**Project Background**

Food Security for the Ultra Poor (FSUP-H) is a five year project funded by the European Union and being implemented by CARE Bangladesh and three national partners, Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS), Assistance for Slum Dwellers (ASD) and People’s Oriented Program Implementation (POPI). The overall project goal is to **reduce extreme poverty, food insecurity and vulnerability in the Haor region of Northeast Bangladesh**. FSUP-H targets 55,000 ultra poor households, with a focus on ultra poor women, in the three districts of Sunamganj, Netrakona and Kishoreganj.

**Message from Masud Alam Khan—FSUP-H Team Leader**

Welcome to the 4th issue of the FSUP-H newsletter. We hope you have been enjoying reading updates from FSUP-H’s work in the Haor region and find these newsletters informative and engaging. In this issue you will find an update on the recently conducted Engaging Men Initiative (EMI) mid-term review. Embedded in FSUP-H’s women’s empowerment work, the EMI is an important project which is designed to encourage a change in the behaviour and attitude of men and boys for women’s empowerment. The mid-term review revealed some interesting results highlighting that men are showing a positive attitude towards women as well as increasing equitable behaviour at the institutional and household level.

This newsletter also presents an article on the future sustainability of the FSUP-H Village Development Committees (VDCs) and how these committees are moving towards becoming sustainable organisations. In the last few months many of these VDCs have carried out annual general meetings (AGMs) to share their progress, the highlights of which are discussed here. Finally the newsletter presents some outstanding stories from the project participants, with a particularly interesting story from Netrokona District where 57 women and their families have collectively invested in a fish trap making business.

We hope you enjoy reading more about FSUP-H’s work and if you have any comments or suggestions please send them using the contact details on the back page.
Engaging Men Initiative Mid-Term Review

To achieve improved food security for 55,000 ultra-poor families, deep-rooted gender inequalities have to be overcome, which requires involving both men and women in the development process. In 2010, CARE Norway provided funding to develop the Engaging Men Initiative (EMI) which uses FSUP-H as a platform to work with men and boys as well as women to challenge conventional norms and promote more equitable relationships among men and women.

In March and April 2013, CARE Bangladesh, with guidance from CARE Norway, undertook a midterm review (MTR) of the Engaging Men Initiative to assess the project’s progress towards its goals. The MTR used quantitative and qualitative techniques to understand the impact EMI is having on the attitudes and behaviour of men and women towards improvements in gender equity and women’s empowerment. The MTR not only helped to explore a number of aspects of women’s empowerment such as attitudes towards gender-based violence (GBV), decision making and economic empowerment but also served to understand the perceptions and challenges of staff working on this relatively new and sometimes sensitive approach.

The MTR revealed some interesting and promising results suggesting that the attitudes and behaviour of both the target group men and impact group women are slowly beginning to change. Important successes include staff’s changing attitude and understanding of hegemonic masculinity and the involvement of male perspectives in women’s empowerment. Additionally, the staff identified strategic approaches to engaging men such as the identification of positive male role models and Ending Violence through Engaging Men (EVEM) forums as having a positive effect on the communities where they are working. Finally, community members highlighted improvements in attitudes and behaviours towards issues including GBV, more equitable decision making at the household and community level, and women’s involvement in paid work.

The midterm review involved both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including a structured questionnaire targeting 408 project participant households. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIs) covered a diverse number of stakeholders including project participants (men, women and adolescent boys and girls), project staff (CARE and partners), community volunteers and positive role models. The following provides a summary of the key findings of the MTR:
Outcome 1: Increase in positive attitudes among men that will promote gender equality and women's empowerment

The MTR was able to measure the change in women's attitudes compared to the FSUP-H baseline study in 2010. The MTR found 93% of women agreed with the statement 'married women should be allowed to work outside the home' compared to a reported 49% in 2010. A similar positive change in attitudes was observed in respect to gender based violence where 79% of women said it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife in 2010 compared to a considerably reduced 34% of women agreeing with the statement in 2013. Similarly the MTR revealed an apparent change in attitudes regarding women's rights to make decisions on their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Women's ability to jointly decide with their husbands on household expenditure for family planning was reported to have increased along with an increase in women now being accompanied to the health centre with their husbands.

A man said, "I should give permission to my wife for paid work because it can contribute to the family though I didn't do it before"

(FGD, 25 March 2013, Village: Boro Bekham, Union: Magansladhar, Upazilla: Mohongang, District: Netrokona)

The qualitative results also revealed men's attitude was slowly beginning to change with regard to women carrying out paid work outside the home. From recent experience where their wives had started a new business as a result of the FSUP-H IGA grant or through cash-for-work, men realised women can contribute significantly to the household income if they are involved in economic activities. The discussions also revealed a greater understanding of women's rights, particularly relating to gender based violence and many men openly discussed the negative impact of this practice. Many of the young men who have been involved the Ending Violence through Engaging Men (EVeM) sessions showed willingness to challenge traditional views of women and break negative stereotypes.

Outcome 2: Increase in gender equitable behaviour among men

Gender Based Violence (GBV) is still considered to be a serious problem in of Bangladesh. Despite this the MTR for EMI did reveal some encouraging changes taking place among men. In 2010, 83% of men said they did not beat their wife compared to 72% in 2013. Further positive results showed men were supporting their wives more during pregnancy. In 2010, only 5% of men reported accompanying their wives to pre and postnatal visits at the health centre whereas 41% now reported accompanying their wives on these visits. This is a particular issue which is discussed in couple counselling sessions undertaken by the EMI project as well as discussed in open courtyard sessions which include men as part of the initiative.

Both the project participants and the project staff reported observing some small changes among men at the household level. Men are reportedly taking on more work in the household such as cooking or taking care of the children while their wife carries out income generating activities. In the past it was reported how men felt shame if they were seen by neighbours working in the household but through greater awareness they understand that supporting their wife will create a more harmonious and productive family. What's more, in the past many women accepted being badly treated or physically abused by their husbands but this too is thought to be slowly changing. Now through women's empowerment groups and support from positive male role models from the EMI project, women and men are protesting against the violent and negative treatment of women.

A man said, "The risk of my wife is the risk of my own also so I should take care of my wife when she is pregnant"

Outcome 3: Increase in shared decision making between women and men

The results of the MTR suggest that more shared decision making is taking place among project participants. At the community level more and more women are becoming members of various community groups. Despite this, the MTR found that very few women who were members of the committees felt they had the opportunity to provide meaningful participation. Only 27% of women members at the time of the MTR in 2013 reported meaningful participation. Despite this low amount, the FSUP-H baseline survey in 2010 found that only 6.8% of women reported meaningful participation in committees suggesting women's voices are slowly starting to be heard at the community level.

At the household level the results were far more encouraging showing that both men and women were reporting an increase in shared decision making. Women reported improved participation in decision making at the household level including contributing to decisions on the purchase of small food items, expenditure on income earned themselves, the purchase of household assets and the utilisation of savings.

During Focus Group Discussions women reported that they were participating at the community level such as school management committees and village development committees. Despite this, women and men agreed that men still dominated decision making at the local government level. At the household level both men and women agreed that men were consulting their wives more before making decisions on household expenditure although larger household asset purchases were still decided by the man. The project staff too felt that as a result of the EMI project, men’s attitude to women was changing at the household level. Staff members reported observing men in the community carrying out household work traditionally associated with women.

(source: In-depth Interview, 25 March 2013, Shofiqul Islam Bhuiyan Ratan, Chairman, Gunodhor union parishad, Upazilla: Korimganj, District: Kishoreganj)
Village Development Committees: A Pathway to Sustainable Organisations

A vital part of FSUP-H’s approach to improving the lives of the poorest households in the Haor region is through the establishment and training of community platforms. These community groups are responsible for carrying out a large number of collective actions which benefit the poorest families such as supporting income generating activities for women, overseeing flood protection schemes and intervening to stop negative social practices such as violence against women and early marriage. These groups are also the main interface for community engagement with the local government.

To date FSUP-H has established 645 Village Development Committees (VDC) which serve as umbrella committees for six sub-groups. The sub-groups focus is responsive to the Community Action Plans (CAPs) developed by the VDC and thus some sub-groups have stronger inputs from the project in order to achieve their targets identified in the CAP.

To date the VDCs have been successful in ensuring the inclusion of women in development initiatives and have accomplished many achievements including:

- The VDCs have supported 39,706 ultra-poor families access social safety-net services from the Government of Bangladesh
- The committees have supported 1,574 women to become members of various decisions making platforms at the community level such as School Management Committee, local government standing committee etc.
- Have supported 202 families to access government land
- Have overseen 645 savings groups for women, providing over 54,400 ultra-poor women with the opportunity to regularly save money for future shocks and stresses.
- Managed the transfer of small seed money to 55,000 women to invest in income generating activities.
Organisational Development Training – Towards Sustainability

Many of the 645 VDCs have been extremely successful in achieving their goals and project experience has shown that the most successful VDCs are those which have a strong sense of solidarity among the members. It is this solidarity which will be vital for the long term sustainability of these groups.

In recent months FSUP-H has carried out organisational development training to all 645 VDCs in order to support the VDCs in the journey towards long term sustainability. The training covered various topics including: principles and procedures of the VDC, developing organisational goals, review and establishment of visions and action plans, development of the organisational structure and by-laws, democratic decision-making processes within the community, record keeping and administration.

In addition to the training each VDC has received a small amount of money to start an operational fund which will help to cover the running costs of the committee in the coming years. FSUP-H is assisting the VDCs to manage this fund over the next six months. With the training and operational fund, each VDC has taken the first step towards becoming sustainable community organisations for the poor.
Promoting Transparency: Annual General Meeting of the Village Development Committees

In the past three months the 645 Village Development Committees (VDC) established through the FSUP-H have held an Annual General Meeting (AGM). The AGMs take place in open community areas where the whole community and other stakeholders can attend.

The main objectives of the AGMs are to:

i) Present the work and role of the VDC to the whole community in a public forum.

ii) The VDC AGM also allows the sub-groups of the VDC to present their achievements and progress (sub-groups include EKATA, EVEM and, Savings and Loans groups).

iii) Critically review the Community Action Plans (CAP) in front of the whole community. This allows the VDC to demonstrate successfully completed actions, review uncompleted actions and reasons for deviations. The VDCs then work with the community to identify new plans for the coming year. Groups and individuals take responsibility for completing certain actions to ensure accountability.

iv) Strengthen linkages with local government and other community groups. Many stakeholders from the local government and various groups attended the VDC AGMs.

VDC pathway to community organisation: Currently the VDCs are conducting development activities fairly informally but many VDCs under the FSUP-H have expressed the desire to become more formal organisations. The AGM provided the platform to discuss this issue in an open forum together with local government officials.

Reflections on One AGM: Rosorai, Laximipur Union, Dowarabazar Upazilla, Sunamganj District In April, Rosorai Village Development Committee held their AGM which was attended by a large number of community members and local government officials. The VDC Chairwoman talking at the event said that “we, the VDC members, will continue with such important events each year, even after CARE and ASD have finished their work. We are grateful to FSUP-H for their work”. The women’s empowerment group and engaging men’s group also shared their achievements from the previous year and hopes for the future.

The UP Chairman (local government official) of Laxipur Union, Mr. Amirul Haq also spoke at the event highlighting how the poorest families had grown in solidarity through the work of the VDC. He also praised the small but encouraging community-led activities undertaken by the VDC. At the end of his speech he committed to support the VDC through an official capacity in the year to come. This event was covered favourably in the local print media.
FSUP-H Snapshots

Tonu (16) is an active gardener in a Nutrition Garden in Karimganj Upazilla of Kishoreganj District. 'Since I have been involved with EKATA, I have learnt the nutritional value of foods. I can help raise awareness among pregnant mothers in my community so that simple changes in their food habit may bring difference in their health.'

Salma Begum (45), Radhanagar Village, Shunamganj District makes Fish Traps and earns approximately BDT 6,000 per month.

'To make fish traps previously I had to take loans and pay back with interest at a daily basis, with the minimum profit and no savings. The small cash grant of BDT 4,700 by the FSUP-H has helped me to invest a standard amount at a time without pressure of paying back loans. This has led me to enhance my business.'

Pushpa, 28 is from Dhormopasha, Netrokona District. She runs a vegetable shop in her village.

'Previously my husband was a street vendor of vegetables. The small cash grant of BDT 4,700 has helped us to start a shop. It is small, but it is our own. We have also started raising poultry. Both of us are really busy with our growing businesses.'

Shaheda (25) is a VDC member since 2011 in Dewla, Netrokona. Her husband has become more co-operative with her since their involvement in FSUP-H.

'Now I am able to support my husband with the family income. He also helps me at home by taking the baby while I cook or he makes his own food when I am busy with other tasks. It feels good now.'
Stories from the Field

Nazma and Salimuddin’s story of Change and Hope

Nazma and her husband Salimuddin together set an example in their community on fighting poverty. Four years ago, Nazma’s family found it hard to have adequate food particularly in the lean season but now this is a blurred past to them. The European Union funded FSUP-H project, implemented by CARE Bangladesh with its three partners in Northeast of Bangladesh has changed lives through lifting up the economic status of many like Nazma and her family.

Nazma’s husband was the only income earner in their family before she was selected as an FSUP-H participant. Like many others in their village Gunodhur, Salimuddin (Nazma’s husband) was a tuly puller (someone extracts soil/clay from the dried up flood plain) for six months of the year. The rest of the year he remained unemployed except for occasional fishing. With five children, of whom two are school going, poverty seemed to be deeply rooted in their daily lives.

With a cash grant of BDT 4,700 from the FSUP-H project and her successful planning she has changed her family’s living standard in the last four years. She added BDT 3,300 to the cash grant and bought a calf for BDT 8,000. She sold the cow after one year at a price of BDT 24,000, in which she reported a profit of at-least BDT 13,000. With this benefit her husband added some money from his savings and a small loan. Together they invested their money on ducks as the most convenient seasonal business in the Monsoon season. They bought 200 matured ducks two months ago. Meanwhile they have already started selling eggs worth BDT 3,000 a week. When asked about paying back the small loan, Nazma thoughtfully replied;

“We took loans to buy ducks from my close relatives and family members; they will not impose any interest rate on this. I have already started paying the loans by selling the eggs”

Managing 200 ducks is never easy, particularly when Nazma does not have her own space to accommodate them. While asked why she took this risk of such a big initiative, she replied with confidence that, the IGA training from the FSUP-H has taught her every aspect of raising ducks. The interview took place near a Haor (locally termed body of water) where she brought her ducks to cool in the heat. She also has a contingency plan against the coming days of flood. She will pay a minimum rent to her brother in law to use their watershed for her ducks when the Haor is flooded over.
Apart from the economic development Nazma has some other improved factors in her life too. FSUP-H provided homestead gardening training to Nazma and she now has a small garden of seasonal vegetables and spices around her home. With improved and diversified food intake her children are healthier now. She also sells additional vegetables after her family’s consumption. She saves money from their earnings of eggs and vegetables and continues to pay their loans that she used to buy ducks. As there is no hunger and no pressure to get involved in economic activities, her children now go to school regularly.

The biggest change is the improved relationship with her husband. Before receiving the cash grant from the European Union funded FSUP-H, her husband spent half of the year idle or with random economic activities with irregular income. Nazma hardly imagined initiating a mutual business. Once gaining profit from the cow, her husband himself offered a partnership to expand the business and to invest in ducks. Salimuddin does not pull tuly anymore. As earnings increased, the daily picture of quarrelling has said good bye to Nazma and Salimuddin. Now Salimuddin often seeks Nazma's opinion when taking decisions. Nazma summed up her life after getting involved with the FSUP-H as:

“I never imagined working with my husband and running my family so peacefully. A small grant of 4,700 brought the biggest change in my life. Both of us dream to expand our business and buy a piece of a land in future”
Sunita Takes Control of Her Life

Sunita’s husband does not earn an income which places the responsibility of earning enough to feed her family of five, on her. This is a considerable challenge for Sunita who lives in the Northeast of Bangladesh, where women’s involvement in economic activities is traditionally restricted by the patriarchal norms which dominate society.

Forced to enter into the male sphere of work, Sunita became a day labourer in order to provide for her family. But Sunita’s income remained low as she did not receive the same income as men in the region for carrying out the same work. Without the money to have their own home, Sunita and her family lived in the houses of others, where they were forced to carry out household work, often without payment. Without a homestead of their own, Sunita and her family remained trapped in poverty, forced to serve the family whose house they lived in and unable to rear their own poultry, livestock or have space to grow their own vegetables.

Life began to change for Sunita when she became a participant on CARE’s FSUP-H project and she received a small business grant to start her own business. Sunita used the money to lease land where she cultivated rice. For the first time in her life Sunita was able to work for herself and was not reliant on others for her income. Sunita’s hard work paid off and this harvest she produced 1,400 KGs of rice. She is now storing the rice which will be used to feed her family for the year and the rest will be sold when the price is high. Now Sunita has control over her family income she will be able to use the profits to reinvest in land in the coming year.

Last year Sunita’s village was identified by CARE as being extremely vulnerable to erosion from the flooding which occurs each year in the Northeast of Bangladesh. As a result, large amounts of land and homesteads have eroded away leaving lives and livelihoods destroyed. As a result, FSUP-H constructed a village protection wall in Sunita’s community to protect homes and livelihoods for many years to come.

The construction of the wall, which benefits the whole community, helped to create a sense of solidarity among the residents and many community members provided voluntary labour to construct the wall. In this atmosphere of unity, a local land owner came forward to donate land, now protected by the wall for the poorest families in the community.

Sunita’s family was chosen to receive a plot of land to construct their own homestead. After receiving the full legal deeds to the land, Sunita’s family constructed their own homestead. "In the past I had many problems” Sunita explained, but “now I am happy to get my own homestead land! On her new land Sunita has begun cultivating vegetables and is rearing chickens and ducks.

With her control over her own income and a place to call home, Sunita and her family have a positive future ahead.
With Confidence Flora Can Provide for Her Family and Lead Her Community

Seven years ago Flora Begum’s life was turned upside down when her husband died in a road accident leaving her to bring up her two sons without a father. After the death of her husband, Flora was forced to move back to her parent’s house and relied on her father’s income to feed her children. This, she recalls, was an extremely difficult time for her family and she was often unable to provide three meals a day to her sons.

In 2009, Flora was selected as a participant on the FSUP-H project and in 2010 she received small seed money to start a business. Flora used the funds to lease agricultural land and bought seeds, fertiliser and other inputs from her own savings to begin rice cultivation. Within the first year Flora harvested 800 KGs of rice on the land. She sold some of the rice and used the profits to access land for the following year the rest of the rice was used to feed her and her two sons.

As Flora began earning her own income her confidence increased in the wider community. In 2011, community members came to Flora and asked her to run for the local government elections. “First I said no” Flora explained, but the community members promised to support her and raised money to fund her election. Flora’s campaign was successful and now she represents her community in the local government. As an extremely poor widow, Flora feels she can speak out as a voice for the most marginalised in her community. “I want to serve the community people” she explained.

Now Flora is very much an independent woman in her community. As Flora could provide for her two sons on her own, her father donated a small piece of land so she could establish her own homestead. Flora received training on homestead gardening and seed packets to start vegetable cultivation around her home. Flora is extremely proud of what she has achieved and now provides her sons with three nutritious meals a day including rice and vegetables cultivated on her land. She also supplements her income by selling excess vegetables. Referring to her future and as a sign of her increased independence, Flora exclaimed, “I will not remarry. I want to support my children in the future. They will be well educated, get a job and lead a good life”.

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Making Fishing Traps, Transforming Lives

FSUP-H's approach to increasing economic activities for ultra-poor women is to provide business training and small cash grants for the women to invest in a business. Radhanagar village, in Netrokona District is a unique example of how 57 women and their families have invested in the same business to maximise profits and strengthen their collective bargaining power.

In 2009 FSUP-H began working in Radhanagar and project staff quickly noticed that many women had a particular skill in making fish traps. Although this practice was profitable for the poorest families they explained all raw materials had to be purchased by taking high interest loans from local money lenders resulting in a constant cycle of poverty and indebtedness. FSUP-H provided business training with small cash grants and 57 women decided with their families to invest collectively in raw materials this time avoiding the need to take a high interest loan.

The women now sit together making the traps while chatting and discussing issues in the community. Project staff also found this to be a good way to talk to the women about important issues relating to negative social norms such as early marriage and, health, hygiene and nutrition. The profitable collective business the women have formed has become well known in neighbouring villages and an interesting change in a common negative social custom has taken place. Dowry is no longer a common practice in Radhanagar village and when a man comes to marry a daughter from Radhanagar he knows she can significantly contribute to the family income using her fish trap making skills. The FSUP-H participants reported the men now recognise the women as successful in business and show them more respect. The following tells the story of Mazeda, just one of the 57 women involved in the fish trap making business.

Mazeda's Story

Mazeda (32) was selected as a participant for the FSUP-H project at the start of 2009. She is from Radhanagar village, in Netrokona district.

Previously landless, Mazeda used to make fish trap by taking a high interest loan from the local money lenders. She could manage to prepare 50 fish traps a month and earned BDT 1500. After paying back the loan each month and purchasing raw material to make the traps she was only left with BDT 400 per month profit. She explained the situation as:

"it seemed like the cycle of my loan and interest was never ending; I never imagined investing more as I was never left with sufficient money".

However the scenario has changed in the last few years. With a small cash grant of BDT 4,700 from the FSUP-H and her hard work, Mazeda successfully lifted
up her family's living condition. She invested the whole money to buy raw materials to make fish traps with other women in her community. The profit remained as she had no loan this time. Now Mazeda regularly sells about 300 traps a month and earns approximately BDT 7,500. The biggest relief for Mazeda is, now she can use the profit to serve other purposes.

When asked her feelings about her contribution, she explained:

'It was big achievement for me to share the responsibility to buy the land for our home. My in-laws are more respectful to me now. My husband also has noticeable change in his behaviour towards me'.

She like many of her peers in the VDC started raising poultry as well. From her savings she managed to buy a cow worth BDT 10,000 taka in the second year of her FSUP-H involvement. At this point, Mazeda and her husband decided to buy a piece of land, so that they can get settled and focus on the future. So the cow was sold after one year for BDT 20,000. She then managed to buy a piece of land of 11 decimals, and Mazeda added her profits to shoulder her husband's expense.

The FSUP-H aims not only to graduate the ultra poor people out of their extreme poverty but also to build their capacity to lead an improved life in the long run. This reflects on participant's changed attitude and practice in the project areas. Mazeda, for instance, previously an ultra-poor woman, now maintains a diversified and healthy diet mostly produced by her own, successfully enhancing assets and consequently enjoying an improved status in her family and community.
FSUP-H has organized district and regional level advocacy workshops and a national round table workshop on access to Khas land for the extreme poor households.

A total of 2,029 project participants (1,538 women and 491 men) included in different local committees.

Sixty-four VDCs completed a Gender Framework Analysis (GFA) at the community level through the use of participatory tools with representation of different level community people.

A total of 94 project participants received five days agricultural service provider training in three districts. This training was jointly organized by the FSUP-H project and the government district agricultural department.

FSUP-H has completed 645 income generating activity training sessions at the community level. A total of 16,125 project participants gained knowledge on local poultry, duck, cow and goat rearing and fruit cultivation.

Eight linkage building workshops with upazila level service providers to encourage access to Government services for ultra poor households have been organised.

FSUP-H has completed 81, day long refresher trainings on disaster risk management and early warning systems for capacity building of school teachers, school management committee members and students.

The project has organized 17 linkage building workshops with health service providers at the local level. After completion of workshop, government health workers developed an action plan for providing easy access to health and family planning services to the ultra poor.

94 Unions have developed disaster contingency plans through facilitation from the project. The plans are now preserved at the local government union level.

Photo: © Angela Platt/CARE
Meet the partners

Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS) has been working with underprivileged and marginalised people, especially women, children and adolescents in disaster prone areas of Bangladesh since 1986 and has been working with CARE since 1994.

Since 1990, Assistance for Slum Dwellers (ASD) has been focused on community development and women empowerment activities across Bangladesh. ASD has been a CARE partner since 1995.

People’s Oriented Program Implementation (POPI) has been working with CARE since 1998 and specializes in poverty focused food security programs in hard to reach areas.

"If you have any comments or thoughts you would like to share please do so by contacting Masud Alam Khan (Team Leader) at masudkhan@bd.care.org <mailto:masudkhan@bd.care.org>.

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