



## “Zero Landlessness” declarations erase Bangladesh’s rural landless women and men’s right to access khas (public) land

### Background

Under the 1997 Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy, the government should distribute Bangladesh’s khas (public) land to landless people living in rural areas of the country, with an emphasis on distribution to women.<sup>i</sup> The Bangladesh Stand for Her Land (S4HL) Coalition views the distribution of khas land to rural women as a crucial pathway to their economic empowerment and a strong method to increase women’s ownership of agricultural land in a country where women rarely inherit land.

The government, however, has recently prioritized the distribution of khas land as small, non-agricultural plots for its housing project. This means that landless rural women and men who might have been granted around a tenth of an acre of khas land suitable for small agricultural enterprises, are now only granted enough land (0.025 acre) for a house, hardly keeping space for animals or a kitchen garden.

### Why are we advocating against claiming “zero landlessness”?

To justify this change in approach to khas land distribution, some the government officials started declaring certain upazilas (sub-districts) of the country as having “zero landless” people. By November 2023, the government had declared half of the country’s districts as free of landless people. However, evidence does not support the claim of zero landlessness. Both the Agricultural Census of 2019 and the S4HL baseline survey conducted in three districts in 2023 document the continued existence of landlessness in Bangladesh.

The S4HL Coalition of Bangladesh took immediate action to advocate against these “zero landlessness” declarations. **First**, it conducted research to determine the extent of landless people in S4HL project areas and the amount of available khas land in these areas.<sup>ii</sup> **Second**, it held a mass gathering of thousands of women and men in Dinajpur to promote the study findings and demonstrate the continued existence of landless persons. **Third**, it held a national seminar in Dhaka to discuss and advise policy makers on the important reasons to continue distribution of agricultural khas land.

The Coalition continues to advocate for the resumption of agricultural khas land distribution to rural women and men in Bangladesh. After this advocacy began, the government paused declaration of new “zero landless” areas for several months. Recently, however, it has resumed such declarations. Continued advocacy is needed.

## Study Findings

Landless women and men continue to live in rural areas. In the Coalition’s six village study areas in Dinajpur, Faridpur, and Patuakhali, residents and local CSO staff estimated that over 50% of residents were absolutely or functionally landless.<sup>iii</sup> Of women-headed households, they estimated that nearly two-thirds were absolutely or functionally landless. The 2019 Agricultural Census estimates the number of absolutely landless rural households at 7.84%. The 2023 S4HL baseline survey, conducted in five villages across three unions, found that about 5% of households are landless, ranging from 3-11% across unions.<sup>iv</sup> All sources demonstrate that there are, in fact, landless households in rural Bangladesh and that claims of “zero landlessness” are groundless.

Further, the Coalition’s study found that agricultural khas land exists that could be distributed to these landless rural women and men under the 1997 policy. While it is difficult to make an exact estimate, the researchers spoke to villagers, local civil society organization staff, and government officials to estimate the extent of khas land. They estimate that one-third of total agricultural and non-agricultural land is khas land. However, much of this land has been taken over and is being used and controlled by influential local people. What khas land the government continues to distribute, it distributes in very small plots (0.025 of an acre) for housing.<sup>v</sup>

Landless women and men working in agriculture live throughout rural Bangladesh

Agricultural khas land is available for distribution

Existing written government policies can be used to distribute agricultural khas land

## Mass Gathering

With the results of the study in hand, the S4HL Bangladesh Coalition organized a mass gathering on March 5, 2024, in Dinajpur. An estimated 2,500 people participated in the event, which featured national and grassroots speakers, signature gathering for solidarity, a peaceful march through the city, and cultural events. Coalition members, women, and CSOs from other parts of the country travelled to join the event, sparking interest among others to host similar engagements.





Above and previous page: photos from Mass Gathering in Dinajpur

## National Seminar

Following the mass gathering and to mark International Women’s Day, the Coalition held a national seminar on March 10, 2024, to discuss the study findings in detail. Attendees included lawmakers, academics, human rights activists, CSOs, and NGOs. It concluded with a strong call against the unfounded “zero landlessness” proclamations and a resumption of agricultural khas land distribution by the government. The seminar was covered by the media and highlighted in a full page supplement in The Daily Samakal, a major national newspaper.



‘গৃহহীনমুক্ত’ ঘোষিত জেলা-উপজেলার বাস্তবতা খতিয়ে দেখা প্রয়োজন

Media coverage from 'The Daily Samakal' featuring a national seminar. The page includes a main headline, a sub-headline, and several columns of text with small portraits of participants.

## Next Steps for Advocacy

The Coalition is now reaching out to Members of Parliament, sharing the findings, key discussion points from the National Seminar, and copies of the newspaper supplement. The Coalition is also compiling video footage taken at the Dinajpur Mass Gathering into a short film for wide circulation.

*The Bangladesh S4HL Coalition will continue to press for resumed distribution of agricultural khas land to the very real rural landless women and men living throughout Bangladesh.*

- i Widows and deserted women have priority for distribution under the policy, however, the policy conditions this on these women having an “able bodied son.” The policy states that distribution should be joint in the case of distribution to married couples.
- ii Gazi Mohammad Suhrawardy. (2024). Study on Status of Landless People, Khas Land and Government Housing Project. Prepared for ALRD and the S4HL Coalition. On file with ALRD and Landesa. Mr. Suhrawardy conducted focus group and key informant interviews in Dinajpur, Patuakhali, and Faridpur. He also conducted a supplementary desk study and news review.
- iii Functional landlessness is defined by the government in the 1997 Agricultural Khas Land Management and Settlement Policy to include those holding less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> acre of homestead land and no agricultural land, but who are dependent on agricultural activities. Under the Agricultural Census of 2019, 7.84% of rural households are absolutely landless—that is having no land at all either for homestead or agricultural land. This census figure excludes the functionally landless as defined by the 1997 policy.
- iv This survey was not designed to be representative at the union or district level and the findings should not be compared directly to the Coalition study, but they provide further support for the existence of landless people.
- v The study finds that the housings distributed under the Ashrayan project is often of substandard quality on sites located in inconvenient locations. Further roughly 40% of the houses distributed were granted to those who did not meet qualifications and those who received housing were often required to pay an unofficial fee to receive it.

