

The Invisible Farmer: Gendered Disaster Reporting and Postharvest Labor in Bangladesh's 2026 Haor Flood

Abstract

This study examines gender representation within Bangladeshi disaster journalism during the 2026 Haor flood crisis, which submerged more than 46,730 hectares of standing boro paddy and affected over 236,000 farming households across northeastern Bangladesh. Despite extensive scholarship on gender and agricultural vulnerability, limited research has examined how disaster reporting represents women's agricultural labor during climate-related crises in Bangladesh. To address this gap, the study conducted a quantitative content analysis combined with qualitative interpretive analysis of 77 news reports published between April 29 and May 9, 2026, across five major national media outlets: The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune, Prothom Alo, Bangladesh Pratidin, and Jago News 24. The findings reveal a systematic gender imbalance in disaster reporting. Only 11 reports (14%) framed women in their coverage, while only 2 reports explicitly identified women as farmers. Among 125 direct quotations, 117 (94%) came from men and only 8 (6%) from women. Image analysis further showed that male farmers dominated visual representation and disaster narratives. The study argues that media invisibility reproduces institutional exclusion within disaster governance, agricultural recognition systems, and postdisaster relief structures. The findings highlight the need for more gender inclusive disaster reporting and agricultural representation within Bangladeshi news media.

Keywords: *Women Farmers in Bangladesh, Disaster Reporting, Haor Flood Crisis, Postharvest Labor, Agricultural Vulnerability*

1. Introduction

This study draws on feminist media framing theory and feminist disaster studies to examine how journalistic representation shapes institutional recognition within disaster governance. Media framing theory argues that news representation shapes public understanding, political priorities, and institutional responses to social crises (Entman, 1993). Feminist media scholars further contend that the repeated marginalization or absence of women within news narratives produces forms of symbolic annihilation in which women's labor, experiences, and social

identities become institutionally invisible (Tuchman, 1978; Van Zoonen, 1994). Within disaster contexts, such patterns of representation influence not only public discourse but also systems of recognition tied to relief distribution, agricultural governance, and postdisaster recovery. In late April and early May 2026, the Haor wetlands of northeastern Bangladesh, including Sunamganj, Kishoreganj, Netrokona, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, Sylhet, and Brahmanbaria, experienced severe flooding caused by an unprecedented combination of premonsoon rainfall, upstream flash floods originating from Meghalaya, and breached embankments. The boro crop, the sole annual crop of the Haor ecosystem, stood ripe in the fields when the flooding occurred. In April 2026, rainfall levels exceeded the seasonal norm by 75 percent. Within a matter of days, an estimated 46,730 hectares of standing paddy were submerged, affecting more than 236,000 farming households and causing losses exceeding Tk 1,047 crore. The human consequences were equally devastating. One farmer reportedly died from a heart attack while witnessing his crop disappear under floodwaters, while another took his own life under the burden of unpayable debt.

The disaster generated extensive national media attention. During the ten days immediately following the flooding, five major national newspapers collectively published at least 77 discrete news reports. Despite the intensity and scale of this reporting, one group remained largely absent from the dominant narrative: women farmers. In rural Haor communities, women play indispensable roles within agricultural production systems through seed selection and preservation, postharvest processing, drying, food storage, and the unpaid coordination of household labor that enables male family members to engage in cultivation. Nevertheless, press coverage systematically rendered these contributions invisible, portraying women primarily through domestic, dependent, or auxiliary identities rather than as agricultural actors in their own right. This study seeks not only to document gender bias within disaster reporting but also to identify the structural processes through which such exclusions are reproduced within disaster governance and agricultural recognition systems. Yet farmers in this region, particularly women, operate within conditions of acute structural vulnerability shaped by single-crop dependency, exploitative informal credit systems, fragile embankment governance, and limited access to agricultural extension and institutional support services. Existing research on gender and agriculture in Bangladesh consistently demonstrates that women perform between 60 and 80 percent of postharvest processing activities and contribute substantially to agricultural labor during peak production periods (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011; Kabeer, 1994). Despite these contributions, the official categorization of “farmer” in Bangladesh, as reflected in agricultural census practices and extension systems, continues to privilege male landholders. Women cultivating family land or participating as wage agricultural laborers without formal tenancy rights are routinely excluded from agricultural beneficiary lists, input subsidies, institutional recognition, and postdisaster relief mechanisms (Seema Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Irene Dankelman, 2010). This study

argues that the invisibility of women within disaster journalism is not merely a representational issue. Rather, media framing shapes institutional recognition within disaster governance, agricultural compensation systems, and public policy. By excluding women from agricultural narratives, disaster reporting contributes to broader systems of institutional exclusion that affect relief distribution, agricultural recognition, and postdisaster recovery.

2. Objectives

Five objectives guide this study:

- To identify the quantity and quality of women's representation in press coverage of disasters, particularly during the 2026 Haor flood crisis.
- To examine how women's participation in agriculture, postharvest activities, household food management, and disaster recovery was represented and respected in national media coverage of the 2026 Haor flood.
- To analyze whether journalistic framing reflected the gendered impacts of the flood crisis on women, particularly their postharvest labor responsibilities, such as drying, preserving, and managing damaged paddy under prolonged poor weather conditions and limited sunlight.
- To measure the extent to which women were identified, quoted, or recognized as farmers in flood-related coverage of the 2026 Haor crisis across five national newspapers.
- To analyze the qualitative framing of women in disaster reporting, including whether women were portrayed as victims, caregivers, dependents, agricultural workers, postharvest laborers, or active agents in recovery and resilience processes.

3. Methodology

The study first determined the period of flood news coverage from April 29 to May 9, 2026. Following heavy rainfall on April 28, 2026, the Department of Agricultural Extension confirmed that Netrokona and Kishoreganj districts had already been affected. After this announcement, national media outlets began extensive news coverage of the severe flood crisis, which continued across different newspapers until May 9, 2026.

3.1 Selection Method of the Media Outlets

For the study, five purposively selected national media outlets were included: two Bangla-language newspapers, Prothom Alo and Bangladesh Pratidin, two English-language newspapers, The Daily Star and Dhaka Tribune, and one online news portal, Jago News 24. These newspapers were selected based on their circulation, online ranking, public influence, and availability of archived e-paper

editions. These outlets were selected because of their strong influence on national public discourse and disaster news agendas in Bangladesh. For print newspapers, news articles were collected from archived e-paper versions. The study only considered news related to the Haor regional flood crisis and collected a total of 77 individual news articles from the five selected media outlets.

Media Outlet	Type	Language	National Ranking / Position	Circulation / Reach (Approx) (combined print and digital)
Prothom Alo	Print & Online Newspaper	Bangla	1st	5.5 million
Bangladesh Pratidin	Print Newspaper & Online Newspaper	Bangla	2nd	4.2 million
The Daily Star	Print & Online Newspaper	English	1st	0.5 million
Dhaka Tribune	Print & Online Newspaper	English	2nd	0.3 million
Jago News 24	Online News Portal	Bangla	1st	3.0 million

Data Source: Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) circulation reports and SimilarWeb digital audience rankings, accessed 2026.

3.2 Data Collection

First, collect and download the E-paper and online news published from April 29 to May 9, 2026. After collecting a total of 77 news reports, each report was coded for gender representation, quotations, occupational labeling, visual framing, and disaster narrative themes. The coded data were collected through Google Forms and subsequently exported to an Excel database for statistical analysis. The study employed quantitative content analysis to measure patterns of gender representation, quotations, occupational labeling, and visual framing across news reports during a disaster.

3.2 Data Analysis

Qualitative interpretive analysis was subsequently used to examine narrative framing, gendered occupational identities, and patterns of agricultural invisibility within disaster journalism. The unit of analysis was the individual news report. To improve consistency, all reports were coded using a standardized coding framework developed before data collection. Coding categories included gender representation, direct quotations, occupational identification, visual framing, disaster narratives, and keyword frequency. Quantitative analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS to examine frequencies, trends, thematic distributions, and patterns within the media coverage.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The Haor flood crisis received substantial editorial importance and national media attention within Bangladeshi news media. Out of 58 print news reports published across four newspapers, 15 (26%) appeared on the front page, while 9 (16%) were published as lead stories. Another 9 (16%) appeared on the back page, while the remaining 34 (58%) were published on inside pages. Despite this extensive coverage, the findings reveal a clear systematic gender imbalance in disaster and agricultural reporting. Among the 77 analyzed news reports, Sunamganj received the highest media attention, appearing in 40.3% of reports, followed by Netrokona (27.3%) and Moulvibazar (23.4%). Coverage was heavily concentrated in the core Haor districts, indicating that national journalistic representation primarily focused on the most severely flood-affected areas of northeastern Bangladesh.

4.2 Gendered Media Framing

Although women play an important role in boro rice farming, they remain largely absent from media framing. Out of 77 reports, only 11 (14%) mentioned women in any farming, while only 2 reports explicitly identified a woman as a “farmer.” In contrast, male voices overwhelmingly dominated the reporting.

Table 1: Gender representation in images and disaster reporting during the 2026 Haor flood crisis

Image content analysis	No. of times appearing	%
Only male farmers	37	55%
Only female farmers	2	3%
Male and female farmers both appeared in the image	10	15%
Disaster impact described by male farmers	46	69%
Disaster impact described by female farmers	6	10%
Natural landscapes	8	12%

Note: Percentages are based on 67 news reports containing at least one image.

Image analysis showed that 67 of the 77 news reports contained at least one photograph. Male farmers appeared alone in 55% of the images, whereas female farmers appeared alone in only 3%. Images portraying both male and female farmers together accounted for 15% of the coverage. Disaster impacts were described by male farmers in 69% of the reports, compared to only 10% by female farmers. An additional 12% of the images focused exclusively on natural landscapes without depicting affected individuals. Furthermore, only 4 reports, representing 6% of total image use, portrayed women as the primary subject of the image. The findings demonstrate a systematic gender imbalance in both visual framing and narrative representation within media coverage of the 2026 Haor flood crisis. Among the 77 analyzed news reports, 68 included direct farmer

quotations. A total of 125 quotations were identified, of which 117 (93.6%) came from men, while only 8 (6%) came from women. Similarly, a study by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF, 2009) found that women represented only 11 percent of quoted sources in agricultural news coverage. The analysis also found no dedicated news coverage framing women's struggles during the postharvest period, the experiences of women-headed households, or the challenges faced by women farmers in Bangladesh during the flood crisis. Keyword analysis identified loan and debt-related terms as the most dominant theme, appearing 47 times across the analyzed reports, followed by "Haor" with 32 mentions and "labor shortage" with 21 mentions. The findings of this study also reflect broader patterns identified within disaster journalism.

4.3 Structural Invisibility and Disaster Governance

The findings of this study also reflect broader patterns within disaster journalism, which primarily framed the 2026 Haor flood crisis through financial insecurity, agricultural vulnerability, and harvesting challenges experienced by flood-affected farmers in northeastern Bangladesh. Hossain (2026) found that 66 percent of women participated in agricultural activities. Similarly, data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2024) indicate that approximately 74 percent of Bangladesh's female labor force is engaged in agriculture.

Despite this significant contribution, news narratives rarely recognize women as farmers or agricultural workers despite their extensive involvement in crop production, livestock rearing, and postharvest labor. Rather, it reflects a longer-standing regional pattern rooted in gendered agricultural recognition systems. The Food and Agriculture Organization (2011) found that women in South Asia account for 43 percent of the agricultural labor force and perform most postharvest activities. Despite these contributions, women remain systematically excluded from land ownership, agricultural credit, extension services, and institutional recognition. In Bangladesh, previous research has similarly documented the invisibility of women's agricultural labor within formal systems and public discourse. Sultana (2010) and Sajib (2020) found that women in Haor regions are extensively involved in postharvest rice processing, seed preservation, drying, crop cultivation, poultry rearing, homestead gardening, cattle rearing, fish hatchery activities, and other forms of household agricultural labor despite receiving limited institutional recognition as agricultural workers. Bradshaw (2013) argued that disaster reporting frequently marginalizes women's productive roles while emphasizing male experiences of economic loss and recovery. A media monitoring study conducted by the Myanmar Women's Journalist Society (MWJS) and IMS-Fojo (2016) found that women's voices accounted for only 16 percent of print news media coverage. This figure is strikingly similar to the present study's finding that only 14 percent of reports featured women in any role, image content, or speech. The persistence of this pattern across different disasters and time periods suggests a deeply embedded structural bias within disaster journalism in Bangladesh.

4.4 Policy Implications

The 2026 flood response further demonstrated the policy consequences of gender invisibility within agricultural and disaster governance systems. Government food assistance and compensation programs for “affected farmers” largely relied on agricultural registration systems that predominantly recognize male household heads (FAO (2011), Kabeer (1994), UN Women (2022), BRAC IGD). As a result, many women cultivators and informal agricultural workers remained excluded from relief distribution, agricultural compensation, and disaster recovery mechanisms. This invisibility extends beyond media representation and reflects broader structural inequalities embedded within institutional systems. Naila Kabeer (1994) argued that women’s agricultural labor is frequently treated as an extension of household responsibilities rather than formally recognized as productive economic work. Amartya Sen (1990) described this process as “entitlement failure,” where institutional systems prevent vulnerable populations from accessing resources despite their contribution to production and livelihoods. Research by Sylvia Chant (2008), S. Arora-Jonsson (2011), UN Women (2022), and the International Labour Organization (2019) further demonstrated that women’s labor and climate adaptation roles remain marginalized within policy, governance, and disaster response systems. In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2024), BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (2020), and CARE International (2020) similarly identified gender-based exclusion within agricultural recognition, social protection, and disaster response mechanisms.

4.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focused on only five major national media outlets and excluded television news, social media platforms, local newspapers, and radio coverage. Second, the study examined news reports published during a relatively short period immediately following the 2026 Haor flood crisis and therefore may not capture longer-term shifts in media narratives. Third, the research relied primarily on content analysis and did not include interviews with journalists, editors, or affected communities to understand newsroom decision-making processes or audience interpretations of disaster reporting. Despite these limitations, the study provides important empirical evidence on gender representation and agricultural invisibility within disaster journalism in Bangladesh.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we propose the following recommendations:

1. Media institutions should adopt more inclusive definitions of “farmer” that recognize women engaged in agricultural and postharvest labor.
2. Disaster reporting should incorporate gender-balanced sourcing practices through the direct inclusion of women’s voices, experiences, and agricultural roles.
3. Journalistic coverage should avoid portraying women solely through domestic identities and instead use accurate occupational classifications for women engaged in farming activities.
4. Government agencies and media institutions should strengthen gender disaggregated agricultural and disaster data systems to improve evidence-based reporting and policymaking.
5. Disaster compensation and relief mechanisms should recognize informal cultivators, women agricultural workers, and women-headed households beyond formal land ownership records.

6. Conclusion

The 2026 Haor flood crisis exposed both the vulnerability of Bangladesh’s agricultural system and the persistent systemic gender imbalance within disaster journalism. Although women play important roles in crop production, postharvest processing, livestock rearing, food management, and household agricultural labor, their contributions remain largely invisible in national journalistic framing. Analysis of 77 news reports showed that disaster reporting overwhelmingly centered on male farmers through quotations and visual representation, while women were rarely identified or recognized as agricultural actors. Journalistic framing primarily focused on debt, crop loss, and labor shortages experienced by men, with limited attention to women’s postharvest responsibilities and disaster-related challenges. This exclusion reflects broader structural inequalities within media practices, agricultural recognition systems, and disaster response mechanisms. By failing to recognize women as farmers, disaster reporting contributes to their continued exclusion from relief, compensation, and agricultural policymaking. The study demonstrates that media recognition is closely tied to institutional recognition. The exclusion of women from disaster journalism, therefore, contributes to their broader exclusion from agricultural governance, disaster compensation, and relief distribution systems.

7. References

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