II

Work and Employment Strategies
MARGINAL LIVES IN MARGINAL LANDS

Livelihood Strategies of Women-Headed, Immigrant Households in the Charlands of the River Damodar, West Bengal

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INTRODUCTION

The women of the charlands (see Box 5.1) comprise a more disadvantaged group when compared to men. However, those households headed by divorced, deserted or widowed women are even more deprived and marginalised than the rest. Such households are known to be the poorest of the poor because of their low human capital, low bargaining power and restricted social and economic mobility (Datta and Hossain 2003). A report of the Asian Development Bank (2001) noted the widespread occurrence of poverty among women-headed households in the Indian subcontinent; as many as over 95 per cent of women-headed households in Bangladesh are below the poverty line. The charland inhabitants of West Bengal, living in extremely vulnerable environments, are generally poor because they do not have assets such as landed property. Therefore, their livelihood is greatly dependent on the number of members in the household who are able to earn. Women-headed households are even poorer because the absence of adult male earning members places the responsibility of running the household solely on them. Not only are they poorer, but in general, compared to other low-income households, women-headed households are also more vulnerable, living in uncertainty and powerless to control their destinies. They are marginalised in char
society with respect to income-generating activities, social status, health and children’s education. Their poverty also affects their ability to provide for adequate self-protection, and as a result they are less able to create safe conditions during floods and riverbank erosion. However, the support of networks and the social capital of kinship relations are the chief mechanisms that women-headed households use to mobilise resources and cope with contingencies (Valdivia and Gilles 2001).

The charlands are highly vulnerable to frequent floods and bank erosion due to shifting river channels. The physical characteristics inherent in the ecology of char formation make the charlands one of the most fragile environments in the world. This vulnerability of the physical environment makes chars risky and disaster-prone places. Newly formed charlands are more fragile than the older ones; their edges may be eroded at any time by the river currents. Even old charlands may be lost to the unpredictability of a river, with fields and dwellings disappearing in a matter of days. Some chars may gradually turn into permanent human settlements along the river courses, depending on the silt properties and the velocity of river currents. These chars are literally and figuratively on the margins of human habitation. The newly emerging chars, on the borderlines of land and water, are legally non-existent till they are officially recorded. The use of these lands throws up unique questions of environmental dynamics and management (EGIS 2000). The ecological fragility leads to human insecurity and vulnerability, which are key factors behind the persistent poverty in these charlands, confirming Wisner’s (2003) observation that poverty and vulnerability are correlated.

Box 5.1
Charlands

The chars are riverine landmasses rising above the water level. Rivers carrying large quantities of silt and flowing sluggishly over the plains create these fluvial deposits. Riverine chars may be on the river beds (when a river has a braided channel), or may appear as attached spits near the banks. The largest char in the world, Majuli, is an island formed by the Brahmaputra in central Assam. The silt-laden Himalayan rivers descending onto the Gangetic plains leave behind tracts of such land, commonly known as diara in north Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh.
The nature and causes of the poverty of the charlands are complex and interlinked (Ashley et al. 2000). Yet, people do live on chars, especially in developing countries such as India and Bangladesh. To live in this hostile environment, people take risks and have to develop lifestyles to cope with the river’s fluctuations. The competency of the chouras—people living on chars—to adapt to what is commonly seen as an insecure environment offers a problematic. The chouras are very poor migrants, both from elsewhere in India and across international borders, who have struggled hard to transform the chars into habitable and cultivable lands.

There are innumerable chars in deltaic Bengal and the Damodar is no exception, although human intervention in the river system is more responsible for char formation in this river. The Damodar river has been notorious for its shifting courses and has created an inland delta while joining the Hooghly through its innumerable distributaries (Bagchi 1944). Its floods had become legendary, and people began to call it ‘the sorrow of Bengal’. To improve the situation, the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) was established in 1948 for multipurpose water resource development. The DVC, though partly successful in reducing the frequency of floods and in providing irrigation water through a canal network to agricultural fields, has brought many changes in the physical environment in both the upper and lower reaches of the valley. Extensive natural forests were cleared in the upper catchments for the construction of reservoirs. As a result, the siltation rates have been much higher in the reservoirs, but at the same time the release of coarser silt through the sluice gates has led to the formation of chars on the riverbed downstream.

The women heads of households are aware of their low status within the charland social milieu, and hence, are engaged in a daily struggle to secure their means of survival. Their livelihood strategies emanate from their experience of living in poverty, from working out solutions to the daily problems of life in the specific and difficult location of the char and from their attitudes to life, which are rooted in cultural traditions.

Set against this background, our research agenda seeks to examine the livelihood strategies of women who head their households in the charlands of the Damodar River in West Bengal. The more specific objectives are to analyse the impacts of their vulnerable locations on these livelihood strategies, bringing the essence of the place into focus. This in turn raises the issue of ‘belonging’, of the attachments of a particular set of women.
to a particular place that forms a very specific context. In the case of the Damodar chars, the extreme poverty, as well as in some cases the non-citizen identity, act as critical elements in increasing their vulnerability to reduced livelihood choices. Finally, in this study we have also tried to understand the perceptions of these women regarding the changing and hostile environment of the charland as a place of residence. Our research also explores the role of social capital, generated out of kinship and community relations in the livelihoods of poor women-headed households. Participatory research methods, which offer a creative approach to information sharing, have been used to understand the livelihood strategies of poor women-headed households living on the Gaitanpur char. In recent years, participatory methods that emphasise a 'bottom-up approach' have become significant in social research. The participatory approach is based on field visualisation, interviewing and group discussions promoting interactive learning, shared knowledge and flexible yet structured analysis (IDS 1997).

We selected char Gaitanpur, located on the Damodar riverbed in Burdwan district, West Bengal, for a micro study of the livelihood strategies of women-headed households. Extending over an area of 2.5 sq km, it is essentially a strip of land running in a north–south direction. Burdwan town, the district headquarters, populated by nearly 285,000 people in 2001, is located 3 km north of this char and provides an important market for both the labour and the products of the char inhabitants. The relative position of this particular char on the riverbed has changed several times due to the frequent shifting of the thalweg (i.e., the main flow channel) within the river. Bhattacharyya’s 1998 study of the Damodar refers to Dickens’ map of 1854 showing Gaitanpur as a marginal bar (that is, a char attached to the south bank of the river). Until the 1950s, it was located on the south bank of the river, separated by a small drainage channel from Gaitanpur village, of which it was a part. The Survey of India map of 1970 showed it as a mid-channel bar (an island char). During the devastating flood of 1978, the course of the river completely changed; Gaitanpur again became an attached char, but it was now attached to the north bank of the river. Since then it has remained more or less in the same position, although minor inundations and bank erosion are common hazards.

Our study is entirely based on fieldwork methods: observations and primary data collection, mainly qualitative; but the use has also been made
of quantitative methods. The survey results reported here are part of an ongoing, larger study. For the purpose of this chapter, we covered each of the 11 women-headed households presently living on the Gaitanpur char (see Table 5.1). We interviewed each woman and recorded these conversations. They were transcribed later to understand the livelihood strategies in view of the personal histories of the individuals. We also met the women-headed households in a group discussion, in which nearly half of them participated. The focus of the group discussion was again on their livelihood strategies, especially in the lean season, on coping with the vulnerability created by the floods and continuous river erosion, and their own perceptions of their identity as ‘illegal-citizens’. All the names given are real, and have been used with the consent of our participants.

THE POVERTY OF WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Women-headed households have been the subject of considerable debate among academics and policy makers with regard to their definition, the increasing trend of women-headship, the relationship between this and poverty, and vis-à-vis targeting them in the policies for poverty reduction. The literature presents them as the ‘poorest of the poor’ (Jahan 1995; Lahiri-Dutt 2000), and as less able to invest in health and education of their children (Folbre 1991; UNDP 1995, United Nations 1996; World Bank 2001). However, across countries and regions, women-headed households do not constitute a single homogeneous group that is poorer than male-headed households. Typically, the group includes widows, divorced women, single women, abandoned women and women whose husbands have out-migrated in search of employment. The percentage of women in each category differs across countries, cultures and regions of the world, and also across time (Joshi 2004). Barros et al. (1997) are of the opinion that women-headed households are a heterogeneous group and that there are strong regional variations. In their study in urban Brazil, they have found that on an average, female-headed households are not necessarily always the vulnerable groups. Indeed, some are quite well-off, whereas others are very poor and vulnerable. This diversity in social status and economic standing must be recognised while examining women-headed households.
### Table 5.1
List of Women Heads of Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Length of Stay in Chur</th>
<th>No of Children</th>
<th>Agricultural Land</th>
<th>Source of Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunita Sarkar</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dipa Sarkar</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Deserted</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11 months</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakali Sarkar</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Deserted</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kajalrani Mondal</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Husband missing</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Padmabati Sardar</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulsi Barui</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukurani Ray</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Circumstantial head</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 bigha</td>
<td>Leasing out land and wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloka Mohali</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Deserted</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 bigha</td>
<td>Farming own land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundaria Mahato</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.25 bigha</td>
<td>Leasing out land and wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhaneshri Mahato</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 bigha</td>
<td>Leasing out land and wage labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dasania Mahato</td>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Petty trading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Field survey.
Developmental agencies as well as academics are concerned about the rapidly increasing proportion of households headed by women in the total number of households, both in developed and developing countries (for example, see Buvinic et al. 1991; Wojtkiewicz, et al. 1990). In South Asia, too, various social factors have led to a high rate of desertion, leading to the situation in which the woman is forced to take up the responsibility of running the household as well as earning cash incomes to sustain the family. Out-migration of males often leaves women in rural areas; they become the virtual heads of their households. It is widely argued that women-headed households are more vulnerable to risk, economically less viable, socially less connected and poorly integrated, and above all, are enmeshed in a social and economic context that is less than optimum for the growth and the development of mothers and children alike (Arias and Palloni 1999). Several studies have shown that women-headed households are the most disadvantaged group in their respective societies. Ashley et al. (2000), in their livelihood assistance scoping study of the Bangladesh charlands, have identified married women who lose their husbands as one of the most vulnerable groups in Bangladesh society. Vecchio and Roy (1998) state that female-headed households face institutional and social discrimination outside the home, limiting their access to income-generating resources. Akinsola and Popovich (2002), in their study on the quality of life of the families of women-headed households in Botswana, have shown that these families experience significant poverty, with subsequent health threats and poor quality of life with respect to food, shelter, clean water and a safe environment.

The nature and causes of women-headed households are different across countries. In developed countries, women-headed households generally include women who are divorced, separated, single unmarried mothers and widows. In contrast, women-headed households in Asia (Islam 1993; Mencher 1993), Africa and South America are households headed by widows, ‘left-behind’ women and women who have migrated to urban areas (Joshi 2004).

The validity of the earlier claims of a relationship between a higher incidence of poverty and women-headed households has, however, been questioned by several studies (see, for example, Chant 1997; Louat et al. 1992; Rogers 1995; Varley 1996). Quisumbing et al. (1995) also raised doubts regarding the often-claimed association between female headship
and higher poverty. From their study in 10 developing countries, they concluded that the difference between male- and female-headed households among the very poor households is not large enough to state that one group is unambiguously worse-off or better-off. In a similar study, Quisumbing et al. (2001) again found that the relationship between female headship and poverty is strong only in two out of 10 developing countries—Ghana and Bangladesh.

The debate clearly points to the need for greater policy attention towards women-headed households, as their economic disadvantage and triple burden (of running households on single earning, gender discrimination in the labour market and time pressure) are indeed a reality. Our study of women-headed households does not fit into any of the debates outlined above, but explores the unique struggle of non-citizen women-headed households in the specific context of the vulnerable environment of the charlands. We defined women-headed households as those units of residence and domestic consumption comprising adults and children living together without a male, able-bodied earning adult to look after them and where the main earning member of the households are women. Such women are marginal in the true sense of the term, as well as being the poorest in all respects. Their marginality is the central focus of our study, which examines the relationship between the vulnerability induced by the environment of the char and the unauthorised migrant identity of the inhabitants.

**VULNERABILITIES OF THE CHAR ENVIRONMENT**

The physical character of the Gaitanpur char is somewhat different from the other chars located in the active delta region of the Ganga–Padma and other rivers in deltaic Bengal. Regular flooding, an important characteristic of the chars of lower Bengal, is absent here. Gaitanpur was flooded only by knee-deep water during the last major flood in 1978. The problems related to recurrent and annual inundations, shifting lands, and the consequent regular conflicts accompanying the re-demarcation of land that has been covered by sand and alluvium, are less intense in this char. Therefore, Gaitanpur provides a comparatively more secure environment
than the Bangladeshi chars (see Baqee 1998), one in which migrants can settle, while at the same time presenting a marginal environment in which established local communities may not wish to live. Property boundaries have become more or less permanent, which offers residents a slightly safer, if not an adequately so, livelihood.

The poor households living on the char are vulnerable to natural calamities such as floods and riverbank erosion, or to socio-economic factors such as a fall either in production or in the market price of crops, or to illness. These multiple vulnerabilities experienced by the char dwellers are the underlying causes of the chronic, persistent and extreme poverty in the charlands (Brocklesby and Hobley 2003). However, the opposite is also true: most of the char inhabitants live in the chars because of their severely restricted choice. Poverty is also the cause of the vulnerabilities faced by char dwellers.

Erosion of the banks, rather than floods, has a greater impact on people’s lives in the Damodar charlands. Erosion is a frequent but irregular danger, and creates catastrophic livelihood shocks as households lose their land, shelter and other assets. The film of loamy soil on chars is only about three to six inches thick above the substantial layer of sand. This loosely packed silt and fine sand is highly susceptible to erosion, and the consequent loss of agricultural land poses a serious threat to the residents. Bank erosion reached its peak during the 1978 flood when half the char was lost to erosion. Some households have been displaced by erosion as many as three times during their stay on this char.

Diseases and illnesses of various types, especially among the earning members, bring vulnerability to the extremely poor households in the charlands. Women-headed households with only one earning member become more vulnerable in the event of ill health. Children’s illness due to malnutrition is a recurrent problem in the poorer households, affecting both the expenditure and the income of the household negatively. Working women cannot work if their children fall ill. As a result of their staying at home, the family income decreases, and at the same time the daily expense increases because they have to purchase medicines. Illness of the sole earning women members of households engaged in daily labour leads to extreme vulnerability. Women-headed households rarely have significant savings with which to run the household for a length of time without an income. In such periods of crisis, women usually seek help from their
friends, relatives and neighbours. Sometimes they borrow money or seek advance payments from the farmers in whose farms they work. This sort of advance payment often takes a heavy toll and sometimes leads to exploitation as the women have to work at a lower wage to compensate the lender for the interest on the loan amount.

WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The 11 women-headed households in char Gaitanpur, out of a total of 199 households (Table 5.1), is not a very high proportion when compared to the rate in both developed and developing countries (20 and 33 per cent respectively). Among the 11 households, eight are headed by illegal migrant women from Bangladesh and the rest by Bihari women who were relatively earlier settlers. They are *de jure* heads (widows and deserted women), that is, women who are legal and customary heads of their own households with full control over their household incomes and expenditures. However, a *de facto* head (married woman heading her household in the absence of her husband), whose husband lives permanently in Bangladesh with his first wife, noted that she too runs her own household, although the man visits her once or twice a year.

The women's ages range from 32 to 55, averaging 40–45, which matches the findings of other scholars (Vecchio and Roy 1998). In some cases they had come to the char with their husbands, who later either died or left them destitute. In other cases, they came as widows with their children and have close family ties nearby on the char. The average family size of these women is four to five persons. A large family, comprising mostly underage children, means more dependents on women, thereby increasing their livelihood burden.

Due to poverty and a lack of significant amounts of landed assets, all except one of the 11 women are agricultural wage labourers. Generally, they are landless with limited cattle resources. Four households have small pieces of cultivated land that they lease out, which adds a significant income of Rs 800-1,000 per crop per bigha (a variable measure of land area, about a third of an acre) to the household’s overall earnings. The landowning households are relatively better-off than those that are entirely landless. One woman does petty trading of vegetables in the nearby Burdwan town.
Some women have lived on the char for 10 to 15 years, whereas others are relatively new to the char. Although they are illiterate, their children’s education is a high priority for them. However, in most cases they cannot continue their children’s education beyond the primary level because of acute poverty. Women with grown-up children usually encourage them to earn money to supplement the household income. The situation is slightly easier when a woman has an older son who is able to fulfil the income-generating role of an adult male member in the household. This son gradually takes over as the head of the household as the earning capacity of the woman diminishes.

LIVELIHOODS IN POVERTY

Women household heads are engaged in low-paid, casual jobs that unfortunately yield uncertain incomes. With little or no formal support from the state, the women are forced to devise innovative ways and means to stay alive under the hostile circumstances. They work from dawn to dusk without rest as they are the only income-earners of their households. All the domestic chores of the household are considered the responsibility of the women in addition to other physical work, making them doubly burdened. In addition to this enormous physical strain, they have to put up with a high level of mental stress because of their perennial anxiety to meet the bare minimum needs of their families. They are marginal not only to the charland society at large, but also inside the households sometimes. It is very easy to exploit their labour at a low wage as they are forced to take loans or advance payments from farmers to cope with the lean season crises. They are rarely invited to village meetings, which are mostly organised with the male members of each household. Inside the households, they usually take decisions. However, the situation changes for the women heads with grown-up sons who take over the responsibility of decision-making for the household as soon as they begin to earn.

Agricultural wage labour is the main livelihood activity of the women-headed households in the charlands. They have developed the skills necessary for all sorts of farm work at par with men, and the wage rates are the same (Rs 50 per day in 2004). Even 10 to 15-year-old girls from these households work as labourers, and get the same wages during the period of
potato harvesting in February–March, when there is a huge demand for labour. However, the nature of the jobs offered is gender-coded, thus restricting the scope of work as well as shrinking the household income. For example, women as a result do not till the land with animal-driven ploughs, or carry bundles of crops from the fields to courtyards.

Job opportunities for agricultural labour are seasonal, as tracts of land remain fallow in the summer (April to June). Double cropping is practised all over the charland, whereas multiple cropping is limited to only 26 per cent of the farms. The sandy soils of the char have a high water requirement. Therefore, only a section of farmers who have shallow and submersible pumps can tap the groundwater and produce multiple crops. During the kharif or monsoon season (July to October, elsewhere the main cropping season), poorer farmers leave their lands fallow as they lack the capital to organise their own minor irrigation. In fact, the main cropping season in the char is the dry season in winter and early summer (October to March), when temperatures are lower. During this time a number of vegetable crops, such as brinjal (eggplant), cauliflower, cabbage, carrot, pea, spinach and mustard, are produced.

The seasonality of agricultural activity also arises out of the fear of crop damage due to flooding. Floods are a recurrent natural hazard that always accompanies life in the charlands. It is to cope with the risk of losing crops due to inundation that lowland farmers usually keep their lands fallow in the rainy season. In winter, in case of rains in the upper catchments areas, the river may fill up with water from the upstream reservoirs. This sudden increase in water level ruins the winter vegetables cultivated on the lands recovered from the abandoned river channels. Coping with seasonal employment is not as easy for women as it is for male agricultural labourers. Men have a diversified basket of wage labour to choose from, whereas all the alternatives are not always open to women. Men can also easily switch over to other off-farm seasonal labouring activities available locally outside the charland. The women are at a disadvantage as they cannot take up such opportunities, because apart from being solely responsible for earning from outside the home, they also have to undertake domestic chores within their homes. Lean seasons, therefore, are harder for women than men.

The chief strategies adopted by women to cope with the crises of the lean season comprise fishing in the river, growing vegetables for household
subsistence in the courtyard, and shared livestock rearing and selling livestock resources, especially poultry and goats. They are also dependent on the collection of subsistence resources from common property. Requesting errand jobs on farms in exchange for only rice, without a wage, is also commonly practised. The informal loans taken from male farmers are repaid with labour during the cropping season. In case of the repayment of a prior loan, the women are usually exploited, either in the wage rate paid, or in the number of free job hours for repayment.

The collection of fuel and fodder, mostly from the fallow areas of the charland, is another time-consuming livelihood activity. Households possessing cattle usually prepare a special dung cake for fuel, which comprises a coat of cowdung around jute straw. The poorer households without any cattle have to depend entirely on wood, catkin grasses, crop residues, dried weeds and bush, rice bran, etc., for fuel throughout the year. The dried leaves and branches of trees are also used as fuel. However, women use the branches of trees from their courtyards only in times of severe fuel crisis, such as in the rainy season, when they have no other sources or stock of fuel. Fuel wood or jute straw sometimes serve as supplementary fuels.

Women who own small pieces of cultivable land usually lease these out for cash. Petty trading of vegetables is also free from lean season crises of livelihood, but entails more skill and initiative. Dashania Mahato is the only woman who has taken up such trading, but her economic status is better than that of others. In her words:

My husband passed away, leaving behind three children. I started petty trading then. I work for 365 day in a year. I do not have to depend on others. I have married off two daughters on my own. My son goes to school. I do not allow him to work to help me. I am looking forward to the future; when my son will grow up and start earning, I will give up this hard work.

Women’s livelihood burdens and hardships increase during the monsoonal flow of the river. The level of the river rises steadily during the rainy season, although major floods have not taken place (except in 1978 and 1998) due to the construction of the DVC dams upstream. However, the sudden release of water from reservoirs do cause short-term flooding and inundates the chars. The loss of household essentials, the increased chore of bringing drinking water from distant areas,
rebuilding houses, etc., add to the hardship of women’s lives. It has been
noted that floods undermine some of the women’s well-being because of
their dependence on economic activities linked to their homes (Khondker
1996), and the losses of harvest and livestock make livelihood difficult
for women-headed households that depend on cattle and chicken for
their cash income (Baden et al. 1994).

STRESSES AND BURDENS

Both physical and mental stresses are usually very high for the women
who are heads of their households. Our conversations with the women were
often interrupted by their deep sighs: long working days, short lunch breaks,
lack of rest, excessive work and poor nutrition characterise their lives.
Vickery (1977) noted that the ‘double day’ economic burden makes all
women-headed households time poor, lacking in leisure time (Rosenhouse
1989), and causing an intergenerational transmission of disadvantages
through nutrition deficiency, illiteracy and the fact of the children having
to labour (Buvinic and Gupta 1997). All these characteristics of women-
headed households are notable in the charland areas. Kakali Sarkar nar-
rated the time stress:

I work from dawn to dusk without rest and leisure. Nobody is there in the
home to share my domestic duties. Night is the only time for rest. For
that reason I dislike summer nights. Winter nights are most welcome to
me because of their longer duration. Longer winter nights offer me longer
period of rest from my heavy physical burden.

Similar sentiments were expressed by other women heads, who are tired
of heavy manual labour to earn their household’s livelihoods, during our
conversations with them.

Poverty takes its toll on the health of women, who often do not get the
nutrition sufficient to compensate for the heavy physical labour done by
them. The nutritional deficiency makes their children physically weak
and unwilling to take up physical labour. Sundaria Mahato said: ‘My
18-year-old son cannot do the jobs on the farm that I can do easily. He is
weak and as a result becomes tired even with a little work. He does not
want to work as an agricultural labourer as it requires strength. Children of women-headed households not only suffer from malnutrition, but are also often illiterate or have low levels of education. It is not easy to support the education of a child; in Dipa Sarkar’s words:

My daughter is going to the village primary school. But, I cannot purchase text books, cannot afford to arrange the private tuition for her. How will she become educated? She has to look after the house when I am at work. Getting education is not possible for the children of poor people like us.

The relatively younger women with young children are usually burdened with more domestic responsibilities. If there is no other female member in the family, infants are often taken to the place of work and laid on the bund of the field. Tukurani Ray, the only de facto household head on the Gaitanpur char, started working in the fields just five days after the birth of her fourth daughter:

My husband lives in Bangladesh with his first wife. He occasionally visits us. When I gave birth to my youngest daughter, I had nobody to look after me except my little daughters. We did not have sufficient food for about a month. Soon, I had to begin working without taking time to recover my health. This lack of rest left me weaker. Nowadays I feel exhausted soon after working in the field under the high sun.

Her expression proves that in spite of her husband’s existence (although his visits are very rare), her livelihood stresses are no less than those of the widowed or deserted women heads.

The domestic burdens of the charland women are increasing as the availability of fuel material is becoming scarcer with the expansion of agricultural land. Several women-headed households use local material such as dried-up bushes and cowdung for fuel. In the early years of settling on the Gaitanpur char in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was no dearth of subsistence resources as the charlands were sparsely populated. However, the common property resources have been shrinking continuously as more people have settled on the chars. The demands for fuel and fodder are increasing at rates faster than the increase in the population, leading to increased work burdens for women, particularly the household heads.
SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR LIVELIHOODS

Monetary and physical support from either kin or neighbours play an immense role in the livelihoods of women-headed households on char-lands. The survival of poor women in such extremely vulnerable areas is possible because of this support and help. Help from kin often serves to meet daily livelihood needs; the fresh catch of fish from the river and cooked food are also supplied from the parents’ house. In the lean season, the period of crisis, the help of others is frequently needed. Such help may take the form of borrowing rice or foodstuff, or cash. Being women, access to private loans from local moneylenders is restricted and hence during emergencies, they approach male neighbours to act as guarantors.

A significant level of crisis occurs when they have to marry off their daughters, which requires a large amount of money, to arrange the dowry and to feed neighbours. Dipa Sarkar points out that having relatives nearby helps: ‘My father and my brother arranged my daughter’s marriage. I had not to think of it at all’. Community networks play important roles at such times. The village headman, who is also a local panchayat member and political party leader, usually makes it a community responsibility to raise funds for such occasions. The community also helps in kind with foodstuffs and goods, as well as by the informal loans given on request by the relatively better-off farmers. Tulsi Barui recollected her daughter’s wedding:

When I arranged my elder daughter’s marriage, I asked the community leader for help. He organized a meeting in which he asked for help from individual household heads. They promised to extend their help in the form of either cash or kind, which was listed in that meeting and they kept their word. The rest of the money I arranged through a loan from my employer, a farmer. I paid off this loan by working for him over the years. However, without the help of my community I could never have arranged my daughter’s marriage.

Contingent situations that occur during floods are also overcome with community help. Men help by carrying the movable assets away to safer areas on the embankment. Sometimes mud huts are washed away by flood waters. Women are then forced to take shelter in the open verandas of other people’s houses. Again, the huts are constructed quickly with the
help of community members after the floodwater recedes. Most of the women we spoke to confessed that their survival is ensured by the human capital generated out of social relations. This is not uncommon for poor people in difficult situations, but in chars the value of these networks cannot be overstated. The lack of citizenship and the illegality of existence make such intra-community social capital essential for survival.

CITIZENSHIP AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Being illegal migrants, the char women have neither legal rights over local resources, nor do they have access to the state support system for poor women, such as the schemes for poverty alleviation and widow's pension. Many of these women came to the chars with their husbands or settled with the help of their kin already living on this char. The women have diverse perceptions regarding their lack of citizenship. Some of them, like Dipa Sarkar, are not particularly concerned about their non-citizen identity. According to her:

We are living on this charland far away from the mainland society because of the lack of citizenship. We are poor, illiterate people who can earn only by the manual labour. Doing manual work as a labourer does not require any citizenship document. Therefore, I do not want to spend money and time in collecting that piece of paper.

However, many men pursue the local channels and are successful in obtaining valid papers for themselves and their families. Unlike men, women heads of households have difficulty accessing the informal networks through which citizenship documents are obtained. Sumita Sarkar told us bitterly: ‘We have neither money nor any adult male in the household to do the rounds for obtaining Indian citizenship documents. Like me, my children will also remain non-citizens’.

Another group of women is eager to obtain Indian citizenship documents, but as women they cannot access the informal networks necessary for this. They are aware of the problems related to their non-citizen status. Tulsi Barui made it clear:

We do not get any economic support from the local panchayat as we are non-entities to the Indian Government. If we cannot arrange our legal
citizenship then we cannot move out of this char. We are stuck here; my children will also suffer due to this. They will not get any job in India even if they get some education.

CONCLUSION

Living in the chars means a relentless struggle for the women household heads. However, because of their poverty and, in some cases, their legal identity as non-citizens, they have no option of getting away from this highly vulnerable land. They bear the double burden of work to sustain their families, but that work often remains unacknowledged. However, not all of them can be put in a single and universal category according to their social and economic status. A section of them were uprooted from Bihar and have migrated to the Damodar charlands due to extreme poverty. The other section comprises lower-caste Hindus who have illegally migrated from Bangladesh. The levels of poverty of these women do not have a strong correlation with their legal citizenship. Women of both origins work hard from dawn to dusk to meet the minimum livelihood needs of their households. However, marked differences are observed in their perceptions of the insecurity of life in the charlands. Whereas they consider themselves distinctly better-off here than they were in their original homes because of the religious persecution they had faced, the Bangladeshi women suffer from insecurity as they have neither a voter’s identity card nor a ration card to establish their claims on the charlands. They are more concerned about the homelessness caused by floods and river bank erosion. Their inability to go to the mainland outside this char to obtain a better and more secure livelihood limits their livelihood options drastically.

Women heads of households have different levels of poverty, individual problems and situation-specific livelihood strategies, which are in no way identical to each other. Within women-headed households, the level of poverty varies with the number of earning members in the household. For example, women with grown-up children have lower livelihood stresses than younger women with young children. Moreover, in the charland environment, poverty is not solely associated with women-headed households. In our field survey of the charlands of the Damodar
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River, we had come across a number of male-headed households that are also poor and vulnerable. The lack of citizenship documents adds a critical dimension to these stresses by reducing the options open to them for earning a secure livelihood. The women heads of households have a knowledge of struggle and means of survival that stems from their experience of living in poverty, from working out solutions to the daily problems of life in a specific and difficult location, and from their cultural traditions. In the charlands of the Damodar, they cope with a hostile environment of floods and river erosion by drawing upon their experience of having lived in more or less similar environmental conditions elsewhere in India or in Bangladesh.

In conclusion, we note the relationship between the cross-border movements of people in eastern India, the question of securing livelihoods and gender, as outlined in this small case study. The location of the community forms a unique setting—a vulnerable environment with just about enough resources to somehow scrape a living—providing an important geographical element in understanding the livelihood strategies of women-headed households. Here, we see the importance of locality, the key characteristic of place, playing a major role in influencing the activities of two sets of translocal women. The focus of our attention is on how, in the shifting sands of the chars, they build a sense of community in securing livelihoods for themselves and their families. The chars are not deterritorialised in the process, as in those locations, despite the fact that neither locality nor community is rooted in ‘natural’ identities, women-headed households, through their livelihood strategies, are creating new forms of economic citizenship enmeshed in a complex interplay of culture and power.

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