



Ummehani (39), a milk collection point manager of BRAC Dairy and farmer leader of SDVC II project of CARE-Bangladesh, lives in Nondokusha, Banani Bazar. She was born in Koemajhira village in the year 1975. Ummehani is the elder child among four children of Mst Romesa Begum & Abul Hamid. Her father Abul Hamid, was the member of the Local Government Institute and known as an elite person in the village.

Abdul Hamid was a very influential and financially solvent, having lots of property and he established a school in his village. Ummehani inherited the hardworking and leadership quality of his father which was needed to trigger on time. Her father did the best to give his children proper education and facility. But Ummehani was too careless to strictly follow anyone's rules opposed to her.

It's true that no sorrow or pain ever came in her early life but when she was busy with enjoying her life she forgot to realize the importance of education. She went to the primary school which was established by her father but she never took her study seriously and discontinued her study after class nine. Ummehani said "I did not realize the importance of education at that time, it was a huge mistake".

As she disagreed to continue her study so her parents decided to arrange her marriage. In 1988 after the flood in spring, she gets married at the age of 13 with Nur Mohammad (20) at an immature age despite the objection of her father. Though Nur Mohammad was not from a financially solvent family, her father didn't want to send her daughter in a poor family. But she was determined to marry Nur Mohammad the man of her choice and was ready to face all difficulty afterwards. But this journey was not so easy for her. It was just the beginning of a life, a life of fighter, a life of struggle, a life fool of dream and courage for a life with dignity.

After getting married the beginning of a new journey with new environment was a huge challenge for her. Her in laws house were too small to live comfortably and they were not financially solvent. She was noticed about it but did not imagine how worse the situation could be. She became sad and little frustrated but later she made of her mind thinking that "this is the path of life I have chosen and whatever happen I can't look back. I can make this better with hard work and honesty." She was lucky that she was not alone in that battle; she got her husband's support and contribution in every step. She said –"in such patrimonial society it is hard to have a partner who can read her inner feelings." Only three decimals of land, four cows and a small hut were all the resources a new couple gets to start a new beginning.

Although Ummehani dropped her education, she loved to do vegetable gardening which helped after her marriage. With her husband they decided to start cultivating vegetable in one decimal land and rice for the rest two decimals land. Along with these they used to sell the milk of four cows in the local market. But the amount of produced milk was only 6 to 7 litters which do not help to support a growing family by meeting their regular family demand and to sell in a commercial manner.

In the year 2001, Ummehani decided to provide AI (artificial insemination) to her cows as part of changing the breed to produce more milk as those can be sold in a commercially viable manner. She was the first person in her village, who provided AI to her cow. When the calves from AI started to produce milk she

was the only producer of her village with highest amount of milk production. At that time they have two school going children. Ummehani was so busy with vegetable cultivation, can hardly manage her time for the children but her children were too mature to realize the difficulty of their daily life and managed to move forward of their own. In 2013 Ummahani arranged marriage for her daughter. Her son is now 21 years old, studying in college and also helping his mother in DFT (Digital Fat Testing) milk collection point.



To meet the growing family demand and to embrace the dream of dignity, Ummehani was searching an opportunity to sell milk at a good price and in a continuous basis and that time she was introduced with Fazlu, the milk collector of her community. During the year 2006 Fazlu has been working as milk collector for BRAC Dairy and Ummehani thought it will be a good idea to sell milk to Fazlu as first step to channel her produced milk in the formal sector. Everything was going good but after few months another milk collector started to collect milk and conflict raised among the milk producers as they were divided in two groups. Through this grouping,

Ummehani was enlisted under new collector's list due to geographical distance, but she was determined to sell milk to Fazlu as loyal milk supplier. After few days, some other producers also wanted to follow Ummehani because the new collector was forcing the producer to sell the milk at a lower price. Then, Fazlu proposed her to work with him as sub-collector and collect milk from the community. She started collecting milk and keeping record of it. For about two years she worked as sub-collector without any benefit and after two years of serving as sub-collector she started to get payment at \$ 0.0065 per liter of milk as commission and she continued working as sub collector for next two years.

In 2012 BRAC chilling plant manager complained about the quality of milk and Ummehani was suspected for the adulteration, even Fazlu claimed it too. At that time she was the farmer leader of CARE-SDVC project and also attended in farmer leader training. She was in good connection with CARE field facilitators and they helped her to raise voice against injustice and she challenged BRAC chilling plant manager about her own produced and collected milk. CARE staffs arranged an investigation with the BRAC chilling plant authority to check the quality of the milk collected by Ummehani. Through the investigation it revealed that Fazlu and Muhammad Ali (another milk collector) mixed water with the milk on the way to chilling plant after collecting milk from Ummehani. Then chilling plant manger decided to give the direct responsibility to Ummehani to collect milk for BRAC and give her a new identity as a BRAC Dairy milk collector.

According to Gobirgonj chilling plant manager Mr. Majharul Islam - " I know Ummehani from 2012 when she used to sell her collected milk to Fazlu but later I realized that most of the milk collected by Fazlu was sold in other market and very few was sold in BRAC and the quality of milk was getting poor day by day. Eventually with the assistance of CARE staff I went to Ummehani's house and investigate about the milk quality. And I found Ummehani is honest, capable and experienced in milk collection so I added a separate code and identity on her name and said her to sell the collected milk directly to BRAC. From then she started selling milk in BRAC at \$ 0.035 per litter as commission and become popular as an independent collection point manager in her community. After serving about eleven months as BRAC collection point manager she got the DFT machine through CARE-SDVC project and later we trained her on DFT machine operation. She learned it very quickly and now operating the machine very efficiently."

At the very beginning, community people did not take it positively but now most of the people understand women's role and contribution in the economy for improving family life as well as the betterment of the community as a whole. Ummehani said -"as I keep myself busy with DFT point and also in agriculture, sometimes my husband cooks for the family and some people see it in a different angle. They think if women involve in work then they don't feel interest and overlook in household work. But I am very glad

that my husband never thinks like that- he is very supportive and values me very well. Without his support nothing could have been possible so far.”

After joining as DFT manager, Ummehani build two new rooms in their new house with the help of her husband. Last year they mortgaged one decimal land for their daughter marriage. They are expecting to repay the money by this year. When she used to collect milk manually the amount was 80 liters but after establishing DFT machine the collection is now 100 liters per day on an average, sometimes it goes up to 135 liters or more. But still Ummehani trying to increase the collection but as most of the cows of the village are from local breed the milk production is not good enough. Their household income is now \$259 to \$ 285 per month which is double than that of they used to make earlier and DFT contributed almost half of the earning of their family. Ummahani's son Miraj said “we are now living a better life for my mother's business otherwise I have to work on the field. I have got chance to get better education and feel proud of her. I can realize the difference when I saw other women of my village are housewife and my mother work hard for our better life. She is different; she is my mother.”

Ummehani collects milk both in the morning and evening time and stay a long time in the DFT collection point. Producers, especially women come to her for advice regarding dairy production and vegetable cultivation. Abdul Aziz, a male milk producer who supplies milk to her collection point said that-“she spent a lot of time in DFT point and she is very hard working. Milk business is very tough job and most importantly she takes care of every single producer with different mentality. She knows her job well and really good at that. She is very helpful to others and even don't deny to help when she is busy. People often come to her for suggestions. She gives advice about cow rearing, cow fattening, treatment, deworming, AI and how to increase the fat of the milk, where to find good feed etc. to the village people”

Nazma Begum, a female producer of the same collection point said that “she is very efficient in her work so it takes less time to sell milk to Ummehani. She gives us good advice on dairy production and even sometimes she calls the veterinary doctor for our help.”

She not only just shares the knowledge and capacity of her work but she also maintains good relation with community people. Her friendly and helping nature made her to take a stand in the heart of the people in her community. “Ummahani is a very nice women and everyone likes her friendly behavior. She introduced us with DFT machine and now we get good amount of money at a time by selling milk. She also oriented her son nicely to assist her in milk collection. She is very soft speaking and is very good behaved” -Sulekha Begum, neighbor of Ummehani.

Ummehani is a bright example of women empowerment in her community. Her initiative involves women in milk selling. Seventy five percent producers in her DFT point are women and these women were hardly involved in selling milk before. Her every step has a story and here the story of Ummehani, a woman of strength, a woman of new beginning. Ummehani is not just a name; she is another name of identity, honesty, patience, dedication and dignity. She showed the pathways of how the rural women who are still suffering with social, economical and mental discrimination over the years can overcome those and can achieve the “dignity”. Ummehani is a star in the sky of dreams; still lots of Ummehani have to come out from the darkness. The pathways may be hard but not impossible to cross.

"Ummahani is an active, hardworking, industrious, helpful woman. She is always available whenever anyone needs any help from her. CARE Bangladesh Strengthening The Dairy Value Chain's DFT innovation helped her to get involved in such business and overcome all the odds and agonies, Through this she created a light of enthusiasm among other women of the village. The pathways she showed through her profession can be a good example for others to work with such innovative ideas to involve thousands of other women like Ummehani. If the village women follow Ummehani as a pioneer they can foster the development of the country also. “

Md. F.M. Ksimuddin
High School Teacher”