Breaking norms: Women take on development challenges in Northern Bangladesh

The place of a woman in Bangladesh, as is in many parts of Asia, is the home. Many women throughout this continent do not have the opportunity to step out of their homes, unless allowed by their husbands or other older women. This inhibits their personal development restricting them to traditional roles while simultaneously excluding them from community and societal development conversation and action.

USAID/FP has funded CARE Bangladesh to implement SHOUHARDO III, a food security program designed to achieve gender equitable food and nutrition security and resilience for poor and extreme poor households living in Char and Haor regions of Northern Bangladesh. The program operates in eight districts, providing participant households with skills to improve production and incomes, achieve better health outcomes for women and children, improve community capacities to cope with and respond to disasters, achieve women’s empowerment, and increase the responsiveness of government to public service needs.

CARE Bangladesh has been promoting a women’s peer-to-peer solidarity model, locally known as ‘Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action’ (EKATA) groups. Women come together in EKATA groups within their local villages to discuss individual and community level challenges such as child marriage, domestic violence, and agency of women and formulate solutions. At startup, the program provides life skills coaching in areas such as communication, decision making and leadership during their regular meetings. Participation in the group is voluntary and free. In breaking with tradition, the women of one EKATA group in Dokin Gobindi village of the Gaibandha district came forward to address a community problem. In August 2017, flooding in the Char area of Northern Bangladesh brought in its wake extensive damage specifically affecting transport and communication infrastructures. Dokin Gobindi village was not spared these damages, and villagers faced with mobility issues — particularly women who could not go to market to buy food and children’s school attendance ability to get across a sub-merged section of the only road in the area.

In a group meeting, the women discussed this issue in their group meeting and felt the urge to solve the problem regarding the disrupted movement. They developed a plan to build a foot bridge with bambo, the estimated cost was approximately $20 USD, a significant amount of money in comparison to their low levels of income. Each of the twenty members contributed an equal amount to raise a total of USD $3.75USD. To meet the difference, the women brought up the matter with the elected chairman of the local Union Parishad (primary tier of the local government), employing the negotiation and advocacy skills they had learned through their participation in the EKATA group. As a result of their efforts, the chairman agreed to add $12.50 to their cause and helped them in purchasing as well as collecting the materials necessary namely bamboo sticks, ropes and poles. As the women started constructing the foot bridge, other community members — men and women alike — joined in on their efforts.

Eventually, the foot bridge was completed and the community could use it to get in and out of the village the students especially could continue their schooling. “It was not an easy task for us, a group of women in a village, to take the initiative to construct a foot bridge- this is not normally done by women. The result has however being remarkably rewarding, we are now regarded as part of the development conversation in the village by all.” shares Hamida Begum, an EKATA member. This group exhibited the inherent capacity of women when their agency is developed and the

Members of the women solidarity group work on a foot bridge across a submerged road, in Dokin Gobindi village in Gaibandha district. Photo©Tanvir,SKS/2017.
structures and relations do not inhibit their aspirations. When CARE staff visited the group to ask them what motivated them, the women said, almost in unison, that they had learned that by working together, no challenge - even negative societal norms - would stand in their way: they would achieve whatever they set out to do.