-making processes to achieve adaptation planning and strategies that effectively reflect women's diversified and localised realities and allow them to respond to climate risks adequately.

Keywords: adaptation, Bangladesh, gender, Global South, power, women

Introduction

The literature on climate change adaptation in the Global South has made a considerable effort over the last two decades to understand women's disproportionate climate vulnerabilities compared to men (Corcoran-Nantes and Roy, 2018; Evertsen, 2022). While deliberate plans have been developed by national, regional and global development agencies to address gender inequalities as part of adaptation strategies (Jerneck, 2018), translating these plans into effective practices remains a persistent challenge (Renner, 2020). This disparity between literature and practice can largely be attributed to the inadequacies in the planning and implementation processes, a problem exacerbated by the insufficiencies in addressing power dynamics at various levels (Jerneck, 2018).

The underlying assumptions in adaptation planning around women's concerns are reported to be leading to insufficient and inefficient adaptation support for women (Jerneck, 2018). Despite several studies expressing concern over planning failure, there is an inadequacy of the literature looking at the interplay of power mechanisms at organisational levels determining the planning paths and their implementation (Resurrección, 2013; Evertsen, 2022). The Global South, including countries like Bangladesh, represents a complicated socio-economic environment where adaptation interventions involve multiple global, national and local organisations with diverse functions, including funding, advisory, regulation and implementation (Ishtiaque et al., 2021). In this complex web of stakeholders, the influence of power dynamics on gender-sensitive adaptation planning

remains underexplored. Taking the case of Bangladesh, the article, therefore, aims to address this critical research gap by scrutinising the interplay of power mechanisms at the organisational levels, which the literature indicated significantly determines the paths of planning and their subsequent implementation (Ishtiaque *et al.*, 2021; Evertsen, 2022).

The study presented here explores the arenas of adaptation planning in Bangladesh and power dynamics in those arenas, particularly when addressing gender concerns. The following section conceptualises power and offers a framework for analysing and understanding power, after which the study's methodology and findings are presented. As we proceed, we will delve deeper into the existing body of literature, focusing on the intricate relationships between gender, power and environmental planning.

Literature review: Gender, power and adaptation planning

Gender disparities in climate change adaptation

Literature on climate change adaptation in the Global South has significantly advanced our understanding of how women often bear disproportionate climate vulnerabilities compared to men (Agarwal, 2018; Corcoran-Nantes and Roy, 2018; Evertsen, 2022). This acknowledgement led to several adaptation plans and programmes to support women's adaptation efforts (Sultana, 2014). Research outcomes kept emphasising the urgency of effective gender-sensitive adaptation planning to devise deliberate strategies by the national, regional and global development agencies to address gender inequalities as part of adaptation plans (Jerneck, 2018). Despite these well-intentioned strategies, there is a persistent gap between theory and practice, with gender disparities persisting due to failures in the planning and implementation processes (Renner, 2020).

One fundamental contributing factor to the inadequacies in adaptation planning is the embedded assumptions within these strategies, reported as insufficient and ineffective in meeting women's unique needs (Jerneck, 2018). These needs, encompassing health, sanitation

and hygiene risks, are often compounded by their limited access to information, mobility and resources crucial for navigating community power dynamics (Kabeer and Huq, 2014; Sultana *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, researchers have explored and emphasised the need to consider power dynamics in studying effective gender-sensitive adaptation strategies. However, there is a noticeable deficiency in the literature investigating the intricate power mechanisms at organisational levels that shape the course of integrating gender concerns in planning and implementation (Resurrección, 2013; Evertsen, 2022). This deficiency becomes more prominent in the Global South, where adaptation interventions converge for numerous global, national and local organisations with diverse functions, creating a complex and dynamic planning landscape (Ishtiaque *et al.*, 2021). Particularly in South Asia, this dynamic landscape has gendered implications, making it difficult to plan for deep-rooted inequalities affecting women (Sultana, 2014).

Case of Bangladesh: A representative scenario

Bangladesh is a representative scenario of the challenges faced in responding to climate change impacts in the Global South (particularly South Asia). Despite the early integration of gender concepts in Bangladesh's adaptation plans compared to other Global South countries (Mallick and Siddiqui, 2015; Ahmed and Kiester, 2021; Boas *et al.*, 2022), studies asserted that the challenge of translating these plans into effective practices has been persistent (Roy and Sims, 2021).

Reports of the social and political marginalisation of women exuberating their climate vulnerability came into the planning discourse in the early 2000s (see Cannon, 2002). The first National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) developed in 2005 attempted to respond to these reports by integrating gender considerations into their discussion. However, studies have identified poor operational planning of that national guideline as a primary reason for the ongoing inadequacies in supporting climate-vulnerable women, even after the guideline was enacted (Shabib and Khan, 2014). The congested planning spaces, where diverse organisations interact with varying interests and

priorities, often hinder the effective translation of plans into practices (Samaddar *et al.*, 2019; Masud-All-Kamal and Nursey-Bray, 2022).

Inadequate consideration of local realities and power dynamics

According to Ahmed and Kiester (2021), women's local realities rarely influence adaptation planning, making substantial long-term changes in their lives unlikely. Organisations in these planning spaces address climate issues alongside contemporary development challenges such as poverty, gender-based violence, health risks, education and environmental pollution, each with diverse priorities (Shaw *et al.*, 2013; Dewan, 2022). The planning spaces, as elaborated by Paprocki (2018, 2019), often fail to go beyond their urban centrism and economic progress vision to fully incorporate a cumulative view of the social challenges of women and their interaction with climatic changes. Their focus on gender in planning has been a cross-cutting concern, whereas gender disparities, as Islam *et al.* (2022) suggested, require dedicated consideration in the planning process to support people disproportionately vulnerable for gendered reasons.

Studies affirm that gender has not received adequate consideration in adaptation plans (Shabib and Khan, 2014), and the influence of how power is distributed, exercised and negotiated within planning spaces requires a better understanding. Further studies are needed on the decision-making process, organisational structures and power hierarchies that influence the planning and often gender sensitivity in the hierarchies (Evertsen, 2022).

Role of international aid agencies and local NGOs

Large-scale funding for adaptation interventions comes from international aid agencies and global development partners (Rahman, 2019), while local NGOs of Bangladesh lead their implementation (Aryal *et al.*, 2020). Adaptation planning and implementation, therefore, often become a place of interaction for multiple organisations to negotiate and lobby for their priorities (Paprocki, 2018; Ishtiaque *et al.*, 2021; Dewan, 2022). Studies have pointed out that while these organisations invest in gender

integration in their organisational activities, their culture and norms on gender-responsive adaptation planning remain underexplored (Evertsen, 2022). The literature fails to delve into the power dynamics influencing collaborative efforts, including unwritten rules, embedded biases and social structures' influence on planners, hindering a comprehensive understanding of gender consideration in adaptation planning (Ishtiaque *et al.*, 2021; Dewan, 2022; Evertsen, 2022). Investigating the organisational practices of planning and identifying power imbalances, if any, would also answer questions about who makes the decisions and whose opinion counts in the planning processes. In addition, investigating power dynamics at the organisational level would shed light on the broader political, economic and governance structures of adaptation efforts in Bangladesh. Understanding the multilevel power dynamics will provide a comprehensive understanding of the broader context in which gender considerations are integrated into adaptation planning and opportunities for better gender-responsive adaptation actions.

Framework for analysing and understanding the power

This study conceptualises power as the ability of actors to produce significant effects on the outcomes of a process (Morriss, 2002). This study primarily examines power as a relational concept, particularly in Bangladesh, between actors or stakeholders. The power exercise between individuals, groups, organisations or states is subjected to given conditions and temporal factors within that relationship (Morriss, 2002). For organisations operating in Bangladesh, this ability can extend to mobilising the resources and negotiating the variabilities needed to meet their goals through planned interventions (Morriss, 2006).

Organisations possess distinct abilities and embedded interests that interact to develop common priorities in collaborative work. Understanding each other's ability to effect outcomes provides scope to negotiate spaces of deliberation. It offers possibilities for opening up the spaces of discussion by bringing the realities to different levels of stakeholders (Gaventa, 2006).

Therefore, decision-making arenas are spaces where organisations negotiate their interests and goals based on their abilities. It is unwise to assume that all organisations in Bangladesh have equal opportunities to exert their ability in all situations, particularly in adaptation planning processes. Variations in monetary and human resources, legislative power, organisational structure and engagement with vulnerable communities greatly impact their capacity to influence.

To account for these intricate dynamics within Bangladeshi organisations, this article employs the powercube, as articulated by Gaventa (2005), to explore how different organisations with different sets of abilities working together in adaptation planning and implementation might be negotiating gender considerations in planning and implementation strategies. The powercube is useful for exploring various levels (global, national and local), forms (visible, hidden and invisible) and spaces (closed, invited and claimed/created) of power and how they interact with each other (Fig. 1).

Each dimension of power is dynamic and constantly exchanges synergies with the other dimensions in creating or withholding opportunities based on changing roles, knowledge, expertise or

resources for decision-making participation. Interdependencies among actors, rooted in their differential powers, intensify competition in decision-making arenas at each level. Participation opportunities at these levels depend on the types of power they control or regulate, as characterised by Gaventa (2005) as visible, hidden and invisible.

In the visible domains, all stakeholders understand the presence of power but may have different assumptions about it and cannot change its course. The exercise of hidden powers obscures conditions of entry of certain actors and issues in the discussion. These powers regulate the alternatives for choices and exclude the concerns of less power from reaching the negotiation stage. Invisible powers are either internalised or active because of unawareness. These ideological or cultural set-ups in organisations conceal the visible conflict in plain sight. Powerful actors in Bangladesh often try to place their in-group ideologies at the cultural centre of decision-making arenas. Complying with these ideologies is the only way to enter into these in-groups. Therefore, marginalised voices remain in the margins even when provided opportunities to participate.

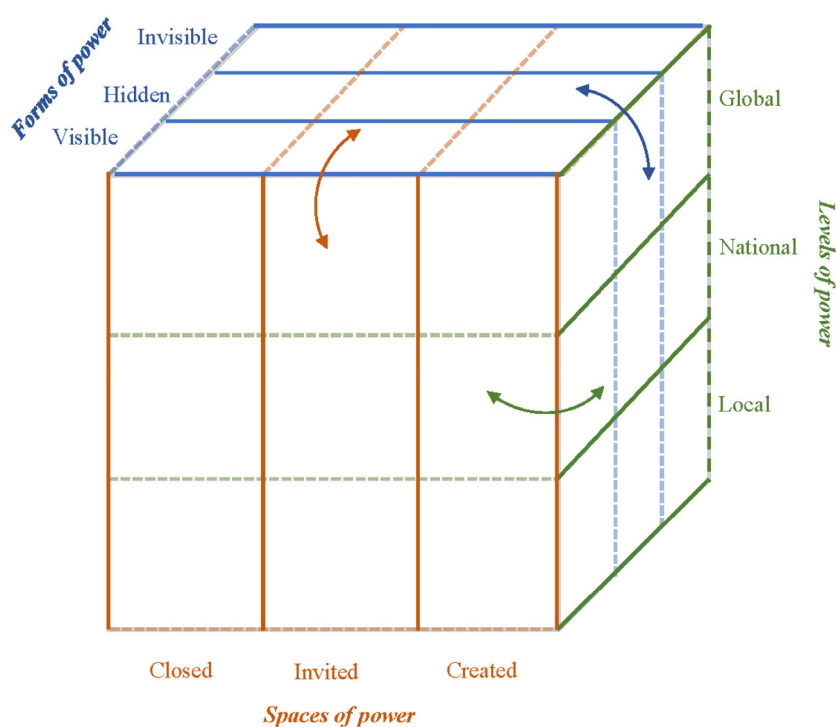


Figure 1. The powercube displaying levels, forms and spaces of power (Gaventa, 2005). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apv.12422)]

Forms of power act in the spaces where decision-making takes place. In closed spaces, decisions are made by a few sets of actors, potentially collecting input from different sources but only inclusive of some stakeholders. Invited spaces broaden the participation; however, only a few actors retain the power to ask (or exclude). It acts as a consultation or information-gathering process and gives a sense of representation for multiple actors. Within the context of Bangladesh, open spaces offer opportunities for collective decisions. They can be claimed by the less powerful actors or created by the higher-level actors to allow every stakeholder to contribute equally to decision-making. Understanding the spaces would also offer opportunities to explore what goes inside the spaces and how much gender considerations are part of the discussions.

The powercube framework facilitates mapping organisations, their circumstances and their interrelations within Bangladesh or their interdependencies. It helps to look at the possibilities for mobilisation and change within the unique Bangladeshi context. The approach also assumes that the set of organisational relations is dynamic and can extend to various levels and spaces of engagement. Each dimension of the levels, forms and spaces constantly engages with each other, directly or indirectly, exchanging synergies of power (Gaventa, 2005). For example, a global organisation might not have direct contact with the local organisation; however, a change at the global level might affect the spaces of participation at the local level. Applying this comprehensive framework enables this study to look at the possibilities of movement, mobilisation and altering the roles of stakeholders in planning and implementing adaptation strategies to find entry points of action for compelling gender considerations.

Methodology

To gain in-depth insights into the understandings, experiences and perspectives of development practitioners engaged in climate change adaptation initiatives in Bangladesh, a qualitative approach was chosen for its suitability in exploring socio-cultural and contextual aspects (Chambers *et al.*, 2013). In-depth semi-structured

individual interviews with study participants from government and non-government organisations (NGOs) formed the core of the data collection process.

The study identified practitioners actively working on projects with climate change adaptation as the thematic intervention area through an online search. Snowball sampling techniques were used to expand the sample, considering information about field-level practitioners is only sometimes readily available online. Potential interviewees were contacted via email and an online interview was scheduled upon their agreement. The lead author conducted 36 interviews through video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Skype) from March to September 2021. Diversifying the interviewees based on practitioners' personal and working attributes was a key selection criterion. A characterisation of the group of interviewees is given in Table 1.

The interviews, conducted in Bengali, took approximately one hour to complete and covered topics related to perspectives and experiences of practitioners in multi-organisational adaptation efforts, adaptation planning processes, the implementation of adaptation strategies, and barriers that impact their work or that of their organisation. The interviewees worked in their respective organisations in significant roles in shaping adaptation projects and organisational priorities in supporting climate-vulnerable people.

In addition to the interviews, the study analysed five prominent national guidelines for adaptation and 22 climate change adaptation projects in Bangladesh. The plans included the NAPA, the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) and the Climate Change and Gender Action Plan (ccGAP). These plans were foundational for project interventions in the last 15 years in Bangladesh (Shaw *et al.*, 2013). For the adaptation project analysis, the study investigated publicly available written documents of 22 adaptation projects initiated between January 2009 and December 2020. The analysis helped to identify representations of organisations involved in developing national plans and implementing significant adaptation projects. Many of the interview participants had working experience in these projects. The objective was to analyse

Table 1. Number of interviewees based on their attributes

Attributes	Variables	Number of interviewees
Gender (as they identified)	Female	15
	Male	21
Affiliation*	Local NGO	10
	National NGO	9
	Regional NGO	2
	International NGO	6
	Government (national)	2
	Government (district-level)	4
	Funding organisation agency	5
Job responsibility	Field-level practitioner	9
	Project co-ordinator/manager	16 (in small-scale projects – 4)
	Administrative official	6
	Consultant	5
Other considerations	Religious minority	13
	Religious majority (Muslim)	23
	Ethnic majority	31
	Ethnic minority (Indigenous people)	5

*The sample size (38) includes two cases of multiple responses because those participants changed organisations within the last five years after completing a project.

the priority areas of these guidelines and projects to understand their probable influence on organisational interactions in devising their adaptation strategies.

Data were transcribed and coded with computer-assisted software NVivo (version 12.5). NVivo is effective in character-based coding, identifying patterns and adding depth and rigour in understanding the trajectory of coded data (Zamawe, 2015). Content analysis of coded data was done, keeping the dimensions of power explained above in mind. The study took a flexible approach to identify and describe the levels, forms and spaces of power and their interactions. It attempted to explore possible powers beyond the defined classifications. The findings of the analysis are presented in the following section.

Findings

This section scrutinises the levels of power wielded by different organisations, utilising evidence from document analysis and interviews to illuminate the intricate dynamics that shape gender considerations in adaptation planning and implementation.

Levels of power

Global influence. The document analysis and interviews with government staff unveiled the substantial impact of international bodies such as the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Global Climate Facility (GCF), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Least Development Countries Fund (LDCF) in the adaptation planning and implementation in Bangladesh. Notably, UNFCCC's guidelines played a significant role in the country's NAPA in 2005, revised in 2009 with a similar template following UNFCCC guidelines. The following evidence from NAPA shows a direct influence of global bodies' directions in country-level adaptation planning:

It (NAPA) has kept the format of the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) 2005 that was prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh as a response to the decision of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (NAPA Forward, 2009, page i)

Bangladesh's dependency on international investments makes the involvement of aid

agencies a common feature in projects. Voicing the same, one interviewee reflected,

Funding authorities have a major influence. If I say from my experience, it may be 70% or more ... they are strict sometimes. They say 'it's mentioned there so you have to show the same works'. Whatever the proposal says, they go the way favourable to them. (Interviewee 3, female national NGO practitioner)

Government and national NGO staff pointed out that gender is often defined and guided by global partners, often a forced requirement for funding rather than exploring the gender intricacies of the local areas to plan for locally appropriate adaptation. One interviewee explained,

[Donor] projects had fixed guidelines that we need to include certain percentages of women ... The projects that we do there is a clause that we need female gender focal points ... This is kind of mandatory, particularly for all community-based projects. (Interviewee 19, female government official)

The findings indicated that national planners and implementers often need to comply with the priorities of aid agencies and international governing bodies because of their ability to control the flow of funds.

National dynamics. The document analysis revealed multiple government agencies' pivotal role in shaping the core of national guidelines, such as the environment, finance, agriculture, water resources, rural development, local government, disaster management and forest. National guidelines actively discuss women's additional climate vulnerabilities and attempt to incorporate gender in the plans. For example, the BCCSAP targets increasing the resilience of vulnerable women as part of the climate action plan (p. 27). NAPA (2005) recommends prioritising vulnerable communities with an emphasis on women in plans for mainstreaming climate change in development (p. 34).

The analysis revealed that government officials, politicians, renowned experts and selected professional leaders of large NGOs guide the nation's global representation and key decision-making arenas. Officeholders in government agencies lead the planning process as

part of their portfolio. However, the planning committees heavily rely on well-known experts in disciplinary studies such as climate change, and gender to provide technical support in compiling and writing the guidelines. National NGO staff mentioned that if any project output contradicts a national target, experts and government officials do not carry them forward in programme planning. As explained by an interviewee,

many project information doesn't disseminate properly ... Firstly, the government doesn't want information or data or pictures of sensitive issues or failure to become visible to people in global platforms. (Interviewee 25, male INGO project manager)

The top government authorities can influence the negotiation with the aid agencies in setting the target areas for funding by the agencies which is different for NGOs. One interviewee highlighted how top government officials can change the direction of donor investments,

Initially, we prioritised high-impact programs in climate change sectors such as education and poverty reduction. The skill-based program was not there. It came into priority after 2015, when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, after the last election, showed keen interest in skill or capacity development. (Interviewee 24, male administrative official in donor organisation)

This study findings suggest that adaptation aid support is declining gradually and government interference to increase adaptation aid support has little influence. In recent years, some national-level NGOs, such as BRAC, have gained prominence in development planning processes, including adaptation. With the popularisation of co-financing projects, NGOs with financial acumen gradually started playing a crucial role in national-level adaptation planning, often not representing the actual experiences of local contexts. One interviewee highlighted the organisational commitment to prioritise gender concerns of large NGOs,

I would say most of the NGOs, and particularly in our NGO, we do focus on women and girls in all our programmes. That's something we do

not compromise. (Interviewee 5, male National NGO project coordinator)

These large NGOs have secondary sources of income and do not rely on development projects to run their organisations. Therefore, adaptation projects present less challenge to these NGOs as the stakes, particularly in money invested, are less than those of smaller NGOs. In addition, they attract experienced practitioners of local NGOs to work with them, leaving local NGOs with less efficient and experienced practitioners to assert their presence in decision-making arenas.

The hierarchy of power is significantly top-down at the national level, with government agencies and their representatives holding more power in national-level negotiations with either aid agencies or NGOs. Even the power gained by the major national NGOs in negotiations can seldom change the government's operational plans.

Local realities. Local organisations, primarily involved in implementing the action plans, play a limited role in national-level policy development. The government's emphasis on community-based adaptation underscores the significance of this level, visible in NAPA (2005) recommending community-participated afforestation programmes in all regions of the country (p. 40) and BCCSAP recommending supporting women's adaptation efforts through the development of community-level actions (p. 27). However, practitioners observed an absence of involvement from marginalised communities in adaptation planning arenas.

Some regulations help to maintain inclusivity, often in a tokenistic way. For instance, mandated collaboration with local NGOs in the Chattogram Hill Tract ensures cultural and regional connectivity but with no surety of inclusivity in the decision-making. Smaller local NGOs, operating on a project-to-project basis, have minimal presence on global and national platforms of policy discussions. They are less concerned about whether there is gender or climate change in the projects as they prioritise getting projects to run their organisations. Interviews also indicated a gap among local NGO staff in terms of how they understand gender and utilise gender approaches in their work

organisations despite available training. One interview commented,

There are many field staff who do not understand the concepts of gender. We encourage them to take training. You know, who does not clearly understand gender, how can we explain to them what is gender mainstreaming ... In so many years, I haven't seen any of my staff explaining gender unambiguously. (Interviewee 14, female local NGO practitioner)

The participation of local NGOs is often confined to the local areas. Selective local NGOs participate in national-level discussions based on the strength of their relationship with government agencies or significant national NGOs. However, local NGO staff mentioned that their role rarely goes beyond sharing selective experiences or token presence.

The findings illustrate the intricate hierarchy of power despite documents mentioning the wider participation of stakeholders. Despite their deep understanding of local contexts, local organisations face constraints in broader policy discussions attributed to power imbalances with larger national and global organisations.

Participation dynamics

Interviewees did not observe any claimed space in adaptation planning or action where local actors do not have decision-making powers in national planning. As they mentioned, the organisational culture is structured and often works top-down. Mainly because the monetary resources are controlled by a few, which seldom provides local actors room for creating spacing of discussion to decide on any new initiative. This is compounded by the community's limited understanding of adaptation, resulting in minimal local pressure for inclusion.

Interviewees revealed that Bangladesh adaptation planning happens in closed or invited spaces, particularly at the global level, for government officials, renowned experts, politicians, donor representatives and prominent activists. The selection of country representatives in global discussion depends on the interests of the 'government's higher authorities'. Document analysis pointed out that renowned country experts, mainly from research institutes and country representatives of international agencies, lead the

Planning for climate change adaptation in Bangladesh

technical discussions of the planning. Local organisations often get invitations to participate in planning, primarily in information-sharing sessions and sometimes merely as a token rather than for decision-making purposes. Local NGOs with good networks with major national NGOs or government agencies are invited to national planning discussions. Document analysis and interviews reinforced that communities do not participate in the decision-making arenas. Some actors, usually government officeholders, control the discussion at each level. One interviewee explained this power imbalance,

I was present in a meeting where I said that post-disaster men-women equal contribution has not reached the expected level. Hearing this, [a higher government official] got very angry. He yelled why I am saying only the negative things. (Interviewee 16, female INGO project coordinator)

Document analysis and interviews, to some extent, reflected the continuation of top-down hierarchy and the significant presence of either closed or invited spaces of participation. For example, the primary steering committee for developing NAPA (2005) had only one female member out of 10. Interestingly, in the gender and local governance sectoral working group, none of the members was a woman. These closed spaces are designed for positions of power where, in Bangladesh, women are in scarce numbers. The planning process included regional and national workshops to which very selective federal and local practitioners were invited. Interviews indicated that the participation of women in these spaces increases when the plan is about gender or women, with experts and bureaucrats steering the proceedings.

Regarding adaptation projects, national NGO staff mentioned needing more space to contribute to selecting funding priorities and approving projects. In contrast, local NGO staff said they have no space at all. Gender considerations, standard features in project descriptions as required by donor agencies, often have prefixed priorities and targets that may or may not address the local needs felt by the people. One local NGO staff mentioned the same,

We work with international NGOs, and they prepare the proposal first. At that stage, we do not have any role to play. They prepare the proposal based on their understanding of the situation. The juniors only get the information that we got the project and need to be ready for the implementation. (Interviewee 26, male local NGO project coordinator)

According to the national and local NGO staff, there is a pool of recognised national and international experts who are often invited or engaged by the donors or top authorities of implementing agencies in the planning and designing of the projects. The project's design also follows if a donor is interested in investing in a particular area. One interviewee mentioned,

If a project is under donor agencies and they are interested in desertification, the project finds people extremely affected by prolonged drought. (Interviewee 19, female government official)

One adaptation consultant mentioned trying their best to engage with local experience. However, local practitioners revealed that these invited spaces for engagement are reserved for the top officials of the local NGOs and less for the field-level staff. The planning process, evidently, still follows a top-down organisational culture where top officials of organisations head planning. To understand this culture, the following section explores the forms of power that appear to maintain the culture.

Forms of power

Visible forms of power. Global treaties, national policies, priorities, plans and guidelines, state laws, administrative structures and organisational resources are some instruments of visible powers actively guiding adaptation planning. An example of their presence can be found in the following project texts,

[Project name] responds to the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) as it highlights the need to enhance national adaptive capacity to reduce adverse effects of floods, establish advanced early

warning systems and calls for planning and implementing non-structural flood proofing measures. (Project-14 design completion report, p. 18)

Government organisational structures are another example of the visible forms that let top officials control spaces of participation. Interviews with local-level practitioners indicated that government agencies have engrained legislative powers that give them additional powers in interaction, mainly when NGOs with limited local expansion of development work are involved. An INGO staff echoed that point,

We cannot do anything without the approval of local government bodies. Last, even the outputs coming from community discussion require local authority's approval. (Interviewee 20, a female INGO project coordinator)

The visible forms or instruments of power act in open decision-making. However, these are so structured in an organisational system that the scope to avoid their involvement in the planning process is limited.

Hidden powers. Analysing the documents and interviews, particularly involving local-level practitioners, indicated how money, human resources, skills, expertise, experience, networks, technology and infrastructures limit the alternate choices of less powerful organisations. As an interviewee explained,

We have an App that we use at the field level to understand how vulnerable someone is. If we have a target to select 300 beneficiaries, using this app we can say that how many from, let's say 30 thousand local people, are can be said vulnerable. (Interviewee 14, female local NGO practitioner)

This app has not been developed particularly for the project or the locality. There is a risk of limiting the criteria of local vulnerability with such Apps. Besides, the local organisations had only one choice other than using the app developed or recommended by donors.

In such cases, the lack of resources and expertise were the key reasons provided in the interviews for local organisations feeling obliged to act in particular ways. Interviews

with local practitioners revealed that they work on broader development problems that sometimes limit their expertise to specific concepts such as gender and climate change. Therefore, when the local actors are invited for planning dialogue, they mention that they often need help to catch up with the latest approaches on specific development concepts.

Interviews with local NGO staff unequivocally expressed that they depend on donors and major national partners for their survival, limiting the opportunities to actively contest the ideas presented by the major partners. The competition among local NGOs to get funding is fierce each year, giving donors and major national partners scope to dictate the terms. The situation is reflected in the following statement,

In the case of our NGO, we look towards donors for funds. Donors have specific requirements. Sometimes, they have fewer funds and want more outputs. We need to adjust our work. This job is tough. (Interviewee 27, female local NGO project coordinator)

The location of practitioners plays a key role in the planning process. Interviewees revealed that the planning process was first initiated by the relevant government agencies in the capital city of Dhaka, which later included experts and representatives of prominent NGOs and, if required, a few representatives of local NGOs. There should have been a mention of community leaders or representatives of vulnerable groups in the decision-making steering committees. For example, no representative of ethnic groups, disabled or gender minorities was listed as a contributor to NAPA (2005). However, gender itself, as observed in the analysis, is a form of power that restricts the presence of marginalised voices. Female practitioners are significantly less represented than male practitioners in the planning. Interviewees also echoed that point,

In development work, women are few, and even there, you cannot find many in administrative positions. (Interviewee 27, female local NGO project coordinator)

If I compare, in our department less than one-third are female. Of the directors that we have,

only four among the seventeen are female. This is less than one-third in top position. (Interviewee 19, female government official)

Therefore, organisations might extend the boundaries to participate that do not ensure the effective participation of women in those spaces. The planners and designers of projects are experts with a plethora of experience in studying and working with climate change or gender concepts. Interviewees mentioned that a gap in experience and knowledge plays a key role during discussions. Experts have more power in decision-making when decisions are made on technical terms.

The above-discussed powers are often present in organisational interactions, yet they rarely face contestation. That leads to invisible forms of power limiting the incidence of disputation.

Invisible powers. Invisible power internalises actions and is influenced by practitioners' socio-cultural background and experience, which, at times, restricts their spaces of participation or boundaries of sharing experience. An invitation to decision-making arenas does not instantly allow representatives of certain marginalised groups to contribute to the decisions actively. Interviews, particularly with practitioners of ethnic and religious minority communities, included a significant reflection on the influence of culture on adaptation planning and what cultural barriers and challenges were experienced in project implementation. The findings can be divided into four types of responses from the reflections by practitioners on how culture as a form of power influences the perspectives of people involved in adaptation planning.

- Response 1: Male practitioners mentioned that working with women beneficiaries in certain religiously conservative rural areas during disasters is a barrier for them. Women feel comfortable with female practitioners.
- Response 2: Female practitioners mentioned that family responsibilities restrict their working time. They need more support from their family and relatives to travel to highly vulnerable areas for development work. In addition to that, dealing with

male-dominated local political structures often comes with safety concerns.

- Response 3: Female development practitioners of an ethnic minority mentioned that they often feel like the out-group in national-level seminars or workshops. Practitioners from Plainland undermine their experience. If their Bengali and English skills are not good, they feel less comfortable presenting their ideas if they conflict with the powerful actors.
- Response 4: Hindu practitioners mentioned that people's additional vulnerabilities because of their religious identity are not discussed in the planning process. Hindu female practitioners mentioned that some had to follow the traditional Muslim norms of covering their hair while working in rural areas.

Each layer of cultural attributes added new dimensions of barriers to practitioners. The lack of adequate representation of a range of marginalised groups, resulting in the insufficient address of the localised needs of vulnerable people, was evidenced in the document analysis. Except for the intersecting inequalities of gender and ethnicity, none of the intersecting unequal groups of religious minorities, disability, gender minorities, social class and gender has adequate representation in the planning.

As observed in the interviews, practitioners' motivation is another invisible power that influences how much they engage in the dialogue of specific development concepts such as gender and adaptation. Practitioners, particularly of local NGOs, mentioned that their job is for their survival, not out of motivation to work to bring social change. National-level practitioners understand that, and at times, it works for them to control the spaces of organisational interactions. It was reflected in the following statement of an interviewee,

We know that many development terms are emerging. How many practitioners try to understand these? If you ask one of our field-level colleagues what gender is, most probably, they never tried to know the true meaning. (Interviewee 06, Male National NGO senior programme manager)

Invisible power has a profound effect on how visible and hidden power operates. Therefore, opportunities appear for actively engaging in decision-making arenas; the invisible powers work to restrict any possibility of movement, mobilisation or change within levels or strategise actions to utilise the spaces for initiating actions of change.

Discussion

The study underscores the repercussions of inadequate gender inclusion in climate adaptation planning in Bangladesh, confirming the prevailing top-down organisational structure, with a minority of women in leadership roles, dictating priorities and strategies for supporting women (Lewis, 2003; Alom, 2020; Dewan, 2022). Recent discussions on local participation in adaptation (Chowdhoree et al., 2020; Samaddar et al., 2021) indicated the expansion of the boundaries of inclusion in policy dialogues in that top-down culture, remarkably increasing the involvement of NGOs. However, the expansion has kept the top-down culture the same and often fails to provide open spaces for marginal voices to come forward. Notably, women's continued lack of presence in the decision-making spaces remains. The technicalities and complexities of understanding the global language of climate change, adaptation and gender have provided certain groups of people, primarily male top government officials, managerial-level staff of NGOs and renowned experts in the technical fields, with positions of power, hindering the representation of a range of marginalised women considering their ethnicity, social class, religion and disability. The absence of sufficient representation and meaningful participation hampers adaptation planning's capacity to tackle the intertwined inequalities experienced by Bangladeshi women, despite calls for gender considerations to be integrated into local contexts and the localised impacts of climate change.

These imbalances in decision-making arenas provide selective opportunities for outside actors to enter, primarily through invitation. However, to enter, outside actors need to comply with the existing organisational culture of planning, such as learning the global language

and following the institutionalised systems of dialogue. Therefore, expanding the boundaries of inclusion to certain groups does not significantly alter the ideological standing, giving little scope to the marginal actors, particularly women, to lead the decision-making process. Figure 2 reflects these circles of power in Bangladesh's adaptation planning process.

The inner (core) circle (Fig. 2) of decision-making on national guidelines consists of donors, bureaucrats and experts with minimal political or industry leaders' presence. They decide whom to invite to the discussion while having better access to control the hidden forms of power to set the agendas. The less porous boundary represents the limited opportunities to enter this circle. Actors in the inner circles often move to outer circles and determine the participation levels in other circles. Representation of women is limited in this circle, particularly among the bureaucrats.

Surrounding the inner circle is the circle of major national NGOs, where planning for programmes or projects takes place. National major NGOs, particularly their top officials, have greater scope for inward movement in the core circle discussions where adaptation plans are formulated. Moving from the second circle to the core circle, as presented through a more porous boundary, is more accessible and they often share similar codes of approaching any planning for preparing guides or projects. Women's representation is present in this circle but not in the leading positions of organisations or in organisational decision-making.

The third circle of power belong to the community leaders and local NGOs. Vulnerable local people rarely enter even the third circle. Only their leaders, often less vulnerable than the rest of the group, can pass through in the third circle. Local NGO leaders can participate in the regional dialogue for local-level implementation planning once projects are approved. Women's leadership is present in this circle. However, they have seldom been able to push to enter the upper circles of decision-making. The circles are not closed. However, the scope for outward movement for more powerful actors (which are often men) is significantly better (as presented by the solid arrow in Fig. 2) than inward movement for less powerful actors (which are often women).

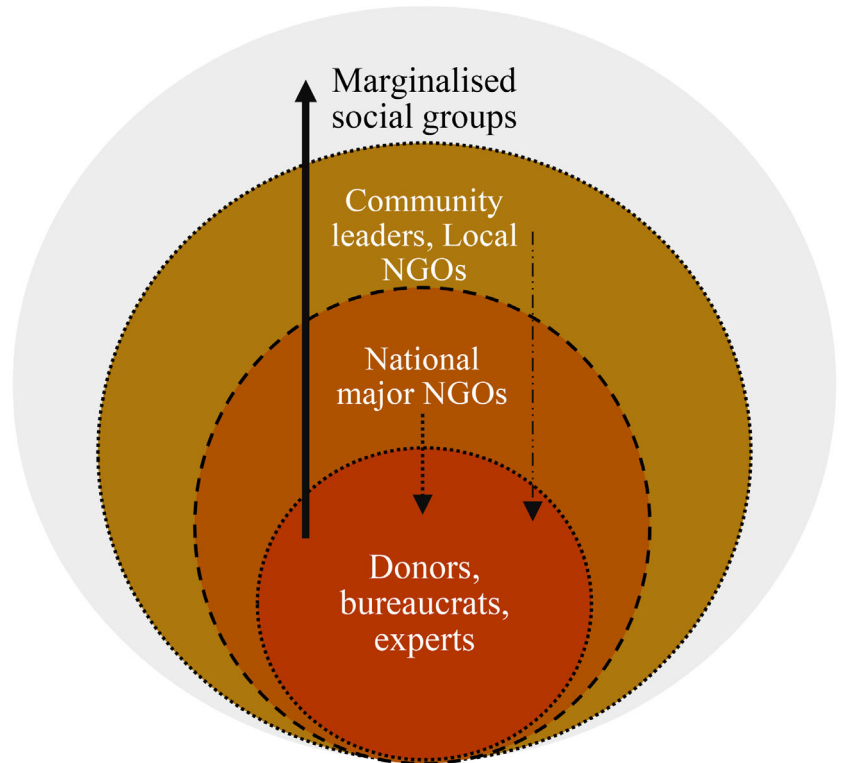


Figure 2. Circles of power in adaptation planning. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apv.12422)]

The discussion contributes to the broader literature on gender, power and climate change adaptation by highlighting the significance of understanding the gendered power hierarchy in organisational interactions (Ishtiaque *et al.*, 2021; Dewan, 2022; Evertsen, 2022). The robust inner circle represents codes of power historically controlled and managed by male, professional-managerial class and Muslim groups. As a professional managerial class, female practitioners often take part as gender experts and they have minimal space to contest the established codes of decision-making power. Such minimal inclusion of women has been repeatedly reported by scholars and practitioners (Evertsen, 2022), but it is nevertheless happening.

As evident in the findings, the core and the surrounding circle often fail to notice that certain marginal groups, particularly women, are not invited equally or are treated differently when included. That resulted in gender differences, often based on religion and ethnicity, and does not have an explicit discussion in any of the adaptation plans and projects. Similarly, the socio-cultural dominance in the inner circle

from male, professional-managerial class and Muslim actors makes it difficult to the operational planning for the transformation of the patriarchal traditions, change the relational pattern of gender or alter the gender-specified stereotypical roles for women. It highlights the drawbacks of top-down organisational cultures and the marginalisation of women's voices, impacting the effectiveness and inclusivity of adaptation strategies. The study's findings illustrate the connection between inadequate support for vulnerable populations, especially women, and how flawed planning processes and power imbalances in organisational interactions diminish the real-world impact of adaptation plans.

Conclusion

The study had some limitations in not covering the community dimensions of power. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible to travel to communities to gather community perspectives.

However, this study has provided an overview of the culture of the adaptation planning process, which excludes the voices of those most marginalised. The study's findings go beyond contributing to the broader literature on climate change adaptation and directly affect the policy landscape in several ways. First, it reflects the hierarchal organisational structure in Bangladesh's development work and how it influences the inclusion of gender considerations in climate change adaptation planning and implementation. Second, by providing practical insights into the challenges and opportunities related to gender-responsive adaptation planning process for different levels of practitioners, the study strongly emphasised the inclusion of localised perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the unique socio-economic and environmental conditions in Bangladesh, which can be crucial for tailoring locally appropriate and adaptive adaptation strategies. It also underscores the need for inclusivity for more equitable and effective climate change adaptation strategies.

The significant power imbalances between organisations planning for and implementing adaptation strategies require urgent attention. Representative participation across levels and forms of power with a gradual effort to open up decision-making spaces has a positive impact. The planning process needs to start with identifying the intersecting inequalities of disability, ethnicity, religion, locality and gender to identify marginalised groups and provide accessible spaces for decision-making. Another option is a circular process of decision-making where each identified vulnerable group would take part in planning for their specific need in a decentralised way. The steering committee of experts and government officials can be there to compile the different sectoral plans.

Based on the findings and discussion, this study provides the following suggestions for policymakers. First, policymakers can develop a separate stream for financing gender-responsive adaptation plans and initiatives for Bangladesh, with women and other marginalised groups taking the lead in the planning process. This targeted planning process can encourage innovative and locally appropriate adaptation measures coming in the overall adaptation efforts. Second, policymakers can invest in

technological innovations to improve data collection, information sharing and decision-making processes to enhance women's access and facilitate a culturally sensitive participation space in decision-making. If the participation space is expanded and open for all, it may support local women in actively contributing to adaptation planning. Third, policymakers need to take adequate initiatives to establish innovative multi-stakeholder collaboration platforms that bring together diverse actors having equal stakes in the decision-making to address gender inequalities in adaptation planning collectively. They would need to systematically track and analyse the outcomes and impacts of these platforms to measure progress and make informed decisions to improve and continuously innovate gender-responsive adaptation policies and interventions.

The study suggests starting afresh with changes in the inner circles of power, empowering local communities to initiate operational adaptation planning and gradually developing compiled guidelines through a consortium of diverse representatives. It is essential to move away from predetermined planning and focus on empowering communities and marginalised groups to shape their adaptation strategies. By challenging and transforming the existing organisational structures, we can foster more equitable and effective climate change adaptation in Bangladesh and beyond.

Conflict of interests

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

References

- Agarwal, B. (2018) Gender equality, food security and the sustainable development goals, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 34: 26–32.
- Ahmed, S. and E. Kiester (2021) Do gender differences lead to unequal access to climate adaptation strategies in an agrarian context? Perceptions from coastal Bangladesh, *Local Environment* 26(5): 650–665.
- Alom, M.M. (2020) Public sector organizational culture: Experience from frontline bureaucracies, in S.D. Göker (ed.), *A closer look at organizational culture in action*. London: IntechOpen.
- Aryal, J.P., T.B. Sapkota, D.B. Rahut et al. (2020) Major climate risks and adaptation strategies of smallholder

- farmers in coastal Bangladesh, *Environmental Management* 66: 105–120.
- Boas, I., N. De Pater and B.T. Furlong (2022) Moving beyond stereotypes: The role of gender in the environmental change and human mobility nexus, *Climate and Development* 15(1): 1–9.
- Cannon, T. (2002) Gender and climate hazards in Bangladesh, *Gender and Development* 10(2): 45–50.
- Chambers, D.A., R.E. Glasgow and K.C. Stange (2013) The dynamic sustainability framework: Addressing the paradox of sustainment amid ongoing change, *Implementation Science* 8: 117.
- Chowdhoree, I., L. Dawes and M. Sloan (2020) Scopes of community participation in development for adaptation: Experiences from the Haor region of Bangladesh, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 51: 101864.
- Corcoran-Nantes, Y. and S. Roy (2018) Gender, climate change, and sustainable development in Bangladesh, in J. McIntyre-Mills, N. Romm and Y. Corcoran-Nantes (eds.), *Balancing individualism and collectivism: Social and environmental justice*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Dewan, C. (2022) ‘Climate change as a spice’: Brokering environmental knowledge in Bangladesh’s development industry, *Ethnos* 87(3): 538–559.
- Evertsen, K.F. (2022) The politics of women’s lives: Gendered re-presentations in Bangladesh’s climate change adaptation regime, *Climate and Development* 16(3): 199–208.
- Gaventa, J. (2005) Reflections on the uses of the ‘power cube’ approach for analyzing the spaces, places and dynamics of civil society participation and engagement, in *CFP evaluation series 2003–2006: No 4*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. p. 1–45.
- Gaventa, J. (2006) Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis, *IDS Bulletin* 37(6): 23–33.
- Ishtiaque, A., H. Eakin, S. Vij, N. Chhetri, F. Rahman and S. Huq (2021) Multilevel governance in climate change adaptation in Bangladesh: Structure, processes, and power dynamics, *Regional Environmental Change* 21: 1–15.
- Islam, M.A., Shetu, M.M. & Hakim, S.S. (2022) Possibilities of a gender-responsive infrastructure for livelihood-vulnerable women’s resilience in rural-coastal Bangladesh. *Built Environment Project and Asset Management* 12: 447–466.
- Jerneck, A. (2018) Taking gender seriously in climate change adaptation and sustainability science research: Views from feminist debates and sub-Saharan small-scale agriculture, *Sustainability Science* 13: 403–416.
- Kabeer, N. and L. Huq (2014) The power of relationships: Money, love and solidarity in a landless women’s organization in rural Bangladesh, in A. Cornwall and J. Edwards (eds.), *Feminisms, empowerment and development: Changing women’s lives*. London: Zed Books.
- Lewis, D. (2003) NGOs, organizational culture, and institutional sustainability, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 590(1): 212–226.
- Mallick, B. and T. Siddiqui (2015) Disaster-induced migration and adaptation discourse in Bangladesh, in *Environmental change, adaptation and migration*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Masud-All-Kamal, M. and M. Nursey-Bray (2022) Best intentions and local realities: Unseating assumptions about implementing planned community-based adaptation in Bangladesh, *Climate and Development* 14(3): 1–10.
- Morriss, P. (2002) *Power: A philosophical analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Morriss, P. (2006) Steven Lukes on the concept of power, *Political Studies Review* 4(2): 124–135.
- NAPA (2005) National Adaptation Programme of Action. Ministry of Environment and Forest Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.
- Paprocki, K. (2018) Threatening dystopias: Development and adaptation regimes in Bangladesh, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108: 955–973.
- Paprocki, K. (2019) All that is solid melts into the bay: Anticipatory ruination and climate change adaptation, *Antipode* 51: 295–315.
- Rahman, S.M. (2019) Structural analogy in development and climate aid: The case of Bangladesh, *Journal of Development Policy and Practice* 4(1): 89–116.
- Renner, J. (2020) New power structures and shifted governance agendas disrupting climate change adaptation developments in Kenya and Uganda, *Sustainability* 12: 1–24.
- Resurrección, B.P. (2013) Persistent women and environment linkages in climate change and sustainable development agendas, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 40: 33–43.
- Roy, S. and K. Sims (2021) Climate change mitigation and adaptation in Bangladesh: The need for community-based approaches, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 62(2): 143–150.
- Samaddar, S., A.J. Ayaribilla, M. Oteng-Ababio, F. Dayour and M. Yokomatsu (2019) Stakeholders’ perceptions on effective community participation in climate change adaptation, in A. Sarkar, S.R. Sensarma and G.W. Vanloon (eds.), *Sustainable solutions for food security*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Samaddar, S., M. Oteng-Ababio, F. Dayour et al. (2021) Successful community participation in climate change adaptation programs: On whose terms? *Environmental Management* 67(4): 747–762.
- Shabib, D. and S. Khan (2014) Gender-sensitive adaptation policy-making in Bangladesh: Status and ways forward for improved mainstreaming, *Climate and Development* 6(4): 329–335.
- Shaw, R., F. Mallick and A. Islam (2013) *Climate change adaptation actions in Bangladesh*. Tokyo: Springer.
- Sultana, F. (2014) Gendering climate change: Geographical insights, *The Professional Geographer* 66(3): 372–381.
- Sultana, Z., B. Mallick, B. Biswas et al. (2022) Role of gender and political connectedness after extreme events in coastal Bangladesh, *Climate Action* 1(1): 7.
- Zamawe, F.C. (2015) The implication of using NVivo software in qualitative data analysis: Evidence-based reflections, *Malawi Medical Journal* 27(1): 13–15.