

Original Paper

Gender, Norms, and Informal Labor: Negotiating Daily Wage Inequality in Rural Bangladesh

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Received: September 13, 2026 Accepted: September 25, 2026 Online Published: October 10, 2026
doi:10.22158/rem.v11n2p34 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/rem.v11n2p34>

Abstract

Gender-based wage inequality remains persistent in informal labor markets, where wage-setting is shaped by customary practices, social norms, and unequal bargaining power rather than transparent standards. This qualitative study examines how wage inequality is experienced, justified, and reproduced among women daily laborers in Nageswari Upazila, Kurigram District, Bangladesh. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with women daily laborers, 30 with men, four focus group discussions (32 participants), and eight key informant interviews, thematic analysis identified five interconnected mechanisms: gendered wage-setting, occupational segregation, contractor-controlled recruitment, unequal bargaining power, and normalization of gender norms. Participants reported daily wage differences of BDT 100–250 between women and men performing comparable work. The evidence indicates these gaps stem from gender norms, limited mobility, unpaid care, contractor dependence, and weak governance rather than productivity differences alone. Addressing equal remuneration requires going beyond formal legal commitments to reform informal recruitment, occupational access, collective bargaining, and local labor governance.

Keywords

gender wage inequality, informal labor market, women daily laborers, rural employment, equal remuneration, Bangladesh, Kurigram, labor rights, gender norms

1. Introduction

Gender-based wage inequality is a persistent global labor-market and development problem, particularly where women are concentrated in informal, low-paid, insecure and weakly regulated employment. The issue extends beyond differences in average earnings: it concerns how work is valued, how employment is allocated, who controls access to jobs, and whether workers can exercise meaningful bargaining power. The International Labour Organization estimates that informal employment accounted for nearly 58% of

global employment in 2024, with women disproportionately represented in occupations and places of work exposed to informality. Informality therefore intersects with gender inequality by limiting contractual protection, social security, wage transparency and effective access to grievance mechanisms (ILO, 2024, 2026). The Global Wage Report 2024–25 further shows that workers in informal employment are concentrated toward the lower end of labor-income distributions and that gender and informality can reinforce one another in producing unequal economic outcomes. (ILO, 2024).

The South Asian context makes this relationship particularly important. South Asia combines high levels of informality, persistent gender segmentation of employment, unequal care responsibilities and relatively weak access to formal wage employment for women. Recent ILO evidence places informal employment at about 87% of total employment in South Asia (ILO, 2026), while the World Bank reports that vulnerable employment remains substantially higher among women than men (World Bank, 2026). Women are also more likely to face mobility constraints, unpaid household care responsibilities and social norms that shape the type and location of work considered acceptable for them. Comparative evidence from South Asia shows that gender wage gaps are associated with occupational segregation, informality and institutional constraints rather than education or productivity differences alone (World Bank, 2024; Poupakis et al., 2024). The regional evidence therefore suggests that closing wage gaps requires attention to the structure and governance of informal labour markets, not only to women's individual skills or human capital.

Bangladesh reflects these wider regional dynamics while presenting a distinctive rural labor-market setting. Quantitative studies have repeatedly identified significant gender wage disparities. Ahmed and Maitra (2010), using Labour Force Survey data, found lower female wages in both rural and urban labour markets and identified a substantial unexplained component associated with discrimination. Rahman and Al-Hasan (2019) found that women earned, on average, 12.2% less than men and that the female wage penalty was particularly pronounced at lower points of the wage distribution, where informal employment played an important role. World Bank data also show that in 2025 women were less likely than men to be wage and salaried workers in Bangladesh (34.7% versus 41.2% of employment) (World Bank, 2026). These national patterns indicate that gender inequality is closely connected with the organization of employment itself.

Yet national wage-gap estimates cannot fully explain how unequal remuneration is produced in everyday rural workplaces. In highly informal settings, wages may be agreed verbally, recruitment may be controlled by local intermediaries, occupational roles may be strongly gendered, and workers may have little realistic ability to refuse an offered rate. Rural women may therefore experience wage discrimination through a chain of mutually reinforcing processes: restricted entry to higher-valued tasks, contractor-mediated recruitment, limited mobility, unpaid care responsibilities, weak information about prevailing rates, and social acceptance of unequal remuneration. These processes are especially consequential in economically vulnerable areas where households depend on same-day earnings and where environmental shocks can intensify competition for casual work.

This study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences and labor-market relationships of women and men daily laborers in Nageswari Upazila, Kurigram District, Bangladesh. The study asks how wages are determined, (i) how occupational and recruitment practices shape gender differences, (ii) how bargaining power is distributed, and (iii) how community norms sustain unequal remuneration. By combining workers' accounts with perspectives from employers, labor contractors, community leaders and local stakeholders, the study moves from the measurement of a wage gap to an analysis of the mechanisms that reproduce it. Its contribution is therefore both empirical and policy-oriented: it shows how global principles of equal remuneration encounter the realities of rural informal employment and identifies institutional entry points for reducing the gap.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Gender Wage Inequality as a Structural Problem*

Economic explanations of wage differences have traditionally emphasized education, experience, skills, and productivity. Human Capital Theory remains useful for understanding some earnings variation, but a substantial literature shows that observed characteristics do not fully explain gender wage gaps. In Bangladesh, Ahmed and Maitra (2010) found that a significant part of the female-male wage differential remained associated with discrimination after accounting for productive characteristics. Ahmed and McGillivray (2015) similarly examined the relationship between human capital, discrimination, and the gender wage gap. Rahman and Al-Hasan (2019) found that the wage penalty for women varies across the distribution and is particularly important in informal employment.

Contemporary scholarship therefore treats gender wage inequality as both an economic and institutional phenomenon. Occupational segregation, unequal bargaining power, social norms, access to productive resources, and unpaid care responsibilities influence the value assigned to women's work (Jayachandran, 2021; ILO, 2024). The issue is especially acute in informal work because the absence of standardized employment relationships increases the scope for discretionary wage-setting.

2.2 *Informality and Gendered Labor Markets*

Informal employment is characterized by weak contractual protection and limited access to social protection and institutional remedies. The ILO estimates that around two billion people were in informal employment globally in 2024, demonstrating that informality is not a marginal labor-market phenomenon (ILO, 2024). Women are disproportionately concentrated in many low-paid and insecure forms of informal work, including agriculture, domestic work, home-based production, petty trade, and casual labor. Informality can therefore reproduce gender inequality by limiting workers' capacity to demand fair treatment and by allowing customary practices to substitute for transparent wage-setting.

In Bangladesh, agricultural and rural casual labor is especially relevant. Women commonly undertake transplanting, weeding, harvesting, processing, and other tasks, while men are more likely to have access to mechanized operations, transport, irrigation, and supervisory work. Such occupational segregation matters because tasks traditionally performed by women may be socially undervalued even when they

are essential to production. Recent longitudinal evidence indicates that rural diversification can reduce gender wage gaps, suggesting that expanding women's access to non-farm and higher-value opportunities is an important part of the solution (Al Abbasi et al., 2025).

2.3 Social Norms, Bargaining Power and

Social norms influence which occupations are considered appropriate for women, whether women can travel for work, and how employers interpret men's and women's economic roles. Jayachandran (2021) demonstrates that gender norms can constrain women's employment decisions even when economic opportunities exist. Feminist political economy further emphasizes that paid work cannot be separated from unpaid care work: childcare, domestic responsibilities, and expectations about women's family roles can reduce mobility and bargaining power (Elson, 2017; Kabeer, 2021).

Informal labor contractors add another layer. Contractors can facilitate access to employment but may also control job allocation, wage information, and workers' access to employers. In settings where workers depend on contractors for daily employment, the ability to reject a low wage may be limited. The present study treats contractors not merely as intermediaries but as actors within the institutional process through which wage norms are maintained.

2.4 Research Gap

Three gaps motivate this study. First, existing Bangladesh research provides strong quantitative evidence of gender wage differentials but less evidence on the everyday mechanisms of wage-setting. Second, scholarships have disproportionately examined formal or urban employment, particularly manufacturing, while rural informal workers remain less visible. Third, workers' accounts are often studied without equal attention to employers, contractors, and community actors who influence wage determination. This study addresses these gaps through a focused qualitative examination of a rural informal labor market in Kurigram.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis combines three perspectives. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974) provides the conventional productivity-based explanation: differences in education, skills, or experience can affect earnings. Labor Market Segmentation Theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971) shifts attention to institutional structures that divide workers into segments with different wages, security, and opportunities. Feminist Political Economy highlights gendered power relations, unpaid care work, social norms, and the social valuation of women's labor (Elson, 2017; Kabeer, 2021).

Together, these perspectives suggest that wage inequality in rural informal employment can emerge even when workers have similar skills and perform comparable tasks. The study therefore uses five linked analytical mechanisms: (1) patriarchal gender norms; (2) occupational segregation; (3) contractor-controlled recruitment; (4) unequal bargaining power associated with mobility, care responsibilities and economic dependence; and (5) weak labor governance. These mechanisms are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than independent causes.

Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework. Source: Author, drawing on Becker (1964), Doeringer and Piore (1971), Elson (2017), Kabeer (2021), and the Bangladesh wage-gap literature.

Structural drivers	Labor-market processes	Observed outcomes
Gender norms; breadwinner expectations	Gendered valuation of work	Lower wages for women
Occupational segregation	Unequal task allocation	Restricted access to higher-paid work
Informal recruitment	Contractor-controlled hiring and wage information	Dependence and weak bargaining
Domestic care responsibilities	Reduced mobility and employment choices	Acceptance of low wages
Weak governance	Informal wage-setting with limited oversight	Persistent inequality

4. Study Area: Nageswari Upazila (Note 1), Kurigram District

4.1 Why the Study Area Is Analytically Important

Nageswari provides a useful case for understanding how environmental vulnerability, rural poverty, informality and gender norms interact. A worker who depends on daily hiring has limited protection against fluctuations in demand; a woman who also carries primary responsibility for unpaid household and care work has fewer opportunities to travel or search for alternative employers; and a contractor who controls access to work can become an important gatekeeper. The study area therefore allows gender wage inequality to be examined as a labor-market process rather than as an isolated difference in individual earnings. The findings should not be treated as statistically representative of all rural Bangladesh, but as an in-depth account of mechanisms operating in a vulnerable rural informal labor market.

4.2 Local Informal Labor-market Dynamics

The local labor market operates largely through informal arrangements. Recruitment commonly takes place through verbal agreements and interpersonal networks, including labor contractors or Sardars who connect employers with workers and may influence job allocation and wage information. The absence of written contracts and standardized wage-setting mechanisms creates room for customary rates and

discretionary decisions. The market is also segmented by gender. Men are more frequently associated with construction, machinery, transport, land preparation, irrigation and other roles socially defined as technically or physically demanding, while women are concentrated in agricultural and post-harvest activities such as transplanting, weeding, harvesting, grain drying, cleaning and processing. This segmentation is important because it affects both the type of work available and the value attached to that work.

4.3 Socio-economic Characteristics and Livelihood Dependence

The study area was purposively selected because of its combination of rural poverty, livelihood vulnerability and dependence on informal employment. Agriculture is central to household livelihoods, but many households supplement or replace agricultural income through construction, earthwork, transport, brickfield activities, local mills and other casual manual work. For asset-poor and landless households, daily labor is not simply an employment category; it is an immediate livelihood strategy. This creates a strong dependence on the availability of same-day work and reduces the practical capacity of workers to wait for better employment or negotiate from a position of strength.

4.4 Geographic and Ecological Setting

Nageswari Upazila is located in Kurigram District in northern Bangladesh, approximately 400 km from the national capital, Dhaka. The area is predominantly rural, with livelihoods closely connected to agriculture, agricultural wage labor, small-scale trading and other forms of informal economic activity. Its geographic position within the wider riverine landscape of northern Bangladesh makes local livelihoods particularly sensitive to seasonal variations in rainfall, river conditions and flooding. Recurrent floods, riverbank erosion and water-related disruptions can affect agricultural production, transport, housing and access to local markets, thereby creating repeated pressures on household income and employment.

These ecological conditions are particularly important for households with limited land, savings and productive assets. Flooding or river erosion can result not only in the temporary loss of agricultural work but also in damage to homes, livestock, crops and other livelihood assets. Poor and land-constrained households may therefore have limited capacity to absorb short-term economic shocks and may respond by increasing their reliance on casual wage labor, borrowing, migration or other insecure livelihood strategies. Such vulnerability can create strong dependence on locally available, low-paid and irregular employment.

Seasonality is another important feature of the local labor market. Agricultural activities generate demand for labor during periods of land preparation, planting, weeding and harvesting, but employment opportunities can decline substantially between agricultural seasons. In northern Bangladesh, this seasonal employment stress has historically been associated with the concept of *Monga* (Note 2), referring to periods of recurring food and income insecurity, particularly among land-poor rural households. Although the nature and intensity of seasonal deprivation have changed over time, seasonal

fluctuations in employment and household income remain relevant to understanding rural labour-market vulnerability.

For women, these environmental and seasonal pressures may interact with existing gendered constraints. Women from poorer households may enter casual agricultural, domestic, construction-related or other informal work when household income falls, but their employment choices can be restricted by unpaid care responsibilities, mobility limitations, social expectations and limited access to better-paid occupations. Consequently, environmental and seasonal vulnerability does not operate independently of gender; it can reinforce households' dependence on informal employment while simultaneously limiting women's bargaining power and access to better-paid work. Nageswari therefore provides a relevant setting for examining how environmental vulnerability, rural informality and gender relations intersect in shaping the wages and employment experiences of daily laborers.

5. Methodology

The study used an interpretivist qualitative design to understand how participants make sense of wage inequality in everyday labor-market interactions. Nageswari Upazila in Kurigram District was purposively selected because of its dependence on rural casual labor and its exposure to poverty, seasonal unemployment, flooding, and river erosion. Participants were selected purposively to capture variation in gender, occupation, work experience, household responsibilities, and labor-market role.

Table 1. Participant Composition and Data Sources

Participant group	Number
Women daily laborers (in-depth interviews)	30
Men daily laborers (in-depth interviews)	30
Focus group discussions	4 groups; 32 participants
Key informants	8
Total participants	98

Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and key informant interviews. Interviews explored work histories, wage-setting, recruitment, bargaining, discrimination, household responsibilities, and coping strategies. Data were transcribed, translated where necessary, and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach. Triangulation across participant groups was used to compare accounts. Ethical safeguards included informed consent,

confidentiality, and presentation of findings without identifying vulnerable participants. The study is not statistically generalizable; its purpose is analytical depth and contextual explanation.

6. Results

The analysis identified five interrelated mechanisms through which gender wage inequality is produced and sustained. The central finding is that unequal remuneration is not experienced as a single discriminatory event. Instead, it is embedded across recruitment, job allocation, wage negotiation, and community expectations. Participants repeatedly described situations in which women and men worked similar hours or performed comparable tasks but received different rates.

Table 2. Major Empirical Themes and Core Findings

Theme	Core empirical finding
Gendered wage-setting	Women commonly reported BDT 100–250 less per day than men for comparable work.
Occupational segregation	Women concentrated in lower-valued agricultural and manual tasks.
Contractor-controlled recruitment	Contractors controlled access to work, task allocation and wage offers.
Unequal bargaining power	Care responsibilities, mobility constraints and income insecurity limited negotiation.
Social normalization	Discriminatory rates were widely described as customary or unavoidable.

6.1 Gendered Wage-setting Practices

The most consistent finding was a gendered wage structure. Women reported receiving approximately BDT 100–250 less per day than male workers despite similar working hours and, in some cases, the same field or worksite. Participants described the difference as customary rather than calculated from productivity. One woman explained: *“We start work together at sunrise and finish together in the afternoon. We carry out the same work in the same field, but when wages are paid, the men always receive more”*. Another said: *“The difference is painful because we know we have worked just as hard. We feel that our work is worth less simply because we are women”*.

The accounts of men and employers help explain why the practice persists. A male laborer stated: *“This has always been the system. Men receive more because everyone believes they have greater responsibilities”*. An employer similarly said: *“Women work hard, but men are expected to provide for their families. That is why the wage is different.”* These accounts suggest that wage-setting is influenced by the male-breadwinner norm rather than an objective assessment of the work performed.

The qualitative evidence does not establish a statistically representative wage gap, and the reported BDT 100–250 difference should therefore be read as an observed range within participants’ accounts. Its analytical significance lies in the repeated explanation that gender, rather than measured productivity, was used to justify different rates. This complements national quantitative evidence documenting gender wage penalties in Bangladesh (Ahmed & Maitra, 2010; Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019).

6.2 Occupational Segregation and the Undervaluation of Women’S Work

Women were concentrated in transplanting, weeding, harvesting, grain drying, post-harvest processing, and cleaning agricultural products. Men more frequently accessed land preparation, irrigation, machinery operation, transportation, construction, and supervisory work. Employers often explained this pattern through assumptions about physical strength or technical skill. Women, however, emphasized that their own work involved long hours and intense physical effort.

One participant observed: *“People think our work is easier because we work sitting or bending in the field. But we spend the same number of hours under the hot sun and become just as exhausted”*). Another added: *“Our work is difficult, but because women usually do it, people think it deserves less pay”*. The pattern is consistent with labor-market segmentation: women’s concentration in particular tasks both reflects and reinforces lower valuation of those tasks. Recent Bangladesh evidence that rural diversification can reduce the wage gap further suggests that occupational access is an important policy lever (Al Abbasi et al., 2025).

6.3 Contractors as Gatekeepers

A distinctive finding was the central role of labor contractors, locally described as Sardars. Women commonly reported that they did not negotiate directly with landowners. Instead, contractors decided who would be called for work, what tasks workers would undertake, and what wage would be offered. One woman stated: *“If the contractor does not call us, we have no work that day. We cannot approach the landowner ourselves.”* Another explained: *“Whatever wage the contractor offers, we usually have to accept because there are many others waiting for work”*.

Contractors did not necessarily describe themselves as discriminating. One contractor said: *“We simply follow the rates that everyone in the village accepts. If we suddenly paid women the same as men, employers would not agree.”* This statement is important because it shows how unequal practices can be reproduced without any single actor explicitly claiming responsibility. The contractor mediates between employer demand and worker supply while transmitting a customary wage structure. In this sense, the contractor becomes an institutional gatekeeper within an otherwise informal market.

6.4 Unequal Bargaining Power and the Role of Unpaid Care

Women described accepting lower wages because refusing work could immediately reduce household income. Childcare, domestic work, limited transportation, and restrictions on mobility reduced their ability to search for alternative employment. *“If I refuse today’s work, my children may not have food tomorrow. I cannot take that risk,”* one participant explained. Another said: *“Men can travel to another village if wages are low. We usually cannot because we have children and household work.”*

Male workers recognized this difference in mobility. One stated: *“If wages are too low, we can leave and work elsewhere. Women have fewer options.”* The implication is that bargaining power is relational. A worker may formally be free to reject a wage, but that freedom has limited practical value when alternative employment is inaccessible, and household survival depends on same-day earnings. The findings therefore connect labor-market inequality with unpaid care work and household gender relations, consistent with feminist political economy (Elson, 2017; Kabeer, 2021).

6.5 Social Normalization and Collective Reproduction of Inequality

The fifth and most pervasive mechanism was normalization. Women, men, employers, and community leaders often described unequal wages as natural, longstanding, or unavoidable. A community leader stated: *“This system has existed for generations. Most people do not see it as discrimination.”* A woman participant reflected: *“We know the wage is unfair, but this is how things have always been. We have learned to accept it.”*

Normalization matters because it reduces the likelihood that unequal treatment will be challenged. The male-breadwinner idea gives employers a socially acceptable justification for paying men more, while women’s own acceptance may reflect repeated exposure to limited alternatives. This is consistent with research showing that social norms can constrain women’s employment and economic agency even when formal opportunities are available (Jayachandran, 2021). In the study setting, norms therefore operate as an informal institution that supports the other mechanisms identified by the research.

6.6 Interconnected Effects and Synthesis

The five themes form a reinforcing cycle. Gender norms shape perceptions of appropriate work and men’s economic value; occupational segregation places women in lower-valued tasks; contractors control access to employment; care responsibilities and income insecurity weaken women’s bargaining power; and weak oversight leaves customary rates largely uncontested. The resulting wage inequality then becomes further evidence for the belief that women’s work is worth less. This circular process helps explain why formal commitments to equality do not automatically change rural informal labor markets.

Table 3. Interconnected Mechanisms Producing Gender-Based Wage Inequality

Structural condition	Immediate mechanism	Outcome
Gender norms	Men's work valued more highly	Gendered wage rates
Segregation	Women concentrated in lower-paid tasks	Lower earning opportunities
Contractor mediation	Access and wage offers controlled by intermediaries	Reduced worker autonomy
Care and mobility constraints	Fewer alternatives to low-paid work	Weak bargaining power
Limited oversight	Customary wage-setting continues	Persistent inequality

7. Discussion

The findings place the study within a broader global pattern in which gender inequality and labor-market informality reinforce each other. Global evidence shows that informal workers are concentrated toward the lower end of labor-income distributions, while women are disproportionately present in vulnerable forms of work. The Nageswari (study area) evidence demonstrates the micro-level mechanisms behind that pattern: women are not simply receiving lower earnings because they work in informal employment; the organization of informal employment itself can create and reproduce the wage penalty.

The South Asian comparison is especially relevant. High informality, occupational segmentation, unpaid care responsibilities and limited access to formal wage employment create a regional environment in which legal equality may coexist with unequal labor-market outcomes. The study's findings are consistent with recent ILO evidence that around 87% of employment in South Asia is informal and with World Bank evidence showing substantially higher vulnerable employment among women. The Nageswari case adds that the informal economy must be governed not only through formal labor inspection but also through local institutions capable of reaching workers who are recruited through social networks and verbal agreements.

For Bangladesh, the findings complement quantitative evidence rather than contradicting it. Ahmed and Maitra (2010) and Rahman and Al-Hasan (2019) establish that the gender wage gap has a substantial discriminatory and informal-employment component. The present study explains how such a gap can be generated in practice: customary rates, gendered task assignment, contractor gatekeeping, limited

mobility and social norms operate together. The findings therefore support a shift from asking only “how large is the wage gap?” to asking “where in the employment process is the gap produced, who has the power to reproduce it, and what institution can intervene at that point?”

The findings also illustrate why legal equality alone is insufficient to eliminate gender-based wage inequality. Bangladesh’s Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds including sex, while affirming women’s equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972, Arts. 27–28). At the international level, Bangladesh ratified the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) in 1998, which requires the promotion and application of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value (ILO, 1951; ILO, 2026).

Yet the reach of formal institutions is weaker where employment is casual, undocumented, and mediated through local networks. The gap between rights on paper and rights in practice is therefore an institutional problem. Extending labor governance to informal workers requires mechanisms that are accessible at community level rather than relying only on conventional workplace inspection.

Finally, the normalization of unequal wages indicates that policy must address social expectations. If employers, contractors, male workers, community leaders, and women themselves regard unequal rates as normal, a legal prohibition may have limited effect unless accompanied by information, collective organization, and dialogue. This aligns with Jayachandran’s (2021) argument that gender norms can be a central barrier to women’s employment. The study therefore supports a multi-level approach linking labor governance, economic opportunity, collective bargaining, and social norm change.

7.1 Policy Implications

The evidence points to five mutually reinforcing policy priorities.

- First, labor governance should reach rural informal employment through community-based monitoring, accessible complaint mechanisms, and collaboration among labor authorities, local government, worker organizations, and civil society.
- Second, informal labor contractors should be subject to appropriate registration, transparency, and accountability mechanisms, particularly regarding wage information and worker recruitment.
- Third, women need greater access to higher-value occupations, productive assets, skills, transport, markets, and non-agricultural employment. Fourth, women’s worker groups, cooperatives, and producer organizations can strengthen collective bargaining and access to labor-market information.
- Fifth, community-level interventions should challenge the assumption that men deserve higher pay simply because they are men, while childcare and social protection can reduce the economic pressure that forces women to accept low wages.

These interventions should be designed as a package rather than isolated measures. Expanding women’s skills without addressing mobility and recruitment constraints may have limited impact. Likewise, wage

monitoring without collective voice may leave women reluctant to challenge contractors. A more effective strategy is to connect rights awareness, collective organization, livelihood diversification, social protection, and accountable local labor governance.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how gender-based wage inequality is produced and sustained among women daily laborers in a rural informal labor market in Kurigram, Bangladesh. The evidence shows that unequal remuneration is embedded in everyday labor-market relationships rather than being explained primarily by differences in productivity. Five mechanisms are central: gendered wage-setting, occupational segregation, contractor-controlled recruitment, unequal bargaining power, and social normalization.

The study's main contribution is to make visible the institutional process behind a wage gap that quantitative studies have already documented. Women may enter paid employment and contribute substantially to agricultural production while remaining disadvantaged in the valuation of their work, access to higher-paid tasks, and capacity to negotiate. The problem is therefore not simply whether women work; it is under what conditions their work is valued and who has the power to determine those conditions.

For Bangladesh and comparable informal labor markets, equal remuneration requires a shift from formal commitments alone toward practical labor-market governance. Policy should address informal recruitment, women's occupational access, collective bargaining, mobility and care constraints, and discriminatory social norms. Future research should combine qualitative evidence with representative wage data across districts and sectors to test how widespread the mechanisms identified here are and how they vary across agricultural, construction, domestic, fisheries, brick-kiln, and other informal employment.

Declarations

- Ethics and consent: The study reports qualitative interviews and group discussions conducted with informed consent. Participants' identities are anonymized in the manuscript.
- Data availability: The qualitative data contain potentially identifying participant information and are not publicly deposited. Reasonable methodological queries may be directed to the corresponding author, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.
- Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.
- Funding: No external funding is reported for this study.
- Author contribution: The author conceived the study, collected and analyzed the data, and prepared the manuscript.

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Notes

Note 1. Nageswari Upazila: A predominantly rural administrative sub-district of Kurigram District in northern Bangladesh, characterized by agriculture, informal employment, seasonal flooding and riverbank erosion.

Note 2. Monga: A seasonal period of food and income insecurity historically experienced in northern Bangladesh, particularly among land-poor rural households during periods of limited agricultural employment.