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IFC SmartLessons

real experiences, real development

Four hundred women light the way! Involving women in entrepreneurial roles.

The SouthAsia Enterprise Development Facility (SEDF), IFC's Advisory facility in Bangladesh, partnered with a rural development organization and worked with 400 women to help them enter the seed business. The project results demonstrate that women can do it, that it is profitable, and that it is sustainable. Does this bear a promise for four million others? We believe it does.

Background**Box 1: The status of women in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, the predominant perception is that women's primary role is to fulfill reproductive and domestic functions. Yet, 58.6 percent of the country's working female population is involved in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Studies show that Bangladeshi women have a higher incidence of poverty than men, their poverty levels are more severe, and their position is becoming more vulnerable. Only 42 percent of economically active women have any formal education, and only 9 percent of the female labor force is skilled. Thus far, the only sector that has engaged women professionally is the readymade garment industry; 85 percent of its 2.4 million employees are women, but these women must migrate to urban centers where readymade garment factories are located.

In Bangladesh, society at large has yet to recognize the role women play in the economic arena (see Box 1¹). However, opportunities do exist for Bangladeshi women who want gainful and productive work without having to move away from their children and family. One sector in particular—seed production—has skills requirements (such as maintaining meticulous work flow, systematic handling, dexterity, and patience) where women prove superior to male employees. The downside is that 80 percent of the seeds used are based on farmer-to-farmer informal production and exchange, resulting in low yields. The

¹ BRIDGE. April 2001. Briefing paper on the "Feminization of Poverty." Report No. 59. Prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

remaining 20 percent is a higher-yield mix of local commercial production plus imports. A simple reversal of this ratio could turn Bangladesh into a food basket rather than a food borrower. With the advent of hybrid seed production, the role of women becomes even more important, because the process involves careful hand pollination. But three factors have prevented women from taking this opportunity:



Looking into the future with hope and confidence

- *The industry fails to realize the potential role of women.*
- *Development projects in the seed subsector have focused on improving seed production per se, without considering the critical role women can play.*
- *Interventions that tried to include rural women did so without regard for socio-cultural sensitivities, and were not customized to suit the women's needs. For instance, since only a few women were interested, they were expected to attend training events with groups of male farmers. This only invited firm opposition from their husbands and other family members, who*

were not keen on the intermixing aspect of the training. Rural women also have problems traveling outside their village for work purposes.

We realized that unless we addressed the barriers to entry of women to participate in the mainstream seed business, the potential mentioned above would hardly be realized. Our search identified the Rural Development Academy (RDA)—a semi-government organization—that had conducted an action research with 10 women to explore the potential for mainstreaming women into the seed business. RDA helped the women develop skills in seed production, processing, and storage. The research was highly effective but lacked scale-up capacity and market linkage. Thus emerged the role for IFC-SEDF.

The Project

We approached the issue from a different perspective—that of removing the fundamental barriers to entry for women. Being convinced of the huge potential for women to reshape the seed sector, we took the approach: Think big and act in small steps. IFC-SEDF, the Ministry of Agriculture's Seed Wing, and RDA partnered to scale up the initiative by working with 400 women in groups of 20. The women were trained not only in seed production, storage, and processing, but also in bookkeeping and business management. Toward the end of the project, the women entrepreneurs were mobilized into the first-ever Women Seed Federation. Also, in-depth thought and efforts went into making these groups sustainable by integrating them into the seed value chain, particularly linking them with the large seed companies. Access to required support services from within the community was also initiated. Our efforts were successful, and they culminated in the National Women's Seed Fair, the first of its kind, in which the village women participated and proudly displayed their seeds. The following is a closer look at how we were able to achieve this feat.

Why Things Worked: Lessons Learned

1) Take an innovative approach to dealing with the socio-cultural aspects.

In a patriarchal society it is very important to creatively devise practical ways to get buy-in from the male members of the family. We realized that to make this initiative work, we need to be more accommodating and invite other family members to join with the respective woman participants. In our case we involved the male members in all the planning workshops, and we had open door policies for all the training events. Even small toddlers and infants were allowed to accompany the women, which helped them focus more on the training rather than having to think about going home to feed or take care of their babies. So in **order to bring the women, we initially had to engage the whole family.** Once the objective was communicated, trust was built and women participants gained the confidence of their family members.

It is important to select the right partner. Partner selection was based not on the prominence of the agencies but on

their understanding of the local context, sensitivity of interaction with women, and a working relationship with the target group. For example, although unknown at the national or even regional level, two local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had been engaged in disbursing microcredit to women in that particular locality. We partnered with these NGOs to efficiently mobilize women into groups and deliver technical support to them. Their familiarity with the local context and their previous experience of dealing with women contributed to their success. Thus, instead of searching for big names to partner with, we sought the most effective partnerships, in this case organizations operating totally at the grassroots level.



The family mix makes it work!

2) Use women touchpoints whenever possible.

The field staff of the implementing agency (RDA) was led by a female who maintained close contact with the women seed growers throughout the project, visited them, and guided them. The bookkeeping and business management training was undertaken by a women-focused organization. And during the three-day residential training, women were comfortable staying at an all-female hostel and being taught by women. These measures definitely contributed to the success of the project, and also resulted in less resistance from the women's families

3) Do not downplay the value of indigenous knowledge and practices.

The participatory workshop for developing the training manual helped integrate the best practices of the technical experts with the innovative technologies being used by the farmers, so as to come up with a customized module that is more practical for the farming community of that locality. People whose main livelihood has been enmeshed in agriculture for generations have knowledge and skills that are truly effective and often innovative. For example, they place lighted candles within seed containers and tightly close the lids. This provides a drier atmosphere for longer storage and better preservation by reducing moisture content in a seed storage container. For pest management they use natural margosa (neem) tree leaves. The project respected this method and did not dismiss it in favor of better-known chemical pesticides. Just because the methods

didn't come out of an instruction manual didn't mean they weren't spot on!



Storage : Innovation at the grassroots!

4) Find ways to assure the use of quality inputs.

One of the main hurdles in agriculture in Bangladesh is the frequent use of low-quality and cheap inputs by the farmers for production, mainly out of fear of increased costs. Our project used freebies to kick-start the use of quality inputs through the distribution of free foundation seeds and high-quality fertilizers to the women seed growers for the first cycle of production. This helped them understand the distinct positive impact that using quality inputs has on the yield. And the demonstrated cost-benefit of using quality inputs helped convince them to start buying foundation seeds and high-quality fertilizers for the next season. Linking them to government agencies for preferential sourcing of quality inputs also helped.



Yellow signage : symbol of their new identity

5) Draw continued attention to a good initiative.

- *Informal branding efforts:* The women seed growers were given a trademark yellow sign at the production site, with the project information, which worked as their identification symbol. As passers-by started noticing the healthy crop fields and started associating the yellow signs with good-quality seeds, local dealers began to come to the women's doorsteps to buy or book the seeds even before the harvest.

- *Getting the right exposure:* Highlighting the uniqueness of this initiative through facilitating coverage on national television channels and by holding an exclusive women seed microentrepreneurs' fair focused the right kind of attention on the project. Representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture also visited the project site after hearing in the media about its innovativeness and success. The exclusive women seed growers' fair highlighted their successes and drew the interest of women from other regions. The fair also showcased some of the innovative techniques being used for storing, drying, and pest management.



Media now finds it worthwhile to interview them!

- *Visibility matters:* The 400 women were mobilized into a Women Seed Federation. This helped in tying the final knot of sustainability, since the seed companies were willing to do business with a formal entity but not with individual women, to reduce their transaction costs as well as ensure consistent supply. Two seed companies—ACI Seeds and Dynamic Seeds—have already signed formal procurement agreements with the Women Seed Federation.

6) Government agencies can prove very effective, contrary to conventional belief.



Signing business contracts: entrepreneurship in action!

The Seed Wing of the Ministry of Agriculture was involved in the project from its very inception. Having a government agency as a partner brought in multiple benefits, such as mobilizing the local community, building confidence, drawing attention from different quarters, assisting in technical quality control, and overcoming legislative hurdles while forming the federation.



Products they are proud of producing and owning!

7) One success breeds the next.

While we were facilitating the technical service provision through RDA, we also were working on devising effective mechanisms that will operate in a sustainable manner in RDA's absence. In this endeavor, we were inspired to create women service providers to cater to the women seed entrepreneurs' needs. Literate young women from the villages were identified on the basis of interest, knowledge, enthusiasm, and passion to be involved with the agricultural sector. They were subsequently trained thoroughly for a period of 4 months by RDA on disease and pest identification, preventive and curative treatments, and good agricultural practices for different varieties of crops. These women were established as Plant Doctors who cater to the technical needs of the women seed grower groups and other neighboring farmers on a commercial basis.

Conclusion

Internalizing the cause, and stubbornly and creatively carving out pathways to achieve it, helps in making successful gender cases. It requires systematic and patient, though often painful, efforts. The value is evident not only from the tangible and immediate positive impacts it has on the lives of women, but also from the benefits it has for the livelihood and outlook of an entire rural family (see Box 2). And for us implementers, such development work comes close to our hearts; it actually touches our lives as much as it touches theirs.

Box 2: Results achieved from the project

- Four hundred women have been successfully established as seed microentrepreneurs.
- Women beneficiaries are earning an additional income of US\$498 per year.
- Two seed companies have started procuring seeds from the Women Seed Federation.
- Women are practicing bookkeeping and handling all financial transactions.
- Interest has been generated in replication of the model by other agencies.
- The women also report that their influence in decision making at home and their status in society have improved with their engagement in seed business.
- According to a study done on women in this sector, the majority of the earnings of women seed workers is used for improvement in children's schooling, food consumption, clothing, and housing.

DISCLAIMER

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